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New South Cooking:

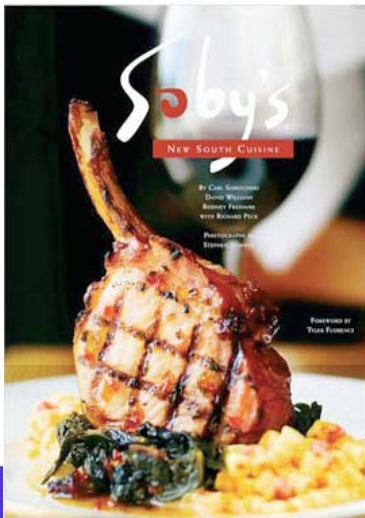
A coffee-table cookbook worthy of its time-consuming recipes

By: *Rosa Bianca* - January 21st, 2009

Soby's New South Cuisine

By: **Rodney Freidank, Carl Sobocinski and David Williams, with Richard Peck**
Table 301, \$49.95

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FIVE-STAR DINING AT HOME: Soby's New South Cuisine is a cookbook that will transform readers' kitchens into the five-star establishments that Soby's serves in Greenville, SC.

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AS A RULE, I AM ENTIRELY OF A PRAGMATIC BEND WHEN IT COMES TO CHOOSING COOKBOOKS. They are tools, like the knives on my counter, or the sturdy stainless-steel measuring cups in my "baking" drawer, or the indestructible Krups mixer I've been using, (heavily) to make cookies and cakes for the last 15 years. And like any kitchen "tool," I need a cookbook to work well. That means, among other things, it has to be legible—no fancy typefaces. It has to be well-organized—no grouping dishes by the phases of the moon (laugh, but I've seen it done). It has to have an index, and it has to have recipes that can be made in an only-moderately stocked kitchen, using ingredients purchased at a supermarket.

It has to fit on my kitchen counter, and be sturdy like all my kitchen utensils and appliances. It has to react well to spills and drips and grease and grime. It has to be flexible—amenable to creating small meals for a single diner and

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Entertainment

larger ones for more festive occasions. It has to be realistic; there is no point in giving me instructions for a dish that requires three sous-chefs and a specialized garnish knife to prepare properly. I have two good knives and only one friend who will occasionally help out in the kitchen, and I dare not abuse the privilege. Most of all it has to have recipes I think would taste good, which is a rarer event than one may think for someone like me who eats often and varied.

If a cookbook is lacking in any of the above criteria, especially the one about abuse of fancy fonts and typefaces, I'm not likely to be interested—quite the opposite. I'm likely to sneer in a superior manner at any book that dares to disregard Rosa's Rules of (Cookbook) Order. Which makes my reaction to Soby's New South Cuisine all the more remarkable: This is a cookbook that blatantly thumbs its gourmet nose at all my ideas of what makes a good cookbook, and yet I was not sneering at all.

Soby's came to my attention when it became a kind of dark horse favorite in last year's short list for the Best Southern Cookbook of the year, as chosen by Southern indie booksellers. It is a restaurant cookbook, put together by Chef Rodney Freidank, Carl Sobocinski and David Williams, as a kind of tribute to their restaurant of the same name in Greenville, South Carolina. Soby's has enjoyed a fair amount of fame since it first opened its doors over a decade ago, and has received the praise and accolades of nearly everybody who is anybody in the world of Southern gourmet dining. Like most restaurant cookbooks, Soby's New South Cuisine is as much a tribute to a great establishment as it is a "tool" for the kitchen. It has all the usual flaws to be found in the genre of restaurant cookbooks: It is big and pretty, more of a coffee table book than a cookbook. It takes up a lot of counter space, and while it endures spills and accidents as well as the next book, it is hard to forget its \$50 price tag when wiping the splashes of wine or olive oil off the page. The typeface isn't too awful but the page layout is . . . artistic. And while a book about fine Southern dining can't be said to be too exotic, there is an entire section called "Soby's Pantry," featuring specialized ingredients deemed absolutely essential to the success of each recipe. And, no, most cannot be found in the neighborhood supermarket.

The food may be five-star, but so are the directions. "It's not the kind of book I'd use to cook for someone without trying stuff out ahead of time," one friend, who is a much better cook than me said. "Those recipes are hard," she admitted. "Some of them need special pans." Which, coming from a woman whose kitchen is equipped with special pans, gives one pause.

Why, then, had Soby's New South Cuisine garnered so much praise and excitement among booksellers and their customers? Open it up to page one and start reading to see why. Unlike most restaurant cookbooks, Soby's talks as much about the restaurant as it does about the food. At least a third of the book is given over to the kitchen, the dining and drinking philosophies of the creative geniuses behind the establishment. It documents not only what's in the menu, but the history of the restaurant itself—how it came to be built, how it became an integral part of the Greenville community. It is a storybook as much as a cookbook, the story of Soby's. It also explores a question almost never broached by other restaurant cookbooks: What makes a restaurant great?

Ask any restaurant patron, and they will say it is the food. Not necessarily so. A great restaurant has to serve great food, of course, but that might not be enough. Ask any restaurant owner or chef what makes a restaurant great, and they will talk about the experience. A meal is great not just because it tastes good, but because it made a diner feel special. That is perhaps what is so endearing (and I can't believe I'm using that word about a \$50 coffee-table cookbook) about the Soby's book. It is as much about how they became special to their community and how their community became special to them.

So among the things readers will learn from this book are the ups and downs that came as the Soby's owners renovated an old shoe store into what would become a showcase dining establishment. How they involved their staff in a way that is almost never really meant when a restaurant says, "When you're here, you're family." "Take the fireplace, for instance," David Williams says. "The new stone face and hearth was built by staff—staff who had never done stonework. We all just did what we had to do. And that brought the team together. It made Soby's their place, too."

Alongside the interesting and often humorous account of creating the restaurant (on their opening day, with two hundred people waiting at the door, they suddenly realized they had neglected to make any bread for the tables, necessitating the last minute creation of their now- signature garlic-cheese biscuits) are extensive ruminations from restaurant personnel on the nature of food, wine, service, hospitality and what might loosely be called "the good life."

To top it off, the food is good—more than good. Despite what my friend said about the difficulty of the recipes, there are quite a lot of dishes in this cookbook that are perfectly easy and rewarding to make for those who don't mind taking a little extra time. It is especially good for unusual fish entrees: pan- roasted striped bass with green tomato and crawfish relish, sautéed skate in mushroom ragout with roasted garlic cream, snow peas and carrots. Sure, they sound delicious, but they really taste gorgeous, and can be done

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at home without too much trouble for a special occasion. Nor do most recipes require the use of “special pans”; in fact, quite a lot of them require little more than a good frying pan and a good sauce pan. Most of the difficult parts of the book come, not surprisingly, in the sauce and dessert preparations. But even here almost every recipe includes short notes and tips from the chefs to help make life easier in the kitchen. Soby’s New South Cuisine, despite all appearances to the contrary, is actually quite a useful and engaging book, and one that will have readers thinking about what exactly makes a good meal. It also has me thinking about the many fine restaurants in the Port City, all of whom I’m sure have stories as interesting as Soby’s. Where are their cookbooks?

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