
**Reviewed by** Sarah Wassberg Johnson (Independent Scholar)

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**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

In *Grain and Fire,* Rebecca Sharpless tackles a massive topic: the history of baking in the American South. While she examines this wide-ranging topic, addressing multicultural influences and combining social, technological, and economic history, Sharpless also tells a broader history of baking overall.

*Grain and Fire* is divided into eight chapters covering the precolonial period to the civil rights era, and the conclusion addresses modern influences on southern baking. Each chapter is arranged around a specific type of baked good. “Acorn Bread,” the first chapter, chronicles the difficulties of baking from precontact and the agricultural failures of the early colonial period. In “Rosquetes de Azucar,” chapter 2, Sharpless introduces enslaved Africans and recounts how European colonists struggled to reproduce the flavors of home. The next chapter, “Plumb Cakes,” chronicles the early eighteenth century as European colonists developed mills, adapted to Indigenous ingredients, and learned to grow grain and bake in the New World, often with the forced labor of enslaved Africans. “Hoecake,” chapter 4, tackles the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focusing on corn and its role in enslavement and also addressing the development of early forms of now-familiar southern foods. Chapter 5, “Raison Cake,” takes on the Civil War, its privations in the American South, and its impact on southern baking, while chapter 6, “White Mountain Cake,” examines the postbellum period, income inequality, and the rise of chemical leaveners and cookstoves. “Jelly Roll,” the seventh chapter, chronicles the modernizing South from World War I to the Great Depression. And chapter 8, “Chiffon Pie,” looks at the role of food in the civil rights era as well as the growth of classic southern desserts influenced by industrial foods. “Pastel de Tres Leches” serves as a conclusion, looking at modern southern food and its influence. From examining hoecakes to Lady Baltimore cake and chiffon pie, Sharpless deftly weaves together social histories of individual men and women with the agricultural and technological influences on developments in baking.
Grains and Fire is eminently readable; Sharpless writes in an engaging and jargon-free style. As soon as readers wonder if she is going to address a certain food or topic, she generally does. Well-read food historians and practiced southern bakers may find lots of familiar ground, but the book is a wonderful introduction for an audience new to food history.

However, despite the excellent footnoting, there are a few issues. The earlier chapters are the strongest. Sharpless gives an excellent overview of the development of baking in the South, including the difficulties in growing various grains; the technological developments in milling and baking; and the melding of Indigenous, African, and European cooking styles and ingredients to create what we know as southern baking today. The later chapters, especially “White Mountain Cake” on, feel a bit rushed. Although these chapters are slightly longer than the earlier ones, they cram in far more information into a smaller space, leaving less time for analysis. In particular, “Chiffon Pie,” with the subheading “Civil Rights and Sameness,” scarcely addresses the civil rights movement beyond the first three pages and instead turns into a rapid-fire summary of various dishes developed in the post-World War II period, everything from chiffon pie and quick breads to the rise of Krispy Kreme and Little Debbie.

A lack of context and analysis is the biggest weakness of Grain and Fire. For instance, although Sharpless devotes entire chapters to wheat and corn, the production of sugar in the American South and its reliance on enslavement, while mentioned briefly, is largely overlooked. This is true also of later chapters, where Sharpless references the increasing cheapness and availability of refined white sugar as a major influence in the proliferation of southern desserts, without illuminating the reasons why.

While Sharpless does an excellent job of including individual enslaved and African American cooks and entrepreneurs in Grain and Fire, she sometimes fails to connect the role of racism to the prevalence of African Americans in food service jobs, especially post-Civil War. And although she briefly mentions early African American cookbook authors, like Malinda Russell and Abby Fisher, she also fails to connect the rise of the popularity of southern food post-Civil War to the concerted efforts of the Lost Cause movement, whose southern cookbooks proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and whose influence rebranded the South as a center of hospitality and genteel living—conveniently overlooking the role of enslavement in plantation life. This lack of context becomes a bit glaring in the conclusion chapter, in which Sharpless addresses the modern resurgence in interest in southern cuisine, without addressing some of the racial complications around that topic. This omission is especially surprising given Sharpless’s previous work, including her book Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960 (2010).

Grain and Fire is mostly a chronology of baking in the South, focused on popular dishes. While the chronology is excellent, the focus on individual dishes without addressing the reasons behind their development ends up like bread without enough salt. It tastes a bit flat. The book overall would have benefited from additional context to address not only how southern baking developed but also why it developed as it did, especially from the post-Civil War period on. The book is only 216 pages without footnotes (which themselves are wonderfully extensive); devoting more time to in-depth analysis and context would have made the book stronger overall.

That being said, Sharpless does tackle an enormous topic, and the book is a good overview of baking in the South. It covers a wide range of classic southern desserts and places them in their historical periods, acknowledging the important roles of Indigenous and Black labor, knowledge, and creativity in developing many of the familiar
foods so many people know and love today as well as addressing the influence of other immigrant groups, including Italians, Germans, and European Jews. Grain and Fire takes a clear-eyed look at an often-romanticized past and provides ample evidence to debunk commons myths and misconceptions. For anyone interested in food history, food studies, or the American South, Grain and Fire is a pleasurable and worthwhile read.

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