



Making Biscuits

Four mornings a week, Gladys Stover fixes breakfast at The Castle Bed & Breakfast on Ocracoke Island. She fries the bacon, whips up casseroles, rolls out the biscuits, and talks, about food and about life.

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photography by Whitebox Weddings



The smile seldom leaves Gladys Stover's face as she works through her day.

A weaker person might not make the biscuits.

Gladys Stover has already been cooking for an hour. She's made the first pot of coffee, started some sausage, bacon, eggs, hash browns, and pulled together a spinach-and-egg casserole. And now it's 7 a.m., and 20 people are about to come downstairs expecting food, and she's gotta pour the juice, and she's gotta fix the fruit, and she's gotta clean the mess in her kitchen, and, oh, Lord, is there really enough time for biscuits?

Stover is 70 years old, a grandmother and great-grandmother who keeps her hair in a bun. She's in the kitchen at The Castle Bed & Breakfast on Ocracoke Island, where she makes breakfast four days a week.

She talks when she cooks. It helps her.

She talks like a grandmother talks. She talks fast, and she jumps back and forth between the food and life. Sometimes, she talks about both at once. She talks about lessons she learned growing up as a black girl on a farm with servant parents, living as a black woman who saw her neighborhood go up in flames in the 1960s, pressing on as a mother whose two sons died in a car accident in the 1980s. She talks about God. She believes she's in a tough spot right now, with the biscuits, but she believes she's had it worse, and she believes Jesus had it worse than that.

So she stuffs her hand in the Crisco and starts to make the biscuits. She doesn't need a measuring cup.

"My parents taught me that there's no, 'I can't,'" she says. "So I don't have a choice. I have to get it done."

Then she keeps talking. And she keeps cooking.

Stover learned to cook by making food for somebody her parents called master. It was the 1940s, and they lived on a white family's farm in the mountains, near Caroleen. Her dad worked in the fields, and her mom worked in the house, and both jobs earned their family a place to live.

But her mother began having trouble with her spine and became bedridden. Someone had to take over her duties — someone had to cook — or they'd be moved out and another family would be moved in.

Stover was the oldest in a family that eventually included seven children. So the job of cooking, the job

of saving the family from being kicked out, fell to her.

She was 6.

"Someone had to help the lady in the big house, or we had to move," Stover says now. Her mother taught her recipes from bed. The owner of the farm cut down a tree and her father made a stool for Stover so she could reach the stove.

Stover says her father was a good man. He taught her to be honest. Once, she caught him taking wheat from the farm's owner and asked him why he was stealing. Her father said he'd been accused

of stealing wheat by another farmhand.

"And if he was going to be blamed," she recalls him telling her, "he might as well be guilty."

Her family soon moved to another farm, in Mill Spring. Because she had to work, often outside, Stover could only go to school when the weather was bad. One day, she recalls, it started raining. She ran six miles, soaking wet, to catch the school bus.

People are starting to wake up. The manager of The Castle walks into the kitchen and asks Stover if she needs help.

"I'm trying something all at once here," Stover says to the manager, laughing and cracking two eggs together for speed's sake.

The manager makes a new pot of coffee and starts to pour the juice.

The Castle, an 11-room bed and breakfast, was built during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. It was renovated in the 1990s and now stands as one of the premier places to stay on the island.

There's a separate dining room for people who want a secluded breakfast. But there's a table in the kitchen, too. With bed-pressed hair and groggy expressions, many guests pour their first cups of coffee and never leave the kitchen once they catch a piece of Stover's story.

She married at 15, found a boy a mile-and-a-half from her home in Green Creek. They had their first child a year later, and they moved to Asheville.

"I was looking for a way out of my situation," she says. "I ran away from home and got married. I wanted my daughter to be able to go to school."



They stayed in Asheville for five years, had another child, and built a life. Then her husband was laid off. He was a man who believed in providing for his family, she says. So with Stover expecting another child, her husband moved the family to New Jersey and started his own cleaning service.

Things were going fine. But it was the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, and turmoil surrounded them. One night in 1967, Stover and her husband woke up and looked out their window in Newark. Their entire city block was on fire.

They packed up, that day, and moved back to Asheville. They later moved to South Carolina for a short time, and then they came back to Asheville.

Eventually, she took a job at Hardee's, as a biscuit-maker.

Things are under control with the breakfast. Stover pulls another sheet of bacon from the oven and pulls it off the paper.

The casserole, the hash browns, and the eggs are all warming under the heat lamp. One of the owners of The Castle walks in and pours coffee. He smiles when he sees Gladys. She smiles back and laughs big when she says, "I was telling them we needed a new stove in here!"

Stover is a member of the family here. She works four mornings a week at The Castle and then heads over to the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching building, where teachers from around the state come for seminars that inspire them to advance themselves and their profession. The center sits on a spectacular piece of property with a view of Silver Lake from its front yard and a view of the Pamlico Sound from the back. And it is clean — because that's how Stover keeps it.

She cleans the center from about 10 a.m. until about 7 p.m. She also cleans rental cottages on weekends.

"My two favorite jobs: The first is cooking, and the second is cleaning," she says. "Well, it should be the first one is cleaning and the second one is cooking, I guess, because I'm not going to cook in a dirty kitchen!"

Stover says she doesn't talk much when she's not working. She works all the time.

She scans her kitchen now and wonders whether there are enough eggs. The biscuits are almost done. She wipes down her counter.

For the first 40 years of her life, even through all that traveling on all those interstates with her family, Stover says she had an uncontrollable fear of tractor-trailers. She also had a recurring dream. In that dream, hearses were driving down a mountain. There were two of them, and they were coming around a corner.

On April 22, 1981, Stover was at home in Asheville. She turned on the television and saw a brief news clip of a terrible car accident in Florida. A car hit a tractor-trailer. Her two sons, the only boys of her five children, were musicians in a church group. The group was in Florida.

They were 23 and 20. During the funeral procession, two hearses drove around a curve down a mountain between Asheville and Polk County.

Stover says she immediately lost her fear of tractor-trailers. And, with time, she eventually went back to work at Hardee's.

"It wasn't easy, but if it's God's plan, you can get through it," Stover says. "Put no more on you than you can bear."

It's almost time to eat. There's a knock on the kitchen door. It's Stover's oldest daughter. She lives here, in Ocracoke, as do several other members of Stover's family.

The daughter needs to use Stover's cell phone. They're sharing one. Stover announces her presence: "Hey, y'all, this is my daughter!"

Her daughter waves to the people at The Castle, takes the cell phone, and goes home.

In 1989, Stover owned a Laundromat in Asheville, when Hurricane Hugo tore up through the Carolinas and caused mass evacuations on the coast. A married couple who left Ocracoke stayed in Asheville. They knew Stover from her Laundromat. Their car had died, and they needed a ride back.

They paid Stover \$100 to drive them. She spent the night in a hotel on the island. When she woke up the next morning, preparing to drive back, she started helping the housekeeper clean up. The hotel manager saw her, and he told her she could come back for seasonal work if she wanted.

Stover cleaned the hotel the following two summers. Then she moved here. Her husband died two years later, and her mother a year after that. She's been living here ever since, working in hospitality.

One of her first jobs was cooking at a pizza place. She got fired for not making pizzas fast enough. Then she found a job making breakfast.

Gladys Stover has been up since 4 a.m. She likes to get up early so she can watch a religious program on television. Today, during that program, she saw a commercial clip of a little girl in another country, a poor country. The commercial asks people to donate money for kids, such as the little girl. Stover has seen that commercial several times lately, and she's been watching closely. Stover is 70 years old, and she

says she has two things she wants to accomplish during the 50 years she knows God has left for her before she dies: She wants to go back to school to get a diploma, and she wants to send that little girl money.

So she cooks. And she talks.

It's 8:30 now, eating time.

"Getcha some food, y'all," she says.

It's Stover's favorite time of the morning, when she

can watch the guests at The Castle eat. She lingers for a few minutes before wrapping up a plate for herself and taking it off to her next job, cleaning at the teachers' center. She won't eat her own breakfast until 10 a.m., same as every day.

As she pulls off in her truck to make the mile-long drive from job to job, she smiles and waves. Except for the brief moment of hesitation with the biscuits,

Stover hasn't stopped smiling all morning. Not once.

One of the keys to making a good biscuit is to not overwork it, to not spend too much time dwelling on the kneading. In fact, compared to other foods, biscuits are pretty simple.

But just more than an hour ago, Stover, a woman who has lived through race riots and both of her sons dying, was fretting over biscuits. For just that minute, just that moment before she slid her hand into the Crisco, she lost the one thing that has carried her through life; she lost her perspective.

So she spent the rest of her time talking, coming back around. You see, cooking and cleaning are not Stover's way of escaping the past. Instead, cooking and cleaning help her talk about the past.

And talking about the past helps her remember that biscuits are easy. 🐾

Michael Graff is the associate editor of Our State magazine.

Visit

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An advertisement for the Foundation for Shackleford Horses. The top half features a photograph of two horses swimming in the ocean. Overlaid on the water is the text "History on Hooves" in a large, white, serif font. Below the photo is a circular logo with a horse and a lighthouse, surrounded by the text "Foundation For Shackleford Horses". To the right of the logo, the text reads "North Carolina's State Horse" in a gold, serif font. Below that, it says "Adoptions available" in a smaller font, followed by "Your tax-deductible donations fund our work for the horses" and "An all-volunteer organization". At the bottom, the website "www.shacklefordhorses.org" is listed in a gold, serif font.