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Reinventing the Peach, the Pimento, and Regional Identity

The story of how a small network of forward thinkers used biotechnology, entrepreneurial moxie, government-supported experimentation, and powerful storytelling to transform their state into an agent of innovation.

In late nineteenth-century Georgia, Samuel Rumph was a legend. Not only had he propagated the beloved Elberta peach and developed the refrigerated railway cars that coddled the fruit as it traveled to northern markets, he and his fellow "fruit men" boosted Georgia's postwar economy in the process. In a triumphal newspaper interview in April 1895, he described his brash expansionist goals as he and a reporter strolled through his Willow Lake nursery in Marshallville, about 30 miles from Macon.

The centerpiece of the nursery was, of course, thousands upon thousands of those Elberta trees, which had remade the agricultural landscape of southwest Georgia since he'd introduced them decades earlier. He explained that he took "pride in making of Marshallville a great fruit center, rivaling or eclipsing any in Michigan and California." Here Rumph's competitive—and sectionalist—streak was showing. His comments were both a subtle lament that southern growers had uneven access to the nation's consumers and an avowal to remedy the gap.

Along with the expected inputs of innovation—wealth, entrepreneurial moxie, a motley stable of collaborators, game-changing technology, and an insatiable jones for problem-solving—Rumph possessed an invisible yet no less important component: an ideology of a South that lagged behind the North due to war, poor infrastructure, and notions that southern farmers just couldn't keep up. These oft-repeated ideas of regional disparity aligned with narratives of postwar southern victimization and emerging visions of "New South" progress, which framed the North-South relationship as one of lingering (but dwindling) opposition and uncharted opportunity that could be exploited by the region's "best men."

Nineteenth-century biotech innovators used this ideology—and produce—to raise the profile of the South, while storytellers, showmen, and the growing state apparatus stoked the idea of state and regional commodities. Rumph and southern fruit enthusiasts contributed to regional transformation via their nurseries as well as their narratives—stories that state officials then took up when promoting the fruit. State government and growers turned peaches and, later, pimentos into fabled and sought-after products of Georgia: delicious proof that a laggard region had become an agricultural pioneer and formidable competitor.

The South has always been a land of storytellers, and at the turn of the twentieth century, the South was producing powerful discourses that blended grievance and aspiration. Even among a small, contained population of forward thinkers, such shared stories fueled innovation—in part because these improvement narratives inherently assessed what was not working and why. The transition of the peach into *the Georgia peach* shows how these social and cultural contexts matter, for breeding better fruit was also a project of refashioning professional and regional identities.

The Pomological Watercolor Collection

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, healthy orchards and groves were seen as crucial to national prosperity. As people across the country created new cultivars, or varieties, through hybridization, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) set out to document them with a national register of fruits. Between 1886 and 1942, USDA's Division of Pomology commissioned artists to create illustrations of thousands of fruits and nuts. A historic botanical resource, the Pomological Watercolor Collection, which is housed at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland, contains 7,497 watercolor paintings, 87 line drawings, and 79 wax models created by approximately 21 artists.

In order to ensure color accuracy, watercolor—rather than photography—was the preferred medium. These technically precise paintings were used to create lithographs illustrating USDA bulletins, yearbooks, and other series distributed to growers and gardeners across America.

The illustrations realistically portrayed fruit in all conditions: the immaculate, the bruised, and the decaying. These watercolors, most of which were painted by women, tell the story of agriculture at the turn of the twentieth century and provide a visual time capsule of many fruit varieties that no longer exist.

Previous page: Mary Daisy Arnold, *Lemon Cling*, 1913.
Right: Royal Charles Steadman, *Elberta*, 1926. All images courtesy US Department of Agriculture Pomological Watercolor Collection, Rare and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library.


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A "crank upon the fruit question"

On the face of it, the peach did not seem likely to launch a new industry, never mind a New South. Georgians themselves often dismissed their peaches as a local treat at best and, like many other Americans, consigned the least palatable varieties, surplus fruit, and rotting peaches to hog troughs or middling brandy. With little pecuniary interest in peaches, some orchards fell into wild, overproducing tangles. Remarking on neglected orchards, northern antebellum tourists tried for an air of concerned objectivity, but there was often a bit of a sneer about southern backwardness or ineptitude. And there was near-universal agreement that there was no market for Georgia peaches outside the "neighborhood." An August 1886 *Atlanta Constitution* article said that Rumph's contemporaries had viewed him as a "crank upon the fruit question," adding: "There was no demand for fruits and trees grown in the South[,] that the [Y]ankee had already a monopoly upon that business … that nobody but a northern man could successfully conduct a nursery."

After he became a success, Rumph's early life became a regional legend, a tall tale of the fruit's founding father: a country boy left fatherless; a mother incapacitated by the burdens of grief and too many children; the grandparents who plucked him from penury; and how, as a teen, he began managing the orchard on the family's plantation from a few seeds. In truth, however, Rumph was no street urchin, and his family were land-rich, slaveholding elites before the Civil War—and still rich after it.

Rumph was part of a homegrown Georgia horticultural elite that tinkered with muskmelons, asparagus, and mulberries. Members of local and state horticultural societies—some backyard hobbyists, others serious botanists, still others devoted to the improvement of a singular plant—gathered annually for long, multiday meetings. He and his partners in pomology traded tricks of the trade from their respective corners of Georgia: how the frost affected trees this year; which trees grew best from seeds and which from cuttings; and the outcome of forays into grafting, the practice of placing together plants with different traits to heal and ideally grow together into a new breed.

Yet sharing this new biotechnology wouldn't be enough to catapult Georgian fruits to the forefront on its own. Even though the South was undeniably agrarian, southern pundits constantly lamented that northern foodstuffs and products often triumphed over local. Henry Grady, the Atlanta newspaperman who spread the ethos of a New South powered by factories and, to a lesser extent, small farms, memorably framed the situation in a famous 1889 speech to a Boston boy's club. Grady had attended a funeral in Pickens County, Georgia, and although the deceased man was buried in the piney woods, his coffin came from Cincinnati, his death coat from New York, and his breeches from Chicago. "That country, so rich in undeveloped resources, furnished nothing for the funeral except the corpse and the hole in the ground," quipped Grady.

Thus, the rise of the southern "nurseryman" came with a sense of regional aggrievement at northern domination of fruit growing. Also at play was the realization that King Cotton was "king—and then a despot," as Grady put it; the intense cultivation of cotton couldn't persist without long-term consequences for the land and the people who worked it. With their mix of social, political, and material capital, Rumph and his fellow horticultural experimenters were determined to show that innovation could germinate in the South and rival northern industry.

A crop that would "leave gold with every farmer"

In this atmosphere, it's not surprising that naysayers reportedly scoffed at young Rumph's obsession with peaches when his trees yielded unremarkable fruit year after year. His familiars tittered about how he missed family breakfasts (a young patriarch's domestic duty), except on the Sabbath. But then, around 1875, he redeemed himself by breeding the hardy and beloved Elberta peach, named after his wife, "who took great interest in all my schemes," according to Rumph.

Just how Rumph begat this new peach is uncertain. It was succulent and bright yellow with red markings. Its pit came out easily, and its fruit matured early in the season. That timing and its firmness were boons, and the trees yielded their large, handsome fruit prolifically. As historian Thomas Okie wrote in his rigorous and compelling study of how the peach became a Georgia icon, Rumph had produced the "industrial peach," a reliable producer that was reasonably good to eat, relatively resistant to pests and diseases, amenable to growing in different climes and soil, and easily transportable.

As a pioneer of what would eventually become agribusiness, Rumph considered the whole peach, from grafting to delivery, and intervened at various stages in the supply chain. First, he bred the peach that took the world by storm. Then, as a member of the Georgia State Horticultural Society's committee on packing and shipping peaches, Rumph devoted himself to studying how to send peaches around the country. Although the first shipment of peaches to New York had happened around the time of Rumph's birth in the 1850s, shipping still bedeviled the peach grower. Picked too green, they lost flavor when refrigerated. Too ripe, and they rotted almost immediately after emerging from cold shipment.

It wasn't long before Rumph reported making a successful shipment of peaches to New York, offering proof of concept that Georgia peaches could ride the railways well and sell high, even though it was an arduous journey for the fruit: usually three days total of trains and transfer to steamers. In an effort to make shipping a precise science rather than a gamble, Rumph created a slatted crate that could be stacked and wheeled, founding the Elberta Crate Company. His unpatented

From left to right: Amanda Almira Newton, *Crawford Late*, 1911; Deborah Griscom Passmore, *Chinese Cling*, 1900; Ellen Isham Schutt, *Elberta*, 1906.

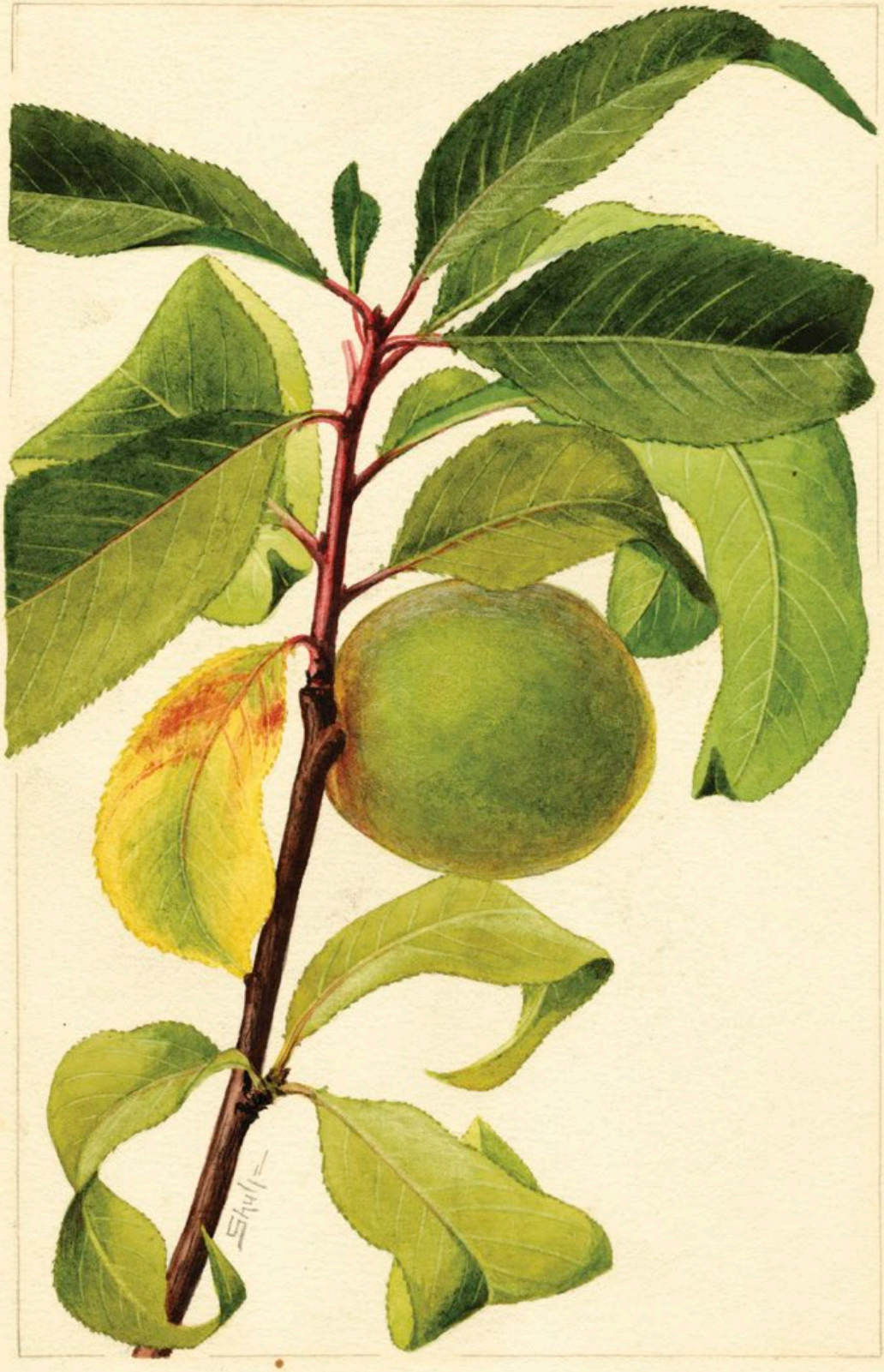
invention spawned industrywide imitation, and he went on to invent a refrigerated railway car—also unpatented—that was widely used by fruit growers thereafter.

Rumph's industry-changing shipping inventions established a durable and productive connection between fruit growers, the state, and industry. Railroads were booming across the South, buoyed by ample northern investment. And peach growers' earnings—and nurserymen's active involvement in politics—determined where railroads would go and stop. The Central Railroad, for example, extended its main line with a short track that went straight to Samuel Rumph's packing house. And when newspapers tried to describe the extent of the peach industry, they often guessed at the number of trees within reach of a given railroad; an 1895 estimate counted more than 2 million trees within the Central's territory.

Peach men were often railroad men, with a foot in both industries, trying to serve mutual interests. In the late 1880s, a Central Railroad commissioner, Major Glessner, courted influential and moneyed citizens, promoting Georgia as a major peach producer and a savvy investment. He organized a trip for Georgia boosters to travel to Ohio, visit orchards, and extol Georgia's virtues as a peach powerhouse. When Ohioans returned the favor and visited the South, Glessner put his "Profit in Peaches" brochure in their hands. Many were interested. Some bought in. Glessner deliberately brought prospective partners to the state in July so they could see fruit ripening on the vine and he could "convince the people of the [N]orth that the summer heat in Georgia was not as oppressive" as the warmth they experienced at home. Such excursions broke down boundaries between southern and northern entrepreneurs while emphasizing Georgia's uniqueness.

Being a nurseryman became something akin to being an evangelist. In expos around the nation, Georgia's fruit men sold the idea that their home state orchards could bestow a windfall upon the intrepid. At the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Georgia blueblood Hugh Washington waxed grandiloquent, claiming the current crop would yield 38 straight miles of Elberta peaches. Although the Elberta did grow outside Georgia, he raved that "nowhere does it grow as it does in Georgia. Down our way we do not say that a handsome girl is 'a peach.' We say she is 'an Elberta.'" And the year's peach crop would "just leave gold with every farmer. Peach culture in Georgia is well along toward perfection."

Reacting to this hard sell of Georgia's now-signature fruit, local Missouri reporter Anita Moore deadpanned that Washington ran out of steam because "even the praise of one's beloved State was a task." She "wondered if the man had gone mad over the name 'Elberta.'" At the end of his show, Washington announced a "peach party" in



the Georgia building, where he boasted that taste tests would prove that "a single Georgia Elberta is better than five peaches of any other kind in the world." (Sources suggest that Nebraska's peaches may have bested Georgia's, Washington's bombast notwithstanding.)

Georgia's peach producers and boosters soon reversed, in word and deed, the idea that the South was a land of failed orchards and farmers. By 1890, when Henry Grady wrote *The New South*, he promised that the region would have its revenge through a revanchist, commercialist "invasion" playing out on the fruit front, via more canneries, factories, and railway lines. "Georgia now realizes more than $1,000,000 a year from melons alone," he wrote. "From Chattanooga berry trains run solid to the North.… Ships are loaded at Charleston and Savannah with early vegetables and fruits for the East.… One peach-grower at Marshallville, Ga., deposited in bank $64,000 this year as profits from peaches."

That prosperous grower may have been Rumph, who continued to tinker with apples, grapes, quince, and 75 peach varieties—among them the Lemon Cling, the popular Crawford's Late, the Indian Blood, and the ubiquitous Elberta.

Fiddlin' with plant chromosomes

In the 1880s, the movement of hobbyist horticulturalists widened and lost some of its aristocratic gilt when the federal government launched an initiative to promote applied agricultural research at state-level experiment centers. Previously, the Morrill Act in 1862 had established agricultural incubators in the form of land-grant colleges. But the Hatch Act of 1887 gave each state a modest $15,000 to seed experiments and education on their literal home turf, testing new ideas and plants in the same conditions that local farmers faced.

Although the new agricultural centers were poorly funded, their work complemented the interests of big growers and the states. At the same time, they institutionalized research into soil, sowing methods, and plant disease, and propelled a new narrative where farmers themselves became agents of innovation as they learned scientific techniques.

The centers arrived during one of the wildest seesawing boom-and-bust cycles in American agriculture. The Civil War had disrupted the South's land-use practices and increased soil depletion and the spread of diseases among farm animals, historian Erin Stewart Mauldin has documented. Cotton production ramped up to all-time heights by the 1880s, and many small farmers gave up on diversified planting to cash in on the boom. But the resulting monoculture, coupled with low prices caused by the glut of cotton on the market, deepened their economic hardship. Overproduction drove the prices of some commodities way down, and growers suffered in the face of insufficient credit and markets. Northern investors seized the moment, putting up mills along southern rivers, gorging on cheap land, and building railroads that guaranteed access to the South's rural interior. The pace of industrialization quickened in the South, and farmers paid the price.

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Georgia peach growers created a playbook that other upstart agricultural industries would try to replicate. It included elite horticultural networks functioning as hubs for scientific exploration; growers leading the charge for advanced technology and expanded infrastructure; and the recycling of agricultural founding stories and marketing that bordered on propaganda. Following the playbook turned states like Georgia into key agents of innovation.

As the region's fruit trade grew in national fame and influence, southern identity ceased to be a liability. And in any case, investment from northern capitalists in Georgia agriculture complicated what constituted "southern." Were peaches southern because they grew on trees below the Mason-Dixon or because the farms had local ownership, in full or in part? The southern fruit men's disgruntlement about their region getting the short end of the national stick began evaporating as they found success in collaboration outside their home states. In 1913, Georgia's Chamber of Commerce conducted "Georgia dinners" around the nation, pushing its wares and an incipient notion of terroir. Georgia and its diverse growing zones constituted unique spaces to grow, say, apples and oranges. And that itself was unique: In what state could you fruitfully grow *both* apples and oranges?

In 1888, Georgia established its experiment station at a farm in Griffin, staffed with botanists, chemists, and other scientists. By the state legislature's charge, the sprawling farm center would devote itself to pursuits such as testing seed purity, the best environments for plant growth, and dairy production.

The researchers at the station espoused science education as a panacea for the many problems facing Georgia's farmers, including ravaged soil, insects, and access to markets. If a farmer knew the right pest control methods, one agriculture instructor reasoned, there wouldn't be one wormy apple in 15 acres. "But how shall they know except that they hear, and how shall they hear, except they be taught, and how should

Left: James Marion Shull, *Crawford*, 1909.

they be taught unless schools be provided," he mused.

To perform that function, the experiment station created early extension programs for farmers. An enthusiastic (but necessarily literate) farmer could send the station a postcard requesting information. In return, he'd receive a bulletin detailing the latest pests decimating area row crops, winter sweet potato preservation techniques, the newest fertilizers, and the best forage for cattle. If Georgia's identity shift was initially led by its "best men," it was continued by everyman farmers, some of whom learned the technical ins and outs of farming with professional scientists leading the way.

As the Georgia Experiment Station pioneered transformative planting techniques and preservation methods, its breeding programs became a matter of particular pride. Proponents displayed something akin to the nurserymen's evangelicalism, barely tempered by scientific jargon learned in the nation's land-grant colleges. Horticultural researcher Henry Stuckey, who directed the center from 1908 to 1948, described the botanists' mission: "Only God can make a grain of wheat, but man, with the knowledge God has bestowed, can fashion the grain into better wheat." For Stuckey and his cohort, "fiddlin' around with plant chromosomes" in trials testing disease resistance or better yields was both calling and profession.

The experiment station labored to develop seeds that could put Georgia industries on the map and money in farmers' pockets. Widespread crises—bouts of disease, pest invasions, drought, a gutted market—accelerated its work. After the boll weevil, a beetle that feeds on cotton buds and flowers, appeared in the state's fields, the Georgia station created Empire cotton in 1942 as a last-ditch effort to salvage the industry. Like the Elberta, Empire's early season was part of its success. Empire cotton matured sooner than the weevils emerged to eat it, its long fibers delighted mill owners, and its higher yields and prices pleased growers.

But as much as Stuckey and his experiment station colleagues believed there was still some future left in cotton, they relentlessly searched for the next big southern crop beyond the peach—just in case. Would it be the pineapple pear, whose fragrance recalled the tropical fruit? Or would it be the thick-skinned muscadine grapes that southerners so coveted? The station and farmers hedged their bets with trial after trial, seeking new seeds and solutions.

A pimento named Perfection

By about 1910, the pimento, a sweet red pepper, had emerged as another unlikely contender for Georgia's most promising new industry. Like the peach trade, the pimento had its own moguls. Samuel Riegel and his sons were farmers who lived within a holler of the Georgia experiment station. Riegel the elder frequented the same horticultural societies and meetings as Samuel Rumph and can be found in organizational reports pontificating on how to spray grapes. He and one of his sons, George, tinkered with breeding cauliflower and potatoes, but Riegel took particular delight in apples, giving his surname to a yellow-and-red-striped apple.

Sometime around 1905, the Riegels became backyard pepper enthusiasts. Soon the family was sowing row upon row of peppers, even though (like the peach several decades before) the pimento wasn't considered a commercially viable crop. Nevertheless, George Riegel pursued the peppers, ordering eight varieties from Philadelphia and canned ones from Spain. To the Riegels, the meatiness and firmness of the European peppers put their American seed-grown peppers to shame.

The Riegels were undaunted—they had watched Samuel Rumph. Seeing government as a partner in their efforts, they deployed their contacts and privilege by reaching out to Georgia congressman Charles Bartlett. Could he help them get seed directly from Europe? Bartlett contacted the US consul in Spain, who shipped seeds to the Riegels in due time. They sowed them and began selecting the best to replant and plant again in a series of longitudinal experiments.

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Several years later, Samuel Riegel said, "One day as I was walking through the field I noticed a plant that had very fine specimens of fruit on it." He summoned George, and the pair happily pronounced the plant to be sublime, the vegetal manifestation of their highest hopes. They named it Perfection. By 1911, they were distributing seeds. In 1920, a seed catalog from Augusta-based N. L. Willetts sang its praises, calling it "the mildest of all peppers and sweet and delicious."

Although the pimento fit in well with the Old South's organization of labor, with hand-picking often done by Black laborers, pimentos were unfamiliar to US farmers. Few US dictionaries even listed the word in the 1920s, but Stuckey and the experiment station released a guide to growing pimentos and bell peppers in 1921. Three years later, *County Agent Magazine* observed that the "earlier use of pimentos for culinary purposes in [the] United States was confined

practically to people of foreign birth and origin." However, the writer continued that it had recently "become common in native[-born] American households" and their salads, stews, and tea sandwiches.

The narrative of an Old South, disadvantaged by spotty infrastructure and northern bias, was once again being dislodged and dismantled by New South ingenuity, even urbanity. What the peach had wrought, the pimento would harvest (and vice versa, because pimento canneries would become peach canneries). It was a qualitatively different job, introducing an unknown vegetable to people who had known peaches for centuries. Southern growers' moxie, connections, and industry brought the pimento to the United States. And pimento producers would literally rewrite the story of this pepper—and rename it. Its journey from obscurity to ingredient in the region's popular cheesy spread was sealed when Georgia growers decided to anglicize its name from the Spanish *pimiento*. In renaming it, they laid claim to the pimento and inducted it into the regional cornucopia.

Georgia growers were careful to emphasize the pimento as another product uniquely suited for their state, as "certain climatic and atmospheric conditions peculiar to the pimento area in Georgia, as in Spain, are prerequisites for the perfect texture and flavor," according to *County Agent Magazine*. The pepper's novelty—as an exotic new vegetable on the block, previously exported to specialty groceries—lent European cachet to southern tables. Georgia residents could buy local and, in the early days when pimentos weren't workaday veggies, still see themselves as cosmopolitan eaters.

The pepper's popularity was no doubt helped by the fact that its scarlet hue presented well in modern color advertisements. Rural experiment stations and local extension agencies joined the push by sponsoring girls' "tomato clubs" that explained how to can and prepare vegetables, including the pimento. In Florida, a rising pimento grower, girls in such clubs reportedly "put up" 26,039 cans of pimentos in 1917 alone.

And so the pimento moved into important American institutions: the home kitchen; the pantries and consciousness of girls and women who managed those kitchens (and, by extension, much of the nation's pocketbook); and the growing realm of modern domestic science. Southerners had caught up with northern nurseries, and now they were embedding the pimento in elements of southern labor and culture.

Still, a particularly vexing wrinkle marred Perfection's flawlessness, one common to all pimentos: thick, hard-to-process skin. It had to be softened with lye or burned off in a fire, then peeled by hand.

The other Riegel son, Mark, who worked briefly for the experiment station, thought there had to be a better way. He invented a roasting machine that ferried peppers on a continuous chain through a line of fire, turning the skin burnoff into a quicker mass process. Like Rumph before him, he attended to the supply chain end to end. Not only did Mark Riegel invent a process, he established a string of canneries that induced growers to cultivate peppers on contract. From the seed to the jar, the Riegels had cultivated the "perfect" pimento, enlisted farmers to grow their marvel, developed a better processing method, and created upbeat marketing campaigns with their Sunshine brand.

Not long afterward, Mark—"who possessed some of the characteristics often associated with genius," according to the dean of the University of Georgia's agricultural college—announced he was leaving the pepper business for good. Walter Graefe, a young veteran of the First World War, would eventually step in and become the president of the National Canners Association, attaining near-legendary status as his own industry grew. He too, had a semi-mythical origin story: the jobless ex-soldier, transitioning to civilian life and looking for employment, was told that opportunity abounded in rural Georgia and its canneries. He hurried to Griffin in his Army uniform.

The Riegel family had leveraged multiple circles in growing its business: horticultural societies, growers associations, congressional intercession, the experiment station, and probably financiers. And they had the power of a story behind them—a small family farm; a happenstance discovery in a field; young men with initiative, one a veteran; and the mysterious departure of one of the business's young lions.

Less than two decades after the Riegels' pepper obsession began, the outlook was positive for the pimento trade. By 1923, one pepper proponent crowed that "American enterprise and American methods of canning have wrested from Europe the supremacy in another line of canning." By the 1940s, a cannery Riegel founded was bringing in $3 million annually, employing 1,100 workers and contracting with 1,000 farmers—and it was just one of 21 pimento canneries in the state. The Georgia Experiment Center jumped into the fray by breeding a hardier pimento.

Georgia's pimento trade so dominated the market that pundits suggested, half-seriously, that Georgia's informal moniker, "The Peach State," be changed to "The Pimento State" (the peach only officially became the state fruit in 1995). The creation of the industry over just a few fruitful decades underscored that horticulture could be both a livelihood and an exercise in identity formation and affirmation—for individual, industry, and state. "The Peach State" may have been a marketing slogan, but it stuck because it conveyed that Georgia excelled at something and that peaches and peppers were more than bundles of seed, flesh, and skin; they were dynamic archives of human effort, intervention, and invention.

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