



Point and shoot: Hayley Downs takes aim at wild game in a film about Florida, food, and personal lives. (Photo courtesy filmmakers)

[In Production](#)

Foraging for "Swamp Cabbage"

By Michael Fox

Julie Kahn, who was born in Miami, routinely uses the word "Cracker" in polite company. It's slightly shocking to your Yankee correspondent, who thought "Cracker" was a rude cousin of "redneck." "In Florida, it's a term of pride," Kahn explains. "It's different than the pejorative meaning white bigot. It refers to Irish settlers who came to Florida in the late 1800s to hunt wild Spanish cattle through the swamps and put them onto boats bound for the Cuban cattle market and trade them for gold." This revelation is just one of several in **Swamp Cabbage**, the long-gestating, cliché-crunching documentary Kahn is making with fellow Floridian Hayley Downs.

Kahn moved to the Bay Area about two years ago to work at Grouper, an online video company that Sony acquired and renamed Crackle. (Purely coincidence, she says with a laugh.) A peripatetic sort whose career has included a Wall Street stint at Morgan Stanley, Kahn explains, "I was wanting for a long time to get more immersed in the online video world because I figure that's where the interactivity can come and also that's where film distribution is partially headed. I felt it was important for me to learn in a more real way other than passively reading about it."

Now an affiliate artist in residence at Headlands Center For the Arts and living on a houseboat in Sausalito, Kahn met her filmmaking partner 13 years ago at a Miami performing arts presenting organization where they both worked as producers. “She was working on a project called ‘Cole Slaw Wrestling,’ in her hometown of Daytona Beach,” Kahn recalls over coffee at Café Quetzal on Polk. “From there I met her family and learned her father was organizing a wild game feast. We embarked on a project to document the feast. That’s kind of how it started.”

The throughline of **Swamp Cabbage** is Downs’ journey from Jesus-loving teenager to college party girl to married woman in Brooklyn. She hit some major potholes when her father was diagnosed with cancer and her husband took up with her best friend, leading her back to Florida to care for her dad. [Check out the kinetic trailer at <http://swampcabbagemovie.blogspot.com/>.]

It’s been nearly a decade since the duo shot those first bits of film. Downs was derailed for a while by her aforementioned personal traumas, while Kahn moved on to other jobs, notably as a freelance producer for Annie Leibovitz. When she received a grant from the Florida Humanities Council to film and photograph Crackers, she returned to central Florida and lived on an abandoned orange grove for a couple years. Food is as much a part of Cracker life and identity as any other culture, so the resulting exhibition, *Swamp Cabbage: Cracker Culture in a Fast Food Nation*, featured a wild-game tasting.

Venison, quail and alligator may seem worlds away from the Bay Area’s upscale romance with Alice Waters, farmers markets and organic produce. Not so, Kahn says. “I think slow food is ultimately about connecting people to their food sources,” she declares. “I think it can be a lot about connecting farmers to markets and making food more pleasurable and viable. If you hunt game, you are very connected to the animal, you’re very connected to conservation. I’ve found a lot of vegetarians say to me they’ll eat game at our wild-game feasts because it’s not about feedlots and corporate meat. It’s about taking one animal for a feast knowing the preciousness of that animal.”

Although there’s definitely an oddball quirkiness to **Swamp Cabbage**—which takes its name from a Cracker staple made from the heart of the Sabal Palm, Florida’s state tree—Kahn and Downs are confident they can build a community around the documentary, which draws from several subcultures. She mentions people who embrace the DIY aesthetic, such as filmmakers and musicians. And, of course, the vast array of folks connected with food.

“A big part of the film is this communal element, these wild-game feasts,” Kahn says. “We’re planning to have a lot of hunters and foragers and chefs and people in the food world involved.” In fact, a wild-game fundraiser for **Swamp Cabbage** is slated to take place Nov. 15 in Mill Valley. That’s a few weeks after the filmmakers pick up the inaugural John Egerton Prize “honoring work in the world of food that challenges conventions and addresses issues of social justice” from the Mississippi-based Southern Foodways Alliance.

Kahn and Downs have about 85 percent of the film in the can, and expect to finish production early next year. They’ll devote 2010 to postproduction—maybe here, maybe Brooklyn—and release **Swamp Cabbage** in 2011.

“We’re exploring ideas like alternative reality games and things that connect people to their own sense of place, their own *terroir*, their own recipes, their own childhoods, their own authentic culture,” Kahn enthuses. “It’s a tricky thing to pull something like that off. That’s what’s so great about the Bay Area—it’s the center of so much of what our film is about.”