



MARCIE COHEN FERRIS

# Matzoh Ball Gumbo

CULINARY TALES *of the* JEWISH SOUTH





Harriet Birnbaum Ullman is one of the leading kosher caterers in Savannah. Like Mildred Bernstein, she learned to cook by watching her mother. Harriet was born in Kobryn, Poland, on 10 July 1927.<sup>156</sup> She vividly remembers the anti-Semitism of her Polish schoolmates and the growing power of the Nazi regime. Harriet also remembers that each week her mother, Chamkie Birnbaum, made cholents, pastries, potato kugels, gefilte fish, and baked fruit compotes. The Birnbaums had their own chickens, a garden, and fruit trees laden with apples, pears, and cherries.

In 1937 Harriet Ullman and her widowed mother moved to Savannah when Sam Tenenbaum, a scrap iron merchant, married her mother. The family lived downtown and was active in the Orthodox congregation, Bnai Brith Jacob. Because of her knowledge of kashrut, Chamkie Tenenbaum became an unofficial mashgiach (inspector of kashrut) at both the Conservative and Orthodox synagogues in Savannah. Ullman inherited her mother's skills in the kitchen, and she used these skills in the catering business that she began in the late 1960s.

Harriet's husband, Albert Ullman, grew up in Bluffton, South Carolina, a small town near Savannah. His father, Sam Ullman, was a Polish immigrant who owned a dry goods store called Planter's Mercantile Company, which was known by locals as "the Jew Store."<sup>157</sup> Stores like this existed from the colonial era well into the twentieth century and were often referred to by local Gentiles as "Jewish Hardware" or the "Jew Store." These names identified a business by what distinguished it from others in a small town—its Jewish owner. Saturday was the busiest commercial day of the week, and closing the store to observe Sabbath was not an option for the Ullmans. Each Sunday Albert's parents brought him to Savannah for religious school at Bnai Brith Jacob. Sabbath meals prepared by Albert's mother, Freida, and their African American cook, "May," featured a mix of low-country foods like fried chicken, rice and gravy, tomatoes and butter beans, and local fish (no shellfish) that were served alongside Jewish dishes such as stuffed cabbage and babka.<sup>158</sup>

Harriet and Albert Ullman lived for fifteen years in Ridgeland, South Carolina, where they owned Ullman's Department Store and Albert Ullman was the mayor. When they moved back to Savannah to provide a Jewish education for their boys approaching bar mitzvah age, Harriet Ullman transformed her "home hospitality" into a successful catering business. Operating her food business allows Harriet Ullman to express her Judaism in Savannah, where she prepares both low-country and Old World delicacies.

Throughout the twentieth century, kosher caterers, hotels and restaurant staffs, sisterhood members, B'nai B'rith brothers, African American cooks, and Jewish mothers have prepared food for a variety of religious