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Author takes us on a tasty romp filled with Southern secrets

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Talk about backlash: This book, "Bitter in the Mouth," has the South strung up by the thumbs and hammered to the barn door. We ain't what we seem (is any one of us ever?), and neither is Linda Hammerick, now of New York, formerly of Boiling Springs, N.C.

>From the blue and gray ranch house (get that little jab at the recent unpleasantness) to the Greek Revival houses of her childhood, nobody gets past whaps of Linda's wet noodles. Or should we say chicken dumplings? Cold grits on the side.

Linda skewers us all - from her mother, DeAnne, Southern belle of the bouffant hair, to grandmother Iris as the only one of the family to ever tell the truth. Who in the South does not have a relative called Aunt Sister or an Uncle Brother? In "Bitter," we have a great-uncle, age 63, who is called Baby, a mortician with a special talent and a secret life, a wardrobe of exquisitely tailored dresses and a discreetly locked bedroom decorated in green velvet. (They always adored that scene from the bible of the South, "Gone with the Wind.") We treasure our eccentrics. They are getting fewer all the time.

When Linda (our estranged heroine) comes back to Boiling Springs for her grandmother's funeral, she remembers the last words her grandmother spoke, "What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two."

In rollicking, dead-on prose, award-winning author Monique Truong takes us on a taste tour of the South and her life through her "gift" (or "curse") of a condition called synesthesia - she literally tastes words. Mother to Linda tastes like chocolate milk. The word no is grape jelly. Really tastes like popcorn. Idea, swiss cheese, and so on - you get the idea, which is kind of fun at first. But, after awhile, reading it on the page becomes tedious. Maybe a glossary, people?

Family secrets come forth as the tale unfolds. Included are cameo clips with the ghost of Virginia Dare, the Wright brothers and George Moses Horton slinking through. What a romp.

So I say come on home, honey. All is forgiven. We don't hold grudges. Much.

Ruth Moose teaches creative writing at UNC Chapel Hill. Her latest book is "The Librarian," a poem collection.