

by Mary Sue Lawrence

Southern cooking is in the midst of a steamy, delicious love affair—it's a threesome, actually, enjoyed by the diners (that's you and me), the creators (that would be the chefs) and the food itself (get ready for details that will leave your mouth watering).



Down Home Goes

UPTOWN!

The new approach has really awakened Southern cooking, says Melissa Cochran, executive chef and co-owner of Juleps Restaurant in Hilton Head, where for more than 10 years she's been turning out such hits as Barbecued Duck Breast with Cornmeal Pancake and Grilled Pork Chop with Hot Bacon Slaw. "We take the good things of Southern cooking and make them more flavorful for the 21st century. For instance, instead of over salting or cooking everything in fatback or bacon, I use fresh herbs to make flavors bolder. This intensifies the natural flavors, makes dishes fresher, more exciting and more eye-appealing," Cochran explains.

In Charleston, considered by renowned food critics to be one of the world's finest restaurant cities, Carolina's Restaurant remains a paradigm of new Southern cuisine since blazing the trail nearly 20 years ago. "When people come to Charleston, they're looking for Southern food with flair," says Chef Rose Durden. "I'm always looking for something new to create a dish." It's an approach that's worked for Durden since she joined Carolina's in 1986 (you could call her the belle of nouvelle); her Shrimp and Crabmeat Wontons on a lime ginger sauce and Crawfish Tails in a Spicy Tasso Cream Sauce are classics. "Getting back to my roots but adding contemporary touches" is how David Williams, executive chef and co-



owner of Soby's Restaurant in Greenville, describes his style. "These are my comfort foods, the staples of my diet," says Williams, whose dad grew up on a farm in Alabama and whose mom was a talented Virginia cook. "I've spent several years cooking French and Southwestern in restaurants, hotels, casinos and resorts...now I'm taking that knowledge and experience and focusing back on the stuff my mom used to make." Their signature dishes are as unique to each as, indeed, their own signatures. Each lends an individual touch, one defined and refined by their unique backgrounds, their training

and other experiences.

For Durden, who left her native Vietnam in 1967 to marry her husband, it's a hint of Asia. "I like to mix the flavor that I know from Vietnam with the things I learned from my Southern mother-in-law," she explains. Her combinations are like taste bud firecrackers: Sweet Potato Crusted Flounder with Watercress and Apple or Sesame Grouper with Cheese Grits and Lemon Butter Sauce and Tropical Fruit Chutney. "Carolina's started the trend of mixing a little Southern with a little Asian; now you can see all the local restaurants have a little bit of an Asian touch," notes Durden. "I'm taking it to one more level. When I go back to Vietnam and taste something I like, I figure out what I can do to adapt that in



Charleston, how to combine our fresh local foods with the flavor of what I love from my homeland.” Cochran is also a natural talent who says she learned from a lot of good chefs along the way, including her mom, who owned a catering business for 26 years. At the time Cochran and husband Sam opened Juleps, few restaurants were offering Southern food beyond sweet tea and Frogmore Stew. “I went to the library and did research on Southern culture to determine which ingredients were constantly showing up on Southern menus, like sherry, ginger and peach,” she says. The result is a continental-style menu incorporated with Southern ingredients. “The great thing about Southern cooking is the wealth of ingredients that we have—grits, black eyed peas, cured ham—when you add all the wonderful seafood and Low-country foods, we’re really blessed. We want our customers to come in and feel familiar with the ingredients we use.

We’re not recreating the wheel, we’re just putting a new tread on it,” she laughs.

For Williams, Soby’s location—a late 1800s building on Greenville’s Main Street—was a great source of inspiration. “The landmark building has such a Southern feel for me; I could look around and see what our concept would be,” notes Williams, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of Art. “New South food was really a hot concept at the time we opened, and nobody was really doing that in Greenville.” It didn’t take long for dishes like Crab Cake with Remoulade Sauce or New

Orleans BBQ Shrimp and Grits to garner a local following. “I take classical techniques and apply them to what are typically Southern ingredients, with the same attention to detail as you find in French cooking,” explains Williams. “To cook the kind of food that, in a lot of ways, I grew up on—but even better!”



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