As Ken Wells writes in his delightful book, southern Louisiana is "the last redoubt of southern Europe in America and like the continental French, Spanish and Italians, our people don't eat to live, they live to eat." In no other part of America does food play such a central cultural role. Nowhere else between Maine and San Diego can people of all means eat as consistently well (superior boudin, a delicious, heavily spiced sausage made of pork, offal and rice, is sold at petrol stations). But, as anyone lucky enough to be invited to dinner by a Cajun or Creole friend knows, the best food, and in particular the best gumbo, is found in private homes.

Mr Wells takes readers into dozens of kitchens, none rendered more lovingly than his mother's. Bonnie Toups grew up in southern Louisiana and left school when she was 12—both because her family, like many others, was desperately poor and because, in early-20th-century Louisiana, speaking French in the classroom was forbidden. She married an Arkansan (no culinary rivalry there), and they brought up their children on a sugar plantation in the bayou. In her daily efforts to feed a large, boisterous family she routinely conjured up "something that flies so close to love that it must be love itself." Her gumbo is classic: chicken, smoked sausage, filé powder stirred in at the end.

The author's affinity for his home region never curdles into chauvinism; he happily admits that decent gumbo can be found in San Francisco, New York and Chicago. But he is clear about the reason why: because so many people have left the bayous. The mill that employed his father closed. The public lands where he learned to hunt and fish have been parcelled out to private owners and sequestered behind "No Trespassing" signs. Every year around 15,000 acres of marshlands—the pantry that generations of rural cooks drew upon—vanish, because of subsidence, a rising sea level and the impacts of flood protection and the oil-and-gas industry.

Yet the book's tone is more affectionate than elegiac. What lingers in the memory is less the food itself than the warm descriptions of the people who cook it. Gumbo is an inherently social dish; it is rarely made for fewer than a dozen diners, and even more rarely, in your correspondent's experience, prepared without a crowd. It will include whatever ingredients the chef can defend adding.

Not long ago Brett Anderson, the restaurant critic for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (one of journalism's most enviable jobs), opined on gumbo created by an Indian-born chef that contains delicious additions such as Kashmiri chilli powder and curry leaves; and on another made with smoked chicken and Thai curry. Gumbo, like America, contains multitudes. ■

The power of speech

Do not think of a white bear

BERLIN

A speaker turns lectures into a performance art

A BEARDED SWEDE in a three-piece suit stands at a lectern. Spotlit, Erik Bünger tells his listeners about an exchange between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell in 1911. According to Wittgenstein, Russell could not say with certainty that there was no rhinoceros in his study. Mr Bünger (pictured) says he is not interested in who was right, but in why Wittgenstein chose a rhinoceros. "There was certainly an elephant in the room," he concludes. "And that elephant was a rhinoceros."

Laughter ripples through the audience at Video Art at Midnight (VAM), a monthly event at Berlin's beautiful Babylon cinema. A series of video artists, including luminaries such as Wolfgang Tillmans, have shown work at VAM in the decade since its inception. Mr Bünger instead offers a lecture performance. In the 40 minutes of "The Elephant Who Was A Rhinoceros", he leads the auditorium through a series of connections. The spectral rhinoceros turns into a metaphorical elephant, which becomes a white bear, which (Mr Bünger says) will flash in listeners' minds when they are told not to think about it. A cultural history of language takes in Adam's naming of the animals in the Garden of Eden, cave paintings and the invention of the alphabet. Invert the letter A, Mr Bünger says, and you see the devil and his horns.

Gradually the amusement is muted as listeners begin to question what he is doing—and, indeed, what they are doing. To begin with, they "can follow everything, feel surprise and even laugh," says Renia Vagkopoulou, Mr Bünger's wife, who has seen all his performance works many times. At some point, things become more complex, as people are forced to interrogate their responses. "Some even get a little shocked. What starts as a theoretical exercise becomes more and more personal."

By getting the audience to grapple with its own role, Mr Bünger's work fits into an established artistic tradition, says Manuel Olveira, an expert in the lecture form and director of MUSAC, a contemporary-art gallery in León, Spain. He cites John Cage's "Event" of 1952 (which incorporated a talk on Buddhism), Dan Graham's "Performer/Audience/Mirror" of 1975 (in which the artist narrated his own movements and observations), and Andrea Fraser's "Museum Highlights" of 1989 (in which she posed as a guide to the Philadelphia Museum of Art). Like Mr Bünger, each raised questions about how knowledge is produced and disseminated. "Lecture performance is a vibrant category within the wider performance medium," says Adela Yawitz, a Berlin-based curator, mentioning several other practitioners. The form is fluid, she notes: performances can be live or taped, discrete or combined with other media.

Performance art is not the only means by which lectures have broken free from formal education. Internet streaming has led to the rise of TED talks, which attract billions of clicks a year, as well as boosting the audience for stand-up comedy. Mr Bünger admits to being inspired by comics such as Larry David and Louis CK, and concedes that, at first sight, his art may seem reminiscent of formats such as TED. But at a deeper level, he insists, "my lecture performance is the absolute antithesis of TED". He sees short video talks as "vehicles of pure solutionism": hard questions reduced to slick formulae. For him, lecture performance lays bare the imbalance of power between lecturer and listener, and highlights the alchemy of language.

His previous work evoked similar themes. "A Lecture on Schizophonia" (2009-2011) explored the impact of recorded speech. "The Third Man" (2010) dealt with the aura of song, roping in ABBA and Kylie Minogue. "The Girl Who Never Was" (2014) tells the serpentine story of a child whose voice was once thought to have been captured on a primitive audio recording, but who turned out not to have existed. "I'm placing a voice in the heads of my listeners," Mr Bünger explains of that piece. "Most will see the girl in their mind's eyes—she will come to exist."

Human speech, maintains Mr Bünger, "refuses to follow the binary logic" of truth and falsehood or past and present. It is more slippery and magical than that. When the lights go on in the Babylon cinema, the magic seems to have worked. "Now, whenever you see an A, you will see something else," chuckles Mats Birgert, one half of the video-art duo Birgert and Bergström. "That's what art is about." ■