2017 THE **NEW YORKER** INSIDE THE FOOD & TRAVEL ISSUE

The Politics of Barbecue and the Legacy of a White Supremacist

In the April 24, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in "Secrets in the Sauce" (p. 66), **Lauren Collins**, reporting from South Carolina, visits Maurice's Piggie Park, a small chain of barbecue restaurants famous for popularizing the yellow, mustard-based sauce of South Carolina's Midlands area. "The Piggie Park is important in the history of barbecue, which is more or less the history of America," Collins writes. It also has a tainted backstory. In 1968, its founder, Maurice Bessinger, a white supremacist who distributed racist tracts, went to the Supreme Court in an unsuccessful fight against desegregation. In 2000, when the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina statehouse dome, Bessinger, by then the largest barbecue wholesaler in the country, raised Confederate flags over all his restaurants. The N.A.A.C.P. initiated a boycott of Maurice's business, and thousands of South Carolinians, many of whom had grown up on his barbecue, stopped eating it. In 2007, Bessinger handed the business over to his two sons and a daughter, and in the months before his death, in 2014, they took down the flags and got rid of the pro-slavery pamphlets. The regime shift represented a touchy moment. Was it O.K., now, to go back to the Piggie Park? Some people wanted to go only if things had changed; for others, no amount of change was ever going to mitigate the legacy of a man who had caused so much pain.

"One of the reasons I'd become interested in the Bessinger story is that it struck me as a small, imperfect test case for how to act in our political moment," Collins writes. She meets three representatives of the third generation of Bessingers—including Maurice's son, Lloyd, who serves as the public face of the Piggie Park today—each of whom are struggling to move forward without disrespecting the past. "When something or someone you love troubles your conscience," Collins asks, "do you try to be a moderating force, or are you obligated to make a break entirely?" Barbecue is an intensely regional food, and it's also an intensely emotional one. Like Amazon or Uber, it's the sort of thing that people, even people hugely opposed to the ethics of its purveyor, can find hard to give up. Still, Lonnie Randolph, the N.A.A.C.P. state president who led the 2000 boycott of Piggie Park, told Collins he didn't think that it was possible to let the past be the past. "It doesn't affect me'—white people can say that, because it didn't affect them," he said. Things might be different, he acknowledged, if the new generation of Bessingers were taking some sort of active steps toward reparation. But when Collins suggested to Lloyd Bessinger that some people needed a tangible sign that the Bessinger family understood the pain they had caused, he replied, "Well, I don't know how I can do that." Kathleen Purvis, a food editor, told Collins about her own grandmother, "who had beliefs, used language that was awful." Should she denounce her grandmother for that? "Being Southern," Purvis said, "always involves that complicated dance."

Introducing Foodies to Cannabis

In "High Cuisine" (p. 48), Lizzie Widdicombe reports on the boom in marijuana edibles, a category that used to begin and end with the bonedry pot brownie and is now undergoing a gourmet revolution. Evan Senn, the editor of the California-based cannabis magazine *Culture*, said that, increasingly, foodies are the target audience for pot. "I'm not going to drink Franzia out of a cardboard box. I'm going to buy a nice bottle of Pinot Noir and aerate it and enjoy it. I have the same approach to edibles," she said. Widdicombe profiles a leader of the edible revolution, the Oregon food writer Laurie Wolf, who is sometimes called the Martha Stewart of edibles. Wolf sees an industry at a crossroads. Down one path are boutique pot growers turning out harvests that reflect local climates and customs. Down the other is Big Weed: joints by Marlboro and pot cookies by General Mills.

Wolf is the author of several cookbooks; her newest, "Cooking with Cannabis," emphasizes comfort foods like mac and cheese and meatloaf. "Strong flavors help conceal the taste," Wolf said. "It is a challenge to keep the foods from tasting like cannabis. That's probably the hardest thing about making edibles." According to Wolf, the secret to cooking with cannabis is fat—THC, the main psychoactive ingredient, bonds to fat molecules when heated. There are high-tech ways of doing this, but Wolf prefers to do it "the old-fashioned way, with good butter and good oil." Wolf's daughter-inlaw and business partner, Mary, helps Wolf run a baked-goods operation, which sells a line of edibles under the name Laurie & MaryJane. Their brownies went on sale in February, and come in packages of five, which sell for twenty to thirty-three dollars, depending on potency. Wolf currently has them in thirty-five dispensaries, and hopes to conquer Oregon—and then to try for California. "The dream is to be everywhere it's legal," Wolf said. "To be the Mrs. Fields of cannabis foods."

Widdicombe attends the annual Oregon Dope Cup, hosted by *Dope*, a "cannabis lifestyle" magazine. One of the judges, Max Montrose, told Widdicombe, "Most cannabis cups are just complete, utter bullshit." At the Trichome Institute, a Colorado-based outfit, Montrose and his partners developed a "sommelier program for cannabis," to teach people to classify plants by their structures and by compounds that produce fragrance, rather than by strain names. "We look at the trichomes, the ripeness, the flush factor, the cola structures, the style, and the stigma," he said, referring to various biological features of the plant. Consumption quality is judged at a later stage. Laurie & MaryJane entered its



brownies and almond bites in the competition—and the brownie won for Best Sweet Edible, Recreational. After accepting the trophy, Wolf told Widdicombe, "Honestly, I thought if anything was going to win, it would be those almond things. But the fucking brownie! People just love it."

How the Quest for a Simpler Life Became a Life-Style Brand

In "#Vanlife" (p. 40), **Rachel Monroe** explores the bohemian social-media movement vanlife—a one-word life-style signifier that reflects a renewed interest in the American road trip, a culture of hippie-inflected outdoorsiness, and a life free from the tyranny of a nine-to-five office job. Monroe hits the road with professional vanlifers Emily King and Corey Smith, whose project Where's My Office Now has nearly a hundred and forty thousand Instagram followers and a dozen corporate sponsors. In 2013, they left New Hampshire and headed south in a 1987 Volkswagen Vanagon Camper they bought for thirty-five hundred dollars. They figured they could live cheaply in a van while placing what they loved—travelling, surfing, mountain biking—at the center of their lives. In 2016, Where's My Office Now posted its first paid, sponsored image to Instagram, on behalf of the water-bottle company Hydro Flask. King and Smith began working more product placement into their Instagram posts, and in the first two months of 2017 they had already lined up ten thousand dollars' worth of endorsements. Smith and King said that they work only with brands they feel connected to. "We try to leverage the power we have as influencers in the social-media world to bring light to companies that are doing good in the world, that are creating products we believe in," King explained.

Scroll through the images tagged #vanlife on Instagram—there are more than 1.2 million—and you'll see plenty of photos that don't have much to do with vehicles: starry skies, campfires, women in leggings doing yoga by the ocean. Vanlife, as a concept and as a self-defined community, is primarily a social-media phenomenon. Nearly all of the most popular accounts belong to young, attractive, white, heterosexual couples. "There's the pretty van girl and the woodsy van guy," Smith said. "That's what people want to see." Monroe writes, "At times, the vanlife community seems full of millennials living out a leftover baby-boomer fantasy: the Volkswagens, the neo-hippie fashions, the retro gender dynamics." But for all its twee escapism, vanlife is a trend born out of the recent recession. "We heard all these promises about what will happen after you go to college and get a degree," Smith said. "We graduated at a time when all that turned out to be a bunch of bullshit." The generation that's fuelling the trend has significantly more student debt and lower rates of homeownership than previous cohorts. "I think there's a sense of hopelessness in my generation, in terms of jobs," Foster Huntington, who popularized the vanlife hashtag in 2011 said. "And it's cheap to live in a van." And so, Monroe writes, "like staycations and minimalism, vanlife is an attempt to aestheticize and romanticize the precariousness of contemporary life."

A Father and Son Go in Search of an Epic

In "An Odyssey" (p. 54), **Daniel Mendelsohn** writes about the journey he took with his father to retrace the mythic hero Odysseus's decade-long itinerary from Troy to Ithaca, and reflects on how the experience helped him process his father's life and, not long after their trip ended, his death. At eighty-one, Mendelsohn's father asked if he could sit in on an undergraduate seminar Mendelsohn was teaching on the Odyssey, at Bard College. "At ten past ten each Friday morning, he would take a seat among the freshmen, who were not even a quarter his age, and join in the discussion of this old poem," Mendelsohn writes. A Bronx-born retired computer scientist with strong opinions, Mendelsohn's father soon questioned whether Odysseus was much of a hero, because, "he's a liar and he cheated on his wife," and "he keeps getting help from the gods!" A month after the end of the semester, Mendelsohn and his father were on a "Journey of Odysseus" cruise in the Mediterranean. "During our ten days at sea, we saw nearly everything we'd hoped to see, the strange new landscapes and the debris of the various civilizations that had occupied them," Mendelsohn writes. But, because of nationwide strikes in Greece, their journey was cut short before they reached Ithaca, Odysseus' home and the last stop of the tour. "The Odyssey itself, filled as it is with sudden mishaps and surprising detours, schools its hero in disappointment and teaches its audience to expect the unexpected," Mendelsohn writes. "For this reason, I came to feel that our not reaching Ithaca may have been the most Odyssean aspect of the whole excursion."

Plus: In Comment, Jelani Cobb writes about Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who, as much as anyone in the Trump Administration, "seems eager to eradicate any trace of Barack Obama's tenure," particularly on the issue of criminal-justice reform (p. 35); in the Financial Page, Adam David-son considers why agglomerations of businesses find it profitable to stay close to one another (p. 41); in Shouts & Murmurs, Josh Lieb imagines what it's like to be Trump's caddy (p. 49); Kathryn Schulz considers why so many writers have been drawn to the North Pole (p. 88); Laura Miller reads Jeff VanderMeer's new novel, "Borne" (p. 98); Peter Schjeldahl views "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction," at the Museum of Modern Art (100); Hua Hsu listens to "World Spirituality Classics 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda," a collection of music drawn from cassettes she released between 1982 and 1995 (p. 101); Anthony Lane reviews Terence Davies's "A Quiet Passion" and F. Gary Gray's "The Fate of the Furious" (p. 104); a portfolio by Newsha Tavakolian featuring photographs of vacations in Iran (p. 74); a Sketchbook by Bruce McCall on various kinds of coconuts (p. 60); poetry by Conor Bracken (p. 62) and Anna McDonald (p. 71); and new ficton by Lara Vapnyar (p. 82).

Podcasts: Dorothy Wickenden and Joshua Yaffa discuss recent developments in the relationship between the United States and Russia; David Remnick speaks with Katharine Hayhoe, the director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech, about the effect of politics on climate change; Andrew Motion reads his poem "Waders" and Alice Oswald's poem "Evening Poem" and discusses them with Paul Muldoon; and Lara Vapnyar reads her short story "Deaf and Blind."

Digital Extras: A recipe for cannabis-infused chocolate bark from Laurie Wolf; additional photographs of Maurice's Piggie Park; additional photographs of vacations in Iran; art works from "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction"; and **Anna McDonald** reads her poem.

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