

unity



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture

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Chef Vivian Howard: Prolific cook, steeped in Southern culture

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Unity is published in February (Black History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Pride Month), August (Back to School), September (Hispanic Heritage Month), October (National Disability Employment Awareness Month), November (Native American Heritage Month) and December (Holiday Celebrations Around the World).

From publishing-house receptionist to stand-up comic

In 2014, when comedian Tara Brown was living in Charlotte, North Carolina, she found herself with extra time on her hands. She searched “things to do” online and was intrigued by the seven-week comedy class at The Comedy Zone that popped up. Brown signed up. “I’m pretty funny, so I’ve been told,” Brown says. “I come from a long line of funny people.”

Brown grew up in a single-parent household in Brooklyn, New York. Her mother worked evenings at the veterans administration hospital, and Brown was entrusted to get home from school and finish her schoolwork each day. The community looked out for her.

“I remember at 13 years old understanding how hard my mom was working and the sacrifices she was making,” Brown explains. “I didn’t want to disappoint her. I rose to the occasion.”

After three years at Baruch College in New York City, Brown left school in 1990 to pursue a career in book publishing. She started as a receptionist with Penguin Books and eventually moved to publicity. In 1996, she joined HarperCollins Publishing’s public relations department. But in 2003, she moved to Charlotte to be closer to her mother.

After finishing the comedy class, Brown continued to hone her craft. Over time, she developed her comedic voice: observational stories that are clean and relatable. Her influences are comedians with sharp, smart humor such as Nate Bargatze, Tina Fey, Anjelah Johnson, Eddie Murphy and Amy Poehler.

“This whole concept of me talking about being a woman of a certain age, things that women go through, resonated with people,” she says.

Brown always wears her late grandfather’s onyx ring on stage. She remembers how much it meant when he introduced her to a group of nursing home residents as his granddaughter and best friend. He was a very funny person, she says. When she met actor Sidney Poitier years later while working in the publishing industry, she shared one of her grandfather’s jokes with him.

“The thing I regret most about this comedy thing is my grandfather never lived to see me do comedy,” Brown says. “He would have gotten the biggest kick out of it.”



Over time, Tara Brown developed her comedic voice: observational stories that are clean and relatable. Photo by Cynthia Clarke Photography

While Brown worked days in a media relations position at INSP, an independent television station in Indian Land, South Carolina, she performed nights at local comedy clubs in the Charlotte region. She’d performed at almost every venue in the city and was lovingly referred to as the “Godmother of Charlotte Comedy.”

“I was getting so many great opportunities that it became more than just a side hustle,” Brown says. “I had to make a decision about what I was going to do.”

When Brown reached out to Zanies, a comedy club in Nashville, Tennessee, the manager invited her to test material at the weekly show, “New Material Monday.” The experience made Brown reconsider her commitment to Charlotte. Was she ready for a new challenge and to pursue comedy full-time?

In 2023, Brown quit her day job and moved to Nashville. She’s since performed on Carnival Cruise Line and at casinos, churches, theaters and minor league baseball fields. Before Brown gets on stage, she reminds herself that she’s the funniest person in the room. She uses a breathing technique to ease her nerves.

“I remember to have fun,” she says. “People want to see me do well. They came to laugh; they came to have a good time. Let’s do it.”

How a national nonprofit helps widows secure their finances



"Our goal is to meet clients where they are and provide the most holistic approach as possible," says Olivia Oster, giving and operations manager at Wings for Widows. Photo courtesy of Olivia Oster

A few months after Jean Jones' husband died in 2022, she reached out to Wings for Widows (W4W), a nonprofit based in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, for financial advice. W4W "provides financial coaching and education to help widowed men and women navigate the financial disruption of early widowhood."

Although family and friends offered to guide Jones, she wanted a certified financial planner, a finance expert with a professional certificate, to review her situation. "Out of desperation, I sought out some help to ascertain where I was financially," says Jones, a Pennsylvania resident. "(My husband) had managed all the finances during our 41 years of marriage."

Once Jones connected with [W4W](#), she completed an online assessment and was paired with a coach who is a volunteer CFP. As a client, Jones also received "The New Widow's Guide to Financial Wellness: A Workbook for Navigating Uncharted Waters After a Spouse Dies," by W4W's founder and CEO Christopher Bentley.

Jones met with her coach online six times, and each session was focused on the areas she was most concerned about. Jones and the coach used the book to follow the steps on topics meaningful to her. "It gave me a good sense of confidence," Jones explains. "I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me and I had to go from a 'we' situation to a 'me' situation. I thought I could do it, but I wasn't sure."

Bentley, a seasoned CFP, recognized a gap in the industry when his business partner died unexpectedly, and his business partner's wife was left to figure out the couple's finances. Bentley saw how most people don't have access to a financial planner.

"After that experience he decided he wanted to change the narrative so others wouldn't feel as lost and hopeless," says Olivia Oster, the giving and operations manager at W4W.

Since the organization's formation in 2017, W4W has served 2,200 people – 95% women and 5% men who have lost a spouse or life partner. Services are virtual so clients come from all over the United States.

The nonprofit relies on 100 volunteer coaches: CFPs (some who are also widows) donating their time to carry out its mission. Many find their way to W4W because it is one of several dozen organizations recommended through the Foundation of Financial Planning, a nonprofit connecting CFPs to community organizations for pro bono work. Funding for W4W comes from corporate sponsorship, grants, individual donations and membership fees.

"That partnership has been instrumental to how we locate and vet willing certified financial planners who come on board as coaches with us," Oster says.

W4W offers various options for clients seeking help. Those who want to navigate the journey on their own may use the free digital toolbox with downloadable forms, checklists and to-do lists on the website. Full-service coaching, WidowWise University and a combination of DIY and time with a financial planner are accessed through a tiered membership model. The Project Cares Scholarship supports those unable to pay a membership fee.

"Every person's loss is different, and grief is multifaceted," Oster says. "Our goal is to meet clients where they are and provide the most holistic approach as possible."



Credit: Courtesy of Wings for Widows

Artistry, functionality, simplicity in every stitch

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Amish quilts are a celebrated American folk art, known for their distinctive aesthetic and masterful craftsmanship. These quilts reflect the lifestyle, cultural values and creativity of the Amish communities primarily in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana. The exhibition and catalog, "Pattern and Paradox: The Quilts of Amish Women," highlights these quilts as functional household items as well as art objects for sale.

According to Janneken Smucker, a fifth-generation Mennonite quiltmaker of Amish Mennonite heritage and author of the catalog, Amish quilt making became popular in their communities as stitching quilts became a widespread practice among American women at large in the late 19th century. Quickly, the Amish began reflecting the stoic values of the Amish faith - humility, community and a focus on utility rather than excess - in their quilts.

Unlike many other quilt styles, which may include printed fabrics, Amish quilts traditionally use only solid-colored fabrics, as observed in the featured

quilt "Center Diamond." The simple geometric design uses four colors: dark green, sky blue, burgundy and electric blue. This choice stems from Amish values that emphasize simplicity and avoidance of worldly adornment. Amish quilts are also known for being meticulously hand quilted, which adds texture and detail to the designs. The quilting stitches of some regions use more rigid, geometric piecing while others incorporate more intricate, flowing patterns, such as feathers, wreaths or scrolls. These tiny, even stitches are a mark of the skill and patience involved in the process.

The exhibition, curated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, reveals how Amish women initially used quilt making to explore creative expression in a society that intentionally separates itself from mainstream culture and deeply values adherence to rules.

In the late 20th century, Amish quilts became highly sought after objects by interested parties nationwide because of Amish simplicity and resemblance to abstractionist masterpieces. These include quilts like



Unidentified, Center Diamond, ca. 1930, cotton and wool, 80 1/2 × 79 3/4 in. (204.5 × 202.6 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2022.4.1



Unidentified, Sunshine and Shadow, ca. 1930, cotton, wool, and synthetic fabrics, 87 7/8 × 88 7/8 in. (223.2 × 225.7 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.4

“Sunshine and Shadow,” with its muted hues of green, purple, red and blue, and bright shades of orange and turquoise like the color palette used by abstract artist Josef Albers. Similarly, this quilt’s undulating blocks create optical illusions reminiscent of the work of Victor Vasarely.

Collectors also valued these original quilts for their connection to the mainstream’s romantic ideals of Amish communities as societies unblemished by modern technology and rampant consumerism. According to Smucker, their way of life, known as *Ordnung*, “regulates symbolic separators that distinguish Amish from other Americans, such as limited use of technology, distinctive dress and prohibition of formal education beyond the eighth grade.”

However, despite popular belief, *Ordnung* changed as necessary. Nonetheless, the Amish still signify simpler living and a deliberate shunning of contemporary culture that many collectors seem to connect with. Today, these quilts are highly prized by collectors and often fetch high prices in the art market.

Over time, different settlements began stylizing their quilts with particular fabrics, patterns and colors. For example, the color choices are influenced by regional and religious factors – some communities favor deep, saturated colors like burgundy, royal blue and dark green, as seen in “Center Diamond,” while others might use more muted tones. Some Amish communities now sell them to non-Amish buyers. The Center Diamond pattern is a design characteristic of the Lancaster County Amish, and is one of the most sought after patterns due to its simple but striking aesthetic. The “Ocean Waves” (circa 1920) quilt features its namesake pattern that includes cascading blocks of fabric creating small triangles of contrasting bold and subdued colors. This style and the patterns in “Tumbling Blocks” are typically made by Ohio Amish communities.

The simplicity, craftsmanship and practicality of Amish quilts embody the values of the Amish faith – humility, community and a focus on utility rather than excess. Each quilt, while crafted individually, is part of a broader cultural expression of faith and identity. Amish quilts are more than just bedding; they are beautiful, functional artworks and treasured heirlooms that tell the story of a unique American community.



Unidentified, Ocean Waves, ca. 1920, cotton and cotton sateen, 70 1/8 × 61 5/8 in. (178.1 × 156.5 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.2



Unidentified, Tumbling Blocks, ca. 1930, cotton and wool, 88 7/8 × 75 3/4 in. (225.7 × 192.4 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Faith and Stephen Brown, 2021.67.1

Prolific cook, steeped in Southern culture



"My coming back was ultimately part of this downtown revitalization effort," Vivian Howard says about opening Chef & The Farmer in Kinston, North Carolina. Photo by Baxter Miller

In 2001, Chef Vivian Howard moved to Brooklyn, New York, from Deep Run, North Carolina, a rural town 90 minutes southeast of the state's capital, to pursue journalism. To supplement her income, she waited tables at a Greenwich Village restaurant, eventually moving into the kitchen to develop skills that could help her as a food writer.

"It turned out that I very much enjoyed cooking," says Howard, now an author and restaurateur best known as host of the award-winning "A Chef's Life" series on PBS. "I like the camaraderie in the kitchen."

On Sundays in Brooklyn, Howard cooked soup for her housemates in their kitchen. When friends suggested she build a small business around the chili, soups and cheddar crackers she was making, she began sending an email on Sundays, listing what soups were available for that week. The quantity of soup became so large, she had to cool the quart containers of soup in a tub of ice in the bathroom before storing them in the refrigerator. On Wednesdays, her day off, she and her then-boyfriend, Ben Knight (now her ex-husband), would deliver the soup orders.

"Wednesdays were the time when The New York Times food section came out," she says. "I would read that aloud while we drove around the city delivering our soup."

Howard enrolled at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York and continued working at restaurants and making soup on the side. After finishing the program in 2003, a customer offered to invest in a soup-and-sandwich shop in New York. When she told her family, they offered to help her and Knight open a restaurant in Kinston, a town close to Deep Run. Chef & The Farmer launched in 2006 and quickly became a destination for travelers.

"At the time, the downtown was boarded up and dilapidated," she says. "My coming back was ultimately part of this downtown revitalization effort."

During the pandemic, Howard opened Lenoir and Handy and Hot in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. Chef & The Farmer closed in 2020 but opened with two new concepts in the Kinston location in 2024: The Kitchen Bar @ Chef & The Farmer, a seven-course dinner for 16 people, offered a few times a month, and The Counter @ Chef & The Farmer, a casual eatery with Southern favorites.

"The pandemic happened and all of these trains that I was on, stopped," Howard says. "I was able to think about the things in my professional life that were working for me and those that were not and I came to this conclusion, I wanted to have some connection to the people who were my fans. I am a natural teacher, and I thought, what if I brought people in and spent actual time with them. I bring in a guest chef to cook with me each time. It's a very intimate experience."



During the pandemic, Howard opened Lenoir and Handy and Hot in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. Photo by Baxter Miller

Book whets kids' appetite for healthy food, adventure



Mary Payne Moran is a graduate of The California School in Culinary Arts. Credit: Jana Bee Photography

Superhero vitamins save the day in Chef Mary Payne Moran's children's book, "The Vita Gang Mysteries: Who Stole Vita D?" With villains Franco Fry and his sidekick Carl Candy holding Vita D atop Brussels Sprouts Mountain, only Super Chef Mary and The Vita Gang can rescue their friend.

"I am teaching children about the benefits of eating healthy foods, the benefits of vitamins and what they do for the body," Moran says. "(I am) inspiring children to cook, motivating them to live a more balanced lifestyle. And have some fun along the way."

The Vita Gang Mysteries, published in 2024 and available on Amazon and publisher [BookBaby](#), is ideal for children in kindergarten through fourth grade. Moran is working on the second book in the series, and minerals will make an appearance alongside the vitamin superheroes. She's pulling important minerals from the periodic table.

"Not only are we teaching the benefits of the minerals," she explains, "it's a slow introduction to the periodic table."

When Moran was growing up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, her mom operated a gingerbread house business. Her love for food started then. "My job as an 11- and 12-year-old was to make the candy that would be the packages and toys that we'd stick under the trees for the gingerbread house," she says.

After high school, Moran attended several colleges. When she finally understood food was her passion, she enrolled in The California School in Culinary Arts and graduated in 2002.

"When I took a step back to look at my life, that's what made me happy, so I enrolled in culinary school," she explains. "It was a perfect fit."

Moran lives in Los Angeles, California, with her husband and two children. When she's not on the road promoting her book and giving cooking demonstrations on television, she teaches in-person and virtual classes through her business, The Silver Lake Kitchen, a cooking academy in Los Angeles.

"With kids, I feel like it's important to empower them to cook for real," Moran says. "We make sure each child makes a meal from start to finish, on their own but with supervision and permission."

Couscous bowl

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 can artichokes in water, drained and quartered
- 1 cup cooked couscous in a separate bowl
- 2 cups fresh spinach
- 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup whole walnuts, toasted
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cracked fresh pepper
- 1/4 cup Italian parsley chopped

Directions

Add vegetable oil to a large sauté pan on medium-high heat. Add the artichokes cut side down to the pan and sear until brown. Turn the artichokes and brown the other side. Remove the artichokes from the pan and add them to the couscous.

Add the spinach to the same sauté pan and lightly cook for 3 or 4 minutes until wilted. Add the spinach to the couscous. Toss the couscous mixture with lemon juice, olive oil, artichokes, walnuts and Parmesan. Add salt and pepper. Garnish with parsley.

Prolific cook, steeped in Southern culture

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Beet Salad

By Chef Vivian Howard

Servings: 4

Ingredients

- 2 cups roasted beets, peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch rounds or small wedges
- 1 teaspoon rosemary, finely chopped
- Zest of 1 orange, removed with a grater
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 2 tablespoons aged balsamic vinegar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 5 turns of the pepper mill or 1/8 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 oranges
- 2/3 cup salt-and-butter roasted pecans
- 1 tablespoon olive oil for finishing

Buttermilk Blue Cheese Dressing

- 4 ounces high-quality blue cheese
- 1/2 cup buttermilk
- 1/4 cup heavy cream (very cold)

Directions

Dressing: Combine the blue cheese and buttermilk in the bowl of your food processor. Blend it till smooth. You'll need to stop and scrape down the sides with a spatula a couple of times. Meanwhile, beat the heavy cream with a whisk until it reaches stiff peaks. Turn the buttermilk blue cheese into the whipped cream and fold the two into each other gently. Whipping the cream and folding it into the blue cheese is best done just before serving. The dressing loses some of its fluff over time.

Assemble and serve: In a medium bowl, stir together the beets, rosemary, zest, honey, balsamic vinegar, salt and black pepper. Supreme (remove the pith and membrane) the oranges over the bowl with the marinating beets and let the orange juice drop. Set the oranges aside and let the beets marinate for at least 30 minutes and up to 2 hours at room temperature. Spoon a nice dollop of dressing on the bottom of your plate. Top with the marinated beets, oranges and pecans, and drizzle with the finishing oil.

On the cover: Chef Vivian Howard. Photo by Baxter Miller. Articles on pages 2, 3, 6 and 7 by Vanessa Infanzon. Article on pages 4 and 5 by Picture That Editorial Team. Published eight times per year, *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com. ©2025 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by [Content Spectrum](http://ContentSpectrum.com).



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