

Emory Report
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Paschel peels into the South's food culture

By Michael Alpert

Jarrett Paschel is a self-proclaimed food geek or “foodie,” to use a more yuppie term. The incriminating evidence is the telltale signs of always having been a food fan—the hundred-plus cookbooks, cooking utensils and the renaissance man’s knowledge of wines.

So when the newest postdoctoral fellow at the recently created Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life decided he’d soon begin researching the Vidalia onion (named for Vidalia, Ga.), it seemed entirely in keeping with his passion, as well as with his previous scholastic research and former work as a restaurant critic and food consultant.

“I want to understand the role of the Vidalia onion in our culture,” said Paschel, 34. “I want to know how we’ve come to understand it as distinctive. I want to look at the cultural and historic foundation of the Vidalia onion and how it came to be.”

Though his culinary tastes include an onion’s pungence, Paschel said he might never taste a Vidalia onion as part of his research. Sure, he’ll probably be encouraged to try one at some point in his months of planned interviews with grocers, produce managers, roadside vendors, chefs and others central to the food world, but his or others’ taste testing isn’t part of the scheme.

He instead is focused on why and how an uncharacteristically sweet, mild onion, initially grown in a small town in Toombs County, Ga., in the early 1930s, became that city’s most acclaimed prize, the sought-after Mercedes of onions, the world-known Sauvignon of grocers everywhere. Paschel plans to embark on a course of research to document, among other things, why the Vidalia onion gained the popularity to be named Georgia’s official state vegetable in 1990, a year after a USDA Vidalia Onion Committee was established to fund its research and promote its popularity.

Paschel’s interest in the Vidalia is similar to that of a Seattle Times reporter who in May wrote about the Krispy Kreme doughnut, a foodstuff that had transcended its industry: “a food célébré complete with nostalgic Americana, devoted acolytes and almost religiously ecstatic rolls of the eyes and moans of ‘mmmm’ when describing the taste.”

But for Paschel, it’s how tastes arise that’s important.

“I’m going to research collective taste and preference, not individual taste,” he said. “My goal is not to set up objective taste tests.

“We all know BMW and Mercedes are good, but the question is: How did that get to be?” asked Paschel, who a month ago came to Emory from the University of Washington,

where he performed similar food research for 10 years. “We all kind of know what is good and what isn’t. I want to find out why tastes are what they are.

“For example,” he continued, “if we all started ranking restaurants, we’d probably collectively rank them similarly. You may like foods that are saltier and I sweeter, but we all somehow agree that the fancy French bistro in Decatur is better than McDonald’s.”

Paschel’s research is some of the first at the MARIAL center, which boasts five postdocs, nine faculty members, three grad students and an undergrad honors student since its founding in January and official opening barely a month ago at Emory West. Paschel’s onion work precedes his plans to examine “barbecue culture” and follows his still unpublished research of distinctive type of peach and Copper River salmon while at University of Washington. Like his peach study and forthcoming examination of onions and barbecue, his research into how a particular salmon went from pet food to a restaurant delicacy is among several case studies he hopes to incorporate into a book.

Paschel’s efforts are central to MARIAL’s purpose of researching ritual and myth in middle-class families in the contemporary American South, for which the center was granted \$3.6 million.

Among MARIAL’s other work is that of anthropology Professor George Armelagos, who’s studying social uses of food in family life, and postdocs Pat Wehner and Felicity Paxton, who are looking into creation and impact of family lifestyles and the significance of proms and similar courting rituals.

Bradd Shore, Distinguished Teaching Professor in Anthropology, directs the MARIAL center and said Paschel provides a welcome energy.

“We were looking for somebody to fill some gaps, particularly in the ritual uses of food,” Shore said. “When we heard what Jarrett had been doing [in Washington], we were very excited.

“He brings not only an academic background, but his own unique perspective on food.”