Southern Farmers Vanquish the Clichés

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHRYN WAGNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

OLD WAYS Top, Emile DeFelice, at right in photo, with Eufren Ninancuro at Caw Caw Creek farm; center, the chef Jacques Larson and charcuterie from Wild Olive restaurant on Wadmalaw Island; Greg Johnsman using an antique corn mill.

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bitions. "In the next five years we should be dominating the world in charcuterie, because we have the best pigs and the most skills," said Craig Diehl, the chef at Cypress, in Charleston, who makes an extraordinary headcheese and about 25 other remarkable cured meats from Mr. DeFelice's pork.

Like California in the 1970s — when Alice Waters collaborated with farmers, foragers and cheesemakers on the food at Chez Panisse — the South today has just the right combination of climate, culinary skill, regional chic and receptive audience.

Even Hurricane Katrina played a key role in reviving interest in the region's food traditions. "It came just as the farm-to-table movement was really taking hold," said Randy Fertel, a New Orleans native and food writer. "The storm hit us over the head with the truth: that we could lose the whole tradition, and we'd better take care of it."

Pork is still the definitive ingredient of Southern cooking, past and present. But the "lardcore" trend has now become a bigger movement embracing the entire Southern pantry.

"As an obsessive person, you realize that there is a better version of everything out there," said Sean Brock, the Charleston chef whose restaurant Husk serves only food produced south of the Mason-Dixon line, from Georgia olive oil to Tennessee chocolate to capers made from locally foraged elderberries. Many Southern chefs are working along similar lines — Frank Stitt, Mike Lata, Andrea Reusing and Linton Hopkins are just a few — but Mr. Brock's rigor has redefined what it means to cook like a Southerner today. Young chefs are joining in, learning butchery and fermentation, putting up chowchow and piccalilli, experimenting with wood ash to make their own hominy.

Perhaps most important, they are paying (and charging) big-city prices for down-home ingredients: money that is keeping food traditions, and small producers, alive.

Jason Powell, a nurseryman in Jemison, Ala., grew heirloom roses until a decade ago, when he took a basket of overflow from his family's fig trees to the back door of a restaurant in Birmingham.

"I never felt like a rock star in my life until I went into a restaurant kitchen with a load of fruit," he said. "All those hands, reaching out to touch your stuff." Now he raises old strains of blackberries, muscadines and scuppernongs ("grapes with a twang," he calls them). They are traditionally used for jelly, but the region's chefs are churning them into sorbet or serving them pickled.

Around Charleston, the relationships between chefs and producers are particularly intimate. "The guys who taught me how to mill are stuck in their ways," said Greg Johnsman, the owner of Geechie Boy Mill on Edisto Island, who drives around the region collecting antique machines used to preserve the particular bran-oil-starch ratio of his cornmeal and grits. "These days, the food comes from factories, and only the chefs care about how things taste."

He started out as a "tie-boy" at age 8, sewing up sacks, and accumulated vast knowledge about Southern grains.

A few weeks ago, he was shouting encouragement over the clanking of his 1945 grist mill to Mr. Brock, who had persuaded him to allow a vat of liquid nitrogen into the mill. The two are trying to determine whether dried corn makes tastier cornmeal when it is flash-frozen before grinding, and didn't seem fazed by the billows of vapor that soon covered the floor. "Heat is the enemy," Mr. Johnsman said; farmers used to line up at mills at sunrise to use the machines before they heated up and changed the flavor of the grain.

Around here, the New Year is ushered in with bowls of hoppin' John, a resilient mix of rice and black-eyed peas that is supposed to bring luck. One food lover in Charleston, when asked if the Lowcountry had any other New Year's foods, said, "I'm sorry, but all that bandwidth is occupied by hoppin' John."

(Others said that hoppin' John brings the luck, but golden yellow corn bread and greens have to be eaten, too, to bring the money.)

One of the most influential characters in the Southern revival is Glenn Roberts, the owner of Anson Mills in Columbia, S.C., a grower of heirloom grains across the region, and a walking Wikipedia on the agricultural history of the South. The modern hoppin' John recipe of converted rice and black-eyed peas, he says, is a flavorless facsimile of the real thing. With sadness, he reported: "People taste it and say, 'Really? That's the dish that has survived for centuries and represents an entire cuisine?'"

In his telling, after the American Revolution, hundreds of varieties of rice flourished in plantations and paddies along the coast of North Carolina and Georgia. The flavor of Carolina rice made it world famous; the finest grains were hand-pounded, barrel-aged and scented with bay leaves. From African slaves, white farmers learned to rotate crops of peas with rice, to replenish the soil; they learned that the two foods, eaten together, could sustain life over many months of winter or hardship.

At harvest, peas — usually flavorful red or cream-colored varieties — were eaten green and fresh, in a dish called "reezy peezy" (a name that shows the influence of the 17th-century Italian engineers who advised local rice planters: "risi e bisi" is a spring specialty in the Veneto). In winter, the dried peas (what Northerners call beans) were the standard for hoppin' John.

Later, when mechanized farming took hold, black-eyed peas (which Mr. Roberts described as "burpy" and starchy) become dominant because they were easy to grow, with high yields. And machine-milled rice, sprayed with vitamins and pesticides, became the standard. "Machining takes the flavor nuances out," Mr. Roberts said.

These days, in high-end Southern restaurants, the hoppin' John is most likely to be made with creamy-textured red peas and heirloom rice, flavored with artisanal bacon fat and fresh herbs grown by the chef — past and present, coming together in delicious new ways.

At Mepkin Abbey, a Cistercian monastery north of Charleston, monks grow huge, lush oyster mushrooms for chefs who turn them into pickles and stews. The young chef Ellis Grossman, whose obsession is healthy alternatives to fast food, recently began working two days a week on a farm, where he buys broccoli rabe and green tomatoes.

Local growers first avoided Jacques Larson, who cooks strictly authentic Italian food at Wild Olive, outside Charleston in Johns Island, but he proved an avid buyer of local pork, tomatoes and greens. "Some farmers around here thought my food was strange at first, but now they drop off escarole on the way to church," he said.

Many farmers work on a small scale, raising a few cows to make clabbered cream, or prowling abandoned farms for old strains of white peaches to sell to chefs. "I'm still not sure I can make a living on this land," said Shawn Thackeray, a longtime farmer on Wadmalaw Island, where the farm business was long dominated by tomatoes for supermarkets and fast-food chains.

Wadmalaw, Johns and other barrier islands lie between Charleston and high-end resort islands like Kiawah and Seabrook; many farms here have been sold because the rich dirt is more profitable for raising second homes than vegetables.

But there are holdouts like Mr. Thackeray who are hoping to ride the Southern revival to sustainability, if not wealth, by raising chef-friendly crops like mustard frills, Ragged Jack kale and Bright Lights chard, organic peanuts and watermelon radishes. Celeste Albers, a local legend for her knowledge of traditional agriculture, has dreams of producing buttermilk for sale from her herd of Jersey cows.

The quest for "real" Southern food isn't new: for decades, food historians and organizations like the Southern Foodways Alliance and Slow Food USA have mourned the extinction of treasures like beaten biscuits and cane syrup.

Today, purists believe, Southern cooking is too often represented by its worst elements: feedlot hams, cheap fried chicken and chains like Cracker Barrel.

"My mother didn't cook like that, and my grandmother didn't cook like that," Mr. DeFelice said. "And if you want to come down here and talk about shrimp and grits, well, we're tired of that, too. Southern cooking is a lot more interesting than people think."

HUSK CORNBREAD

Adapted from Sean Brock, Husk, Charleston, S.C.
Time: About 30 minutes

2 cups coarse yellow cornmeal (see note)
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
5 tablespoons fresh lard, melted
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 1/2 cups buttermilk, preferably made from fresh milk
1/4 cup bacon fat, if making croutons
Salt.

1. Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Place a 10-inch cast-iron skillet inside.

2. In a bowl, combine the cornmeal, salt, baking soda and baking powder.

3. Combine 4 tablespoons of the lard, the egg and the buttermilk. Stir the wet ingredients into the dry until smooth.

4. Move the skillet from the oven to the stove top, over high heat. Add the remaining lard to the pan and swirl to coat. Pour in the batter; it should sizzle vigorously. Shake the skillet to distribute it evenly. Cook 15 to 18 minutes, or until a tester inserted into the center comes out clean.

5. To make large croutons (to serve as a base for greens, poached eggs, etc.), let the cornbread cool in the pan, then turn out and cut into 2-inch pieces. (If using in soup or beans, cut into 1/2-inch cubes.) Arrange on a baking sheet and dry overnight in the turned-off oven, lightly covered with foil. Remove.

6. When ready to serve, heat oven to 425 degrees and place a rimmed baking sheet inside to heat. Add the bacon fat and swirl to coat. Gently turn the cornbread pieces in it, spreading them out, and sprinkle lightly with salt. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, until brown and crisp. Serve hot.

Yield: 8 servings cornbread.

Note: Fresh cornmeal direct from mills like Geechie Boy and Anson Mills makes soft, fluffy cornbread. If using a supermarket variety, use 1 1/2 cups cornmeal and 1/2 cup all-purpose flour.

CREAMED BRAISING GREENS

Adapted from Jeremiah Bacon, the Macintosh, Charleston, S.C.
Time: 30 minutes

6 tablespoons butter
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 shallot, thinly sliced
1 cup heavy cream
Pinch freshly grated nutmeg
Salt
3 to 4 pounds young greens, like collards, kale, chard or mustard, stemmed and finely shredded.

1. In a saucepan, heat 2 tablespoons of the butter over high heat until it foams. Add the garlic and shallot and cook over medium-low heat, stirring, until softened and golden, 5 minutes. Add the cream, bring to a simmer and cook until slightly thickened, 10 minutes. Add the nutmeg and salt to taste. Using a hand blender, purée until smooth.

2. In a large pot, heat the remaining 4 tablespoons butter over high heat until it foams. Add the greens and cook, stirring constantly, until tender but still bright green, about 5 minutes. Sprinkle with salt and add the cream mixture. Lower the heat, cover and let simmer until cooked through, 5 minutes more. Taste for nutmeg and salt, season to taste and serve hot.

Yield: 8 servings.