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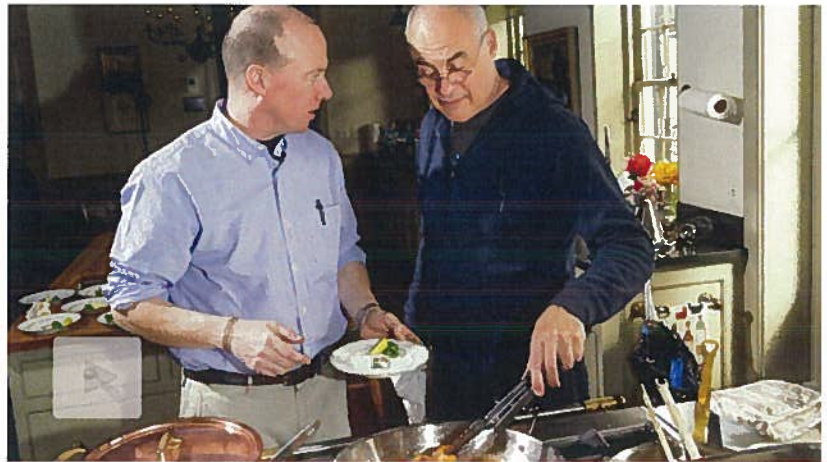
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Sunday, March 24, 2013

Feast in the South

Mark Bittman and Sam Sifton travel to Charleston, S.C., and show you how to create a spring holiday dinner party — and make the process into a celebration itself.

By **MARK BITTMAN** and **SAM SIFTON**
Photographs by Grant Cornett



We went looking for spring, Mark and I, down in Charleston, S.C., a stunning city, rich with history both sad and ecstatic, in a region that offers a tremendous bounty of fresh ingredients and regional flavors. We had the vague idea of a holiday feast for the season — one that was grand and nondenominational — that would help banish memories of winter. The hitch was that we had only about eight hours to shop and cook before a dozen people showed up to eat with us in a marvelous old house off the Battery.

This is nice work if you can get it. [Mark and I tried to pull off a similar task last December in Brooklyn](#), and now, as then, our plans solidified as we shopped. There is a great lesson in that for the home cook: buy what's fresh, what makes sense for the season and what looks good, then cook it simply. We found amazing local greens and decided to make a composed salad, in part to highlight their beauty and in part to show how little you need to do to great ingredients. We found good lamb and decided to cook it two different ways, braised and grilled, to bring different textures and flavors to the plate — and also to nod to the tradition of the paschal lamb in Jewish and Christian springtime traditions. (One of the oldest synagogues in America was

built in Charleston in the 1840s. But owing to our obsession with country ham, some of our dishes were hardly kosher.) We bought local grits to celebrate the region; likewise, rice and shrimp and pecans.

When we got back into the kitchen, we sketched out our menu on paper, then figured out what we needed to start on first, what could come later and what we needed to do at the very last minute. Then we threw out almost everything that required work at the very last minute. The last thing you want when you're cooking a big feast is a lot of complicated work at the end.

This plan allowed for some simple cooking — a long-cooked rice pudding from Mark and some biscuits from me, as a lamb shoulder bubbled away on the stove. We braised some root vegetables in butter. We whisked up some grits. We cleaned up as we went. And as you'll see on the timeline of our day, we kept an eye on a single goal: to give each dish the time that it needed, in the hope that it would all come out right at the end.

Thankfully, it did. Here's how we pulled it off — and how you can, too. **SAM SIFTON**

The Play-by-Play

S.S.: Charleston is a serious food city with a lot of good restaurants specializing in local ingredients. I thought the groceries would be good if we went to where the chefs shop.

M.B.: GrowFood Carolina gets vegetables from farms



within 120 miles and sells them to local restaurants and supermarkets. The greens — kale, mustard, collards — were ultrafresh. So we decided to make them into a salad with buttermilk dressing.

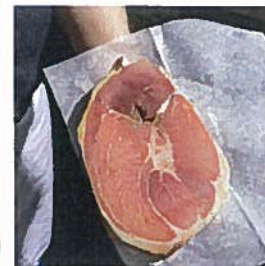
Pick up vegetables at GrowFood

S.S.: Then we saw sweet potatoes that were the size of W.N.B.A. basketballs and decided to make sweet-potato fries.

M.B.: They had those beautiful carrots and parsnips that were thinner than pencils. You never see that! So we decided to braise them.

S.S.: Shrimp and grits is this iconic Charleston dish, but I was a little worried about cooking clichés.

M.B.: Still, they were pretty nice-looking shrimp — head on, recently live, flash-frozen. We knew we could use them for something.



10 A.M.
Shop for shrimp at Magwood's Seafood.



10:45 A.M.
Arrive at Ted's Butcherblock. Buy ham, lamb shoulder, leg of lamb.



RECIPE
Sweet-Potato Fries



RECIPE
Grits



RECIPE
Pecan Tartlets



11:15 A.M.
Pick up a little too much bourbon at The Wine Shop.

11:30 A.M.
Arrive at the Piggly Wiggly. Shop for general provisions.

S.S.: I was obstinate about getting country ham — a ham that's salt-cured, smoked and aged forever (and hard to find in New York). And Mark and I agreed that lamb, which you find in all monotheistic religions, was the perfect protein for this feast.

M.B.: We knew that we wanted to start the dinner with a passed appetizer of biscuits and ham with a dollop of this mayonnaise that David Chang serves at Momofuku Ssam Bar in New York. And small glasses of bourbon. We also ended up using the ham in the grits. The folks at Husk, an excellent restaurant in town, where we ate the night before, told us to buy Geechie Boy grits, which we

picked up at the Piggly Wiggly.

S.S.: One of the things about Southern casual-restaurant cooking is this concept called “meat and three” — you go to a restaurant and order a protein, and you get these three vegetable sides. We were trying to do a meat and three in two ways — one for Passover, another for Easter.

12:30 P.M.
Get in the kitchen. Start marinating lamb shoulder.



1 P.M.
Chop veggies, start the biscuits.



RECIPE

Stovetop-Braised Carrots And Parsnips



RECIPE

Buttermilk Salad Dressing



RECIPE

Biscuits and Momofuku Red-Eye Mayo

M.B.: One preparation was a play on tsimmes, a traditional Jewish casserole. I figured I'd take all these North African and Middle Eastern flavors and throw them in a pot with a lamb shoulder and braise the hell out of them. It achieved perfect tenderosity without a lot of work.

S.S.: The other lamb dish was inspired by an old Easter favorite: lamb with mint jelly. We had a boneless, butterflied leg, and I grilled it on a Weber in the yard. We'd bought a bunch of pecans and pecan shells, which we added to the fire. Just as the fat was beginning to render and the thing was starting to flare, I put the top of the grill on and the pecan smoke really, really got into the meat.

M.B.: A mint jelly would have been terrific, but I was thinking of it as a mint chimichurri.

S.S.: Mark also had this idea to do a rice pudding that we would serve as dessert with pecan tartlets. That was the best call of the day.

M.B.: The rice pudding cooked for three or four hours, very low, at about 200 degrees.



2 P.M.
Start rice pudding.

2:30 P.M.
Begin work on pecan tartlets.



RECIPE

Grilled Leg of Lamb

3 P.M.
Quick break.

5 P.M.
Put the lamb on the grill, reheat root vegetables, assemble salads.





RECIPE
Rice Pudding



RECIPE
**Shrimp,
Mark's Way**



RECIPE
**Braised Lamb
With Dried Fruit**



M.B.: At around 3, Sam was panicking that we were running out of time.

S.S.: I took 20 minutes off, walked around the block. And there's a lesson in that for people doing dinner parties. That short break helped a lot. I came back focused and ready to finish.

M.B.: I sat down, and I did start drinking bourbon, which I thought was quite helpful.

S.S.: We cooked the shrimp on the stove with olive oil and paprika, salt, pepper, garlic and lemon. We served it as an appetizer with the salads.

S.S.: I think that grilled lamb was the biggest success of my day. The biggest disaster, which took three or four hours to unfold, was a demi-glace made from Cheerwine, that red soda from North Carolina, which I thought I could use for a whipped cream. But Mark said, "I won't eat that whatever you do with it." It tasted like the worst cough syrup. I threw it out.

5:30 P.M.
Sauté shrimp,
make whipped
cream.

5:45 P.M.
Guests arrive.



M.B.: Thank God. So when are we going to do this again?

Produced by LACY GARRISON, SAMANTHA HENIG and JOHN NIEDERMEYER

An earlier version of this article misidentified the state from which Cheerwine, a cherry red soft drink, originates. It is North Carolina, not South Carolina.

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