Throughout the grand march of art history, many works have taken food as their subject. The variety of shapes and colors inherent in food is beautiful, detailed, and often lovingly portrayed by artists. Textures and light effects have always been important in depicting lavish spreads that bespeak wealth and abundance, and many compositions symbolically allude to temporality. To a large extent, then, the food photographs of Al and Mary Ann Clayton tap into the vital tradition of still-life images. But although the Claytons charm and engage us with their use of established aesthetic forms, they delight in veering from tradition, and as they peer into uncomfortable corners, their work serves up more than a dollop of the dark side. Their presentation of art as a paradoxical source of both calm and disturbance signals a deft manipulation of the idea of beauty, and their images, at once agents of civility and splendor and of subversion and discomfort, demonstrate cunning and masterly creativity.

Ever since Critter Cuisine (1992) and Dreadful Delicacies (1993) appeared, I have been enamored of Al and Mary Ann Clayton’s books. This conversation with them offers readers a taste of their delightful irreverence.

VP: First off, how do you describe yourselves professionally? Photographer and author? Guerrilla food stylists? Surreal gourmets?

MAC: Al has had the extreme good fortune to excel in what he loves—photography—and has been working in that capacity all his life. I, on the other hand, have had many labels; for the purposes of this article you can say I am a food/photo stylist and writer. I think it best to describe oneself minimally and let the adjectives fall where they may.

VP: How did you meet?

MAC: After a series of varied careers, I began working as a freelance stylist for Al and other photographers. We met when I was in art school and Al had a studio in Atlanta. I also worked freelance for the Atlanta Journal Constitution’s food department, where I styled photos, wrote articles, and tested and developed recipes. I love food, growing food, eating food, and cooking food, so when a food client showed up, Al asked if I would help out. I did, and I kept helping out for many years.

We have worked on several cookbooks. Southern Food by John Egerton, The Book of Feasts by Eliza Nelson and Kay Goldstein, and Cookwise by Shirley Corriher are a few. Al contributes to Cornbread Nation, a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi. We have three sons and two daughters; one of our sons is a chef in Memphis. All of our children are good cooks. So food has been a major theme in our lives.

VP: Can you share more of your varied careers?

MAC: Al's photographs of malnourished people in the American South in the late 1960s were published in Still Hungry in America, written by Robert Coles, which was used in the congressional effort to establish the food stamp program. He also photographed starving children and mothers in Biafra in the early 1970s. I have been an art instructor; worked in public relations and in political, legal, and social service areas; and have also designed, produced, and marketed fashion accessories.

AC: A writer friend, Pat Watters, had left the Atlanta Journal Constitution and joined the Southern Regional Council as a writer and information director. The Southern Regional Council was an old race-relations organization that was deeply involved in voter registration and information dispensing. It could have been identified as a gang of foaming-mouthed liberals. Pat’s coverage of the movement in the South, the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Martin Luther King, was very good, and we talked about doing something in print about this region of the country and what was happening there politically. It was a time of change, a change I felt would be the most important one
this country had seen. Some of us believed that a large section of the population who had been left out of decisions that affected their lives would be empowered and actually have a voice in how things were done.

A team of doctors was traveling around the South, talking with poor folks, observing their living conditions, medical access, diet, and so on, and concluded that things down here were comparable to third-world countries. Watters asked if I would be interested in following behind the docs, taking photos of whatever I saw and whatever I thought described the condition of the poor folks. This was a dream come true for me. Pat told me the photos would be used by a senate committee on welfare and unemployment headed up by Senators Joe Clark and Robert Kennedy.

The assignment went on for about three months, through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and eastern Kentucky. The conditions in the Delta and eastern Kentucky were probably the worst from any point of view. The stories of people in dreadful, hopeless conditions are endless; the visiting docs found several cases of kwashiorkor, marasmus, and pellagra.

The senate hearings were held, and the news of living conditions in the South became quite public. The senators
and congressmen from Mississippi were very angry. Some of them were cotton planters and were being paid huge sums not to plant cotton. The soil bank program that paid farmers not to grow a crop was left over from the days when it was meant to keep poor farmers from starving when they couldn’t make a crop because of bad weather or bad economic situations. It wasn’t designed to make our leadership wealthy. Some of us asked if we could use the land to grow vegetables to feed hungry, malnourished people, but that wasn’t a welcome suggestion. Some senators said we were communists; others had the FBI investigate us. But in the end, *Still Hungry in America* came out, and folks became aware of the way a lot of us citizens were living and eating.

**VP:** However did your professional focus evolve into *Critter Cuisine* and *Dreadful Delicacies*?

**AC:** While I was in the navy, I applied to the US Navy Medical Photography School in Bethesda, Maryland, and received orders to attend it. This was a good place to learn and experiment. I came across my first Irving Penn book there. His work is stunning.

While practicing medical photography, I shot a lot of gross specimen stuff, operating room material, surgical procedures, birth abnormalities, and had the distinction to photograph Senator Joe McCarthy’s liver. Joe had a roaring case of cirrhosis, and after he died, a doc brought Joe’s liver to the studio, and we shot it. Terrible liver, I mean really bad liver.

**Above:** Snake and Eggs in the Grass. This is one of the most elegant dishes I have ever created. Visually everything seems to be in the only place it could be. How else to arrange the two sizes of garden snakes, where else to put the quail eggs, what else to bed them on but the flat garlic chives? Elegance demands simplicity, so all that is served with the main course is toasted French bread slices and a coarse mustard sauce. There is no wine that I know of to match Snake and Eggs; one must have bourbon and branch water. For the setting I have used my mother’s wedding china. The black band broken by delicate flowers is a perfect echo of the intertwined snakes. Photograph by Al and Mary Ann Clayton ©1993.
After the school term ended, the staff wanted me to join them. I did, and I learned more. It was there that a guy from National Geographic, who came to the studio frequently, advised me to continue school after I was discharged. I followed his advice and attended the Art Center School in Los Angeles, with a major in photojournalism.

Picture stories have been a real love of mine from the start. I felt that people could be moved to act, to change their ideas through information. These days television provides immediate coverage, but in “olden times” the still photo was it.

In the 1970s freelance magazine work began to dry up, so I started doing more advertising work. Ad agencies had money, magazines didn’t. I had a family, five young’uns to care for, so I wanted money. Having money is better than not having money. Some of the ad agency clients had food accounts. Their art directors said, “Learn something about food photography and we’ll give you more work.” I did, and they did.

The idea of taking stuff that was eaten somewhere, on a regular basis, and turning it into an ad setup, all styled and propped, began to creep into my work.

VP: To a certain extent, your stylized photographs subvert and demystify the classics. When did you decide to confound and possibly disturb your audience?

AC: Yes, the photos are in some way related to traditional still-life paintings of food and game. That’s part of the fun, to set the photo up as serious, but when you really look at it and begin to see the reality, you are shocked. We had many people wandering through the studio who would start off by saying, “Oh, that is so beautiful!” then go on to “Oh, yuck! What is that?”

VP: So you revel in violating a cardinal rule of mainstream American life—that food not resemble the creature it came from.

AC: Well, I don’t think mainstream gourmands have quite caught up to us yet. However, were we to try to be even more outré, the first thing that pops into my mind is foraging for poisonous plants and venomous animals and figuring how to circumvent pain and death when partaking of them. Or maybe choosing certain animals and preparing a gourmet feast for them, and incorporating the foods they actually eat.

VP: Could you share some of the photographic and stylist techniques you use to make your whimsical presentations? How do you render such visually seductive sets? How do you get your subjects ready for close-ups? Such nose-to-tail choreography is amazing.

MAC: Because I am more of an editorial stylist, I rarely use any of those tricks of the trade: shellac, varnish, etc. My tool kit, which some of my peers laugh at because of its paucity, consists of artists’ brushes, small very sharp scissors, offset tweezers, toothpicks, water spritzer, vegetable oil, and Kitchen Bouquet. That will get you through just about any food shoot. The secret is to keep the food looking moist and fresh.

While they were growing up, our children viewed the kitchen countertops and refrigerator interiors with great trepidation, cautiously inquiring, “Is this real food?” And that will probably be the title of a personal family cookbook I am putting together now.

Al is a master of lighting, the essence of photography. I have a sense of what works in food preparation. And we never hesitated to plumb the minds of our many talented friends. We worked together on composition and content.

Critter Cuisine started as just one poster, the “Beak and Claw Surprise.” The rooster heads were from Al’s sister. Then we thought we might do a picture book. That’s when creatures began showing up at the studio at all times of the day and night. Al’s sister had just killed several roosters in her flock, so she sent the heads to him. You can find a possum in your back yard almost any night, and most mornings you can see several dead ones on the road. I think their purpose in life is to throw themselves in front of car tires. I counted seven last week between my house and town; that’s about one per mile. A few of the animals were lab specimens. Some were bought at the Municipal Farmers Market located in downtown Atlanta.

AC: I had worked on a road kill article for Esquire, a wonderful idea that came to me while driving our nation’s highways. The idea came from the damage an automobile can cause to critters both large and small. The working title for the story was “Look Out Pussy, Here Comes Detroit.” I had photographed large and small and flying critters of every type, smashed, strung out, eviscerated on the concrete and asphalt. When the Esquire automobile and auto-accessory advertisers found out about the story, they threatened to pull their ads. Well, editorial integrity can only go so far, so the editors pulled the story. I sort of digressed on the road kill, but went back to critters in studio stuff.

My sister called and said she had some roosters which had outlived their purpose, and did I want them for anything? This was a challenge, you know, to come up with a use for useless roosters. Atlanta had some wonderful Chinese cooks who would do duck feet, pig ears, all sorts of stuff most folks get queasy about. The idea of chicken feet and chicken heads on a platter emerged, and the show was on the road.
Mary Ann, my bride and precious thing, had some wonderful prepping and styling ideas, and while we were working on this, an art director friend of questionable sanity came by the studio and made a remark about “Beak and Claw Surprise.” The poster or “leave-behind” is a promotonal device that photographers and designers leave with art directors to get more work. That was the original purpose of the “beak and claw” thing.

When friends learned of our project, they started contributing. Snakes and lizards came from herpetologist friends. Another called from a board meeting and said he had something for me. He told me to come to a certain corporate boardroom and knock three times, softly, and he would hand a paper sack out to me, which I shouldn’t open until I had cleared the building. I did as instructed. A bat was in the sack. He had found the bat in a downtown parking building, sacked it up, and called me. Very thoughtful.

The armadillos, or “dillys,” as some Floridians call them, came from the panhandle area of the Sunshine State. A fish and wildlife guy, friend of a friend, sent three to us by FedEx in a Styrofoam cooler, iced down. Now, the ice had melted, and these were really funky dillys. When I opened the cooler, I reeled, thrashed, gagged, went to the parking lot, and walked in a circle. Never, never had I smelled anything as horrible. I poured a gallon of serious odor eliminator on them, shut the lid, and left them till next day. The wildlife guy had selected three dillys, stair-stepped in size, a lovely conformation. Finer dillys couldn’t be found.

MAC: The creative aspect of this project evolved as we were challenged by the stream of unusual subjects. We wanted it to be upscale “arty” with a punch. Al used his lighting skills to dramatize the compositions.

The text came at the insistence of the publisher; we had originally planned to have only captions. I set the pictures up beside me and began to tell stories about them in a kind of deconstruction of a Martha Stewart style of talking about recipes, collections of dinnerware, cookware, linens. I used actual names of my family.

The cameras we used were Sinar 4x5 View and Nikon F3. The film was Fuji Chrome and Kodachrome. Sometimes electronic flash was used; sometimes it was natural light from a window. We had a lovely space on the second floor of our studio where the light from a large window was beautiful. Al often used this area for shooting. Al and I shot these photos, usually with Al’s assistant, and at times with various curious onlookers.

MAC: One of the funniest photos was the tadpole bouillon. Some friends brought us a big jarful of tadpoles from a creek near their house. The tadpoles are actually alive in the soup. You may not know this—I didn’t—but tadpoles poop a lot. Between every take I had to use an eyedropper to keep the liquid clear.

Several of the subjects were alive when we photographed them. They were returned to their natural habitat. The Japanese beetles came from a beetle trap, so of course their spirits had left us long before the shoot. The bat for the bat burger came from a friend who found it (dead) in a parking garage in downtown Atlanta.

Armadillos in Florida are as ubiquitous as the aforementioned possums in Georgia. Our cover composition for Critter Cuisine was inspired by a Florida friend’s purse that looked just like the picture, but we joined the tail to the mouth. Which brings to mind those fur stoles made of several whole foxes, heads included, that were popular with church-going matrons when I was a child. Totally frightening. Maybe that’s why I could never wear a fur coat.

VP: The press for your first book billed it as “For the cook who’s cooked it all—new and wonderful dishes based on the creatures that crawl in our yards at night, swim in our drainage ditches, and flap around in vacant houses.… [They] give new meaning to the old idiom ‘cooking from your own backyard.’” And yet both of your books are subtle, marvelous parodies and do not promote a road kill mentality of “tastes real good, straight from the hood.”

MAC: You could say we were attempting to elevate the presentation. We tried to be super careful about not killing any animals for the sole purpose of the book, and I do think we succeeded. One night after Critter came out, I received a phone call at home. A very distressed woman wanted to talk to me about my irresponsible presentations, about how she was trying to raise her daughter as a vegetarian, about respecting animals, and so on. We talked for a while. I explained to her that if she would read the text, she would see that I was promoting choices, that I supported her choice of vegetarianism, and that I support the responsible use of ready resources—all, didn’t the narrator eat from her own backyard? Before she hung up, she said, with a little question mark at the end, “Well, you seem like a nice person…” I think we parted friends. We didn’t really get bad reactions. The eco-friendly text, I think, balances the dark visual humor.

VP: Can you share some of your favorite moments during the course of photographing and styling the food?

VP: Your books are not conventional cookbooks in any sense. Though they hint at recipes, they don’t include them.
MAC: I read one review of the book that said, “I wish you had put real recipes in it.” A neighbor came over and asked to look at my garden, not getting that the narrator is a fictional character. I suppose I could have included real recipes. However, published recipes need to be tested, and I couldn’t find anyone to do the tasting and the testing.

VP: Some of your creations hint at Edward Weston’s pictures in which he reveals the complex design and grace of natural form and shows off the technical diversity and achievements of photography. But he seems to have had little interest in food as sustenance. By contrast, you both seem to regard the substance of food with reverence. Are there other artistic influences on your work?

MAC: We do regard the subject of food with reverence. But anything can be taken to the extreme. Every picture of a McDonald’s french fry has a photographer and a food stylist behind it, along with probably at least one photographer’s assistant and one food styling assistant and a prop stylist, an art director, an account supervisor, a client representative…you would not believe the production! That’s what got us started on the critter theme, we had to have some levity, it was all so serious, and for what? A grease-drenched piece of root vegetable. You could lose your sense of priorities. Still, it does take skill and aesthetics to make a beautiful photograph of a french fry, and there are several photographers who can do it well.
Photographing food can be extremely challenging—it keeps changing as it sits there. It takes skill, experience, and patience to coax a beautiful picture from the setup. It takes a good working relationship among those working on the picture. The photographer conducts the shoot and gets the fame or the shame, depending on the result.

Al admires the still-life work of Irving Penn, Jean Paul Endress, and Gerald Zanetti and the documentary work of Eugene Smith and Dorothea Lange. The Jewish Museum in New York had an exhibition of Lange’s and Al’s work side by side.

AC: The idea behind the exhibition was to illustrate the notion that nothing had changed since Dorothea Lange’s time. There are still great numbers of poor and hungry, and there always will be.

VP: What prompted you to select the exotic fare you did, and what are your sources for your gourmet spoofs and seemingly hard-to-swallow meals?

MAC: We were diligent in making sure that all of these foods are eaten by someone somewhere in the world. Although I confess my own prejudices—the only thing I sampled was mealworms—Al is a much more adventurous eater. He ate mealworms, grubs, and red wigglers. He was okay with the first two but felt that the wigglers left a muddy, funky taste that lingered on the palate for way too long, even though I had purged them for a couple of days with cornmeal. We did not sample any of the critter fare. I hold to freedom of choice.

VP: Why do you think Americans are such fussy eaters?

MAC: As the availability of foodstuffs becomes wider and the variety ever expanding, there is more from which to choose or to reject. I think it is more of a social decision. If fish and rice is all there is to eat, you’re probably not going to develop a distaste for either.

After Critter Cuisine, I became interested in insects as a food source. We were going to do the sequel, Dreadful Delicacies, as all insects, but it became tedious to photograph, as the insects are very small, and there is not a lot of propping you can do with a subject that is only a few centimeters tall. So we did some insects as well as some animals.

In the 1990s there was a surge of interest in insect cuisine, already an ancient part of diets in other countries, Mexico closest to home. I corresponded then with Gene DeFoliart, professor emeritus in the Department of Entomology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Professor DeFoliart had edited The Food Insects Newsletter, a serious periodical devoted to research on the consumption of insects. And in London I picked up a small book titled Why Not Eat Insects? that was originally published in 1885. Here is a quote by Laurence Mound, keeper of entomology at the British Museum: “What we see and taste as beautiful depends largely on what our family and friends approve of—with just a little room for personal preference.” Personally, I think this statement would include art—painting, sculpture, photography. Who got to choose what hangs in museums, and how much money and schmoozing did it take to get it there?

VP: Where do you get your delicious sense of humor?

MAC: A psychiatrist once said to me, “You have no respect for authority.” I took that to mean his authority, as we seemed to have reached an impasse in our relationship when I asked that he also show some respect for my opinions. So, I guess these books are somewhat irreverent, but only in the sense that I think each of us should make thoughtful decisions about what we eat as well as what we accept as art and what we accept as appropriate in all areas of our lives. The “unexamined life” and all that.