

FOOD & WINE

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american classics *updated*

50 best recipes from the new south

how to cook with spices P. 142

37 top all-american wine pairings

*Shrimp with saffron
rice—perfect with a rich
Virginia Chardonnay*
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[editorial]



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industrial-chic
atlanta style

The “whole animal” ethos and minimalist look of Abattoir in Atlanta reminds writer Julia Reed of hunting-club meals during her Mississippi Delta youth. The menu also offers genteel cocktail-party staples, such as pickled shrimp. 1170 Howell Mill Rd.; 404-892-3335.

When Restaurants Get Personal

Whether its walls are covered in shimmering velvet or reclaimed pine from an old tire factory, a great restaurant can make the hoary concept of Southern hospitality come alive—and inspire writer *Julia Reed* to hug her waiter.

WHEN I WAS GROWING up on the Mississippi Delta in the 1960s, our license plates bore the motto “The Hospitality State.” But there were few or no fine-dining restaurants to back up the claim. Just as in the earliest days of the Southern colonies, hospitality meant opening up your home and impressing—if not overwhelming—your guests with copious amounts of food, drink and conversation.

My own mother entertained so often, and with so little notice, she developed a stock menu for especially

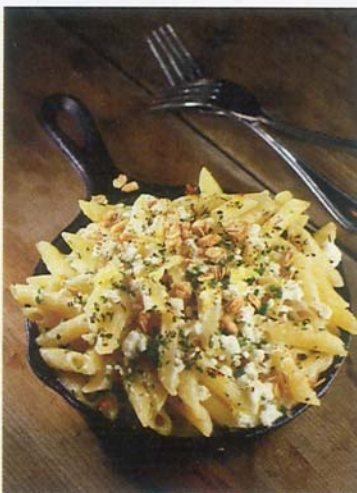
important guests that her best friend referred to, tongue-in-cheek, as the VD Dinner. The initials stood for Visiting Dignitary, and the dishes always included beef tenderloin, scalloped oysters and charlotte russe.

To eat out was a far less elegant, though no less bountiful, experience. One of the few restaurants in my hometown of Greenville was a justifiably famous steak house, Doe’s Eat Place, where you (still) enter through the kitchen and pick out the cut you’d like before it hits the ancient broiler. On weekends we would fish in a nearby lake, and the cook at the rustic club on its banks would fry

our catch and serve it with to-die-for thin onion rings and homemade coleslaw. Hunters could do the same thing at the hunting clubs that dotted the landscape.

Dining both in and outside the home was, clearly, never pretentious, but an intimate, intensely personal event in familiar surroundings. “Staff” was either actual family or adopted family. Recently, when my father was hospitalized after an accident, the first card he received bore

Julia Reed is the author of The House on First Street and Ham Biscuits, Hostess Gowns, and Other Southern Specialties.



french country meets memphis modern

Eating at Memphis's Grace is like going to a dinner party. Chef Ben Vaughn (ABOVE, LEFT) makes a stellar mac and cheese (TOP). 938 S. Cooper St.; 901-274-8511.

the return address of Jim's Cafe, a classic meat-and-three where he has eaten lunch every weekday for the last 30 years.

Even the one fine-dining mecca of my childhood, a Memphis restaurant called Justine's, felt like home—if home were a 19th-century Italianate mansion with a lively proprietor who set the tables with silver bowls of full-blown garden roses. Long before anyone ever heard the phrase “farm to table,” the garden at Justine's also provided fresh produce, and the food

was so good that my family made the three-hour trek with astonishing frequency. Though I still dream of Crabmeat Justine (a ramekin of buttery crab topped with hollandaise and browned), I think what we all loved most was that being there felt like being at a heightened version of the dinner parties to which we were so accustomed.

Though Justine's is long gone, her ethos survives. In New Orleans, one of the first restaurants to reopen after Hurricane Katrina was Donald >

Three-Cheese Mac and Cheese

ACTIVE: 40 MIN; TOTAL: 1 HR 40 MIN

6 TO 8 SERVINGS

Three different types of cheese, plus sour cream and egg yolks, make this recipe from chef Ben Vaughn of Restaurant Grace in Memphis especially rich.

- 1½ pounds penne
- 3 cups heavy cream or half-and-half
- ¼ cup finely chopped sweet onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour

- One 10-ounce log goat cheese
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, shredded (1½ cups)
- 1 packed cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- ¼ cup sour cream
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 2 teaspoons chopped thyme
- 1½ teaspoons grated lemon zest
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper
- 3 large egg yolks

1. Preheat the oven to 400° and butter a 10-inch cast-iron skillet. In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the pasta until al dente. Drain the pasta; return it to the pot.
 2. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, bring the cream to a simmer with the onion and garlic. Transfer 1 cup of the cream to a bowl and whisk in the flour; return the mixture to the saucepan. Whisk over moderate heat until thickened, 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and whisk in the goat cheese, cheddar and half of the Parmigiano until melted. Whisk in the sour cream, parsley, thyme and zest and season with salt and white pepper. In a bowl, gradually whisk 1 cup of the sauce with the egg yolks, then whisk the mixture into the saucepan.
 3. Pour the sauce over the pasta and stir to coat. Spread the pasta in the cast-iron skillet and sprinkle with the remaining Parmigiano. Bake for about 45 minutes, until bubbling and golden. Let the mac and cheese rest for 15 minutes, then serve.
- WINE** Rich, bright white wine: 2008 Martínspancho Verdejo.



low-country cuisine in high style

"I've never dined in Charleston's grand manses, but after countless trips to the city's Peninsula Grill, I don't have to," says Reed. 112 N. Market St.; 843-723-0700.

Link's Herbsaint. It was a month after the storm and the staff numbered six of their usual 40, but clean white linen graced the tables, along with Link's usual delicious gumbo and the comfort food we all needed. As tough as things were, opening night was like a family reunion—albeit one at which everyone got along.

Now, I'm sure this sort of intimacy and warmth exists elsewhere, but in New York City and Los Angeles especially, dining too often involves posturing, jockeying for a table and fretting over the seating. "Friendly" is when the waiter irritatingly introduces himself as "your server."

The Southern dining room is built around personal relationships that often extend beyond waiter-and-guest. When Link wanted artwork for his newest project, Calcasieu, he took Mississippi-born artist William Dunlap on a road trip to visit his family in the Louisiana parish of the same name. The gatherings at Link's family camp moved Dunlap to create the enormous canvases and prints, including one of the iconic smokers, now displayed on the exposed-brick walls of Calcasieu's private dining area.

(While it's "private," even small parties may book a lunch or dinner there.) Dunlap reported that he had never been as happily sated in his life as he was on that trip, and the same could be said of a shorter trip to the restaurant itself. Link cooks the deceptively simple-sounding dishes of his youth—like spoon bread with okra—along with VD-style staples, like a perfect combo of tenderloin, brabant potatoes and creamed spinach.

The exposed brick at Calcasieu reminds me of the rash of supposedly Southern restaurants that were all the rage in the 1980s, when I first arrived in New York City. Brick and otherwise distressed walls abounded, but instead of museum-quality artworks, there were rusted Dixie beer signs. The menus were similarly one-note—fried catfish, fried oysters, fried everything. The tendency (on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line) to lay on the kitsch and call it Southern is an unfor-

“Just as in the days of colonies, hospitality means your home and impressi

tunately easy one. But it never translates into the essential celebration of food, and mark th

A WONDERFULLY GENUINE celebration can be found at Atlanta's Abattoir, the latest creation of chefs Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison. Situated in a former slaughterhouse, the restaurant features "whole animal cuisine" (which, of course, was once the norm in these parts), a theme evidenced in the life-size cow statue at the entrance. Maybe it's because I grew up picking out my porterhouses at Doe's, where the wide-plank wood floors are worn thin, but my heart leapt when I entered Abattoir to find the walls and floors covered in gorgeous heart pine, reclaimed from the shuttered Goodyear factory nearby. "I think of wood like you think of pork," designer Dominick Coyne told Quatrano. Despite the macabre origins of the space, Coyne has imbued it with the feel of an airy, open farmhouse, without prettying it up too much.

The farmhouse effect continues on Abattoir's menu. Some dishes, like rabbit rillettes and pickled Georgia white shrimp (long a cocktail-party staple in Southern houses, including my own), are served in old-fashioned pickling jars. The jars totally relate to the food—and for a buck each, you can take them home.

If Calcasieu and Abattoir have roots in the more rustic haunts of my youth, there are plenty of fancier places to visit. Not far from the old Justine's in Memphis is a new restaurant that also

bears a woman's name, Grace, for chef Ben Vaughn's young daughter. Like Justine's, Restaurant Grace has the feel of someone's house—the front “salon” is furnished with upholstered sofas and antique love seats where folks can sit and have a drink or a bite to eat (possibly Vaughn's superlative mac and cheese—recipe, p. 45).

The walls are pale green and cream, hung with local art and elaborate empty gilded frames, a soothing and inviting blend of French country and Memphis modern. The food, almost entirely sourced from local producers, could be described in the same way—if only the French were lucky enough to mess around with black-eyed peas and soft-shell crabs.

Vaughn serves “Ben's Very, Very Good Chocolate Cake,” which is an example of another component of Southern hospitality. At heart, it's at least partly about showmanship, and Southern cooks have long loved to show off with rich signature cakes. We even name them after people who either created or loved them (as in the Miss Emma Lane Cake and the Robert E. Lee Cake, respectively).

I've not tasted the version at Grace, but my favorite example is the multi-layered version at the Peninsula Grill in Charleston, South Carolina. Based on a recipe from chef Robert Carter's Florida grandmother, it's so popular that the restaurant now ships it all over the country, but I much prefer to eat it there.

The Peninsula Grill's dining room also feels much like Justine's—but this time, you've landed in the grand private house of the rich old South Carolina branch of the family. Noted local designer Amelia Handegan has covered the walls with oyster silk velvet that shimmers in the candlelight and 19th-century oil paintings. There's also a lovely patio, but it was in the bar that I fell in love—specifically the



new orleans cajun connection

Calcasieu combines museum-quality art with Cajun dishes by chef Donald Link (TOP RIGHT). 930 Tchoupitoulas St.; 504-588-2188.

moment when Carter sent out a hot biscuit loaded with seared foie gras and duck confit with peach jam.

It was one of those transcendent experiences that, to me, defines hospitality—hosts taking pleasure in coming up with something mind-blowingly delicious, and then sharing it in a place where they've worked hard to make you feel utterly at home. That place could be Doe's, where the flatware doesn't match, or even a Manhattan restaurant like Le Bernardin, where the mackerel tartare with osetra

caviar has more than once moved me to tears. The difference is that after my Peninsula biscuit, I'm pretty sure I hugged the waiter, and at Le Bernardin, I wouldn't dare—but it's not the latter's cheerful staff I worry about. It's the buttoned-up diners who never weep with gratitude over the astounding things they're given, and who, therefore, miss out on a lot. Southern hospitality works both ways. We may be famous for the graciousness with which we offer it, but we also know the proper way to accept it. ●