



A Taste of Home

Favorite recipes from Ala., N.C., S.C., W.Va. and La.

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Food that feeds the soul — that aptly describes traditional dishes that represent a taste of home. Bite by bite, a revered recipe provides a shared cultural identity among a people and place.

In Alabama, fried green tomatoes retain favorite food status long after the dish landed the title role in a classic film. As they have for generations, West Virginians continue to draw comfort from cast-iron cooked pinto beans and corn bread. Pork barbecue fans in North Carolina gleefully debate the merits of “dip” versus sauce, vinegar against tomato. South Carolinians vow fealty to the sublime marriage of shrimp and grits. Finally, for dessert, the world-renowned bananas Foster provides the piece de resistance for the people of Louisiana.

Alabama's Fried Green Tomatoes

Bill McMichael's mom and dad had no idea Hollywood would influence their menu at the Irondale Café when they bought it in 1972. That was before author Fannie Flagg based her “Fried Green Tomatoes” book-turned-movie on her Great Aunt Bess' former restaurant. Soon after the movie's release, the McMichaels began frying



60 to 80 daily servings of the ‘mater dish at the café. Prior to the film, Bill McMichael says, “I don't think I ever remember seeing fried green tomatoes on a restaurant menu anywhere, including our own.”

The McMichaels sold the café in 2000 but retained the trademark that allows them to market products under the name Irondale Café Original Whistlestop

Recipes (www.whistlestopcafe.com). Today, independent retailers across the country stock the family's boxed mixes for apple crisp, chili starter, and, of course, fried green tomatoes.

Only the unripe tomatoes possess a texture hardy enough to withstand a dunk in grease. “Once the tomato starts to turn pink, if you try to fry it, it will fall apart,” Bill McMichael says.

The delicious dish was first created as a thrifty afterthought. Folks were looking for ways to use green tomatoes picked at the end of the season before the first frost. The result? A star was born on the dinner plate and on the silver screen.

North Carolina's Barbecue

Sweet and salty rivalry divides the Tar Heel State. "It's kind of like Duke and Carolina," says Bob Garner, who has written and lectured extensively about North Carolina's love affair with pork barbecue (www.blairpub.com). In the eastern part of the state, folks flavor their barbecue with a hot, salty, vinegar concoction. In the Piedmont area, people swear pork adorned with sweet and tomato ingredients delivers unbeatable taste. "The sauce in the Piedmont is called "dip," especially around Lexington, N.C.," Garner says.

"It's a good-natured rivalry," he adds. "People love to talk about barbecue as much as they love to eat it." Garner cites the large crowds who show up at venues such as the North Carolina Museum of History to hear him talk 'cue.



The early English settlers in Jamestown, Va., and soon thereafter northeastern North Carolina found that

Native Americans practiced the same barbecue protocol as that of Indians in the West Indies. Garner says they would build a framework of sticks and put meat — usually a whole hog — over it. The meat was "seasoned with a common table condiment, a hot, peppery, salty vinegar," most likely to disguise the gamey taste of free-roaming pigs, Garner says. Notably, many believed tomatoes were poisonous at the time.

Later, German immigrants moving into the Piedmont area of the state favored pork shoulder to whole hog cooking. Once tomatoes were given the all-clear signal, these Piedmont settlers created the tomato-based sauce for their pig. "They liked a sweet and sour kind of sauce," Garner says.

Side dishes also differ within the state. "In the East, they serve a mild cole slaw that has mayonnaise and usually some mustard and is meant to cool down the spiciness of the barbecue," Garner says. "In the Piedmont, where the barbecue sauce tends to be milder, they put a lot of red pepper and make a 'red' slaw with barbecue sauce ingredients."

As for his own personal preference, the barbecue expert remains diplomatic. "I cook both kinds, and I kind of go back and forth," he says. Whichever style is chosen, all North Carolinians agree with Garner on this point: "Barbecue is a food of celebration. It's always marked special moments in our lives."



West Virginia's Brown Beans and Corn Bread

Brown beans and corn bread are "as vintage West Virginia as you can get," says Kendra Bailey Morris, a cookbook author and food writer known as

The Accidental Chef (www.theaccidentalchef.net). "When I was growing up, we ate it once a week." Bailey Morris' Granny Boohler always served the simple comfort food to guests, even those as distinguished as U.S. Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., a family friend.

Virtues of the tasty bean and bread combination are many. "It's easy to make," Bailey Morris says, requiring only "water, a little bit of salt and pepper and time." Cooking the beans in a cast-iron pot increases iron intake and adds a crucial "mineral" flavor. The nutritious beans also deliver lots of protein, which was especially important during lean times when meat was scarce.

Eating a bowl of beans by itself "won't leave you disappointed," Bailey Morris says, but combining the beans with corn bread exalts the meal into the realm of perfection.

"It's a different kind of corn bread from typical Southern corn bread, which tends to be lighter and sweeter," she says.

Corn bread tastes dense and filling. "You've got the crunch of the corn bread, then the soft richness of cooked pinto beans," the West Virginia native says. "It's comfort food in its purest form."

South Carolina's Shrimp and Grits

"To a Southerner, eating grits is practically a religion," says Linda Stradley, author of "What's Cooking America" (www.whatscookingamerica.com). As proof, she cites a resolution in which South Carolina declared grits the official state food. Using the stodgy language of "herein" and "therefore," policymakers pointed out the importance of grits, including its "vital role in the future of not only this state, but also the world."



The resolution backs up this grand claim by describing the delicacy as "inexpensive, simple, and thoroughly digestible food" and adds that "given enough of it, the inhabitants of planet Earth would have nothing to fight about." Tongue firmly pressed against cheek, the resolution solemnly concludes: "A man full of (grits) is a man of peace."

To residents of the Palmetto State, blending grits with delectable shrimp further elevates this long-favored food. "In the Lowcountry of South Carolina and particularly Charleston," Stradley says, "shrimp and grits has been considered a basic breakfast for coastal fishermen and families for decades." Now, however, "It is also served for brunch, lunch and dinner. The dish has been dressed up and taken out on the town to the fanciest restaurants."

No doubt the rapid momentum of this Lowcountry favorite is due to its lofty mission — bringing peaceful contentment to all who are fortunate enough to have their fill.

Louisiana's Bananas Foster

In Louisiana, and certainly in New Orleans, Ted Brennan says, "It's probably the most famous dessert." The owner of Brennan's restaurant (www.brennansneworleans.com) refers to bananas Foster, the flaming fruit and ice cream extravaganza that's as flamboyant as a Mardi Gras costume.

The recipe was first created by the restaurant's Chef Paul Blange at the behest of Ted Brennan's father, Owen Edward Brennan. "In the late '40s and early '50s, New Orleans was the major port of entry for Central America and South America for bananas," Ted Brennan says. Bunches of the yellow fruit literally lay up and down the docks, prompting the senior Brennan to challenge Chef Paul.



"He started with just the sautéed bananas, butter, cinnamon and brown sugar," Ted Brennan says of the chef's first efforts. "Then he added the flaming aspect to it, which really gives it its drama." The dessert was dubbed bananas Foster in honor of family friend Richard Foster.

Ted Brennan initially tried the dish at age 5. It was love at first bite. "When we evacuated with Hurricane Katrina and went to Dallas, one of the dishes I missed the most from New Orleans was bananas Foster," he says.

Now Brennan's restaurant is back, once again setting ablaze a whopping 35,000 pounds of bananas a year to make the dessert beloved by many. "I've gone into restaurants in Hong Kong and had bananas Foster," Brennan says. "We're very flattered that it's become a known dessert all over the world."

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Home Cookin' Recipes

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Morsel by morsel, certain recipes instantly transport people once again to Mom's supper table, a favorite diner or a long-standing community buffet. Far beyond an ingredient list, some special dishes represent a shared language of sorts, where words are replaced with flavor and texture.

Following are foods that nourish state pride as much as empty stomachs. The good folks of Alabama, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina and West Virginia won't mind a bit if you make these well-loved favorites your own, even if you have to cross state lines to do so. To see more recipes, visit WeSave.com.

Fried Green Tomatoes (Alabama)

1 and 1/2 cups flour
 1/2 cup cornmeal
 1/2 tsp. salt and pepper
 Milk
 Vegetable oil
 4 medium-size green tomatoes (makes 4 servings)



Mix together flour, cornmeal, salt and pepper. Add enough milk to create a thick batter. Heat 1 inch of oil in a large skillet. Batter each tomato slice and wipe off excess. Carefully place in hot oil, browning on both sides (may or may not need turning, depending on the amount of oil, but make sure the tomatoes are covered in oil). To cool, drain in a colander to keep tomatoes from becoming soggy. Salt to taste.

Recipe reprinted with permission from Whistlestop Products. To buy the ready-made batter in a box, see www.whistlestopcafe.com.

The Senator's Brown Beans and Fatback (West Virginia)

1 (16-ounce) package dried pinto beans
 1 medium to large slug of salt fatback (about 3 inches long and 1 1/2 inches thick), or 1 to 2 meaty pork ribs
 1 and 1/2 quarts water
 Salt and pepper



After cleaning the beans, place the beans in water in a cast-iron cooking pot on medium heat. Next, put fatback in a microwavable coffee cup and cover with water. Microwave on high for 30 seconds or so, then turn the fat over and do the same for another 30 seconds. Pour the fatback and broth into the cooking beans. Once the beans begin to lightly boil at medium heat, lower the temperature to low, cover and cook for about 2 hours.

Recipe reprinted with permission from "White Trash Gatherings: From-Scratch Cooking for Down-Home Entertaining" by Kendra Bailey Morris. Copyright 2006. Published by Ten Speed Press. See www.theaccidentalchef.net.

Basic Eastern North Carolina Sauce (North Carolina)

- 2 quarts apple cider vinegar
- 1 1/2 to 2 ounces crushed red pepper
- 2 T salt or to taste
- 1 T black pepper or to taste

Mix all ingredients well. Use to baste pig and to season chopped barbecue to taste.

Recipe Courtesy North Carolina Pork Producers Association

Lexington-Style "Dip" (North Carolina)

There are a thousand variations of this type sauce. You can follow the basic proportions shown here then bring your own creativity into play.

- 3 cups apple cider vinegar
- 2/3 cup brown or white sugar
- 1/2 cup catsup
- 2 T Texas Pete hot sauce
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. black pepper
- 1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tsp. onion powder
- 2 tsp. Kitchen Bouquet browning sauce

Combine all ingredients in large pot. Bring to a simmer over medium heat and stir until sugar melts. Let sit for several hours before serving over chopped or sliced pork shoulder.

Recipe reprinted with permission from "North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time" by Bob Garner. (John F. Blair, Publisher). See www.blairpub.com.

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Creamy Grits with Shrimp (South Carolina)

- 1 pound large raw shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 cups water
- 1 1/2 cups hot stock (shrimp, chicken, or vegetable)
- 1/4 cup butter
- Salt and black pepper to taste
- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- 3 T fresh lemon juice
- 6 bacon slices
- 2 T finely chopped onion
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 T finely chopped green or red bell pepper



In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, combine cream, water and hot stock; bring to a gentle boil. Add butter, salt and pepper. Slowly add grits, stirring constantly (so that the grits do not settle to the bottom and scorch), until all are added; reduce heat to medium-low. Cook for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally (be careful not to scorch mixture), or until the grits are tender.

NOTE: Grits should have absorbed all of the liquid and become soft and should have the same consistency as oatmeal (moist, not dry). If the grits become too thick, add warm stock or water to thin. Remove from heat.

Sprinkle shrimp with lemon juice, salt and pepper; set aside. In a large frying pan over medium-high heat, cook bacon until brown but not crisp. Remove from heat and pat dry with paper towels; set aside. Coarsely chop bacon when cool. Reserve 4 tablespoons bacon grease in the frying pan. Add onion, garlic and green or red bell pepper. Sauté 10 minutes or until the onion is transparent. Add shrimp mixture and bacon. Sauté 5 to 7 minutes or until shrimp is opaque in center (cut to test). Remove from heat.

To serve, spoon hot grits onto individual serving plates and top with shrimp mixture.

Recipe and photograph reprinted with permission from Linda Stradley's What's Cooking America Web site at www.whatscookingamerica.net.

Bananas Foster (Louisiana)

- 1/2 stick butter
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
- 1/4 cup banana liqueur
- 4 bananas, cut in half lengthwise, then halved
- 1/4 cup dark rum
- 4 scoops vanilla ice cream



Combine the butter, sugar and cinnamon in a flambé pan or skillet. Place the pan over low heat either on an alcohol burner or on top of the stove, and cook, stirring, until the sugar dissolves. Stir in the banana liqueur, then place the bananas in the pan. When the banana sections soften and begin to brown, carefully add the rum. Continue to cook the sauce until the rum is hot, then tip the pan slightly to ignite the rum. When the flames subside, lift the bananas out of the pan and place four pieces over each portion of ice cream. Generously spoon warm sauce over the top of the ice cream and serve immediately.

Recipe and photograph reprinted with permission from Brennan's restaurant. Bananas Foster was invented at Brennan's in the French Quarter of New Orleans. See www.brennansneworleans.com.