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Southern Food Rises Again

The Land of Fried Ora is Having a New Rebel Moment Everywhere We Eat It Up.
You think you know what Southern food is, even if you've never clutched a fork south of the Mason-Dixon. It's a sea of saucy mahogany and burnt beige splattered across checkered tablecloths, with a bucket of tea like melted cotton candy to wash it all down. Right?

Drive through the region and it's easy to see the Southern fried stereotypes. But pull over and start tasting, and you'll discover the remarkable complexity of this loaded land.

"We're seeing a true renaissance in Southern food," says John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance. "We're doing it in our own way—it's honest and distinctive and real."

These days, a growing cadre of Southern cooks have cut down on grease, shaken off excess flour, and added freshness to their plates. And I'm setting off on a Deep South road trip to taste it all. As a guide, I've enlisted chef Sean Brock, James Beard Award winner and arguably the most influential voice in the Southern kitchen right now. Brock grew up eating butter beans from his grandma's garden; now he talks Southern food on TV with Charlie Rose. He's a busy man, but when I ask him if he can spare a few days for the journey, he's unequivocal: "Let's make it a week."

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**CHARLESTON, SC**

A journey of a thousand meals begins with a single bite, and if there's a better bite than Brock's crispy pig ear lettuce wraps, I have yet to sink my teeth into it.

It's the New South in the palm of my hand: an unfairly maligned cut of pig brightened with fresh and pickled garden vegetables. Its flavors are classic Southern, while its form, borrowed from the lettuce-wrapping traditions of Asia, winks at the demographic shifts of a region that was once nearly all black and white. This bodes well for the week ahead.

My journey begins in Brock's backyard, where a new crop of Southern restaurants effortlessly balances richness and vibrancy. At the Macintosh, featherweight fare like red quinoa with seasonal vegetables sits side by side with bone marrow bread pudding. The serious sandwich architects at Butcher & Bee tweak classics like pulled pork by swapping in pulled squash and crowning it with smoked coleslaw.

When I sit down at Brock's flagship restaurant, McCrady's, my remaining assumptions I had about Southern food evaporate: In nine courses, I eat nothing fried, nothing beige, and no meat to speak of. Instead I dine on tiles of raw swordfish with sea urchin and rose petals, grilled mako shark with sunchoke and a shamrock-green herb puree, and cabbage-wrapped onion with a sweet pudding of rutabaga. Brock may look like a good of Southern boy, but I see proof of a true vegetable lover when I peer at his left arm: a tattooed mural of carrots and candy-stripe beets. One hundred hours of needles have rendered his skin a frosty vegetable garden.

As paradigm-shifting as McCrady's may be, Brock's other restaurant, Husk, has made an even deeper impact on Southern food in the 2 years since it opened. Brock's food weaves a tale of heroic farmers, regional history, and personal past. Take his cast-iron skillet of roasted snapper with risotto and tomato gravy. The snapper comes from Mark Marhefka, a Charleston fisherman who works hard to maintain sustainable fishing practices. The risotto is made from Carolina Gold Rice, an exquisite grain that Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills and David Shields of the University of South Carolina brought back into cultivation. And the tomato gravy, well, it's Brock's mom's recipe, right down to the bacon drippings.

This is food your grandma used to cook—if your grandma happened to have graduated from the Culinary Institute of America with a degree in soul-satisfying, hyperseasonal comfort food. "The menu writes itself. This is what today tastes like. Not this week, not this month. Today," Sean insists. Today for me means wood-fired pork chops with smoked field peas (one of dozens of items Husk smokes out back every day), along with the best shrimp and grits I've ever tasted—a perfect balance of spice and ocean brine. And, of course, those pig ear lettuce wraps. A glorious today indeed.

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**ATHENS, GA**

All great road trips have a few things in common: a carefully balanced blend of methodical planning and spontaneous discovery, an abundance of asphalt to burn, and a car weighed down with first-rate provisions. Thanks to Brock, our road stash would make Dean Moriarty and Hunter S. Thompson flush with envy: There are piles of Southern cookbooks, magazines with barely clothed women on the covers, DVDs about whiskey making and outlaw tap dancers, a tub of Brock's own take on Slim Jims, and, for after the sun sets and the car is parked, a few mason jars of 120-proof Tennessee moonshine. Giddy up.
At Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Foods in Athens, the man himself makes it “automatic for the people.” It stuck with R.E.M., and it’ll stick to your ribs.
We’re using less sugar, less salt, less fat.
I want it to be healthier,
and I want you to be able to taste the food.”

With James Brown dancing over the speakers, we roll into one of the most iconic college towns in America: Athens, Georgia, home of the Bulldogs, launchpad for some of the greatest bands of the past few decades, and protectorate of a great Southern culinary institution, Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Foods: Automatic for the People. (Fun fact: Michael Stipe and company used to sustain themselves on D’s cooking back when R.E.M. was ramping up. After borrowing D’s tagline for one of their bestselling albums, they brought the sultan of soul food with them to the Grammys.) Walk into Weaver D’s and you’re greeted by the man himself. “Y’all ready to play?” he’ll ask. Sure, whatcha got? D blankets the joint in a hall-of-fame lineup of Southern staples: catfish, pork chops, braised collards, black-eyed peas, squash casserole. All you have to do is choose one meat or fish, plus a couple of the vegetable dishes. The food is pitch-perfect: simply prepared, skillfully seasoned, and surprisingly light.

“I love how honest it is,” says Brock, moving from one pile of vegetables to the next. “He doesn’t try to do anything he can’t. But unlike with some soul food, you actually taste the collards. You taste the squash.” D tells me he’s diabetic, so he feels a responsibility to watch out for his customers. “We’re using less sugar, less salt, less fat. I want it to be healthier, and I want you to be able to taste the food.” But why “Automatic for the People”? “Because when you want simple, good food cooked with a lot of love, you come to Weaver D’s. Automatic.”

ATLANTA, GA

Long before California became the fertile crescent of American agriculture, the South was busy growing some of the finest produce on the planet: thick, peppery greens, tomatoes as beefy as butcher steaks, peaches that shed sugary tears when you bit into them. If you grew up here, chances are someone in your family had a garden out back that provided the foundation of their meals. That’s how Brock grew up. “We didn’t go to restaurants, because there were none. If I was at my grandma’s house, I was either sheding cabbage for sauerkraut or picking beans.” And if you weren’t growing the vegetables yourself, you probably knew the farmers who grew them.

That way of life has taken a hit in the past 50 years as industrial agriculture and imports have swallowed up small farms. With their cheap tomatoes and insipid iceberg lettuce, they’ve priced family farms out of business. But a few farmers never left, and their ranks have swelled in the past decade thanks to support from local cooks and restaurants. We drive to Love Is Love Farm at Gaia Gardens, a hyperproductive small-scale urban operation. On a little over 2 acres of farmland, Joe Reynolds and Judith Winfrey grow a stunning variety of vegetables: tomatoes and carrots and broccoli, of course, but also vines of chrysanthemum grapes and logs of shiitake mushrooms. They even have hives bursting with fresh honey.

Reynolds and Winfrey are part of a group of young, creative growers who defy typical farmer stereotypes. They don’t just dig dirt—they read academic journals, comb through vintage cookbooks, and share ideas on Twitter. For $26 a week, locals can pick up a bounty of the farm’s near-perfect produce on or off the property, part of a groundswell of CSA (community-supported agriculture) programs that have sprung up around the region in recent years. And whatever doesn’t end up on the average Georgia dinner table comes through the back door of some of Atlanta’s finest restaurants.

At Restaurant Eugene, chef Linton Hopkins turns that Love Is Love Farm produce into vegetable-driven plates that people study as much as they eat: carrots roasted in carrot ash, beets crusted in coffee grounds, spring peas whipped into a creamy sorbet. “People think Southern food is fried chicken and collards,” says Hopkins. “To me it’s local vegetables, garden pickles, and sliced tomatoes with onion and vinegar.”

Brock and I eat in the kitchen as the plates, pretty as paintings, come off the line. Then, since burgers just taste better after all those vegetables, we cross the parking lot to Hopkins’s second restaurant, Holman and Finch Public House, where hungry diners clamber for a scant two dozen burgers that come flying out of the kitchen at 10:00 p.m. It’s easy to see why: The burger—griddle-crusted, double-stacked, and swaddled in American cheese—is obscenely sexy. The chuck-and-brisket blend is served with fries and homemade ketchup and mustard, all of which you will ignore as you try to devour the burger without losing a finger in the process.

Down the road at Empire State South, Hugh Acheson and executive chef Ryan Smith combine local bounty and a loaded larder to put on an impressive show of Southern food’s diversity. Wooden serving boards are paved with sweet, salty slices of country ham, piles of pickled sunchokes and green tomatoes, and bowls of sweet, tangy chowchow relish alongside platters of grilled pork and roasted fish. It’s deeply delicious food that won’t leave you horizontal. “In the South, he who has the best pantry wins,” says Brock with a chuckle.

Acheson and Smith deploy those pantry items to produce one of the best dishes we taste on the trip: pork belly wrapped in juicy Indian puri bread and topped with pickled vegetables, kimchi, herbs, and a drizzle of yogurt. A fusion of Indian, Korean, and Southern flavors, it’s a nod to Buford Highway—

The Art of “Meat and Three”

Simply cooked produce and beans have always been at the Southern table. Bring them to yours.

COLLARD GREENS

Roughly chop the leaves from 1 lb washed collards. Sauté a finely chopped onion, 2 minced garlic cloves, and a few chile flakes in butter until soft. Add the greens with a few cups of water; simmer until very tender, about 1 hour. Add salt, pepper, and a few shakes of vinegar and hot sauce.

BLACK-EYED PEAS

Cook 4 pieces of bacon until crispy. Remove, crumble, and reserve. Add a chopped onion and 2 minced garlic cloves to the bacon and cook until soft. Add 2 cups dried black-eyed peas, 2 cups water, a pinch of cayenne, and salt and pepper. Cook until the beans are just tender, adding more water if necessary, about 1 hour. Stir in the bacon.

BUTTERED CABBAGE

Halve, core, and shred a head of cabbage. Add it to a large pot with 2 Tbsp butter and 2 Tbsp water. Cook on medium until just soft, 20 to 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
LEFT: a slice of pecan heaven from Leatha's Bar-B-Que Inn in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and a sandwich board to savour at Atlanta's Empire State South.

BELOW: Chef Linton Hopkins hams it up at Holman and Finch, also in Hottanta.
Atlanta’s famous concentration of Asian restaurants—and to the rapidly shifting cultural influences of the South. After a bourbon nightclub at the Clermont Lounge, where plump old women strip unconvincingly to off-key karaoke, I go to bed convinced that Atlanta is one of the greatest food cities in America right now.

**At Jim ‘N Nick’s Bar-B-Q, we get a glimpse of what quick-service food could be if just a bit more love went into it.**

most remarkable of all, a meaty piece of triggerfish, slow-roasted on the bone like some glorious aquatic pork chop, served with nothing but the grilled collard greens.

Just down the street at Highlands Bar and Grill, Frank Stitt has been pushing the limits of upscale Southern cuisine for three decades. Taste his baked oysters with wilted greens and crunchy bread crumbs and you can understand why chefs like Brock refer to Stitt as the Godfather. Along with regional pioneers like Bill Neal of Crook’s Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Louis Osteen, formerly of the Charleston Grill, Stitt reminds Southern cooks that they have all the ingredients—the vegetables, the pork, the history—to create some of the best food on the planet.

**BIRMINGHAM, AL**

On the fifth day, our gypsy caravan closes in on Birmingham. This is the city I’m most skeptical about seeing real change in—after all, Alabama, where nearly one out of every three people is obese, is officially the fattest state in the nation.

As it turns out, pig might be part of the problem—but it’s also part of the solution. We make a pit stop at one of the five farms that comprise the Fatback Pig Project, an initiative started by Nick Piakas to raise healthy local pigs rather than rely on out-of-state factory hogs. Later, at Jim ‘N Nick’s Bar-B-Q, his family’s chain of barbecue restaurants, we get a glimpse of what quick-service food in this country could be like if just a bit more love went into it. Everything from the pulled pork to the brisket is made fresh daily, often with local ingredients. And it tastes like it.

Commited chefs and restaurateurs like Piakas serve as a reminder that we can’t just rely on advocacy groups and smart policy to change the way we eat; chefs can be powerful guiding lights. “Our food supply is broken, and the only hope of reversing it is by re-creating small, regionally focused food-supply chains to provide alternatives to the processed stuff that’s killing us,” says Chris Hastings, chef at Hot and Hot Fish Club, a Birmingham institution known for its work with local farmers, fishermen, and foragers.

At his restaurant, Hastings does more than his part, both by supporting the best local food purveyors and by serving some of the leanest, most refined cuisine you’ll find anywhere: an Alabama salad of roasted, pickled, and raw root vegetables, shad roe wrapped in a thin, crispy layer of country ham, and,

**NEW ORLEANS, LA**

Roll into New Orleans and you may start hunting for a hit of jambalaya, a sip of Sazerac, a bite of beignet. Me, I’m going for the seafood. The fishing industry here took a massive hit in 2010, when BP spilled almost 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf. But Louisianians are resilient, and fishermen have fought hard to clean up the waters and bring the bounty back to the people. Spend a couple of days eating in and around the Big Easy, and you’ll see that seafood is still at the core of its cuisine.

Case in point: Two of the city’s most talented chefs, Donald Link and Stephen Stryjewski, welcome our merry band into Cajun country with a crawfish boil. They cook 80 pounds of crustaceans with lemons, garlic, and salt, and toss them with Old Bay and Cajun spices before dumping them onto a plastic-covered table for immediate consumption. Twist the body, pop off the head, suck the “fat,” peel the tail, and chase with beer; repeat. Like all great Southern food, the crawfish boil is designed to bring people together, and no amount of tinkering or updating can ever improve this recipe.

At their restaurants, Cochon and Herbsaint, Link and Stryjewski highlight seafood in more sophisticated but no less soulful ways: roasted oysters crowned with bubbling chile butter; meaty catfish served with a spice-laden vegetable stew; shrimp gumbo so savory and mysterious that you want to strap on a scuba tank and explore its murky depths. “Eating here is like crawling under grandma’s quilt,” says Brock.

**EVERY TIME I TRY TO DISCUSS FOOD IN THE NEW SOUTH WITH a local chef, he wants to talk about the Old South. “What people don’t realize is that we’ve been doing it right the whole time,” says John Currence, chef and owner of City Grocery in Oxford, Mississippi, and a native New Orleanian. What went wrong here is what went wrong everywhere. “Fast food and a desire for convenience messed us up, but the core of Southern cuisine has always been fresh, honest food,” agrees Link. Southern chefs will continue to push their region’s food in new and healthier directions, but all the while, classic Southern cooks will continue to make pork chops and collards and red beans and rice the way they have for decades. And that’s a damn good thing.**

**SOURCE YOUR CRAWFISH**

Have 10 to live crawfish delivered to your door from lacrawfish.com, or swap in large shrimp (preferably from the Gulf).

**START THE BOIL**

Gather many friends around a backyard table; keep them occupied with beer. Bring a giant lobster pot of water to a boil. Stir in salt until it tastes like seawater. Toss in two heads of peeled garlic and four halved lemons. When the water comes to a strong boil, add the crawfish. Cook until pink and firm, about 10 minutes.

**STEEP IN SPICES**

Drain the crawfish, transfer them to a plastic-lined cooler, and toss them with 1 cup each of Old Bay and Tony Chachere’s Original Creole Seasoning. Then close the top and let ’em steam: 15 minutes for crawfish, 10 for shrimp. Dump them onto a newspaper-covered table and consume with glacially cold pilsner.
The boys at Cochon use a simple, spicy compound butter and a hot grill to blast these oysters into the stratosphere. This recipe makes plenty of extra butter. Keep it in the fridge for up to a month and serve slices over hot steaks and chicken.

1 stick unsalted butter
1 Tbsp chile-garlic paste or sriracha
2 anchovy fillets, minced
1 Tbsp minced garlic
1 tsp chile flakes
1/2 tsp cayenne pepper
1/4 tsp salt
1 lemon (juice and zest)
2 dozen oysters

Cut the butter in 1-inch pieces into a bowl and set it on the counter to soften. When it’s soft, mix in the remaining ingredients, stirring to evenly incorporate them. Lay out some plastic wrap and spoon the butter in the center. Wrap the plastic over it and twist the ends until it forms a log shape. Refrigerate or freeze.

Preheat the grill on high heat. Shuck the oysters, leaving the meat attached to the bottom shell. Cut the butter into thin coins and place one over the top of each oyster. Place the oysters directly on the grill grate and cook until the butter is hot and bubbling and the edges of the oysters begin to curl, about 8 to 10 minutes. Makes 4 servings.

Grilled
Oysters with
Chile Butter

SEAN BROCK, HUSK, CHARLESTON

Brook learned to make this bright, all-purpose tomato sauce as a kid watching his mom cook. At Husk, his restaurant, it’s often ladled over seared pork chops.

4 bone-in pork chops (1 inch thick)
2 Tbsp bacon fat
2 Tbsp fine cornmeal (preferably from Anson Mills)
3 cups canned San Marzano tomatoes
1 Tbsp each kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper

Four hours before you’re ready to cook, salt the pork chops generously and refrigerate. When you’re ready to cook, heat the bacon fat in a large saucepan on high. Stir in the cornmeal with a wooden spoon. Reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring, until the cornmeal turns light brown, about 5 minutes. Crush the tomatoes and add them to the pot. Raise the heat to medium and simmer the gravy, stirring occasionally, until it has thickened slightly, about 10 minutes. Stir in the salt and pepper. Preheat the grill on high. Remove the chops from the brine and pat them dry. Rub them with oil and season with pepper. Grill for 8 minutes on each side for medium. Makes 4 servings.

Pork Chops with Mama Brock’s Tomato Gravy

RYAN SMITH, EMPIRE STATE SOUTH, ATLANTA

This dish of seared fish and wilted greens with a bit of bacon captures the soul of the New South.

3 Tbsp sherry vinegar
1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
2 shallots, minced
4 oz bacon, chopped
1/4 cup olive oil
8 large Swiss chard leaves, chopped
1 Granny Smith apple, sliced
Salt to taste
4 catfish fillets, 6 oz each
2 Tbsp butter
Juice of 2 lemons

In the same pan, heat a thin film of oil on medium. Season two catfish fillets with salt and sear them until golden brown on both sides. Remove them and add 1 Tbsp butter, 1/4 cup water, and half the lemon juice to the pan. Simmer until the sauce thickens. Repeat with the remaining fillets.

Serve the fish (over rice if desired) with the pan sauce, vinaigrette, and chard. Makes 4 servings.

Seared Catfish
with Apple and
Bacon Vinaigrette

THE RECIPES