

Good Vibrations: Vertamae's Back in Town!

Written by Laura Von Harten



Cher, Prince, Madonna, Oprah, Elvis, Angelina – for some people, a last name is just superfluous. I have another person to add to the list of one-namers: Vertamae.

And I have good news: Vertamae has come back home to the Lowcountry.

I first heard Vertamae Grosvenor on National Public Radio, which for many years was her main forum for cultural commentary. After listening to some of her stories I came to understand that she was from the Lowcountry, and for this I loved her. The basic storyline, in my imagination, was this: Local girl makes good and gives the world its comeuppance. With style.

Who was this infinitely creative, cosmopolitan woman with the soul of a poet and the fortitude of a soldier? In her use of language, she bridged the casual and the ceremonial. She was deadly serious about her writing, her people, her mission on earth – but at the same time she had a sense of play and pageantry that made it seem like the most logical thing in the world that she should perform with Sun Ra and his Arkestra in the professional capacity of Space Goddess.

Simply put, Vertamae embodied both the earthy and the ethereal. She could discuss the frying of pork skins and the streets of Paris's left bank and the outer periphery of the universe with equal authority.

So over the past few years I've often wondered, whatever happened to Vertamae?

Turns out she's living in Jasper County.

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I met some people who, knowing my interest in local food and culture, mentioned that Vertamae was their neighbor and that she was settling in for a while. Would I be interested in meeting her?

OMG. That would be a yes.

So after some telephone tag and the harriedness of the holidays, we finally got together. Before I drove out there, I called and asked her if she needed any groceries from Beaufort, and it turns out she did. So on the way out of town I stopped at the grocery store.

And I tell you what: it was the most thrilling trip to Bi-Lo I have ever made. I was so excited I almost forgot to use my Bi-Lo Bonus Card. I was floating through the aisles thinking thoughts along these lines: Wow! I am grocery shopping for Vertamae Grosvenor! I am holding in my hands a shopping list for things that Vertamae is going to eat! She's actually going to cook it and put it in her mouth! And maybe, just maybe, she'll cook something for me!

Because you see, Vertamae's biggest claim to fame is her cookbooks.

Her first, *Vibration Cooking*, came out in 1970. The full title was *Vibration Cooking, Or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*. The book was a big hit, and there have been two subsequent editions.

One might think something like, "Oh, how sweet, a nice little cookbook from down South, spiced up with some humorous anecdotes; let's try a recipe for collards and see how it turns out." You wouldn't expect much more out of it. Because a cookbook can't have an earthshaking impact, right?

Wrong.

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Although at the time it might have seemed to be a perfectly harmless endeavor, it turns out that Vertamae wasn't messin' around. What she wrote was more than a cookbook. Her words were interpreted as a call to arms for Black women who had been trapped in a life of domestic service.

Back in the day Black women had a proper place, and that place was serving as cooks and maids to the white families who wanted to maintain a comfortable status quo. All that changed, however, during the Civil Rights movement, and later during the Black Power movement.

It was only then that Black women found their true proper place: serving as cooks and maids to the Black men who wanted more status and less quo.

At least that's the storyline perpetuated by the various literary critics and critical theorists and theoretical metaphysicists who, over the past forty years, have squabbled with each other over Vertamae's writings with a maniacal passion.

The critical consensus seems to be that Vibration Cooking smashed the Myth of Black Mammydom to smithereens. It was all right for Black women to cook as long as they were smart and sexy, and as long as they didn't cross the thin line between heartfelt service to others and utter subjugation.

And also one more thing – white people had better stop pretending that Southern cooking had nothing to do with Africa.

Vertamae went on to work on a wide variety of projects – acting roles in the films *Daughters of the Dust* and *Beloved*, creative collaborations with other artists, her NPR work, and a PBS show, *America's Family Kitchen With Vertamae Grosvenor*.

The latter inspired two more cookbooks: *Vertamae Cooks in the Americas' Family Kitchen*, and *Vertamae Cooks Again: More Recipes from the Americas' Family Kitchen*. And despite all that emphasis on America, one of Vertamae's gifts to us is that she thrust authentic an American cuisine onto the global culinary radar screen.

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But now she's come back full circle. Gracefully aging, her dancer's limbs still liquid, she is at home in the Lowcountry, and she is finally at liberty to reflect on her busy and remarkable life. Right she is occupied by the monumental task of sorting through the 40 boxes of documents, tapes, CDs and mementos that were shipped to Jasper County from her NPR office.

There have been other challenges. Her Emmy award statue arrived bent, with one of its wings missing – how does one fix something like that? There are priceless audio and video recordings on obsolete media that are in desperate need of transfer -- where to start? There is a long-distance collaboration on a play with the son of a Broadway legend. And most of all, there is the forthcoming re-issue of *Vibration Cooking*.

Vertamae has to work hard at this because each new edition of the book gets a revised ending, a sort of updated account of what has happened to the people and places in Vertamae's stories. But for this particular new edition there is a different type of ending: it's about Vertamae.

Just as *Vibration Cooking* changed the nature of academic scholarship regarding women, race and food, *Vibration Cooking* changed the nature of Vertamae's life. It created a fortuitous chain of circumstances that made her who she is today, and I am delighted that she has chosen to share the story of this journey with the rest of us.

And maybe, when she is ready to take a break, Vertamae can make time to do some guest lectures, or writing workshops, or cooking demonstrations.

Vertamae, we welcome you home.

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