



Fried green tomatoes, collard greens and sweet potatoes are but three culinary treasures gaining menu momentum in a wave of “new-Southern-cuisine” places like Soby’s in Greenville, S.C.

THE SOUTH Rises Again

Infused with rich flavors, deep culinary traditions and craveable comforts, Southern food is being reborn

BY JOAN LANG

Whatever happened to regional American cuisine? It seems the food world has been so busy focusing on paella, sushi and Southeast-Asian cuisine that our own culinary heritage got lost in the shuffle. But the exploding popularity of local, farm-raised and artisanal foods has given new meaning to the words “buy American,” and no homegrown, American-regional cookery tradition is more recognizable than Southern food.

As Southern-born chefs move up through the ranks into executive-chef and restaurant-ownership positions, they’re bringing contemporary techniques and creative sensibilities to such good ol’ Southern standards as shrimp and grits, gumbo, pimiento cheese, sausages and other pork products, collard greens, rice dishes, bread pudding, red velvet cake and even bourbon-based cocktails.

Then, too, Hurricane Katrina brought not only a reawakening of interest in Louisiana-style culture and cooking, but also a wave of New Orleans chefs settling in other parts of the country.

“Lots of chefs are relocating, spreading it around a bit,” says Joe Vuscovich, who left New Orleans and the family-run Visco’s empire to open the first Yats, a no-frills, self-service Cajun-Creole restaurant in Indianapolis, in the mid 1990s. The name comes from “Where y’at?” — an old New Orleans expression that turned into a nickname for people in the Ninth Ward, Ground Zero for Katrina damage.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

With six Yats now in operation in Indiana and Illinois, Vuscovich has been introducing other parts of the country to the richly seasoned flavors of such working-class Louisiana favorites as jambalaya, gumbo and chicken Creole, plus his own pan-Creole creations, including B&B (black beans and corn in a light cream sauce) and Chili -Cheese Étouffée with Crawfish, a stew-like dish from southern Louisiana, once-removed from the French term for “smothered.” The Chili Cheese is homage to Vuscovich’s Wisconsin-born wife. He also serves a vegetarian spinach-and-mushroom étouffée.

Many people wrongly equate Cajun food with spicy hotness, says Vuscovich, who clarifies that the seasoning is more a matter of “getting those spices spot-on, the same every time.” To that end, he opened a commissary kitchen to produce boil-in-bag versions of his most popular specialties, particularly now that additional units are planned in both Indianapolis and Chicago.

“Louisiana food isn’t spicy, but it’s distinctively spiced,” notes Vuscovich. “That’s one of the reasons I think people are so interested in it right now.”

BEYOND BLACKENED

Compared to the ersatz, pepper-fueled spice of the blackened-redfish craze in the mid-1980s, the new Southern standard is both more authentic and more creative.

Sampling the SOUTH

KENTUCKY TAPAS MENU SECTION

Fried Oysters on Creamy Spinach with Broadbent Bacon Chips; Kentucky Lake Catfish Spring Rolls & Asian Dipping Sauce; "Kentucky Plate" of Duncan Rabbit Croquette, Garden of Eden Lamb Skewer and Fiedler Spicy Pork Sausage — *Lilly's Bistro, Louisville, Ky.*

SOUTHERN-FRIED QUAIL

With buttermilk spoon biscuit, goat cheese-pepper gravy, red-onion marmalade — *Dogwood, Atlanta*

CRAWFISH & RICE CROQUETTES

— *Ahnvee, Miami Beach*

SOUTHERN-STYLE SHRIMP & GRITS

Creamy grits, scallion-chile broth — *Soul, Clarendon, Ill.*

MONDAY'S RED BEANS & RICE

Slow-cooked beans with smoked ham and andouille sausage, served with rosemary cornbread — *Stan's Place, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

SOUTHERN-STYLE TOASTED-PECAN-CARROT CAKE

With pecan-cream cheese frosting — *Julep's, Richmond, Va.*

"Southern food is a great opportunity to showcase local and artisanal ingredients," says Linton Hopkins, chef/owner of the year-old Holeman & Finch (H&F) Public House in Atlanta, the casual, snack-focused yin to the more upscale yang of Hopkins' original Restaurant Eugene, located right next door.

Both restaurants showcase beautiful, local ingredients like fresh seafood, butter beans, collards and locally raised meats, but at H&F, Hopkins has pulled out the stops to celebrate Southern tradition. "I collect old cookbooks, and I love recipes that have been handed down through the generations," says the chef. He calls his cooking "smart South."

He and his kitchen colleagues are making jams, breads and sausages and curing meats, experimenting all the while. It's a departure from the upscale menu at Eugene's.

"You can get jaded sautéing a scallop," Hopkins observes, "but when you're breaking down a whole animal, tying and stuffing sausages and waiting six to 12 months for them to be ready, it makes you really feel good."

SMALL BITES OF THE SOUTH

The moderately priced, small-plate-intensive H&F menu allows customers to taste as many things as possible, from cornmeal-fried oysters with rémoulade and lemon to souse (a type of head cheese) with balsamic-clabbered cream, fried okra with pepper vinegar, pimiento cheese and Saltines, and a Southern Ham Showcase plate.

Rather than being divided into traditional appetizer, entrée and dessert courses, H&F's menu is divided into several sections: Plates, with tastings like Deviled Eggs Three Ways; Parts, offering pork belly, sweetbreads and marrow; Farm, with vegetable dishes, including okra, turnips and sweet potatoes; Meats, where charcuterie and salami appear; Cheese, full of local specimens; and Sweets, with oddities like Down Low Coca Cola and Fernet Branca Ice Cream Float and Fried Apple Pie.

"At Holeman & Finch, I can put anything I've ever wanted to on the menu, even if it sells just a few portions," says Hopkins. "I may sell only four or five portions of souse, but because we're breaking down a whole pig and turning it into lots of different items, we can afford to do that. And if, in the process, I've introduced customers to something new or helped preserve the idea of Southern food, I've done my job."

ACADIANA APPRECIATION

Jeff Tunks is another big fan of Southern food, both as a committed locavore and as one of the top chefs in the Washington, D.C., area. He owns, with two partners, Passion Food Hospitality LLC, which operates the pan-Latin Ceiba, the contemporary-American restaurant DC Coast, the pan-Asian TenPenh and the new PassionFish, specializing in seafood. Tunks calls Louisiana "the last stronghold of truly authentic, regional cuisine," a fact he wanted to celebrate with Acadiana, which opened in September 2005, just as Hurricane Katrina was devastating the region.

Tunks, who worked in New Orleans' top-rated Windsor Court Hotel from 1994 to '97, fell in love with the rich, flavorful Creole food tradition and went back to the city with a "SWAT team" of business partners and chefs to research Acadiana's menu. The effort included sampling muffuletta sandwiches at six different locations in a single afternoon and touring

neighborhood luncheonettes to sample red beans and rice, a staple on Monday, laundry day.

"We created our take on all the classics," says Tunks, including the little-seen Grillades and Grits; his version uses sautéed veal medallions with mushroom sauce and cream grits, instead of the more-utilitarian, long-cooked veal shoulder. There's also The Peacemaker, a twist on the iconic fried-oyster po' boy that New Orleans men bring home instead of flowers as an apology to their wives.

Other specialties include classic turtle soup with sherry, made with real turtle meat, which Tunks sources from the Eastern Shore; Crispy "Gas Station" Pork Boudin (sausage) Balls; Grilled Gulf Redfish with smoked red-bell-pepper sauce; and New Orleans-Style Barbecue Shrimp in a sop-worthy sauce of butter, black pepper, Worcestershire and garlic.

The elaborate cocktail list showcases Southern classics like the Sazerac, Ramos Fizz, Mint Julep and Brandy-Milk Punch, as well as more creative options, like the Basil Belle, made with gin, muddled basil, fresh lime juice, simple syrup and a splash of lemon-lime soda.

THE OLD SOUTH IS NEW AGAIN

The menu at Soby's, a "new-South-cuisine" restaurant in Greenville, S.C., also has been plumbing the depths of Southern food tradition under Chef de Cuisine Shaun Garcia, who grew up in a South Carolinian tradition of "making do with what we had" at the family table. He sources foods from such local producers as a Tamworth heirloom-hog farmer 30 miles from Greenville and does a fair amount of research before writing each seasonal menu.

"South Carolina has four different barbecue-sauce traditions," says Garcia, "more than any other state." The Carolina Gold mustard-based sauce, influenced by German immigrants who colonized the midland area of the state, inspired a top-selling appetizer of Slow-Smoked, Local, Heritage-Pork "Sliders" with Midlands Mustard BBQ Sauce, Drive-In Slaw and Sweet-Potato Fries. The Drive-In Slaw, which raised some local eyebrows, is a tribute to the slightly sweet, finely chopped coleslaw served at a carhop drive-in frequented by Garcia's grandmother — typical of the chef's desire to "get people thinking about the food and talking about it."

U.S. RICE MAKES TAKE-OUT



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Other specialties that riff on local favorites include Pimiento Cheese Hushpuppies with jalapeño-honey butter, Fried Green Tomato Napoleon and Low-Country Shrimp with Watauga country ham. Garcia's New Orleans BBQ Shrimp is flavored with rosemary and served with creamy, white-cheddar grits from the famous Anson Mills.

"People smile when they see the menu for the first time," says Garcia. "They see something comforting that they probably grew up with, but we change it up a little."

SOUTH VIA HOLLYWOOD

Los Angeles may be as far away as it gets from the South — both geographically and culturally — but that didn't stop Executive Chef Lauren Kyles of Tart restaurant at the Farmer's Daughter Hotel from returning to her roots with "nouveau-Southern-style" food utilizing seasonal, local ingredients.

Having grown up among natural Southern cooks, Kyles is well aware that if you make something like macaroni and cheese, "you're going to have people who won't want to try it because their mama's was the best."

Then, too, L.A. is not the place where customers are going to gravitate toward traditional Southern ingredients like lard and sausage gravy. So Kyles did a creative remake, adding different twists of technique and product to create menu items that don't carry the full weight of those expectations. Her Southern

Grape Leaves feature blanched collard greens filled with dirty rice and andouille dressing. Crawfish shows up in spring rolls with avocado-lime dipping sauce, and Southern-Fried Chicken appears in a club salad. Entrées are served with an array of sides, including sautéed greens, mac and cheese and crispy grits cakes.

"The challenge is to meld healthy Southern California tastes with Southern food traditions," notes Kyles. "I'll use smoked turkey instead of ham hocks in the greens, for instance, and the fried chicken is marinated in buttermilk and dusted with flour, instead of coated with batter, so it's light but still crispy."

GOLDEN GATE SOUTH

In San Francisco, chef-owner Brenda Buenviaje has had similar success melding Southern and French cuisine at Brenda's French Soul Food. Noting that cooks in Louisiana have always come from the melting pot of French, Spanish and African tradition, Buenviaje — herself a native of New Orleans from a Filipino-Creole household — has taken iconic specialties like beignets, biscuits and grits and turned them on their ear with her own creative touches.

Brenda's, in fact, has become locally famous for its beignets, New Orleans-style doughnuts that Buenviaje serves in two versions: sweet, filled with molten Ghirardelli chocolate or Granny Smith apples and cinnamon-honey butter, and savory, stuffed with crawfish and cayenne, scallions and cheddar.

Omelets, which are served with a choice of potato hash or grits, run to andouille and cheddar, Gulf shrimp and goat cheese and Creole veggie with maque choux (a traditional, creamy, stewed-corn specialty), washed down with Community coffee and chicory or the signature Sweet Watermelon Tea. And while Buenviaje serves daily specials like shrimp and grits, one thing she doesn't want to do is serve dinner.

"I've paid my dues working all hours in restaurants," she says. "And, fortunately, New Orleans has a great breakfast and lunch culture, so this is perfect for San Francisco."

POPEYES REVISITS ITS ROOTS

Now under new management, Popeyes — that great New Orleans fried-chicken institution —

At Hungry Mother in Cambridge, Mass., chef Barry Maiden focuses on slow infusions of Southern flavors, as with this roasted chicken with red-eye gravy jus.



ADAM GESUERO

is doubling down on its Louisiana heritage and hoping to restore some regional culinary luster to the fast-food chain's brand.

"We've got so much culinary 'there' here," says Dick Lynch, chief marketing officer, "and it's a great story to tap into Popeyes' culinary credentials and heritage."

Now called Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, the company has gone back to those roots with a series of product launches that play off Popeyes' distinctive spice profile. Among them are the Big Easy Chicken Bowl with red beans and rice, topped with pulled chicken and Cajun gravy, with optional hot sauce and sour cream, and the Big Easy Chicken Sandwich, featuring a crispy chicken breast, lettuce and tomato on a new diamond-shaped roll, with the chain's signature creamy Delta Sauce.

Along with other new products, like the Louisiana Travelers line of portable nuggets and tenders, seasoned with the same distinctive spice mixture used in Popeyes Bonafide Chicken, and the Big Deals, which include the Loaded Chicken Wrap, Delta Mini and Chicken Biscuit, the concept hopes to boost its lunchtime appeal.

The brand's Delta Sauce is essential to the new menu program and the back-to-Louisiana message. "It's based on the Louisiana 'trinity' of bell peppers, celery and onion," explains Amy Alarcon, who heads up menu R&D for the 1,900-unit chain, which was founded by Al Copeland in New Orleans in 1972 and is now headquartered in Atlanta. "That trinity of flavors is used in many of the state's most-famous traditional foods, such as red beans and rice, gumbo, jambalaya and Creole sauce."

FLAVOR INFUSED

The flavor comes first in Southern food, whether in the Low Country of the Carolinas or the Cajun country of Louisiana. "But there's still so much to explore with all the sub-regions of the South," says Barry Maiden, a native of southwestern Virginia who opened Hungry Mother in Cambridge, Mass., in March 2008, after stints at such culinary bastions as Lumiere and L'Espalier.

"There's the Appalachian highlands, eastern Tennessee, Nashville, western North Carolina, where I have family. [The South has] as many different regional styles as France."

For Hungry Mother, the chef wanted to "rethink Southern food, rather than do clichés like fried chicken and barbecue." And that means signature specialties like bourbon-braised pork shoulder, smoked-catfish-brandade cakes, cornmeal catfish with hoppin' John, roasted Virginia peanut soup, and shrimp and grits, made with tiny, fresh Maine shrimp in season.

Southern tradition, says Maiden, loves a slow infusion of flavors, like those found in the pork shoulder: Berkshire pork braised overnight in a concentrated stock flavored with bourbon, mirepoix, garlic, bay leaf, thyme and rosemary, then finished with fresh aromatics, crème fraîche and whole-grain mustard on the pickup.

He's having fun working with indigenous ingredients like country ham and heirloom-rice "middlins" (broken bits of Carolina rice, called rice grits in South Carolina), which release lots of starch into things like the black-eyed peas for hoppin' John.

Southern food is naturally cheap, the legacy of a culture that, with the exception of wealthy pockets in such places as Charleston and New Orleans, made do with what it had.

"It lends itself really well to the application of technique and creativity, but it's still really affordable," says Maiden.

Which could be why the Southern Reconstruction is so right for these times. ☺

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

CHANGE PLATFORMS: Wrap dirty rice and beans in healthy blanched greens or scatter fried chicken on a salad

GO GRITTY: Smooth, creamy grits are a side to fit any menu, and they take well to signature extras

SAMPLE THE SOUTH: Try a starter plate of hush puppies, po' boy biscuit sliders and crawfish and dip for a taste of Southern comforts



BRENDA'S FRENCH SOUL FOOD