Chefs add their own local interpretations for an eclectic cross-section of the popular regional fare.

By Amelia Levin

Courtesy of Saltyard

Courtesy of Magnolias

beyond black-eyed peas

In 2015, Culinary Institute of Charleston chef-instructor Kevin Mitchell teamed up with Charleston chef BJ Dennis and April McGreger, owner of Farmer's Daughter, a North Carolina artisan food producer, for a first-of-its-kind Southern pea tasting meant to rediscover some of the Southern heirloom varieties. The group prepared 21 different types of cowpeas beyond the familiar and most basic black-eyed pea most Southerners grew up eating. In a tasting and balloted vote:

- The Pinkeye Purple Hull, a sweet, sturdy legume, won in the "black-eyed" category.
- The Brown Crowder, a simpler, sturdy pea, was tops among crowder peas.
- The Lady pea won in the cream pea category for its soft, creamy taste and a consistency like mashed potatoes.
- The Petite Rouge took first among the field peas as a water-tolerant, hardy pea that can stand up to both floods and heavy braises.
- The Tresimino White won among the rice peas for its sturdiness and buttery taste.

Classic Southern dishes—thanks to their comforting appeal and bold flavors—continue to rage in popularity, regardless of whether or not you're in the South. As a cuisine type, Southern-style food ranks third in popularity (39% of consumers) behind Mexican and "contemporary American" food, according to Chicago-based market intelligence agency Mintel.

Many chefs are redefining what Southern cuisine means in different parts of the South and even in the North, zeroing in on specific regions from the Carolinas to the Deep South, Louisiana and beyond as they add their own hyper-local spin to classic recipes while showcasing seasonal and native foods from their area.

"You can't talk about Southern food without mentioning Southern chef and author Edna Lewis, or perhaps Joe Randall from Savannah," says Kevin Mitchell, CEC, a chef-instructor at the Culinary Institute of Charleston at Trident Technical College, North Charleston, South Carolina. "But Southern food is evolving in that chefs are creating a more modern take on an old Edna Lewis recipe. They are reaching back to traditions and cultivating heirloom ingredients."

Nick Leahy, chef/owner of small-plates restaurant Saltyard, Atlanta, shares a similar view. "There is definitely a lot more interest in Southern cuisine outside of just the South," he says. "Southern influences are making their way into contemporary American restaurants in different cities around the country. But I also think Southern cuisine is evolving in that it's a little less about all the butter and cream and fried food and more about the approach to ingredients."

Even KFC has gone regional, recently introducing Nashville-style hot fried chicken. "Southern cuisine is sort of like barbecue—the flavors are very different, whether you're in Memphis or the Carolinas," says Leahy.

ingredient-centric

Given the diversity of Atlanta, Leahy says he doesn't feel as driven by region as he does by seasonal, local ingredients, though he grew up in the South.

In spring, he pairs ramps and English peas with simmered black-eyed peas for a colorful, sweet twist on the Southern legume dish. In summer, he makes bruschetta with Georgia peaches, goat cheese, caramelized onions and thyme to go alongside his popular housemade pimento cheese version.

For a play on KFC's hot Nashville buttermilk fried chicken, Leahy swaps quail for the chicken and adds a poached vegetable escabeche with sweet peppers as a cooling side. For the hot sauce, he uses hot peppers from the restaurant's patio garden. He slow-roasts Georgia white shrimp with salt, pairing it with comeback sauce, Jackson, Mississippi's, answer for a rémoulade with mayo, homemade chili sauce and plenty of paprika. He pickles and cans fruits and vegetables sourced from the garden and from local farms.

"A large part of Southern cuisine is about preserving to reduce waste, so you see a lot of cured meats, pickled vegetables, and canned fruits and jams," he says.

northern interpretations

Kevin Sbraga, chef/owner of The Fat Ham, Philadelphia, has proved that Southern food can be redefined no matter your location, using local ingredients. Longing for the cuisine he grew up with during his years in the South, Sbraga, like Leahy, puts his own spin on hot chicken, soaking the bird in buttermilk and frying it in lard, then tossing it with a cayenne-based hot sauce and resting the crisp meat atop a slice of white sandwich bread baked at Sbraga, his first restaurant.

"We also make a boiled-peanut hummus, a classic Southern dish," says Sbraga. Peanuts additionally appear in a salad he makes with seasonal, local mustard greens and benne seeds, a Southern staple, along with a hot vinegar dressing.

Even the cocktails at The Fat Ham are ingredient-driven and Southern-inspired. The head bartender "often utilizes vanilla and caramel notes from barrel aging to complement my bold flavors and spice," Sbraga says. "Since the South is the home of bourbon, our bar program features over 180 American whiskeys, ryes and bourbons."

louisiana and lowcountry

Samantha Carroll, co-owner of Sac-a-Lait in New Orleans with husband Cody Carroll, has done extensive research to rediscover old Louisiana recipes from her family and others in the region.

Courtesy of The Fat Ham

Courtesy of The Fat Ham

"Sac-a-Lait represents all things you can farm, hunt and fish here in the state of Louisiana," says Carroll, who, like her husband, grew up in the state's rural area. They source plenty of local produce, grains, geese, wild boar, venison and acorn-fed hogs for their interpretations of Southern, Creole and New Orleans dishes. Think hog's head cheese, tasso ham, and a play on "dirty rice" risotto with ground boar meat, onion, bell pepper and a pickled turnip garnish (paying homage to the rows of canned and pickled extra-harvest vegetables she grew up eating).

Kelly Franz, executive chef at the acclaimed Magnolias, Charleston, South Carolina, set about to redefine Lowcountry cuisine with contemporary imprints and a focus on local, seasonal, heirloom and artisan foods.

While Lowcountry cuisine is primarily considered coastal fare from South Carolina and Georgia hallmarked by seafood stews or boils, "Charleston

previous spread: Pan roasted scallops, cauliflower puree, horseradish and fennel from Saltyard, Atlanta. Photo by Kenan Hill
opposite: Grits, shrimp and sausage served at Magnolias, Charleston, South Carolina.
top: Kevin Sbraga of The Fat Ham, Philadelphia, puts his own spin on hot chicken. Photo by Michael Persico
bottom: Collard greens at The Fat Ham. Photo by Jen Woodruff

is known specifically for its chutneys, benne seeds, shrimp and grits, pimento cheese, crabcakes with tarragon and fried green tomatoes. They're on every menu," Franz says.

She explains that Southern cuisine is historically defined as "cooking with love," aka, butter or bacon fat. "But it has gone beyond that, with more of an emphasis on tradition, care and ingredients."

For example, Franz starts off with the typical shrimp and grits found just about anywhere in Charleston, but she elevates the dish with a housemade lobster stock turned into a velouté with wine, sweet vermouth and butter to finish.

She always sources the freshest local collard greens she can find and the most sustainably raised local chicken for her buttermilk-marinated fried chicken with Texas hot sauce and sausage gravy.

In spring, Franz waits anxiously for the first South Carolina strawberries, pairing them with fresh radishes and other early greens in salads. She also uses the berries for chutneys, a Charleston staple. Depending on the weather, she'll source different types of tomatoes for a variety of dishes, and chutney, too. For her spin on fried green tomatoes, Franz adds white cheddar, caramelized onion grits and local country ham.

Considering Charleston's abundant summer corn, she favors the Silver Queen variety, a Southern delicacy with larger kernels and a sweeter flavor. She prefers it for creamed corn and for a Lowcountry-inspired succotash also featuring heirloom butter beans or local crowder (or field) peas simmered until just tender. She may pair the succotash with crabcakes or a bourbon/buttermilk-marinated catfish with a Creole-inspired rémoulade sauce spiked with green Tabasco, pickled okra and celery.

Franz isn't afraid to fuse Southern dishes with Latin influences, such as in her chili-rubbed tuna with habanero hummus, pepper jack spring rolls and roasted mango salsa, all placed atop more of that Creole rémoulade. "Even if I get way out there with new ideas, I try to reel it back in with those classic Southern tastes," she says.

gullah revived

Gullah cuisine's origins in the Lowcountry area of the South stem from West Africans settling in the New World as slaves in the 1700s.

"The Gullah corridor starts in North Carolina and runs through South Carolina and parts of Georgia and Florida," says Mitchell, who will soon take a sabbatical at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, to further study the history of Southern cuisine. He has partnered with the Southern Foodways Alliance on projects (see sidebar).

In Gullah cuisine, also known as Geechee in slang terms, rice is a key ingredient, most commonly used in perloo, a one-pot, simmered dish similar to a Louisiana-style jambalaya that might also include shellfish, meat, tomatoes, potatoes, sausage, okra and /or oysters.

"Slaves had only one pot to cook with, so they had to make a full meal with that one pot," says Mitchell.

Rice, specifically Carolina gold rice, is prevalent in Gullah cuisine, "because that's what made Charleston one of the richest cities in the world in the late 1700s and 1800s," Mitchell says.

Some artisan grain companies and food banks are focused on bringing back Carolina gold rice, often thought of as the "grandfather" of long-grain rice in America that was lost over the years after floods. The type has starchier properties with some slightly floral notes that lead to a fluffier end-product, says Mitchell. In colonial Charleston, slaves would hand-pound the golden-colored rice with mortar and pestle until the hulls broke down into a white color with finer consistency.

Mitchell, who tested recipes for the cookbook *Gullah Cuisine: By Land and by Sea* (Evening Post Publishing Co., 2010), by Charlotte Jenkins, also points to fish-head stew as another popular Gullah dish, using the cheeks from grouper or catfish. He makes a rich fish stock with fish heads, removing the meat for use in the stew, which includes red and green peppers and tomatoes.

Most recently, he explored the history of Nat Fuller, a prominent African-American caterer and restaurant owner who was born into slavery and freed in 1865. Fuller hosted a memorable, high-end, biracial dinner celebrating George Washington's birthday following Charleston's surrender to the Union in which he integrated Southern dishes with classical French cuisine. Mitchell recreated the famous dinner in an elaborate partnership with University of South Carolina (Columbia) professor David Shields and local chefs BJ Dennis and Sean Brock at Brock's McCrady's, Charleston. Dishes included turtle soup, venison with currant sauce, chicken chasseur and charlotte russe for dessert.

"Learning about Southern food teaches us a lot about American history," Mitchell says. ■

above: Georgia peach bruschetta, local chevre and caramelized onion served at Saltyard. Photo by Kenan Hill **opposite:** Guests gather at McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina, for Culinary Institute of Charleston chef-instructor Kevin Mitchell's recreated historic dinner once hosted by famed African-American chef and caterer Nat Fuller.

Amelia Levin is an award-winning food industry writer, certified chef and cookbook author. Her work has appeared in a variety of restaurant industry trade magazines as well as in the *Chicago Tribune, Health* and *Cooking Light* magazines.

NEXT ISSUE root vegetables

southern foodways alliance

The Southern Foodways Alliance, Oxford, Mississippi, is a nonprofit organization founded in 1999 by author John Egerton with 50 founding members in partnership with The Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, Oxford, to document the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Members of the organization include academics, chefs, food artisans, farmers, writers, photojournalists, illustrators, filmmakers, documentarians and other activists interested in furthering the study of Southern cuisine and food traditions through oral histories, films and podcasts, written articles, mentorships, scholarships, events, conferences and workshops. Over the past 17 years, the alliance has grown exponentially and recently released a five-year plan to grow its on-campus internship program and other symposiums. *Gravy* magazine, published bimonthly, integrates with the website to offer print articles as well as links for downloading podcasts, oral histories and videos. Visit www.southernfoodways.org/.