

JILL CONNER BROWNE

The Sweet Potato Queen



Photo by Tom Joynt, © SPQ, Inc.

“Boss Queen” **Jill Conner Browne** conceived of and founded the Sweet Potato Queens® in the early 1980s. After passing through a patch of the doldrums, she found herself in need of some excitement, and a new direction. Jill discovered that she lived near Vardaman, Mississippi, self-proclaimed Sweet Potato Capital of the World, and inspiration struck—she volunteered to be the queen for the farmers’ annual festival. Although the crowning never materialized, the prospect of being the queen of *anything* was too good to pass up; so, in 1982 Jill entered herself and a few similarly inspired friends in Jackson, Mississippi’s first St. Patrick’s Day Parade. The four original Queens all wore green, hand-me-down, ball gowns and tiaras, and waved to the crowd from the bed of an old pickup truck. It was modest, but it was a start. The Queenly costume has undergone several upgrades since then, and now consists of a green-sequined dress (stuffed to its voluptuous forty-pound carrying weight), flowing red wigs, Revlon® “Love That Pink” lipstick, and real-live majorette boots. By 2011 the Sweet Potato Queens® entourage had outgrown the St. Paddy’s parade; so, Jill partnered with Fondren Renaissance Foundation and created the Zippy Doo Dah® Weekend, benefiting the Blair E. Batson Hospital for Children. The first three events have raised over \$220,000 for sick and injured children of Mississippi.

Jill has written nine books: her latest is *Fat Is The New 30: The Sweet Potato Queens’ Guide to Coping with (the crappy parts of) Life* (Amazon Publishing, 2012); *American Thighs: The Sweet Potato Queen’s Guide to Preserving your Assets*, (Simon & Schuster, 2009); *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Guide to Raising Children for Fun and Profit* (Simon & Schuster, 2008); her sixth book is her first work of fiction: *The Sweet Potato Queens’ 1st Big-Ass Novel: Stuff we didn’t actually do, but could have and may yet* (Simon & Schuster, 2007); her fifth book, a *New York Times*® bestseller, is *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Wedding Planner and Divorce Guide*, (Crown Publishers, 2005), an ingenious flip-book; her second #1 *New York Times*® bestseller is *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Field Guide to Men: Every Man I Love is Either Married, Gay, or Dead* (Three Rivers Press, 2004); her first #1 *New York Times*® bestseller is *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Big-Ass Cookbook (and Financial Planner)* (Three Rivers Press, 2003); and, the national bestsellers *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens* (Three Rivers Press, 2001) and *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Book of Love* (Three Rivers Press, 1999)—the book that started it all—has been translated into German and Japanese. Jill has won awards for her readings of the audio versions of her books and she also narrates, *Building Blocks*, a documentary about the cultural recovery on the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina.

A Broadway musical based on the Sweet Potato Queens® is being developed by Grammy® award-winning singer/songwriter Melissa Manchester, writing the music; writing the lyrics is Oscar® nominee, international multiple #1 songwriter, and Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee, Sharon Vaughn; and, writing the stage play is Rupert Holmes, the first person in theatrical history to solely win Tony® Awards for Best Book, Best Music and Lyrics, and Best Musical for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Jill has been featured in *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Denver Post*, *The St. Petersburg Times*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Forbes*, *SOUTH*, *The London Observer Magazine* (UK), and *Bella Magazine* (UK), and *Today in English* (France) just to name a few; she has appeared on numerous TV shows, including three times on *The CBS Early Show* and three times on *Good Morning America*; she been on the *Today Show*, *CBS News Sunday Morning*, *The Other Half*, *The Wayne Brady Show*, *The Caroline Rhea Show*, *Southern Living Presents* (nominated for a 2005 Regional EMMY®), *The Rick & Bubba® Show* twice, CMT’s *100 Greatest Love Songs*, *Tucker Carlson*, Mississippi Public Broadcasting’s TV productions of *Writers*, (The “Southern Humorists” episode featuring Jill won a 2005 Regional EMMY®) and *Mississippi Roads*; Jill represents Mississippi in the History Channel’s mini-series, *The States* (2007), and a photograph of her attending a luncheon in the President’s private dining room is prominently shown in the History Channel’s *The White House: Behind Closed Doors* (2008); Jill has been featured on NPR’s *All Things Considered*. She has written several columns for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and is a monthly contributor to *AY Magazine*. Through Jill’s books, personal appearances and social media she has inspired over 6,300 registered Sweet Potato Queen Wannabe™ Chapter Groups, in 37 countries around the world.

Jill is a founding member of the Women’s Fund of The Community Foundation of Greater Jackson. She assisted Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, raising over \$100,000 in cash through her website; she cooked with Chefs for Humanity™ for law enforcement and victims on the Gulf Coast; she did clean-up detail with Camp Coast Care and she participated in the nationally televised *Mississippi Rising Gala Concert*, raising in excess of \$15 Million. Jill also serves on the Volunteer Board of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and on the Jackson State University Development Foundation Board of Directors. Jill received the *Mississippi National Guard Patriot Award* for her support of our military and was chosen by *Mississippi Business Journal* for their 50 Leading Business Women in Mississippi. The Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women awarded Jill *Woman of the Year 2013* for her outstanding contributions in the Performing Arts & Entertainment Field.

The International Waterlily and Water Gardening Society registered the cultivar: *Nymphaea* “Queen Jill,” a waterlily specifically created to honor Jill’s charitable works around the United States.

When Jill is not writing, working for relief efforts, or speaking at fundraising events around the country, she lives and reigns in Jackson, Mississippi, with three elderly cats, a rescued 3-legged girl dog, a huge rescued boy dog, her daughter’s rescued mutt, a rescued Lab-coonhound mix, and her husband. And no, he’s not the Sweet Potato King.