

**Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine [book review]**

By: [Kathelene McCarty Smith](#)

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**Abstract:**

Book review of: Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine. Deetz, Kelley Fanto. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. ISBN 978- 0-8131-7473-0 (Hardback); \$29.95. 192 p.

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## Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine

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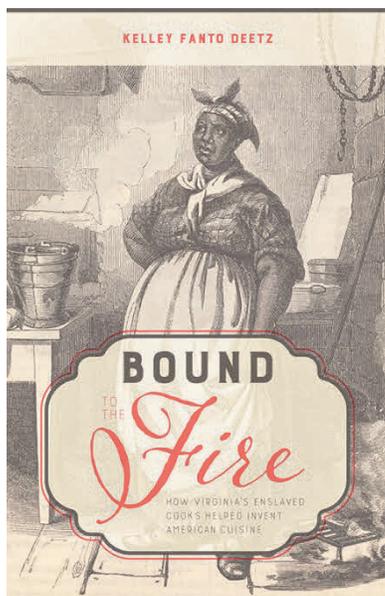
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**Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine.** Deetz, Kelley Fanto. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. ISBN 978-0-8131-7473-0 (Hardback); \$29.95. 192 p.



While the South has built its reputation on hospitality and unique culinary arts, little is known of the enslaved plantation cooks who developed the recipes that would become the backbone of the region's exceptional cooking style. In her book, *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine*, Kelley Fanto Deetz describes the lives of these enslaved cooks, and, by doing so, gives the reader a deeper understanding of historical Southern foodways and of the antebellum plantation's true social structure. Deetz, an archaeologist, historian, and professional chef, paints a truly realistic scene of how an antebellum Virginia kitchen would have functioned and gives a voice to the cooks who spent their lives there.

Deetz discusses not only the practical workings of the kitchen, but she also tells the story of the men and women who were "bound to the fire," preparing up to four meals a day for the family who enslaved them. The relationships between the cook, other plantation slaves, and the white family that they served were complex. Because of the close proximity of the plantation owners and the enslaved kitchen staff, there was often forced social interaction that proved uncomfortable for both. While the enslaved cooks ran the kitchen for all practical purposes, the slave owner's wife held the supreme authority and often wielded her power cruelly and oppressively. But the kitchen was also the heart of the plantation's African American social structure. The cooks, and often members of their family who were being "trained up," lived in the kitchen area, which in turn, became the settings for African American weddings, musical gatherings, and other social interactions.

As the most important enslaved person in the house, the cook held the top position in the "domestic hierarchy,"

which started in the kitchen and ended in the field. While cooks had to be able to "perform educated tasks," such as counting and reading recipes, other slaves would use their skills to provide the kitchen with a range of meat and vegetables, depending on the seasons and the available resources. Fish, fowl, shrimp, oysters, and fresh vegetables were cultivated or caught to create original and unique recipes. Distinctive dishes created with fresh meat, vegetables, spices, and techniques brought from Africa could enhance the family's standing among their neighbors. Beyond the main courses, the cooks were responsible for baking bread, making desserts, and creating alcoholic beverages, such as wine and punch. Many of the recipes that survive were chronicled by white mistresses, who sometimes took credit for their cook's talent in the kitchen.

Particularly interesting is the chapter entitled "In Fame and Fear," which provides information about enslaved cooks of the early presidents, as well as anecdotes relating to "notorious poisoners." Men such as Hercules, George Washington's chef, and "Chef Hemings" who was Thomas Jefferson's enslaved cook, gained widespread notoriety for their talent in the kitchen. As the young country attempted to establish itself in the eyes of the world, it was important that the presidents have excellent cooks, and these men were held in high esteem. Yet this fame often masked the fact that these were still captive men who were at times used to illustrate "front-stage," or "civilized" slavery, to the rest of the world. The presidential household's social structures seemed at times even more complicated than the plantation's, as the White House also combined free laborers and apprentices. The cooks were constantly vulnerable and sometimes their lives ended in misery and anguish. The author also highlights the darker side of the enslaved cook's talent by featuring chefs who poisoned their masters and paid the price with their lives.

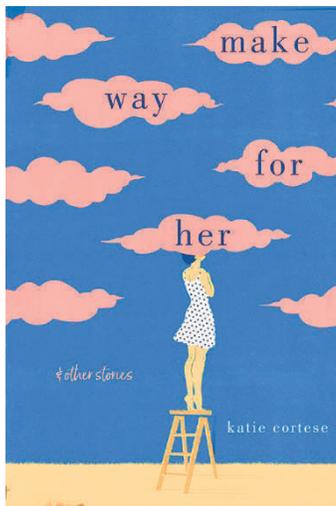
In her last chapter, "In Memory: Kitchen Ghosts," Deetz explains how the legacy of the enslaved cook has "permeated our social, cognitive, and material worlds." She points specifically to the embarrassing use of fictional African American cooks, such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, who have become "sanitized and romanticized" representations of the enslaved black cook in popular culture. Along with the focus on racialized advertising, Deetz stresses her belief that the interpretation of the plantation kitchen, as well as current operations of modern kitchens and social occasions of the wealthy, remain highly bound to concepts of race.

Deetz's well-researched book, *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine*, was nine years in the making and clearly the author is very passionate about the subject, weaving together historical and archaeological research, culinary expertise, and a personal analysis of the enslaved antebellum cook in popular culture. As both a professional cook and a historian, she offers a keen insight into the workings of the kitchens of the past and how they operated. Although there is little left to draw upon to flesh out this history, Deetz has used interesting primary source material including handwritten cookbooks, slave narratives,

artifacts, and local folklore to contextualize the often complex position of the plantation cook. Dispersed throughout the book are authentic recipes from Virginia's antebellum kitchen, contextualized with details of the kitchens and enslaved labor. This is an interesting read for those wanting to learn more about the lives of enslaved cook in antebellum history, southern foodways, and the history of American cuisine.

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**Make Way for Her and Other Stories.** Cortese, Kate. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018. ISBN 978-0-8131-7512-6 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-8131-7512-6 (epub). \$24.95. 188 p.



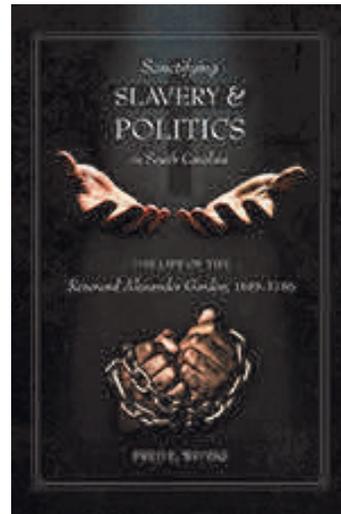
In this thought provoking and delightful selection of ten short stories by Katie Cortese, readers will find female narrators from five to forty relating narratives that are wist, funny, serendipitous, and sad, but always entertaining. In addition to the variety of ages, Cortese, as our guide, challenges us to explore many different places, geographically, situationally, and emotionally. Each story is layered and characters are remarkably well-drawn despite the brevity of the narratives. As the narrators explore their own stories, readers are treated to diverse plots and settings that include dense forests, YMCA cooking class, river boats, writing conferences, first love, and unrequited love. Each narrative has a completely different story to tell, some quite in the realm of examining our daily lives, and at least one with a touch of fantasy. Ultimately, Cortese relates through her well-done fiction that wisdom and observation are not age-related; sometimes they are merely in the right time and place.

Katie Cortese's stories and essays have appeared or are slated for such journals as *Indiana Review*, *Blackbird*, *Gulf Coast*, *Wigleaf*, *The Baltimore Review*, and elsewhere, including the Rose Metal Press anthology, *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres*. She has also authored *Girl Power and*

*other Short-Short Stories* (ELJ Publications, 2015). Cortese holds a PhD from Florida State University and an MFA from Arizona State University, and teaches in the creative writing program at Texas Tech University where she serves as the fiction editor for *Iron Horse Literary Review*.

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**Sanctifying Slavery & Politics in South Carolina: The Life of the Reverend Alexander Garden, 1685-1756.** Fred E. Witzig. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-61117-845-6 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-846-3 (ebook). \$39.99 both formats. 235 p.



Fred E. Witzig, Associate Professor of history at Monmouth College (Monmouth, Illinois), makes a fairly convincing case for the importance of the Anglican Church establishment, largely through the efforts of Alexander Garden, to the development of a southern elite culture ("polite society") that successfully laid the foundations of what became the Old South in South Carolina and beyond.

Garden (1685-1756), whose early life in Scotland remains obscure, was engaged as minister at St. Philip's Church, the only Church of England congregation in Charles Town (now Charleston) in 1720 following the firing of his immediate predecessor and a prolonged period of instability at the church. Witzig speculates that Garden may have accepted such a remote post as a way to escape a possibly "socially despised parentage" in Scotland plus a combination of "opportunism, industry, and ambition" (p. 24). The pay and prestige might have been high, but Garden arrived at a particularly fraught period in the history of South Carolina.

The Yamassee War of 1715 was a devastating event that cast a lingering pall over the colony of South Carolina. Witzig describes a colony laboring under a state of distress, economic hardship, and, adding to the aftereffects of the