

May 21, 2008-----

Based in the warm cradle of Oxford, Miss., the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) takes its show on the road Friday through Sunday when "Camp Chicago: An Up South Expedition" hits various Chicago eateries.

The SFA's exploration of Soul Food at Edna's and ribs at Lem's are commonplace for most Chicagoans. But the mother-in-law sandwich is a rare experience, even by Chicago standards.

Chicago food historian Peter Engler will conduct a field trip of South Side diners that serve the spicy concoction of chili and tamale in a hot dog bun.

Look for the weather to be chili today, hot tamale.

Fat Johnnie's, 7232 S. Western, is regarded as Chicago's premier venue to experience the mother-in-law, but John's GAR hot dog stand, 2658 W. 47th (773-927-1514), takes the idea to extremes by serving the tamale in a styrofoam cup of chili (\$2.05; a tamale on a bun with chili is \$1.75.) Engler's research determines the funky meal gets its name because "both types of mother-in-laws are known for giving you indigestion."

Engler then took a bite from the tamale sandwich.

Chili dripped out of the bun. It was a disturbing sight.

Short order cook Ed Dopkowski has worked at John's GAR for more than 20 years. While standing in the kitchen he told Engler, "A mother-in-law is a cup of chili with a tamale inside."

Engler asked, "So what would you call a tamale on a bun with chili?"

Dopkowski answered, "A mother-in-law is a cup of chili with a tamale inside."

Engler persisted, "Some people say a mother-in-law is a chili tamale, sometimes in a french fried boat or on a bun. But you have to have chili, right?"

Dopkowski said, "We would call that tamale on a bun with chili."

John's GAR (which stands for the last name of the owner, Javier Garcia) uses tamales from neighboring Tom Tom Tamale & Bakery, 4750 S. Washtenaw. Engler's tour will likely include a stop at Tom Tom's, which uses original factory equipment from the 1930s. When eating a mother-in-law at John's, Engler

suggested ordering the homemade giardiniera on the side.

John's GAR opened in 1965. Engler, who doesn't own a car, found the hot dog stand while riding by on a CTA bus. "There's so few of these places left," said Engler, 52. "Twenty years ago there were corner hot dog stands in every neighborhood. I wonder how much longer this one will be around."

John's tamale on a bun had a very generous chili-to-tamale ratio. Engler elaborated, "There's a little too much cornmeal for me. The Chicago-style tamale is cornmeal based with beef filling as it is the Delta. Almost always Delta tamales are handmade. The Chicago tamales are industrial. But Oaxacan tamales are great in Chicago. The Maxwell Street Oaxacan tamales, in particular."

Delta-style tamales also tend to be more spicy. I've had tamales in Natchez, Miss., with ancho chile powder and garlic cloves. But the steamy chili of the mother-in-law makes up for any spice deficiency.

Engler will start his tour at Ramova Grill, 3510 S. Halsted, because he loves their old-style chili. The 79-year-old diner serves mother-in-laws by request. The group will also stop at Fat Johnnie's. The group, however, will miss Peppo's, 10303 S. Roberts in south suburban Palos Hills, which serves a mother-in-law (tamale on a hot dog bun) and a father-in-law (tamale stuffed with a hot dog and served on a hot dog bun).

Engler is convinced the mother-in-law is a South Side phenomenon, just like bad bad Leroy Brown.

"I made a concerted effort spending a couple of days going all over the North Side asking about mother-in-laws," said Engler, who worked in mouse genetics at the University of Chicago between 1988 and 2007. "Nobody knew. It's not on any menu."