

Episode Title: Vivian Howard's Tom Thumb Nachos

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, talks to chef, restaurateur, author, and five-time James Beard Award semi-finalist Vivian Howard about her latest book, her North Carolina roots and the unique experience of both opening and closing a restaurant during the pandemic.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guest today is an acclaimed chef from North Carolina, and thanks to her hit PBS program, A Chef's Life, the first woman since Julia Child to win a Peabody award for culinary broadcasting. Over her career, she's found that the ways Southern food traditions are passed down are just as important as the food itself.*

VIVIAN HOWARD: That's the way that so many of these, like rural recipes are. they're so simple and so mundane that, you know, people never even wrote them down. There's so many things that are kind of cornerstones of rural culture that no one's ever thought to really celebrate.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Five-time James Beard award semi-finalist Vivian Howard is the restaurateur behind Chef & the Farmer, which opened in 2006 in the little town of Kinston, North Carolina, and has remained one of the most influential and celebrated restaurants in the South. Another PBS show of Vivian's is Somewhere South, a culinary exploration of how Southeast Asian, Hispanic, and other communities are redefining Southern food. Here's a clip from the show's trailer.*

(Somewhere South trailer plays)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *On today's show, Vivian talks about her latest book, what brought her back to eastern North Carolina after years in New York City, and the unique experience of both opening and closing a restaurant during the pandemic. Plus, collard kraut, tom thumb nachos, and much more today on Biscuits & Jam.*

(Theme music ends)

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian Howard, welcome to Biscuits & Jam.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Thank you for having me.

SID EVANS: Before we start, I just want to say. I've just been a fan of yours for a long time, and you've got a lot of fans at *Southern Living*. And, I think the first time, we met, very briefly, was at a Southern Foodways Alliance lunch that you hosted like 10 years ago. It was in Oxford and the theme was...

VIVIAN HOWARD: Women at work.

SID EVANS: I think women... yes.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Mm-hmm. Yes, yes, I cooked the Tabasco lunch that year. Yes. And we filmed it for a chef's life.

SID EVANS: Right.

VIVIAN HOWARD: It's a...what was already a stressful, you know, opportunity was doubly stressful because any time you add cameras to something, it's additional pressure.

SID EVANS: Yeah, well, it—the lunch was fantastic and it really made an impression. And I don't know how you pulled it off, but you sure did.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Thank you. Thank you so much. That lunch for chefs for a long time that was like, you know, a golden opportunity because so many like food writers and food lovers go to that conference. And so to be able to cook that lunch was like one of the things that if I had a resume, I would put at the top of it.

SID EVANS: Yeah, but a lot of pressure because you're cooking for your peers, right?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Exactly. Exactly. I mean, I literally worked on that lunch for maybe four months. I remember there was this pickle relish on top of a Tom Thumb sausage, and we made the Tom Thumb sausages and hung them for like 60 days. And then I made this like watermelon, rind relish to go on top. And I cut, I cut all of it by hand for 400 people. And the relish had these little diamonds that I meticulously cut. It was a great example of like when you're really prepared and you give everything you've got, it can be really successful. I've never been more prepared for something probably in my life.

SID EVANS: Well, it was a very special lunch and I still remember it 10 years later.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh, thank you. Thank you so much.

SID EVANS: I wanted to start by just asking you about growing up in deep run North Carolina and what that was like for you.

VIVIAN HOWARD: So I am the youngest of four girls, and the sister closest to my age is nine years older than I am. So I was like a major accident. When I came around, you know, my mom had already kind of, I think, felt as if she had done most of her parenting. I kind of lived to entertain all the other people in my house. When you're nine years younger than the person closest to your age, you become the entertainment. And that's...that's really what I remember. My dad farmed tobacco, and so our summers were centered around that. Because my sisters babysat me, I would end up at the tobacco barns with them, helping, I guess. That's in air quotes. One of my first memories is just wanting to leave and to move. I desperately wanted to live in a city and like, order Chinese takeout and have somebody bring it to my door.

SID EVANS: Well, you found a place where that happens, which is New York City, which couldn't be more different from Deep Run, right?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yes. In college, I had an internship at CBS Sunday Morning. And so I moved to New York for a summer and I decided immediately, like, I...I have to live here. I'm going to move here and I'm going to kick Katie Couric out of her *Today Show* chair. That's going to be my path. But I moved there, but I didn't get anywhere near Katie Couric, so...

SID EVANS: So when did the farm start to feel small to you or when did you start to have this kind of desire to to leave? Did that start at an early age?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yeah, you know, I don't ever remember not having that desire. One of my sisters went to an all girls boarding school in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and I just remember thinking, OK, Curry left when she was 14. I can leave when I'm 14 if I get really good grades and I can go to this boarding school. I always had, like, big dreams and I just didn't see them being realized in a tiny little Deep Run.

SID EVANS: So you go to New York and you were there a for pretty long time, right?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yeah. About six years.

SID EVANS: And you get this invitation from your dad to move back to the Deep Run, and open a restaurant. Right?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Kind of, yes, I had a little soup business, with my now husband and we made soup and delivered it around the city. And this was like 20 years ago. So we were way ahead of our time with our meal delivery system and our little soup business had taken off. And we had investors who wanted to help us open an actual storefront because at this point we were making the soup in our apartment and chilling it down in the bathtub. And, so we were going to, you know, open a legit place. And my family, when I told them that, they were like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. We never thought that you would actually put down actual roots in New York. So we want to do everything we can to encourage you to come back to North Carolina." And the understanding that I had was that my family would help us open a restaurant anywhere in North Carolina that we wanted to do it. But, once back in Deep Run, it became really clear that we could open a restaurant anywhere inside this 10,000-square-foot building my family had already purchased in downtown Kinston. So... there was some strategy there for sure.

SID EVANS: Well, it seems like it worked.

VIVIAN HOWARD: It did. It did. And I have to say that, you know, I never saw myself living in Deep Run again, but living across the road from my parents has afforded me the opportunity to do so many things that I would not have been able to do if I hadn't been close to my family. So I'm so grateful that I made that decision or that my parents made it for me.

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian, tell me about those first few months when you moved back. I mean, that had to be pretty shocking in a lot of ways, even though you grew up there, just to sort of go from New York to such a small town. Was that tough for you?

VIVIAN HOWARD: At first it was not. In fact, I mean, I was so tired of, like, the grind that is New York City that I moved to, Jones County, North Carolina, which is actually even less populated than where I live now and lived in my dad's, kind of—we call him—it his nap shack. If he hunted, it would be his hunting cabin, but I moved in there literally almost off the grid. And for the first several months, everything seemed... you know, I think I saw eastern North Carolina through rose-colored glasses, like all the food at the Food Lion, the produce...I mean, it looked amazing. And, so it wasn't until a little later that that 'new' started to wear off. And I saw how much eastern North Carolina had changed since I moved away. Tobacco was no longer the cash crop that it once was. A lot of the textile industry had moved on and there had basically been like a massive brain drain of eastern North Carolina, meaning like if you could leave, if you did. And the symptoms of that really started to show about three or four months after I moved.

SID EVANS: Yeah, so it was an adjustment for sure.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yes, yes, and, it, you know, it continues to be.

(Instrumental music)

SID EVANS: Well, so, Vivian, you have this passion for cooking that is so deep. And yet I've heard you say that your parents were not so into cooking when you were growing up. Where do you think that came from?

VIVIAN HOWARD: So my mom had and still has rheumatoid arthritis, since she was 16. And so she always saw cooking as a burden. And my dad, I don't think he's ever turned on a stove. So...cooking was not something that was a source of enjoyment in my house. But we, we certainly all love to eat. You know, that's, that's how we socialize. That's how we share. You know, when we're eating one meal, we talk about what we're going to eat for the next. My maternal grandmother was a very good cook, but she had no interest in having me in the kitchen with her. You know, she was no nonsense. I'm there to

get a job done. And so I really came to cooking as a means to turn that experience into a career in food writing. I was a server at a restaurant in the West Village called Voyage. And the chef, his name's Scott Barton, he was a masterful storyteller. The food that we served at this restaurant was Southern Food via Africa. And so it was kind of like kismet that I landed in this restaurant as a server because I was just so inspired by the stories that Scott Barton told around the food that we were serving. And I was like, "Oh, my God, OK, so I'm not going to be Katie Couric, but maybe I can pursue this dream of writing through something else I also love, which is food." And so I started working in the kitchen because of that. and just found that I liked being in a kitchen. I liked the camaraderie of it, working toward a common goal. I liked making stuff with my hands and I was good at it. And, you know, we all like to do things we're good at.

SID EVANS: Well, when did you kind of realize that this desire to be a storyteller was going to happen through food?

VIVIAN HOWARD: I don't know that I even really thought that that was happening until we started making *A Chef's Life*. I couldn't quite navigate how to make it happen, you know? I started working in kitchens in New York and then just became really interested in becoming a better cook and not embarrassing myself in the kitchen. And so I just kind of put my head down and did that for many years. And that kind of aching desire to be a storyteller just never really went away. And after we opened Chef and the Farmer and had been open about four years, I just...I couldn't keep it down anymore. I couldn't swallow it. And so I started looking around me for some stories to tell. And that's kind of how all of this started. It started with collard kraut, honestly.

SID EVANS: Mm-hmm. Oh, tell me that story.

VIVIAN HOWARD: So we were still living in Jones County in my dad's nap shack. And I woke up one morning and went to let my dog out and there was a Ziploc bag on our doorstep that had these, like, dark leaves, that were swimming in this kind of milky looking liquid. And I was like, what in the -- what is that? My dog wouldn't even get near it because it smelled. And so I called my dad because that's what I do whenever, you know, eastern North Carolina asks me a question that I can't answer and I was like, "someone is trying to poison me. I don't know what this is." And he's like, "no, Vivian, that's, that's a gift. It's Collard Kraut, like your neighbors up the road make that." And I was like, oh, my gosh. So I—at the time, I was reading Sandor Katz's book, *The Art of Fermentation*, and it was the thing that every like cutting edge chef, which is what I wanted to be, was reading. And so the idea that, like the geezers down the road for me and Jones County were making kraut with collards, and I was reading *The Art of Fermentation*, it just blew my mind. And so I was like, oh my God, I have got to, to be with these people that are making this. I've got to learn about this. And so I went to my neighbors and I said, "Oh, thank you so much for this kraut. I would really love to, to make it with you, to see how you do it." And they're like, "OK, great. We'll do it next year, right around Thanksgiving." And I was like, "Oh, no, no, no, I want to do this now." And they were like, "We only do it once a year. You know, you have to make sure that the moon....the Farmer's Almanac that says the moon and the stars are not in the sign of the bowels. And, you know, women can't make the kraut. So you'll have to stand like outside of here because women taint it." And I was like, "oh, my God, what is...this is so wild. All of this folklore surrounding this kraut making." And so I waited a year and I went and, and watched them make kraut and was just so energized and inspired by it. I wrote the first thing I'd written since college, which was a blog about making collard kraut. And when you, you know, when you write a blog and you don't have any followers, you're really just writing yourself an email. But, nevertheless, I was like, oh, my God, there's something here. There's stories to be told. And so that's how that happened. And I just, like, dug my heels in and called a friend from childhood and asked—she's a filmmaker, Cynthia Hill, and said, "Hey, I want to make this documentary about the food traditions of eastern North Carolina. Will you help me?" And she said, yeah. And little did I know she was far more interested in me than the food traditions of eastern North Carolina. So we made a good pair. A good team.

SID EVANS: Well, there are just so many stories in that part of the South, and, it must have been just such an amazing discovery to realize, you know, oh my God, nobody's really told a lot of these stories.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yeah. I mean, you know, the Mills brothers, the men that I went and watched to make kraut, you know, they couldn't even fathom why I would be interested in what they were doing, you know? And that's the way that so many of these, like rural recipes are. They're so simple and so mundane that, you know, people never even wrote them down. There's so many things that are kind of cornerstones of rural culture that no one's ever thought to really celebrate. And that's what we were able to do on *A Chef's Life*. And neither Cynthia nor I knew the power of it until we tapped into it.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: We'll continue with the great chef Vivian Howard, after the break.

BREAK

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome back to *Biscuits & Jam*, from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with chef, author and TV personality Vivian Howard.

SID EVANS: So, Vivian, now you're two books in. Right? You just came out with your second book, which I want to ask you about. It's called *This Will Make It Taste Good*.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Mm-hmm.

SID EVANS: And it's very different from your last book which I think was very intentional. And I was reading the introduction. And you made a pretty bold statement in the intro where you said, "You will emerge both kitchen magician and domestic God." So you got to tell me about that.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Well, you know, as you said, this book is really, really different from *Deep Run Roots*, which, *Deep Run Roots*, I think, from my perspective, was a love story about the food and ingredients of eastern North Carolina. And *This Will Make It Taste Good* is a really lighthearted, fun book that is meant to kind of reshape the way you, work in your kitchen. And so in the opening, I had to be really, really, encouraging and almost forceful to get people on board to do this, you know, kind of 'next level' meal prep. Maybe I wrote checks I couldn't cash with the kitchen magician and the domestic God, but not if you think so. Not if you don't think so.

SID EVANS: I think it's just a fantastic book. I love the way it's organized around these ten kind of hero recipes. It just makes cooking seem very approachable, and like something anybody can do.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Absolutely. You know, I think for so long people cooked without recipes. you made what your mom taught you to make. You made what you saw your grandmother make. then, you know, in the 90s, 2000s, we started watching food television and watching people, measure everything, you know, accurately and follow recipes to the nth degree. And I think a lot of us started thinking, wow, this is—I can't do this. You know? I don't have this ingredient or I don't have this piece of equipment and I don't have this much time. And so I think it got us out of the practice of just trusting our instincts and cooking food that tastes good to us. And so that's one of the things that I was really trying to do with this book is like say, "Hey, let's think about this a little differently. You've got these ingredients that you always buy when you go to the grocery store and, let's figure out how to use them in a different way." This is the way that I cook at home. And it's very much informed, by the way, that we cook at *Chef and The Farmer*, in that, you know, during the summer we get all kinds of produce and lots of it. And so we would pickle and preserve. And then in the fall and winter, I would pull from those pickles and preserves and briny things that we had put up and make our fall and winter food really exciting. And so then when I stopped cooking at the restaurant so much, I started taking these things from the restaurant to my home kitchen and they really became almost like my crutches. Like, I can't cook at home without them. And I started writing the second book with the idea that it would just be a simple cookbook. I read the reviews of *Deep Run Roots* routes single morning on Amazon for one year, all the new reviews. And

one of the things that kept coming up that I kept seeing was, people wanted more simple recipes. So this book was going to be simple, like come hell or high water. And, I was so bored. I'm like, this is not even how I cook. At the end of that book, in my table of contents, I had a chapter called, "This Will Make It Taste Good." And it was like all the flavor heroes. And I made notes like, if you want to make the recipe on 145, page 145 tastes really good. Make this thing. And so finally I just said, you know what, I'm going to write the book that I want to write. And I flipped the whole idea on its head and made the book about that one chapter.

SID EVANS: Well, I've got to ask you about a specific recipe in this book, and it's not very highfalutin. It is your nacho recipe.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh, yeah.

SID EVANS: And it sounds like it has a great story behind it, and I'd love to hear that.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yeah. So you're talking about nacho normal.

SID EVANS: Yeah. .

VIVIAN HOWARD: And that's one of the really fun things about the book, is that I gave everything a name, whatever I wanted it to be named, you know? And so nacho normal is—these are nachos that have cauliflower that's been cooked with a community organizer on them. And the idea was inspired by my first book tour. We took a food truck around the south and for nine weeks, we served about 400 people a day out of this food truck. And I had this very elaborate menu planned that we were going to try and cook all through the nine weeks. And about a weekend I was like, this is not working. This is too much work. And we're blowing through this food in a way that is wild to me. So I was like, OK, let's figure out how we can feed people and have them feel excited about it, but let's make it easier on ourselves.

So Tom Thumb, the sausage that I mentioned before was one of the things that we were planning on serving, but we were blowing through this Tom Thumb like no one ever has, literally. And so I thought, OK, let's make nachos, let's make Tom Thumb nachos. And that will allow us to spread our Tom Thumb and our pickle relish and our preserved butter beans...that'll allow us to, like, spread it over a lot more meals. And everybody's like, OK, great idea but I had never made nachos before. Like, I'd had nachos at TGI Fridays, but I'd never actually put nachos together but everyone was looking to me to be the nacho chef because I was the chef. And so I put our first round of nachos together and I had like six layers. It was like, you know, the first time I ever made pizza. More is more is more and until it's really not. I had a very sharp learning curve with the nacho thing. And so that's what this recipe and *This Will Make It Taste Good* is about. It tells that story and it gives you the appropriate ratio for building nachos.

SID EVANS: Would you consider yourself a nacho expert now?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Absolutely. Absolutely. And domestic God and kitchen magician.

SID EVANS: All right. I got to ask you about one more, and that is your gas station biscuits. What can you tell me about those?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh, yeah. So, in eastern North Carolina, there is a cheese biscuit tradition in that, you know, you make a biscuit, you don't make it—you stuff it with a knob of hoop cheddar, or hoop cheese and you bake the biscuit and the cheddar just kind of like melts out and forms like a lace crust around the edges. And it's just....it's heavenly. So this gas station biscuit recipe is meant to, you know, celebrate that very humble idea. And so these are biscuits that are stuffed with fontina and mayonnaise and parmesan cheese and then a little green dress. And it all bakes together. I believe I say in the book that it's better than pizza.

SID EVANS: And maybe not that good for you, but it sure does look good.

VIVIAN HOWARD: I don't want anybody to think that there's a bunch of just decadent recipes in the book. I would say that most of them are healthful, because that's the way that I generally eat and the things that I try to feed my kids.

SID EVANS: That's very true. And I'm sorry that I'm drawn to the more decadent ones.

VIVIAN HOWARD: No, they definitely stand out.

SID EVANS: So, Vivian, I want to turn to music for a second. And just because this is Biscuits and Jam and, I want to ask you about another North Carolina treasure, and that's The Avett Brothers.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yes. Yes. I'm glad that someone I know—when you said music, I'm like, oh, God... we're going to be talking about Salt N' Pepa here.

SID EVANS: Well, these guys, they are from North Carolina. Of course, they did your theme song. they've been on your show. And, I'm especially wondering about Joe Kwan, the cellist, and your relationship with him, because I think he's the one guy in that band that really loves to cook.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yes. And he's an excellent cook. I met Joe through the Raleigh food scene. He is such a—I hate the word foodie, but he is such a foodie. And, one of the things that we talk about a lot is how no one else in the band is. They all, like, eat to live and he lives to eat. And so much about touring for him is introducing the other guys to good food and just trying to get them on board like this is—this can make your life so much better if you enjoy this. And his wife is from Aidin, which is about 30 minutes from where I live. And so...

SID EVANS: Home of some very good barbecue.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Absolutely. Absolutely. So we have this Christmas tradition that Joe and Emily come to our house, Christmas Day after they've spent time with her family. And Joe will often bring— he has this little charcoal grill from Tokyo and he'll bring it and light the briquettes and then grill these little skewers of meat on there. it's something I look forward to all year. And I have to then make something that competes with what Joe's making. I'm like, gosh, Joe and Emily don't have children and, you know, it's Christmas. But I can't be outdone.

SID EVANS: Yeah, he's got a little more time to focus on the cooking, maybe?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yes, that's what I'm sticking with.

(Instrumental music break)

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian, I want to turn to the last year and what we've all been through. I just want to hear about your journey through this pandemic and especially as a restaurant owner. You had to lay off more than a hundred employees, I think, back when this all got started. I'm sure a lot of them feel like family to you, and I'm just wondering what you have kind of learned from that experience.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh, my gosh. So much. Yes. You know, at the start of the pandemic, we closed our two restaurants in Kinston. And shortly after that, I made the decision to permanently close one of them, and arguably that is the restaurant that our town I loved the most. The boiler room. Having, you know, two restaurants in a small town and always, competing with ourselves for staff and for customers. And so the pandemic kind of allowed me to step back from all of that and, say, OK, what do I want this all to look like on the other side of this? How can Chef and The Farmer, be stronger, be more successful, be less of a stressful place to work. That's why I made the decision to not re-open The Boiler Room. It has been very painful letting people go and then also having the town kind of hate me for closing it.

I am one of the few people, I think, that both closed and opened a new restaurant in the pandemic. You know, I had this incredible opportunity to open a biscuit and hand shop and a sit down restaurant in

Charleston. And it was all slated to happen in May. And, we have put off opening Lenore, the sit down restaurant. But in August, it—we had to do something. So we opened the Biscuit and Handpie Shop. And opening a restaurant in a pandemic does not feel good. And the uncertainty that surrounds it and, you know, the fact that, like nobody is, is caring about restaurants that are opening in a pandemic. It's like when a tree falls in the woods and nobody's there to hear it, like, did it even happen? What I've learned through all of this is that as a chef and a restaurateur, I really need to figure out how to feed more people, without having all those people have to be in my restaurant.

SID EVANS: Yeah.

VIVIAN HOWARD: How can we, how can we reach more people? How can we make better use of the kitchens that we have and the staff that we have so that our front of house and back of house employees have similar wages? How can working in a restaurant be a consistent living? How can it not feel incredibly stressful every single night? Those are the things that this moment in time has allowed me to step back and look at and try to assess.

SID EVANS: I want to talk about your connection to your community for a second, particularly at tough times. You know, when the hurricanes hit a couple of years ago. You've been through a fire, all sorts of things. What do you think restaurants kind of owe to the community in terms of helping be a backbone when things go south?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Our restaurants in our community have been a huge source of pride for the community for me. It's been, you know, a great gift to be a part of that place that, you know, brings so much pride to other people. What can a restaurant provide for a community in hard times? What is our responsibility? I don't know, Sid. If you had asked me a year ago before all of this, I think I would have a much clearer answer but what I have learned is that if a restaurant is an important thing for a town, people feel ownership over it. And so when you do something like close it, people feel like you've taken something from them that, you know, they feel as if they had ownership over. That's a feeling and a sentiment that I'm still very uncomfortable with, because I'm kind of in the middle of it right now.

SID EVANS: Well, it's been amazing to me that even though restaurants have been some of the hardest hit businesses, over the last year, it's restaurants and chefs who have stepped up and done so much, to help people get through this. And, you know, I'm thinking of like Ed Lee's Lee Initiative and Louisville and Chris Shepperd's Southern Smoke Foundation and Jose Andres with World Central Kitchen and so many other chefs and restaurateurs who are giving back at the local level. That's a remarkable thing to see. and it's something I think that's especially happening in the South.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Yeah, you know, so many of us get into this business because we like doing things for people. We like cooking for people. We like making people happy. They don't call it the service business for nothing. You know? once you're in the service business, you're always on that side of things that the giving, the raising up, Ed Lee, Jose Andres, Chris Shepherd...They have been amazing examples of, like, how you can be struggling and you're in your particular restaurant, but you can still do so much more to help your community. And I mean, I think that they are incredibly inspiring.

SID EVANS: Well, as are you and all the things that you've done to give back to your community and, just—I don't know how you do it, but...we're all pulling for you.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian, I want to ask you about your show that you premiered last spring called *Somewhere South*. It felt very timely because you were really exploring so many different cultures and celebrating the diversity of Southern food. What are some of the things that you learned on the journey of making that show?

VIVIAN HOWARD: Oh my. Making that show was really a dream come true. I had you know, we had made five seasons of *A Chef's Life* and I was so fatigued by my own story that I really wanted the opportunity to turn the lens outward and learn about the cultures and communities in my backyard,

which is the American South. It was all loosely based around this idea that I've discussed with my editor, over the years, which is, that there's really only about 20 dishes in the whole world. And every culture has their, you know, their hand pie, their way of cooking grains, their...their way of cooking over fire, their pickle. You know? We all eat the same things. and so that was the guiding principle around *Somewhere South*. And I knew that going into it, but I didn't know how it would manifest itself.

And, one of my favorite moments, making that show was we were outside of Atlanta, with an African woman and she was going to cook this feast for us. This Sunday feast. And it was for the Greens episode. So she was going to make cassava greens. And I watched her pound them to death and cooking these greens took like several hours. And it reminded me so much of cooking collard greens with ham hock, which also takes like an uncanny amount of time. And so, you know, from very early in the day when we're cooking together, she was cooking and I was watching, I noticed little similarities like that and then when we sat down to eat, it was like, OK, she's from Burundi and she's made nothing that I recognize here but everything is recognizable. we had these greens that had been cooked to smithereens, that were full of flavor. we had this meat that had been stewed for a long time and was also super flavorful and soft, like, the meat that my mother would have cooked. and then she had made fufu, to scoop up the greens and the meat. And I'm like, oh, my God, this is just like cornbread. And we're using it in the exact same way. And so sitting around that table, I thought, wow, this is what I meant when I've been talking about how there's only 20 dishes in the world and how we all have our own version of it. I'm sitting here at a table living that idea. So I had that experience over and over and over, shooting *Somewhere South*.

SID EVANS: Yeah.

VIVIAN HOWARD: It was amazing.

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian, what are you making for dinner tonight?

VIVIAN HOWARD: That is a very good question, you know, we're here on Baldhead and the market closes at six. I try to bring a lot of food down here. I have some ground beef left. This is not going to sound very exciting, but I do have 9-year-old twins, maybe some spaghetti.

SID EVANS: Oh, OK. That sounds good. There's always nachos.

VIVIAN HOWARD: There's always nachos. Always.

SID EVANS: Well, Vivian Howard, thanks so much for being on *Biscuits and Jam*.

VIVIAN HOWARD: Thank you so much for having me and for not making me talk about music too much.

SID EVANS: Come back sometime.

VIVIAN HOWARD: I will. I will. Thank you so much, Sid.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Vivian Howard. You can visit her website, vivianhoward.com for social media, information on her restaurants and her latest book, *This Will Make It Taste Good*, available in stores or online.

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Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Danielle Roth, Matt Sav, Erica Wong and Rachael King at Pod People.

We'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!