



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Jenny and her jams

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 10.29.25



(Pixnio)

I wouldn't, under ordinary circumstances, compose a testimonial – particularly one concerning preserves, of all things – but gratitude, that most insistent of emotions, has compelled me to set down these appreciations.

The proprietress of the enterprise in question, Jenny McCain, represents a fine example of the Alabama entrepreneurial spirit. She happens to be a friend of mine, and fellow practitioner of law, though I assure you this acquaintance has done nothing whatsoever to color my judgment of her confections.

Her business is called [Woodhill Cottage](https://woodhillcottage.com/) (<https://woodhillcottage.com/>), a small but growing local enterprise blending Southern tradition with modern craftsmanship. It possesses a distinctly Southern character – the sort of thing that makes you think of screened porches and the drowsy hum of summer afternoons with delicious sandwiches.

I've been purchasing her jams for perhaps two years now, developing particular affection for the peach and the strawberry varieties.

I confess I'm no expert in these matters. I couldn't begin to explain the technical distinctions between jelly, jam and preserves, nor can I say with any certainty which category this marvelous product properly occupies. But I know what I like, and what I admire equally is the spirit of enterprise that makes such things possible. While so much commerce has gone cold and automatic, Woodhill Cottage restores the warmth of human touch.

Recently, finding myself depleted of stock during one of those dreary supermarket expeditions we all must endure, I committed what I can only describe as an act of faithlessness: rather than waiting to place my usual Woodhill Cottage order online, I seized upon some Smucker's and Welch's offerings, tossing them into my cart with the resignation of the temporarily desperate.

That evening, my daughter requested a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a sacred covenant between us. I obliged, naturally, but when attempting to spread the newly acquired jelly across the bread, it refused to cooperate. It remained obstinately lumpy, clinging to itself with a kind of sullen determination. My knife made wounds in the bread, little craters of failure. I was forced to apply more jelly, which only created more clumps – a topographical map of culinary disappointment.

Woodhill Cottage jams are altogether different. They possess an almost liquid grace: You can very nearly pour them from the jar, and they glide across bread with the ease of silk across skin.

And you can actually discern the fruit! Imagine that! Real fruit, not some chemist's approximation of the Platonic ideal of strawberry.

The true story isn't merely the superior jam, however, but a local business built from the ground up by someone who already had a demanding profession yet found the time and courage to create something tangible and personal. Today, when so many transactions are abstract and impersonal, Woodhill Cottage reminds us that entrepreneurship can still be rooted in care, community and craft.

Woodhill Cottage also offers gift baskets, which I discovered last May. I had organized, along with colleagues from the Heritage Foundation, a Semiquincentennial (America 250) Celebration at the American Village in Montevallo – quite an impressive affair – and afterward sent baskets to my Heritage associates as tokens of appreciation. The reception was enthusiastic, to put it mildly.

Now, Jenny may very well disapprove of my writing this at all. She seems to possess that rare quality of shunning attention, retreating from the limelight as others rush toward it.

But her entrepreneurial spirit, her sheer *gumption* – these deserve recognition. By day, she's an attorney and shareholder at Maynard Nexsen, directing an entire banking practice, which is no small accomplishment. Yet she manages this separate venture with equal aplomb, proving herself to be one of those remarkable individuals who contain multitudes.

Her story says something quiet but enduring about small enterprises: the courage to imagine, the pleasure of making, the stubborn wish to live by one's own design. Such people stitch together communities, turning a pastime into purpose and, almost by accident, making life around them a little richer.

In the end, what strikes me most is this: Jenny has managed to bottle something more than mere jelly. She's captured a certain quality – call it care, call it craft – that has become increasingly rare in our expedient age.

And if her jams can transform even the humble peanut butter and jelly sandwich into something approaching grace, well, that seems worth celebrating.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).

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