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**HOW THE
“GRUNCH” STOLE
CHRISTMAS**
*Benny Grunch
& the Bunch*

**FIVE
ALARM
FRYER**

*Talking turkey with
Thibodaux’s All Volunteer
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GONE PECAN
Honeyed Browned-Butter Pecan Pie



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DISCLAIMER: Actual Holiday Dinner containers not shown in photos. **PICTURED:** Rouses Premium Oven Roasted Turkey Dinner 10-12 LB (Serves 4-6) \$79.99.



▲ Donny Rouse

Season's Eating

My wife, Kara, and I really love to entertain. There are friends, neighbors and family drifting in and out of our house all of the time, especially during the holidays.

And Rouses chefs make it so easy. They work for months on our holiday offerings, which include fully cooked Holiday Dinners with all the trimmings, plus casseroles and dressings that can be ordered separately. At our house, we get a complete Thanksgiving Dinner with cornbread dressing every year. It's just our longtime tradition; I know your family has some of your own.

We have pecan pie as this issue's cover story, along with pecan pie-perfect bourbon pairings from one of our whiskey writers. He recommends choosing bourbon that's a little lower in alcohol so you don't overwhelm the dessert — a good thing to know, since we take our food and drink pretty seriously around here. As you'll see in this issue, there are all kinds of variations on pecan pie. I personally like traditional corn syrup pecan pie, which is the kind we sell at Rouses — it's the classic Southern recipe your grandmother probably used too. Caribou Crossing Single Barrel Canadian Whisky pairs well with it, and comes in a beautiful bottle that makes a great gift.

Black-eyed peas and cabbage are a time-honored New Year's Day food tradition on the Gulf Coast. I cook a whole suckling pig over a flame every New Year's Eve, and leftovers are served with lucky black-eyed peas, smothered cabbage and cornbread the next day. In this issue, writer Crescent Dragonwagon offers a twist on these symbolic foods, including a Brazilian-style collard green salad you can make with cabbage — just to keep your lucky streak going.

Stop by your neighborhood Rouses Market to help jump-start your holiday cooking ideas. We look forward to helping you make this the best holiday season ever.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

Donny Rouse, CEO
3rd Generation

➤ On the Cover

Honeyed Browned-Butter Pecan Pie
on pg. 23

Photo by **Romney Caruso**

Holiday Recipes

Find recipes for other holiday favorites and heating directions for our famous turduchens and deboned stuffed turkeys, chickens and pork tenderloins online at www.rouses.com.

Holiday Classes & Events

There's always something new and fun on our schedule, including holiday cooking classes for adults and kids taught by our chefs Nino and Sally. Visit our website at www.rouses.com to see what events are going on in your neighborhood.

Help Stop Hunger During the Holidays

We work closely with the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank, Second Harvest, Feeding the Gulf Coast (formerly Bay Area Food Bank) and food pantries all over the Gulf Coast to provide disaster relief and feed the hungry year-round. We make it easy to help those struggling to put food on their tables this holiday. Just scan a coupon at any Rouses register to add to your bill, or purchase a pre-packed bag of canned goods for \$10, which we will be happy to deliver for you.

table of contents

NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2017



8



14



45



48

FEATURES

- 14 **GastreauxNomica**
by Sarah Baird
- 32 **Benny Grunch & the Bunch**
by Alison Fensterstock
- 36 **Feast of the Seven Fishes**
by Helen Freund
- 48 **White Christmas**
by Judy Walker
- 50 **Ginger All the Way**
by Erin Z. Bass

COOKING

- 8 **Five-Alarm Fryer**
by Pableaux Johnson
- 28 **Puttin' on the Grits**
by Virginia Willis
- 31 **The Biscuit Queen**
by Regina Charboneau
- 56 **Happy-Go-Lucky**
by Crescent Dragonwagon

BAKING & CANDY MAKING

- 22 **Gone Pecan**
by Crescent Dragonwagon
- 24 **Pecan Pie Baking Essentials**
- 24 **Pralines**
by Kit Wohl
- 44 **Baking Spirits Bright**
by Judy Walker

WINE & SPIRITS

- 25 **Bourbon Sweet**
by Bobby Childs
- 38 **Cin Cin!**
by Helen Freund
- 42 **Rum's the Word**
by Wayne Curtis

RECIPES & COOKING INSTRUCTIONS

- 8 **Fried Turkey**

- 17 **Ginger Beer Spaghetti Squash with Shrimp**
- 18 **Jerky Turkey**
- 18 **Boudin Dolmas with Cajun Tzatziki**
- 23 **Honeyed Browned-Butter Pecan Pie**
- 24 **Sue Rouse's Pralines**
- 29 **Red Snapper Provençal**
- 30 **Sweet Potato Grits**
- 30 **Sweet Potato Spoon Bread**

- 31 **Regina Charboneau's Butter Biscuits**
- 36 **Feast of the Seven Fishes**
- 46 **Fruitcake Cookies**
- 46 **Satsuma Rum Cake**
- 56 **East-West Black-Eyed Peas**
- 56 **Brazilian Style Collard Green Salad**

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 1 **Letter from the Family**
- 4 **Products & Departments**



“We all have our own recipes and food traditions that make the holidays even more special. I wait all year long for my mom’s holiday pralines (see recipe page 24).”

—Donny Rouse, 3rd Generation

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Every year we get hundreds of customer requests to open more stores. Our Bluebonnet Blvd. store in Baton Rouge opens mid-November 2017. New stores in Moss Bluff, Sulphur, Covington, Louisiana and West Mobile, Alabama are already slated for 2018.

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DEPARTMENTS & PRODUCTS

We've got everything you need for the holidays — from Gulf Coast seafood and Cajun specialties to gifts for your friends and family.



BUTCHER SHOP

Each Rouses Market features a full-service butcher shop with master butchers available to answer your questions about cuts, grades and cooking. Crown roasts, beef tenderloins, pork tenderloins — even six-drumstick turkeys — are available. Special orders are welcome.

CAJUN SPECIALTIES

You can't fake Cajun! Our boudin, andouille, deboned stuffed meats and famous turduchen (turkey, duck and chicken stuffed with a choice of sausage and/or dressing) are Rouse Family Recipes that go back three generations. Cooking and heating instructions are available online at www.rouses.com.

SEAFOOD MARKET

We offer the widest selection of fresh local seafood on the Gulf Coast with seafood experts in store to help you choose just the right count of shrimp for your dressing or mirliton casserole. Fresh-shucked Louisiana oysters; jumbo, lump and claw crabmeat; gumbo crabs; crab fingers and wild-caught Louisiana shrimp are delivered daily. Fat-on, peeled, deveined Louisiana crawfish tails are available frozen.





GIFTS & BASKETS

We offer a variety of beautifully wrapped gift baskets, or build your very own gift basket with your favorite food and drink. We also have great ideas for food lovers, from 100% Italian extra virgin olive oil and aged Modena balsamic vinegar to Panettone (Italian cakes) and Amaretti Chef D'Italia, Cantucci Toscani, Baci Di Saronno and Limoncini (Italian cookies).

PREPARED FOODS

The holidays are showtime for our Rouses chefs and cooks. We have fully prepared traditional and premium Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. You can order these dinners at your neighborhood Rouses Market deli. We also have extras of our holiday sides-to-go in our prepared food case just in case you need to round out your feast.

WINE, SPIRITS & BEER

We offer wines at every price point and have wine experts on the floor to answer questions and offer pairing suggestions. We also have spirited gifts for the holiday season, including commemorative packages, barware, and bourbon and whiskey personally selected by Donny Rouse. For the beer drinker, we offer the largest craft selection on the Gulf Coast.

LOCAL PRODUCE

Fall and early winter are harvest time for so many great local fruits and vegetables. Be on the lookout for sweet potatoes grown in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama and local satsumas, oranges and grapefruits grown by second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-generation farmers like Ben & Ben Becnel and Matt Ranatza.



ROUSES GIFT CARDS

When you give a Rouses Gift Card, your recipient gets to pick exactly what they want, when they want it. Looking for corporate gifts or to make a bulk gift card order? Email us at info@rouses.com.

CAKES & DESSERTS

Our bakery makes the whole store smell great all holiday season long. We've got house-baked breads, fruit and cream holiday pies, best-selling Gentilly and Doberge cakes — even red-and-green Christmas king cakes. If you'd like to place a special holiday order, stop by or call your neighborhood Rouses Market.

FLOWER SHOP

Our floral directors are as picky about the flowers we sell as our chefs are about the ingredients that go into the foods we make. We have one-of-a-kind holiday arrangements and centerpieces, and you'll love our great selection of decorations. Custom orders are welcome.

Eat Right With Rouses

Our Rouses registered dietitian Esther has handpicked more than 500 grocery items that have lower sodium, saturated fat, healthier fats, more fiber and less sugar. Just look for the Eat Right logo on the shelf tag or package.

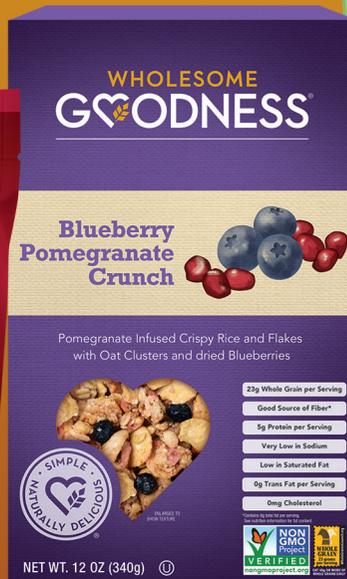
“A race or walk before the big Thanksgiving meal is a great way to burn calories and can put you in the right mindset to make healthier choices. Setting a goal to complete the race can also keep you motivated to train regularly, which can stave off any weight gain you may normally experience around the holiday season.”

—Esther Ellis,
Rouses Registered Dietitian

- **The Greater Lake Charles Rotary Club 6th Annual Turkey Trot** rolls the Saturday before Thanksgiving. The Turkey Trot 5K and Kid-K benefit student scholarships at McNeese State University and SOWELA Technical Community College.
- **Lafayette's annual Camellia Crossing, Acadiana's Gleaux Run**, takes place Thanksgiving eve. The race begins at Town Square River Ranch.
- Meet at Spanish Plaza in Downtown Mobile, Alabama on Thanksgiving morning for the **Turkey Trot for Hope & 5K Gobble Wobble**, which benefits Camp Rap-A-Hope.
- **The Fit First Turkey Trot** through Downtown Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, benefits the Friends of the Animal Shelter. The Thanksgiving Day race begins at the Bay St. Louis Train Depot.
- **The March of Dimes' Baton Rouge Turkey Trot** is celebrating its 31st year. The race returns to Downtown Baton Rouge on the morning of Thanksgiving.
- **The New Orleans Athletic Club's annual Turkey Day Race** has been a Thanksgiving Day tradition for over a century. The race benefits Spina Bifida of Greater New Orleans.

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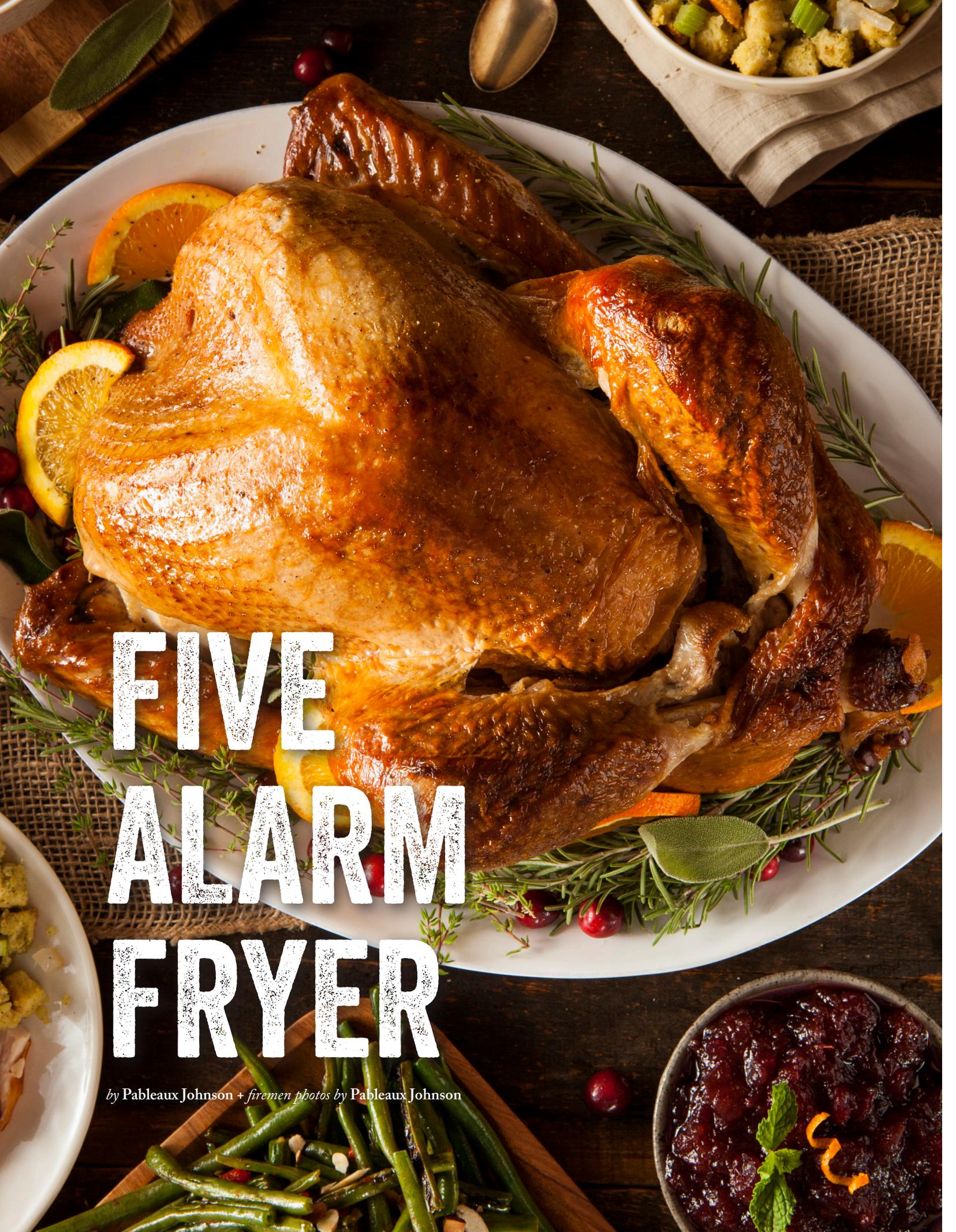
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A high-angle photograph of a roasted turkey on a white platter. The turkey is golden-brown and glistening, surrounded by fresh herbs like rosemary, thyme, and sage, along with sliced oranges and red berries. The platter is set on a dark wooden table. In the background, there's a bowl of stuffing and a small bowl of cranberry sauce. In the foreground, there's a wooden tray of green beans and another plate with more stuffing.

FIVE ALARM FRYER

by Pableaux Johnson + firemen photos by Pableaux Johnson

There will come a time in every family Thanksgiving timeline when somebody suggests a little tweak to time-honored tradition — “Why don’t we *fry* the turkey this year?”

This homegrown technique seems perfect for adventurous cooks along the Gulf Coast. After all, it sprouted from our crawfish boil and fish-fry traditions, and yields a perfectly cooked bird — moist white meat and tender dark meat with crackle-crisp skin all around.

But executing a perfectly fried bird is a good deal more complicated than the traditional “bake and baste” technique. The simple fact that you’re dealing with gallons of hot oil, a high-pressure open flame and unwieldy poultry means fried turkey is a very different ball game. (For proof, do a Google search for “turkey frying accidents” and you’ll see a cavalcade of greasy infernos, house-scorching fireballs and first-timers setting their carports aflame while their neighbors film the whole thing.)

Master of the Flame(s)

When it comes to deep-fried turkeys, you want to avoid potentially life-threatening rookie mistakes, so it helps to learn from a trained professional. And for this we enlisted the help of the most qualified person we know, Chef Nathan Richard of Cavan Restaurant in New Orleans.

In addition to being a chef, Richard is also a 15-year veteran of the volunteer fire department in his hometown of Thibodaux.

As a teenager, Chef Nathan joined the department and studied Fire Science at Delgado Community College with the goal of becoming a firefighter and arson investigator. In the course of his studies, he got inspired by a part-time job at Commander’s Palace and instead pursued a life in the restaurant kitchen.

In the years since, Richard has remained an active volunteer firefighter — and so has extensive experience with flames, both controlled and uncontrolled. This combination of skills and experience makes him the perfect guide to teach you how to properly (and safely) fry a turkey at home.

The Key: Take Your Time

One of the most-mentioned advantages to a deep-fried turkey is its cooking speed (approximately 3-4 minutes per pound rather than the 15-20 minutes per pound required for roasting). But the frying technique also requires a fair amount of time-intensive prep work to assure home safety and a tasty final product.

To this point, Chef Nathan suggests that first-time cooks think about the fry as a 3-day process — with little bits of homework that have to be completed before you spark the burner on Thanksgiving Thursday morning.

“I always make sure the bird thaws for at least 3 days in the fridge. Ice crystals deep in the bird can cause a grease fire, so give it plenty of time to unfreeze.”

A long thaw time prevents potentially

explosive water/grease contact — a critical theme that we’ll see echoed often during the prep and frying process.

Stage 1: Monday Night

Buy the right bird. If you’re accustomed to a Norman Rockwell-style, 20-pound roasted turkey on the table, you’ll need to adjust your expectations for the fried variety. “For frying, the smaller the bird, the better,” Chef Nathan says. “Look for something in the 8-10 pound range, because you want it to fit in that fryer with room to spare. Give it room to move, because you don’t want the wings to get caught on the edge of the basket.”

Start the thaw. Begin the long, slow thaw by putting the unwrapped frozen turkey(s) in a deep baking pan in the refrigerator. Over time, the turkey will go from rock-hard to pleasantly pliable; it’ll just take time. Remember: Patience is key.

Stage 2: Tuesday

Check your equipment. The standard outdoor cooking tools for turkey frying might look a lot like your uncle’s crawfish boiling rig, but the differences are just pronounced enough to require special attention.

Take a few minutes and read the instructions for your fryer, and follow all manufacturer’s instructions carefully.

The “gas and burner” situation is usually identical to the crawfish boiling rig; so in this venture, too, you must make sure there’s plenty of gas in the tank, and that the flexible hose is just the right length (too short and it could pull the pot, too long and someone could trip and tip the whole rig over).

“Also make sure you’ve got a couple of different thermometers (one for oil temperature and a digital probe to test meat doneness),” he says, “And get your safety equipment: a set of fireproof welder’s gloves and a multipurpose (ABC rated) fire extinguisher. It’s better to think about safety *before* you get started.”

Scout your fryer site. Make sure that the spot where you’re placing your rig is *FAR AWAY* from anything that can possibly go up in flames including (but not limited to) houses, garages, trees, fences, overhead power lines, wooden decks, carports.

“The rule is, 15 feet away from any structure,” he says. “Make sure your surface is solid. I’ve seen my share of fryer fires, and you don’t want that.”

Change your oil. Since you’ll be frying at 325-350 degrees, you’ll want an oil with a high “smoke point” rating that won’t break down and get unstable once it’s on high heat.

“I like peanut oil, but these days a lot of people are more sensitive to it, so if you’re worried about allergies, go with sunflower oil.”



◀ Chef Nathan Richard

Stage 3: Wednesday

Trim/prep the bird. By now, your bird should be mostly thawed and ready for basic preparation. Pour out the raw juice that's collected in the thawing pan and wash the bird thoroughly. Take out the turkey neck and paper sack of giblets (gizzards and livers) that are either in the bird's body cavity or in the neck hollow. You'll often feel chunks of ice stuck to them or the inside ribs — take those out now so they don't cause potential problems later.

Also, take a sharp knife and cut away any excessive skin flaps. Remove the little plastic pop-up "doneness timer."

Check your oil level (with water). This might be the most important part of your pre-fry homework assignments: making sure you have enough oil to fry, but not so much as to cause a dangerous overflow. Unlike an over-bubbly crawfish pot, which just makes clouds of steam, an overfull turkey fryer can splash oil onto the burner flame and trigger the large, fast-moving fireballs and unstable grease fires you may have seen on YouTube. The goal is to have just enough oil to cover your biggest turkey while staying away from the lip of the fryer pot.

You can avoid overflow with an off-the-burner "dip and mark" routine.

"I use water displacement to calculate my oil level," says Chef Nathan.

"Fill the pot halfway, then put your thawed turkey in the pot. If the water doesn't cover the bird completely, add enough water to do that."

"Take the bird out and after the water settles, mark the pot at the waterline with a marker. When it comes time to fill the pot with oil, hit that line and you're good."

(Make sure to dry off the pot and turkey well after this "dip and mark" process.)

Check the weather/develop Plan B. Check the weather forecast, and if there's *any* chance of rain Thanksgiving Day, make sure you have a solid Turkey Day Plan B. Again, it's the cold water/hot oil combination that could cause a problem. If you're running an outdoor deep fryer and rain hits, the resulting grease fire can get out of control quickly. Better to have a solid alternative for the sake of the family feast.

The first choice could be the standard roasting technique: Pop it in the oven and baste away, just like Maw Maw used to do. But if you want to maintain a sense of adventure, you can always break out the crawfish pot and gently boil the birds in crab boil and spices. (The resulting bird is more poached than roasted, and has distinctive flavor, but none of the crispy skin and caramelized goodness of a



▲ Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department assists Chef Nathan Richard.

typical Thanksgiving bird.) If you've got a smoker, go the barbecue-joint route and shoot up your birds with beer instead of pepper sauce for "drunken bird" flavor.

Stage 4: Thanksgiving Thursday

And now it's time for the Big Show, the time when all your careful prep will pay off with savory success. At long last, it's finally time to do things that look like *cooking*.

Double-check the turkey. "Make sure that everything's dry on that bird, inside and out," says Chef Nathan. "Blot every square inch dry with paper towels, and make sure that there aren't any bits of hidden ice at the center of the turkey."

Season your bird. A few hours before frying, deep-season the turkey with injectable marinade (Rouses carries several versions of this, along with the oversized syringe needed to pump liquid spices into the large muscles (breast, thighs, drumsticks) before cooking. Let things settle for an hour or so for the marinade to distribute, then re-dry the bird to remove any runoff.

Pre-cook routine. Double check your gloves, thermometers, extinguisher and surroundings. Put any pets away while the fire is burning. Fill the oil to the level you marked on Wednesday and fire up the burner. Level off the fire when the oil temperature reaches 325-335 degrees.

Bread 'em up. Meantime, dry the turkeys one last time and roll them in a mix of 2 parts flour/1 part cornstarch to crisp up the skin during frying.

THE BIG FRY: Triple-dip it. Once you've affixed the flour-dusted bird to the frying basket or vertical poultry-holding platform, you're ready for action. Turn off the flame and get ready to fry.

As you slowly lower the bird into the hot oil, watch for a quick cloud of potentially scalding steam rising out of the pot. You can minimize this by lowering the turkey gradually: dipping it in a quarter of the way, letting the water evaporate, lifting it out for a 5-second rest. Repeat this at the half- and three-quarters marks before leaving the bird in its final frying position. (This method also helps you avoid the common "drop and run" method that often leads to dangerous overflow situations, sometimes resulting in sudden fireballs.)

With your bird safe in the oil and gently burbling away, relight the burner and maintain an oil temperature of 325-350 degrees.

Time and test. At this point, you're literally cooking. Use 3-4 minutes a pound of frying as a baseline, and after that, use an instant-read digital thermometer to carefully test for meat doneness (when breast meat reaches 165).

"You'll want to stick the thermometer in the thickest part of the breast for a reading (of 160); that will allow for 5 degrees of carryover cooking as the meat rests."

Turn off the flame again, carefully lift the bird from the oil, and let it drain on paper towel-lined cardboard (10-15 minutes or until cool).



➤ Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department

The Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department — one of the oldest all-volunteer fire departments in Louisiana — traces its storied 174-year history to the year 1843 when, as Assistant Chief Benton Foret describes it, "a loosely organized group of concerned citizens bought some leather buckets and a ladder" for community protection.

In the years since, the city has grown significantly, and the all-volunteer firefighting force — now the Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department — has as well. Its 480 members are organized into eight different companies (among them, Thibodaux Fire Company No. 1, Protector Fire Company No. 2, and Vigilant, Chemical, and Hose Fire Company) that reflect a proud tradition of one of the state's oldest citizen-run safety organizations.

The Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department draws much of its support and strength from the community at large, most notably during the Firemen's Fair, an event held the first weekend in May every year. The four-day celebration started as the town's gift to its firefighters — a single day off when they could rest up — and has turned into a citywide festival that includes a Firemen's Parade, fundraising auction, carnival midway and, of course, friendly competitions among the various companies. Donny Rouse was Grand Marshal of the 2015 Thibodaux Firemen's Fair & Parade. His father, Donald, was Grand Marshal in 1986.

Your bird — crispy on the outside, tender on the inside — is ready for the feast. Whether it's a new standard or a one-time experiment, you'll have expanded your family's Thanksgiving, hopefully without starring in a viral YouTube video.

The safety procedure may seem like a lot for civilians and home cooks, but Nathan Richard has seen more than his share of holiday disasters.

"Yeah," he chuckles, "There's nothing worse on Thanksgiving than people showing up for dinner and your house is burned down." ■

"My family ties run deep in the fire department, and especially with the Protectors, who are celebrating their 150th anniversary this year! My great-grandfather, John Barrilleaux, was a volunteer firefighter with #2, and his son, my Paw Paw Carroll Barrilleaux, followed in his footsteps. He served as president of his fire company, as his dad did, for nearly a decade, and volunteered as a firefighter for his entire adult life. My husband Billy has also been a Protector for the last seven years; and just a few months ago, he became president of his company as well."

—Ali Rouse Royster, 3rd Generation

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PUMPKIN PANCAKES

Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: 12 minutes

- 1 egg
- 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup canned pumpkin
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 1 teaspoon **McCormick® Pure Vanilla Extract**
- 2 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon **McCormick® Pumpkin Pie Spice**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

BEAT egg in medium bowl. Add milk, pumpkin, butter and vanilla; mix well. Mix remaining ingredients in large bowl until well blended. Add pumpkin mixture; stir just until blended. Let stand 5 minutes.

POUR $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of batter per pancake onto preheated lightly greased griddle or skillet. Cook 1 to 2 minutes per side or until golden brown, turning when pancakes begin to bubble. Serve with walnuts and maple syrup, if desired.

Makes 10 pancakes.

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HEALTHY ORGANIC FOOD FOR ALL



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Gastreaux Nomica

by Sarah Baird + chef photos by Romney Caruso

We all know that capital cities across the globe are where the politicos do their hobnobbing and cultural landmarks abound. (The Louvre, anyone?) For those of us who are constantly hungry, though, they also often serve as integral touchstones for the culinary scene of their state or country. Who could possibly think about heading to Austin without digging into the most novel spins on barbecue, or daydream about Madrid without wondering what tapas the mad scientist-style chefs are whipping up these days? Answer: No one.

Now, in Baton Rouge, a new generation of food innovators are ready to make their beloved town the next spot that's a primo food and drink — ahem — capital for locals and hungry travelers alike.

"We want to be a food capital city among capital cities," chuckles Ryan Andre, a Gonzales native who (among other endeavors) pushed the envelope as the former head chef for City Pork Hospitality Group. One bite of any dish he whips up — from saffron rice *arancini* stuffed with smoked pork to duck ham pasta — and you'll see why he's become a leader of the Baton Rouge culinary new school. "It's time to replace some of the chain restaurants with places where chefs really get to shine," he says.

Welcome to GastreauxNomica, Baton Rouge's culinary "think tank" and underground test kitchen, where chef-driven dining is the name of the game.

Sound a little off the beaten path? Good! That's just how they like it. Andre and ringleader Sean "Poochy" Rivera of Driftwood Cask & Barrel are the co-founders of this novel approach to dining in a city long focused on restaurants themselves, not the people in the kitchen making it happen.

"Chefs spend so much of their lives in the kitchen, away from their families and out of the spotlight," Rivera explains. "We want to showcase the people who put in the sweat."

Rivera is a New Orleans native who relocated to Baton Rouge after Hurricane Katrina and recognized the potential for a city that, by and large, has been heavily rooted in traditional dishes. Today, the self-designated team of "rebel chefs" (along with a handful of bartenders, bloggers and other culinary entrepreneurs) are using pop-ups, new companies and their own in-house menus to introduce guests to Louisiana flavors reimaged in an entirely new light.

"We really have the best audience for trying new things," he explains.



[RIGHT] ▶
GastreauxNomica's
Sean "Poochy" Rivera
[BOTTOM]
GastreauxNomica's
Ryan Andre



With their collective brainpower and dynamism, it's not difficult to imagine the group tinkering around in a secret bunker into the wee small hours, taste testing and mixing their way into new frontiers like some kind of bland-food-fighting superhero league. Need someone to make the most innovative mac 'n' cheese of your life? A Gastreaux Hero is on the way. Want a party catered with oysters prepared in topsy-turvy, delicious ways? GastreauxNomica powers, unite! These are the kind of brainy, rowdy, charismatic people you want to have a beer (or three) with at the end of the night.

"Something I know what drives us is this feeling that if people say we can't do it, we're going to try and prove them wrong," says Matt Vondenstein, the mastermind behind the drinks program at Driftwood and a cocktail-innovating machine. Vondenstein isn't afraid to be playful with his drink construction, swizzling up tipples like the Beyonce, which combines honey-flavored Irish whiskey, ginger-mint simple syrup and lemon juice. (Vondenstein promises that if the pop goddess herself comes in and orders the drink, it'll be on the house.)

"Baton Rouge has always been overshadowed by New Orleans, and we want to change that by making Baton Rouge and New Orleans more like the Twin Cities up in Minnesota," says Rivera. "St. Paul is the capital, and Minneapolis is bigger, but they work together to create this huge culinary community."

A sense of cooperation and camaraderie radiates whenever the

Gastreaux team discusses their work. Nick Puletti, a sous chef with GastreauxNomica, moved to Baton Rouge to attend LSU in 2010 and was quickly taken under Rivera's wing. "We believe in and love supporting each other. Like last night, Ryan did a dinner in Downtown Baton Rouge, and we all showed up for him. I don't know if it's arrogance or what, but we believe that we can outcook just about anybody, anywhere."

And he might just be right. In addition to the Gastreaux team, the city's rich with a plethora of fresh talent. There are the chefs at classic-leaning restaurants pushing their menus in exciting new directions — like Peter Sclafani of Ruffino's and Chris Motto of Mansurs on the Boulevard. At Chef Kelley McCann's Kalurah Street Grill, wok-seared shishito peppers and rabbit ragout sit happily side by side on the menu. And a new wave of contemporary gastropubs, like The Overpass Merchant, certainly opens up new vistas for those looking for snappy ways to pair their tea-brined fried chicken sandwich with local beers.

Make no mistake about it: These chefs are interested in playing the long game to improve and diversify the city's dining scene for decades to come, creating a place where tradition and innovation can cook side by side.

So Fresh, So Clean

Of course, diversifying the city's dining options also means introducing a variety of straight-from-the-garden ingredients to balance out the less health-friendly explorations. Enter Pat Fellows: founder of FRESHJUNKIE, a GastreauxNomica member and an entrepreneurial dynamo in the city.

"I'm trying to cook healthy food in the most unhealthy place in the world," Fellows teases.

FRESHJUNKIE is a restaurant specializing in salads and wraps, and Fellows considers himself something of an expert in the field.

"My strength is grilling and coming up with creative, delicious dressings — things that might give people a healthy meal for the first time, but they're still going to enjoy it. When we started out, we made everything healthy but we never really sold it as healthy. We just had great flavor profiles, and it was kind of unassuming. We didn't smash them in the face with it."

Fellows also runs Somos Bandidos, a taco joint, as well as a race production company, FRESHJUNKIE Racing, which produces 12 events a year across the Gulf Coast. (Whew.) And where does Fellows pick up his good-for-you fuel for all of these endeavors? Rouses Markets, of course.

"I might be the odd man out a little bit with GastreauxNomica because I come from such a different culinary background, but it's great to be a part of this new guard."

For the People

This experimental, devil-may-care attitude towards flipping the script on tradition also extends to the world of catering in the city. Sydney Harkins and Jamie Brown are a duo of fireballs who, with their powers combined, make up the BouillaBabes. And while their company name clearly pays cheeky homage to the traditional



▲ [TOP] GastreauxNomica's BouillaBabes, Sydney Harkins and Jamie Brown
[LEFT] GastreauxNomica's Nick Puletti [RIGHT] GastreauxNomica's Pat Fellows

French Provençal seafood stew (get it?), their attitude towards their guests is anything but cheeky.

"We never stop cooking, and we're always thinking about cooking even when we're nowhere near a kitchen," says Harkins. "I was cuddling with my dog the other night and texted Jamie to say, 'Yo, why don't we put chorizo in this new dish we're doing?' It's that way all the time."

The pair met in April via Rivera (naturally) and immediately bonded over a desire to both support and raise the profile of female chefs in the city.

"We were like, 'People are catching on that women are badass in a male-dominated field, and now that people are getting with the times, let's capitalize on that!'" Harkins explains. "We're female-centric and very much female empowerment, right down to our decor. If you look on TV at female chefs, it's mostly this total 'Holly Homemaker' look. We definitely aren't that. We want to be like your best friend, but better."

The BouillaBabes are also about as populist as they come. Through an innovative pricing model and a desire to work with clients' budgetary needs in mind, Harkins and Brown are making catering accessible for folks who might've never considered it an option.

"We're caterers for the people," laughs Brown.

That also means being out and about as a fixture in neighborhoods across the city.

“One of the things I want BouillaBabes to focus on is partaking of events that are neighborhood-centric, and to sell food in the middle of a local arts festival or a street party alongside acrobats and live bands. We want to be an active part of the community,” says Brown.

Holidaze

For those looking to bring a little bit of GstreuxNomica-inspired innovation to their holiday traditions this year, don't sweat it: The crew has you covered.

Looking for a dish that can pull double duty? Andre upgrades his sweet potato casserole with a pretzel crumble on top, and swears by its ability to be both a side *and* a dessert. Puletti gussies up store-bought stuffing with hazelnuts and herbs, noting that simply adding fresher ingredients can make all the difference, even in not-quite-from-scratch dishes. Brown turns her sweet potatoes into a sweet bread, and also assigns the dish two very important roles.

“My dad loves sweet potatoes, and I like to do a sweet potato cranberry quick bread. Not only is it delicious, but you can gift it. I have a huge Italian family, so I just bake stuff for folks as gifts.”

Looking to stay healthy? Fellows is your guy. “I try to make subtle changes to things I love. Mashed potatoes are better with butter and cream, but you can put in a quarter of them and still get the same flavor. I also grill a turkey. It's not very difficult, and you sear it off on a grill or finish it in the oven. I can't in good conscience make green bean casserole, so we'll do roasted green beans with lemon zest, and it's super simple. It's all about balance, not just more for more's sake.”

The hallmark of a community leader is not just involvement, but a willingness to push against the grain, however big or small, in order to foster a better place to live (and in this case, eat) for everyone. The brains behind GstreuxNomica know that, at the end of the day, a “lift as you climb” mentality among chefs is the best way to push one another to new, creative heights.

“I want to see friendly competition in the city so we can all improve each other, and lift each other up so that the entire food chain gets better,” says Puletti. “The coolest thing is people are starting to realize that it's really chefs that drive the innovation instead of just the restaurant itself. If you find a chef you really like, wherever the chef goes, it's going to be good. We want to educate y'all on how we think it should be.” ■



▲ GstreuxNomica's Matt Vondenstein



Sean “Poochy” Rivera’s Ginger Beer Spaghetti Squash with Shrimp

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 2 spaghetti squash
- 1 cup olive oil
- Salt and white pepper to taste
- 1 can of ginger beer
- 4 ounces pickled ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 sticks unsalted butter
- 1 pint heavy cream
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
- 3 pounds of tail-on, peeled and deveined shrimp
- 2 sprigs of thyme
- 1 cup of white cooking wine
- 1 bunch flat-leaf Italian parsley (for garnish)

HOW TO PREP

Preheat oven to 450 degrees F.

Slice the squashes in half and scrape out seeds. Line a large sheet pan with aluminum foil. Season the spaghetti squash with olive oil, salt and white pepper. Place flesh side down and roast for 30 to 40 minutes, or until fully cooked. Remove from the oven and let rest until cool enough to handle.

Place ginger beer, pickled ginger, ground ginger, salt and white pepper in a saucepan. Heat over medium heat until reduced by half.

Add butter and cream; stir until sauce is thick enough to coat spoon.

In a large skillet, sauté onion and garlic till translucent. Add thyme and shrimp, and cook until shrimp is firm and cooked through. Remove thyme sprigs.

Deglaze with white wine; add ginger beer butter to skillet with shrimp and keep warm.

When squash is cool enough to handle, scrape the strands of squash from the inside of the skin with a large spoon. Reheat the spaghetti squash just long enough to heat through, in oven or microwave.

Place spaghetti squash in serving bowl. Top with shrimp and ginger beer butter mixture, and garnish with parsley.

➤ Spaghetti Squash

Spaghetti squash has a milder flavor than other winter squash like acorn and butternut. The flesh separates into long, tender, chewy strands when cooked.



BouillaBabes' Boudin Dolmas with Cajun Tzatziki Sauce (Boudin Stuffed)

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

Boudin:

- 1 pound boneless country-style pork ribs, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 pound pork belly, cut into 1-inch cubes
- ¼ pound liver (chicken or pork), cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 poblano peppers, seeded and roughly chopped
- 1 large onion, roughly chopped
- 2 celery stalks, roughly chopped
- 4-6 cloves garlic, chopped
- 6 tablespoons Cajun Seasoning
- 2 cups cooked white rice (preferably Louisiana-grown)
- 1 cup parsley, chopped
- 1 cup green onion, chopped
- 1 (16-ounce) jar of grape leaves

Sauce:

- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1 cucumber
- 2 tablespoons Cajun Seasoning
- Juice of 1 lemon

HOW TO PREP

Place all ingredients for boudin (excluding rice, parsley and green onion) in large saucepan or stockpot; add enough water to cover.

Bring pot to a simmer, and simmer until meat and vegetables are tender, 1½-3 hours.

Strain liquid from meat/vegetable mix, reserving liquid, and spread meat/vegetable mix on a sheet pan; allow to cool.

After cooling chop meat/vegetable mix to a medium-coarse consistency by hand or in a food processor.

Mix with cooked rice, green onion and parsley. Add reserved liquid a tablespoon at a time until a uniform bound consistency is reached. Season with Cajun Seasoning to taste.

Place boudin mixture in refrigerator and allow to cool.

In clean food processor mix all ingredients for sauce. Blend until smooth and season with Cajun Seasoning to taste.

Once boudin mixture has cooled, start rolling grape leaves by placing a grape leaf on a flat cutting board with the leaf's point facing away from you. Add a heaping teaspoon of the boudin mixture in the center of the leaf, and fold the sides over the boudin. Starting with the end of the leaf closest to you, roll the leaf up tightly towards the pointed end, being careful not to tear the leaf.

Repeat with remaining boudin mixture and grape leaves.

Serve with sauce drizzled on top of grape leaves or on the side.

Pat Fellows' Grilled Jerk Turkey

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

10-12 pound turkey, deboned (or, legs/breasts purchased deboned)

Jerk Sauce

- 1 cup chopped onion
- ¼ cup whole peeled garlic
- 2 inches peeled ginger
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon thyme
- ½ tablespoon nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 bunch cilantro
- 1 cup soy sauce
- 1 cup lime juice
- ¾ cup molasses



HOW TO PREP

Debone turkey; set aside.

Place onion, garlic and ginger in a food processor and purée.

Add black pepper, cinnamon, thyme, nutmeg, red pepper and brown sugar, and purée.

Add the cilantro and purée.

Add the soy sauce, lime juice and molasses, and purée.

Apply the jerk sauce generously to the turkey. (Set remaining sauce aside.) Marinate turkey for up to 6 hours.

Light grill and heat to medium-high. Grill turkey, skin side down. Watch closely; the sugars in the molasses and brown sugar will char a little, and that is desired.

Using tongs, turn turkey over and grill the other side. Reduce heat, cover and cook until a thermometer in the thickest part (breast) reads 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Warm the remainder of the jerk sauce and serve it alongside the turkey.

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Fall Wild Blend® Rice Salad

TIME: 2 HOURS
SERVES: 6
GLUTEN FREE: RECIPE
VEGETARIAN: RECIPE

- 1 cup Organic Wild Blend® Rice
- 1 orange, zested, peeled and diced
- 1/3 cup dried sweetened cranberries
- 1 Tbsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 Tbsp. maple syrup
- 3 Tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 1/3 cup toasted almond slices
- 1/3 cup goat cheese, crumbled
- 2 cups kale, coarsely chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste

Prepare Wild Blend rice according to package directions. Meanwhile, combine orange zest, Dijon mustard, maple syrup, and vinegar in a medium size salad bowl. Add olive oil, salt and pepper, mix thoroughly. Add cooked rice and remaining ingredients. Toss and season with additional salt and pepper to taste. Chill for at least 1 hour before serving.

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Artichoke Stuffed Filet Mignon

Impress your guests with this delectable delight!

Prep Time: 20 minutes | **Cook Time:** 20 minutes | **Servings:** 4

Ingredients:

- 1 can Reese Artichoke Hearts, coarsely chopped
- ½ cup breadcrumbs
- 1 egg beaten
- 2 leaves fresh basil, minced
- 4 filet mignon, about 6 oz. each
- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil
- 1 jar Reese Béarnaise Sauce
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. In a small bowl, add artichokes, breadcrumbs, egg, and basil and mix together. Add salt and pepper to taste.
3. With a sharp knife, cut a slit through the center of each filet mignon –end to end. Push a clean finger into the cut to expand it slightly. Push one-quarter of the stuffing into the hole in each steak.
4. In a cast-iron skillet (or any kind of oven-proof sauté pan), heat oil until smoking. Season all sides of the meat with salt and pepper to taste. Sear the tops of the steaks until browned, about 10 minutes.
5. Turn steaks and place skillet or pan into the oven. Roast meat for 8–12 minutes for medium rare or medium. Roast longer if you desire your meat to be cooked through.
6. Serve with Reese Béarnaise Sauce.



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Gone PECAN

by Crescent Dragonwagon + photo by Romney Caruso

Everyone is convinced that their, or their mother's, pecan pie is the world's best. I can see several reasons for this conviction. Possibly, it's just because most of us have a rip-roaring sweet tooth, and pecan pie is essentially a gigantic piece of really good candy in a crust, and eating something this sweet makes us happy, and the version we most often eat is our own, or our mother's.

Possibly this is because, given that one cannot possibly rationalize eating a gigantic piece of really good candy in a crust with frequency, it is a rare treat, indulged in once — maybe twice — a year, max, so it gains extra allure, served up with the whipped cream of superlatives.

Or possibly it's because pecan pie is a food you encounter at home far more often than at a restaurant. This means it is likely to

be homemade, with all the associations of familial care and tradition; it's Aunt Sudie's recipe that Memaw just *had* to make, and Boudreaux will have no other.

I understand, and respect, these rationales for why your or your mother's pecan pie is the world's best. But, meaning no disrespect, there is one definitive reason why, no matter what you believe, your or your mother's version cannot be the world's best.

And that reason is this: *My* pecan pie is the world's best.

Here's why, and before you get all bent out of shape, relax; I'm going to give you the recipe at the end of this, and you'll be able to make it and see for yourself.

My pecan pie is not the same old, same old.

Look, all pecan pie fillings are essentially the same thing: a sweetened liquid mixture that is, like a custard, bound and thickened by eggs. But where a custard pie uses sweetened milk or buttermilk for the liquid, in a pecan pie the liquid is all sugar and sugar equivalent, say, corn or some other syrup. For the vast majority of Americans, that syrup is Karo. And, again, for the vast majority of Americans, that recipe is the one right on the Karo bottle. And it's a fine recipe, as far as it goes, and I know you have always enjoyed it and would be happy to have its shoes under your bed ... but it *is* the same one you have eaten your entire life.

Forthwith, here are some persuasive points of difference where *my* pecan pie is concerned:

My pecan pie's sweetness is not a Johnny-one-note.



Yes, it has that same old, beloved, so-sweet-it-sets-your-teeth-on-edge goo, but it is sweetness that has dimension. Instead of a goo made of just-sugar-plus-corn-syrup, mine includes honey and a tiny lick of molasses. (And, these days, in a variation I have grown right fond of since moving to Vermont, real maple syrup.... If this appeals to you, substitute maple syrup for honey, and add 2 teaspoons cornstarch to the food processor mixture.)

My pecan pie has more butter.

Way more butter. And — this is a fact — if you're going for all-out indulgence for dessert, you can hardly have too much butter. The traditional Karo pecan pie uses a mere 2 tablespoons. But for an iconic, looked-forward-to-all-year dessert, I call that stingy.

My pecan pie uses $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of butter. You might call that excessive. But I call it appropriate.

My pecan pie is made with browned butter.

Will you allow me to take a little side trip into a bit of food science, if I promise it'll make your pecan pie exponentially better? Yeah, I thought so.

I know you think butter is a fat, and you're right, up to a point. That point is, if we are talking about American butter, it's 80 percent fat. The remaining 20 percent, though, is not actual butterfat but a combination of milk solids and water. Most of the time we just ignore this.

But if we are making so-called clarified butter — or, in Indian cooking, ghee — we cook the butter, all by itself, very gently and slowly, to drive off the water, and then we strain it, discarding (or saving for another use) the little crumbles of lightly browned milk solids that sink to the bottom of the pot.

But if we are making browned butter, as I am going to have you do for my pecan pie, we cook the butter a bit more quickly, and we deliberately take the milk solids to a slightly deeper brown. And we don't separate these milk solids from the melted butterfat; rather, we include them. Indeed, that's the whole point: These brown crumbles have caramelized, and their flavor is hold-the-phone, intoxicatingly good.

Add browned butter to a pecan pie and, heavens, it goes into the stratosphere of rapturous deliciousness. And, no, it is not a lot of trouble to make browned butter. It's easy, like they say, as pie. Here's how, since I'm about to call for it:

Place the butter (for this recipe, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup) in a saucepan over low to medium heat and cook, watching closely but not stirring, until golden brown, with deeper browned bits at the bottom. This will be no more or less than 5 to 8 minutes. Do not burn. Pour browned butter into a bowl and set aside, unrefrigerated, to add while still liquid to the pie.

My pecan pie mixes chopped pecans with whole ones.

Whole pecans are decorative. But chopped pecans allow that nutty pecan-ness in every single bite, get evenly browned, get a nice all-the-way-through crunchiness, and make for cleaner, neater slices. A mixture is just better.

My pecan pie recipe does not gild the lily.

Here's the thing: Why muck around with greatness? Every change rung on the classic traditional pecan pie recipe in my version still sticks to the basic goodness; it just enhances it. In my opinion, anything much beyond this is complication and overkill. Add chocolate chips, thereby making it Kentucky Derby Pie? In my view, *ewwww*; that's taking something that already skirts the edge of too-sweetness into the territory of sugar shock. Add cinnamon? No, no — save it for the apple pies, the pumpkin pies. Ditto ginger. Bourbon for flavoring instead of vanilla? Okay, if you insist; that's pretty good (though you could just as well add the bourbon to the whipped cream, or have a shot on the side).

But when you've got the world's best, it's best to just let it be. Perfect is perfect. ■

Crescent Dragonwagon's Honeyed Browned-Butter Pecan Pie

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 3 large eggs
- 1 cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 3 tablespoons light corn syrup
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup honey
- 1 tablespoon dark molasses
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons pure vanilla extract (or $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons bourbon)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup browned butter
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup chopped pecans, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup whole pecans
- One 9-inch piecrust, unbaked
- 1 cup heavy cream, whipped (optional; and, optionally, flavored with more bourbon)

HOW TO PREP

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.
2. Blend the eggs, sugar, corn syrup, honey, molasses, vanilla and salt in a food processor until smooth. Add the browned butter and blend. Add the chopped pecans and process with just a few quick pulses. Pour the mixture into the piecrust, and scatter the whole pecans decoratively (or, place them methodically — your choice).
3. Bake for 12 minutes. Lower the heat to 325 degrees and bake for another 40 minutes (check to see if the crust is browning too quickly; if it is, cover it carefully with a long, narrow, folded-over piece of foil). Pie should be nicely browned and firm at edges, but still a little liquidy at the center.
4. Remove from the oven and let cool thoroughly. Pecan pies should not be eaten hot or warm.

Pecan Pie

BAKING ESSENTIALS

Southern Cane Pure Cane Sugar, Gramercy, Louisiana

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Three Brothers Farm Cane Syrup, Youngsville, Louisiana

Father-and-son co-owners Bob and Chris Romero produce, package and sell raw sugar and a sweet, amber-hued cane syrup.

Brown Sugar

Brown sugar is essentially less refined white sugar. The difference between light and dark brown sugar comes down to the amount of molasses. Light brown has a more delicate flavor, while dark brown, which contains more molasses, is more intense.

Local Honey

The color and flavor of honey varies depending on where the bees collected their nectar. Light-colored honey typically has a milder flavor, and dark-colored honey is more intense. Two of our favorite honeys are produced in Louisiana's Cajun country — Bernard's Apiaries, a bee and honey farm in Breaux Bridge, has been bottling Bernard's Acadiana Honey for nearly three decades, and the Carmichael family of Youngsville has been making honey for over three generations.

Steen's 100% Pure Cane Syrup, Abbeville, Louisiana

The Steen family is one of the country's last remaining producers of unrefined cane syrup. Their syrup, which has a rich caramel flavor, has been a local favorite for over 100 years. They also make a thick, syrupy molasses.

Karo Corn Syrup

Legend has it, pecan pie was originally introduced in 1902 by the company that makes Karo Corn Syrup. Unlike many other sweeteners, corn syrup doesn't crystallize and turn grainy when it's chilled, so it's a good choice for pecan pie. Karo Light Corn Syrup is mildly sweet and flavored with real vanilla. Karo Dark Corn Syrup has a rich, brown color and a flavor similar to molasses.

Maple Syrup

Maple syrup is actually sap from a maple tree that's been boiled down, which decreases the water content and helps concentrate the sugars.

Sessions Farm Pecans, Grand Bay, Alabama

Alabama produces an average of about 6.8 million pounds of nuts a year. Production is centered in Baldwin and Mobile counties on the Gulf Coast. That's where third-generation farmer Jeremy Sessions plies his trade, working land first planted by his grandfather J.P. Sessions in 1948.

Bergeron Pecans, New Roads, Louisiana

More than six million pounds of Louisiana pecans are shelled each year at H.J. Bergeron Pecan Shelling Plant in New Roads, near the False River. In addition to the Bergeron's family-owned orchards, the 108-year-old company sources pecans from over 90 growers across Louisiana.

PRALINES

by Kit Wohl

Many, if not most, of our Southern recipes are variations derived from other country's recipes. Pralines — a mixture of whole or chopped pecans, sugar, butter, some form of milk or cream and, often, but not always, vanilla — came to us from the French.

Chef Clement Lassagne is credited with the invention of the pecan candy. Lassagne worked at the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte for the French diplomat Caesar, duc de Choiseul, comte du Plessis-Praslin (better known as the *maréchal* (marshal) du Plessis-Praslin. Chef Clement Lassagne coated almonds in sugar, which Plessis-Praslin, a notorious ladies man, would present to the women he would court. The confection became known as a *praslin* (pronounced *prah-leen*), after the master of the house.

While Lassagne's original French praline called for almonds, when French settlers reached Louisiana and Alabama, they discovered an indigenous bounty of delectable Southern pecans. They adapted their recipes accordingly. Milk or cream and butter were also added, giving the candy a fudgier texture.

Praline recipes have continued to evolve with the addition of coconut, chocolate, bourbon, rum and other flavorings. Here, we eat our history every day, improving it, adding to it, grafting one dish onto another, then celebrating something new.

The classic praline also varies by recipe and technique. Candy making is most assuredly an art and definitely a science. It can be genuinely unforgiving and requires accurate measurements, exact ingredients, timing, good equipment, temperature control and patience, but Sue Rouse's recipe offers an easy-to-follow, straightforward technique. The most difficult part of it is to not eat the pecans before they are incorporated into the mixture. ■

Sue Rouse's Creole Pralines

Makes 3 dozen

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 3 cups sugar
- 1½ cups Rouses whole milk
- ¼ cup corn syrup
- 3 cups pecans, roughly chopped
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon vanilla

HOW TO PREP

Cut an 8" x 11" piece of parchment paper and place it on counter.

In a medium-to-large saucepan, combine sugar, milk, corn syrup and pecans, and cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally until syrup comes to a boil. Let boil, stirring constantly, until mixture reaches soft ball stage.* Remove from heat, whisk in butter, and set aside until pot is cool enough to handle. Add vanilla and whip until smooth. Drop by spoonfuls onto parchment. Cool until firm before serving.

**To determine soft ball stage: Using a spoon, place a drop of the praline mixture into a glass of water to quickly cool down. Remove and roll around with your fingers to make a soft ball. If it holds its shape, you can remove the pot from the stove to cool.*





If you're not pairing bourbon with pecan pie, you're missing out. Nothing — besides ice cream — goes better with pecan pie than bourbon. These two are Southern soul mates. They share the same flavor nuances. Sure, different mash bills (grain recipes), ages and proofs differentiate one whiskey from another, but it's the caramelized sweetness that comes from aging in charred new oak barrels that gives bourbon its distinctive flavor — the same type of caramelized sweetness you find in pecan pie.

When it comes to pairing bourbon and food, there are two approaches: contrast or complement (it's the same with wine). Think spicy, like Sazerac Rye, or sweet, like a low-rye mash — either Buffalo Trace or Eagle Rare. Avoid higher-proof bourbon — stick to the 80- or 90-proof range — you want something smooth and food-friendly. Save your rare and barrel proof bourbons higher than 100 proof for after dinner.

Here are a few of my favorite pairings to get you started.

Jim Beam Black

The ever-popular Jim Beam White is everywhere, but its slightly older brother also can be easily found. In addition to the classic bourbon notes of caramel and vanilla, Jim Beam Black has a slight nuttiness that complements the pecans in the pie. Thanks to the fact that it spends a little more time in the barrel than Jim Beam White, Jim Beam Black's caramel character comes across a bit darker and

richer. The extra aging adds a touch of oak spice as well. This makes for a somewhat complex combination of flavors. And the bourbon's modest 86 proof makes it very easy drinking — perfect to wash down that rich pecan pie.

Eagle Rare

Eagle Rare is matured for at least 10 years, making it the oldest whiskey on this list. What makes this bourbon from Buffalo Trace Distillery stand out here is its richness. The decade this whiskey spends maturing in a new American oak barrel imparts Eagle Rare with complex layers of dark caramel, vanilla bean and oak tannins. It's more elegant than Jim Beam Black and adds a sense of refinement when paired with pecan pie. It beautifully sits in the flavor space between the pie's rich filling and crunchy top.

Wild Turkey 101

For bourbon, a lot of its spiciness comes from the rye grain used in its mash bill. (When I say spice, think rye bread vs. wheat bread.) Some bourbons, like Jim Beam Black, don't use a lot of rye. Others do. If you're looking for a bit more bite, reach for Wild Turkey 101. Wild Turkey uses a lot of rye in its bourbon, which accounts for its singular spiciness. That bite, however, comes from its high proof — 101, or 50.5 percent alcohol by volume. (You can determine proof by doubling the alcohol by volume.) There are lots of spices to be found in this bourbon. Things like allspice, cloves and cinnamon will definitely kick your pie-eating experience up a notch.

Sazerac Rye

Okay, this last one isn't bourbon. It's a rye whiskey, which is just as American. Where bourbon is at least 51 percent corn, rye whiskey must be made from at least 51 percent rye. All that extra rye grain makes this whiskey spicier than the much sweeter bourbon, and to some, it tastes a bit sharper or drier. Sazerac Rye offers baking spices, toffee and even a touch of dill with a clean, minty finish. That doesn't sound like it would pair well with pecan pie, but you'd be surprised how nicely they go together. All that spice cuts right through the pie's rich filling, leaving your palate surprisingly cleansed and ready for another bite.

If you don't like bourbon or rye, we can't be friends. Okay, okay — you *can* choose a tawny port, which is also aged in wooden barrels and pulls in some of the same flavors as the pecan pie. Or a dessert wine like Madeira, which matches the sweetness of the pie. Even a rich, dark, nutty, dessert beer, like a heavily roasted milk stout, works well with pecan pie. ■

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Chicken Fajita Quesadillas

- 4 oz John Soules Foods Chicken Breast Fajitas, thawed
- 8 Tortillas
- 4 oz Pepper Jack Cheese, shredded
- 4 oz Mozzarella Cheese, shredded

In a mixing bowl, combine the chicken and both cheeses, mix well. Lay 4 tortillas on top and spread the beef and cheese mixture evenly between all 4 tortillas. Place one of the each remaining tortillas on top to form the quesadilla.

Preheat a non-stick skillet over medium high heat, spray with pan release. Place the assembled quesadilla in the pan and allow to cook for 2 minutes on each side, or until golden brown, and the cheese is melted throughout. Repeat for the remaining 3 quesadillas. Allow to rest for 2 minutes before serving. Serve.

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PUTTIN' ON THE GRITS

by Virginia Willis

For many Southerners, grits are the ultimate comfort food. I am a grits missionary dedicated to converting the uninformed and uninitiated to the glories of grits. Comments like “I don’t like grits” get me pretty fired up. As far as I am concerned, if you don’t like grits, you simply haven’t had the right grits. And, if the only grits you ever had were poured out of a paper packet and were cooked in a microwave, well then, it’s *no wonder* you don’t like grits! If the truth is told, most fast casual and fast food restaurants don’t serve very good grits either. Creamy, comforting grits take time and patience. Nowadays, the very best examples of this simple country food can be found in chef-driven restaurants or private homes. And when properly prepared, this simple country dish can be transformed into something extraordinary.

First, what are grits? Grits are simply ground corn. Corn has long been a major ingredient in Southern cooking. It has historically been eaten fresh in the summer, and dried and ground into meal for boiling into porridge and baking in the winter. The term “grist,” meaning grain for milling, became “grits.” What’s the difference between cornmeal and grits? Cornmeal is ground corn, as well — simply a much finer, flour-like grind. In an artisan grits mill, very often when the grits are ground, the larger pieces are sifted

out and labeled as grits, and the smallest, finest grind that falls to the screen below is reserved for cornmeal.

Both grits and cornmeal are ground from “dent” corn, a type of corn with low sugar content and a soft, starchy center. Dent corn gets its name from the slight dent in the center at the top of the kernel. Flint corn is the type of corn used for polenta in Italy and for masa harina in Latin America. Flint corn gets its name from being “hard as flint.” Despite the fact that they’re made from two different types of corn, grits and polenta are almost universally interchangeable. Ground yellow corn results in yellow cornmeal (and polenta), and ground white corn results in white cornmeal (and grits). Masa is made from corn that has been treated with lime and water to loosen the hull in a process known as “nixtamalization.” This kind of corn grind *cannot* be used interchangeably with grits or cornmeal.

Grits are further defined by how they are prepared and ground. There are hominy grits, stone-ground grits and various grades of commercially ground grits.

Hominy is made from corn kernels soaked in an alkaline solution of water and lye to remove the kernel’s outer hull. When hominy is dried and coarsely ground, the result is hominy grits.

Stone-ground grits are made from dried, whole-corn kernels ground between two stones, just as it has been for centuries, which guarantees an intense corn flavor. The same stone-ground corn can vary in flavor depending on the size of the grind. Stone-ground grits are more perishable and should be refrigerated or frozen. They must also be simmered very slowly for 45 minutes to an hour to coax out their tender, creamy texture.

In commercially ground grits, the germ and hull are removed to prevent rancidity and improve the product’s shelf life. The grits are finely ground and produce a smooth, bland porridge without a whole lot of corn flavor. Artisan stone-ground corn varieties are traditionally left in the field to dry completely, a practice known as field ripening, while commercial milling typically demands that the corn be harvested unripe and dried with forced, and sometimes heated, air.

Instant grits also have the germ and hulls removed and are cooked, and then the resulting paste is spread into large sheets, which are then dried and reground. They are virtually a pot of starch with no flavor.

To make this ordinary porridge called grits something special, it’s important to start with the best-quality, stone-ground variety. The ratio of liquid to stone-ground grits is 4:1 (4 cups of liquid to 1 cup of stone-ground grits). You can use all water, or a combination of stock and water, a blend of water and milk — you get the picture. Use all water when you want the flavor of the corn to dominate. Use stock when you want to amp up the savory profile. If you’re serving the grits with a dish that contains beef, chicken or seafood, it’s nice to layer the flavors by using the corresponding stock — beef stock with beef, chicken stock with chicken, etc. For example, shrimp and grits made with a combination of shrimp stock and milk are unbelievably delicious.

When cooking grits, start by bringing your liquids and 1 teaspoon of coarse kosher salt per cup of grits to a boil over high heat — it’s best to use a heavy-bottomed pot to prevent scorching. Whisk in the grits, decrease the heat to low, and simmer, making sure to whisk occasionally, until the grits are creamy and thick, 45 to 60 minutes. To give the grits a nice finish, a bit of butter may be added. You may also add a bit of



▲ *Red Snapper Provençal on Stone-Ground Grits with Parmesan and Herbs* — Photo from *Lighten Up, Y'all*, courtesy Virginia Willis

heavy cream or grated cheese at the end of cooking.

During the holidays I often cook my grits overnight in the slow cooker. It's a great way to get a head start on the day, especially if you have a full household. However, it's very important to use water only or a combination of stock and water for the cooking liquid, *not milk*, in the slow cooker. The milk could burn during the long, slow cooking process, so it's best to add any dairy at the end of cooking in the morning. The slow cooker's steady, moist heat releases the starch in stone-ground grits with minimal stirring, creating a naturally rich, creamy texture. Here's the technique: Stir together 1 cup of grits and 4 cups of water in a slow cooker. Cover and cook on "low" overnight, about 8 hours, then stir until smooth, and taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Add any butter, cheese or cream just before serving.

I'm sharing two recipes for the holidays: Sweet Potato Grits and Red Snapper Provençal on Stone-Ground Grits. The combination of the earthy sweet potatoes and the creamy corn is incredible — it makes an excellent side dish for your roast turkey or prime rib. And the Red Snapper Provençal on Stone-Ground Grits is a perfect meal to serve on Christmas Eve.

Bon appétit, y'all! ■

Red Snapper Provençal on Stone-Ground Grits with Parmesan and Herbs

Serves 6

Red snapper is a Gulf favorite. I remember my parents going deep-sea fishing when I was a child and returning with massive coolers packed with red snapper. I absolutely love the ocean. It's so intensely primal, and the only feeling that remotely approaches that sensation that comes close would be the basic human reaction to fire. I'm pretty certain that, if I lived at the beach, I'd ditch my red lipstick pretty darn quick and become someone who fishes a whole lot more and bathes a little less. Fish and grits is an old-timey country dish that may be enjoyed for both breakfast or supper. Here I've gussied it up with fennel and olives. This is a family favorite.

Grits

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 1 tablespoon pure olive oil
- 1 sweet onion, grated
- 2 cups 2% milk
- 2 cups water
- Coarse kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- ½ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (about 2 ounces)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

HOW TO PREP

In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until transparent, about 3 minutes.

Add the milk, water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring the mixture to a boil over high heat. Whisk in the grits, decrease the heat to low, and simmer, whisking occasionally, until the grits are creamy and thick, 45 to 60 minutes. Stir in the butter, cheese and parsley. Taste, adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper, and keep warm.

Red Snapper

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 1 tablespoon olive oil, plus more for the pan
- 1 small bulb fennel, cored and diced, fronds reserved for garnish
- 1 sweet onion, diced
- 3 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme, plus thyme sprigs for garnish
- 2 tomatoes, cored, seeded and chopped, or 1 (14.5-ounce) can no-salt-added diced tomatoes
- 20 Kalamata or other brine-cured black olives, halved and pitted
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- Coarse kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 6 (4-ounce) red snapper fillets, skinned

HOW TO PREP

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Grease a shallow, ovenproof casserole with some of the oil for the fish; set aside.

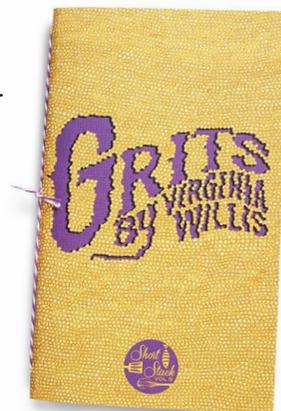
To make the sauce for the fish, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the fennel and cook until just tender, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the onion and cook until soft and translucent, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the garlic and chopped thyme and cook until fragrant, 45 to 60 seconds. Add the tomatoes and sauté until soft, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the olives and vinegar. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper.

To cook the fish, place the snapper in the prepared casserole; season with salt and pepper. Spoon the sauce over the fillets. Bake until fish is opaque in the center when pierced with the tip of a knife, about 10 minutes.

To serve, place a spoonful of the grits in individual shallow bowls. Top each with a portion of the fish and ladle over some of the tomato sauce. Garnish with sprigs of thyme and fennel fronds.

➤ About the Author

Virginia Willis is an Editor-at-Large for Southern Living and author of the magazine's popular column "Cooking with Virginia." She is the former TV kitchen director for Martha Stewart Living and author of several books including Grits, Okra, Bon Appétit, Y'all, and Lighten Up, Y'all, which won a 2016 James Beard Foundation Award of Excellence.



Sweet Potato Grits

Serves 4 to 6

The first time I had sweet potato grits, it was a revelation. Two of the ultimate Southern sides were married into one — and it was delicious. I've said many times that cooking has taught me a lot about life, and it sure keeps trying to teach me patience.

Anyone who has burned his or her mouth tasting a spoonful of hot grits before they're cool knows the importance of patience. Remove a steak from the grill and cut into it before it has rested? The juices run all over the board and the steak is dry and tough. Even more dire is to cut a cake or a loaf of bread before it cools sufficiently; believe me when I tell you, it will crumble. Open the oven door too often to check on how your dish is cooking, and your dish ceases to cook because all the heat has escaped. Patience is a key ingredient. These flavorful grits are a reward for being patient.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 2 cups water
- 2 cups low-fat or whole milk
- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- 2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and grated
- Coarse salt and freshly ground white pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- Pinch of ground cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter

HOW TO PREP

In a large, heavy saucepan, combine the water and milk and bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat.

Slowly add the grits, whisking constantly. Add the sweet potato. Season with salt and white pepper. Decrease the heat to low and simmer, stirring often, until the grits are creamy and thick, 45 to 60 minutes.

Taste the grits and sweet potato to make sure both are cooked and tender. Add the ground ginger, cinnamon and butter. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and white pepper. Serve immediately.

Sweet Potato Spoon Bread

Serves 4 to 6

Add a bit of technique and our basic country classic is transformed into a brilliant soufflélike spoon bread.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- Sweet Potato Grits, prepared as above
- Butter or oil for greasing casserole/soufflé mold
- 2 large eggs, yolks and whites separated
- Pinch of salt

HOW TO PREP

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Butter an ovenproof casserole or round 2-quart soufflé mold.

To the sweet potato grits mixture, add 2 large egg yolks, one at a time, stirring after each addition.

In a separate bowl, using a handheld mixer, beat 2 large egg whites with a pinch of salt on high speed until stiff peaks form. Gently fold the egg whites into the warm sweet potato mixture.

Transfer the lightened mixture to the prepared pan; smooth the surface with a spatula. Bake until the outside is puffed and risen, the inside is firm but moist, and the top is golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Serve immediately while still puffed.



▲ Sweet Potato Grits — Photo from *Basic to Brilliant, Y'all*, courtesy Virginia Willis

Meet the Growers

We work closely with local farmer partners who are passionate about what they grow. When you know the farmers and their fields, you know the produce is going to be the best quality.

• N&W Farms, Mississippi

The rich fertile soils of North Mississippi make Mississippi sweet potatoes appealing both inside and out. Most of the sweet potatoes are produced in Northern Mississippi, and the largest acreage is centered around the town of Vardaman, which has a long history of producing great-tasting sweet potatoes. That's where farmer Randle Wright has been growing his Beauregard variety of sweet potato for over 30 years. These potatoes have a smooth, rosy outer skin and a deep orange flesh, and are soft, moist and sweet with a smooth creamy texture after cooking.

• Sirmon Farms, Alabama

The Sirmon family has spent over a century farming the same Baldwin County, Alabama, land. For the past 30 years, Joel Sirmon and his father, Gordon, and brother, James, have been growing sweet potatoes. The tubers are raised from sprouts, or "slips," the green shoots from mature sweet potatoes, that were selected and stored at the end of the previous planting. The Sirmons' sweet potatoes are exceptionally sweet and perfect for making traditional sweet potato casseroles.

• Garber Family Farms, Louisiana

Michael, Matt and Wayne Garber carry on an Iota, Louisiana, farming tradition started in 1881. Their Louisiana sweet potatoes — often referred to as yams — have a bright orange, soft flesh, and are higher in natural sugar. Michael manages the farm crop production, while Matthew manages the storage, packaging and marketing of sweet potatoes and other crops. Wayne handles the day-to-day administration of the family business.



Regina's Butter Biscuits

Makes 3 dozen

The best part of my biscuit recipe is that the biscuits can be made weeks in advance and frozen. The tea towel is the key! Read the instructions a couple of times before starting.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup baking powder
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ cup (1 stick) salted butter, chilled and cut into ½-inch cubes
- 1½ cups (3 sticks) salted margarine, chilled and cut into 2-inch cubes
- 1¾ cups buttermilk, chilled

HOW TO PREP

Put flour, baking powder and sugar in the bowl of a stand mixer with a paddle attachment. Turn the machine on low and blend the dry ingredients for 15 seconds.

Add the butter, margarine and buttermilk to flour mixture before turning mixer back on. Turn mixer on medium and count to 10. This goes very quickly; the key is to not overmix the dough. There will be large chunks of margarine, the size of quarters, in the dough.

Scrape dough from the bowl onto a generously floured tea towel (or other floured work surface) and shape into a long, vertical rectangle about 2 inches thick. The dough will seem rough and messy. Using the edges of the towel, fold the lower part of the dough (about one third) toward the center, then fold the top portion down. With a rolling pin, roll dough out to a 2-inch thickness. Fold the two ends in again, lifting the edges of the towel to help move the dough. Give dough a one-quarter turn, and roll it out again to a 2-inch thickness. Continue folding, turning and rolling dough until it is smooth, with noticeable yellow ribbons of butter and margarine throughout.

Roll dough to a 1½-inch thickness. Using a 2-inch biscuit cutter, cut dough into rounds. Punch cutter into dough cleanly, without twisting. When refolding and rerolling the dough, gently stack it to retain the layers. Do not overwork.

Place biscuits on a baking sheet and freeze. Once they are frozen, transfer biscuits to plastic bags. The unbaked biscuits can be frozen for 2 months.

To bake, heat oven to 350 degrees. Place frozen biscuits in the cups of muffin tins, and let thaw in the refrigerator for 20 minutes. Bake until golden brown, 23 to 25 minutes.

Make no mistake about it — Southerners all love a good secret. Sometimes, this takes the form of “telephone”-style gossip about the latest (scandalous!) happenings in one’s hometown. Others are the kind that bond friends for life, like a couple of poor decision tattoos on a Panama City spring break. And, often, the secrets are those passed down from generation to generation in the kitchen.

For many families, these recipe secrets are the most serious. Like, confess-them-in-hushed-tones, threat-of-disownment-if-you-tell kind of serious. They’re the sort that require almost a blood oath to respect and protect. And you know what? Rightfully so. These are the dishes that have nourished both stomachs and hearts for decades. The fierce intimacy feels earned.

Biscuits are some of the most guarded of family culinary lore, often safeguarded for years by a single denizen of flour and butter. This holiday season, is it time to make sure you’re in on your family’s most hallowed edible secrets — or start a new tradition?

The Biscuit Queen

words & photos courtesy Regina Charboneau

My sweet mother, a sixth-generation Natchezian, often admitted that her least favorite room in the house was the kitchen. In Natchez, Mississippi, you’d encounter biscuits at many meals — both breakfast and dinner. Most every household had a qualified biscuit maker who, more often than not, had a special wooden bowl used daily for the sole purpose of making biscuits.

My mother could not make a biscuit without the sound of a pressurized tube being popped open.

It was not until I was a culinary student at La Varenne in Paris, and French friends requested Southern biscuits, that I attempted to make my first biscuit. I was a mere 24 years old.

I knew the basic ingredients for biscuits were flour, sugar, baking powder, Crisco and buttermilk. But when I went shopping in Paris, I could not find Crisco. I thought of replacing it with butter, but I knew that if I used all butter I would have a shortbread instead of biscuits. So I decided to use three parts margarine, which seemed a better substitute for Crisco. I kept one part butter for richness.

That decision served me well, and the biscuits I made that day in Paris nearly 40 years ago are the biscuits I make today — it’s still my go-to recipe. ■



HOW THE “Grunch” STOLE CHRISTMAS

by Alison Fensterstock + photo courtesy Benny Grunch & the Bunch

During the holidays in South Louisiana, snow is unlikely (to say the least), and even wintry weather isn't guaranteed, but there are still some dependable, festive traditions that always let you know what time of year it is. There's the Celebration in the Oaks light display at City Park, for one. There's the grand opening at the track on Thanksgiving Day, when locals work up their turkey appetites by showing off their holiday finery. From Christmas to New Year's, restaurants host *Reveillon* dinners, reviving an elegant and magical 19th-century dining tradition. And, of course, there's Benny Grunch.

A local institution since at least 1990, when he released his four-song cassette featuring the signature parody “The 12 Yats of Christmas,” Benny Grunch works year-round: the Benny Grunch & the Bunch band

has played Jazz Fest and the French Quarter Festival, and takes plenty of gigs outside the holiday season. Carnival time is a busy one, due to their other big seasonal comedy hit, “Ain't No Place to Pee on Mardi Gras Day.” But Christmastime — which, on the band's calendar, starts around late September — is the true Grunch season, when audiences clamor for Benny's extensive songbook of holiday-themed joke songs with a New Orleans twist, including “O Little Town of Destrehan,” “Santa and his Reindeer Used to Live Right Here,” and of course, the “12 Yats,” the one that started it all.

In the early '60s, the comedian Allan Sherman, probably best known for his hit novelty song “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah,” had put out a parody of the classic carol “The 12 Days of Christmas,” which

did well on Billboard's special Christmas chart. As Grunch recalls, it was the wife of one of his bandmates who remembered the Sherman tune and suggested they do their own New Orleans-flavored version.

“The original ‘12 Days of Christmas’ is in the public domain — it's probably from the Middle Ages or something like that,” Grunch explained. There was no need to pay to license the melody; all he had to do was come up with his own countdown.

“And I just started thinking backwards,” he said. “Twelve dozen Manuel's tamales. Eleven — I couldn't think of anything to go with eleven. Seven — 17th Street Canal. Six — six-pack of Dixie. Five fried onion rings. Three, instead of French hens, French *bread*s. Two — Tujague's restaurant.” Slowly, he filled in the rest: eleven Schwegmann's bags.



The Lower Ninth Ward. Eight became “ate by ya mama’s,” in familiar dialect. But the last one was the toughest.

“And a crawfish they caught in ...” he said, letting the missing rhyme dangle. “I thought of Metairie, but no, way too cosmopolitan. Paradis — no, way too small.” Then, in its way, fate intervened. On his way to a gig at the Riverwalk, he got stuck in traffic behind an Arabi Cab.

“And I thought, I’m so stupid, it’s right there. Literally,” he said. The band recorded at Ultrasonic Studios on Washington Avenue in October 1990, and had the song — complete with a crawfish they caught in Arabi — out for the holiday season.

Benny Grunch, whose real name is Benjamin Antin, displayed a wacky sense of humor from an early age. “In grammar school, I used

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to always write something funny when they’d tell us to do a composition as an assignment,” he said. “And that got me thrown out of St. Dominic’s at the end of sixth grade in 1957.” But he spent decades playing professionally before becoming Louisiana’s favorite holiday parodist. Around the time of his expulsion from St. Dominic’s, he’d gotten his first guitar. He took lessons at Werlein’s Music and apparently was a natural. By the time he turned 16, he was picking up jobs with bands on Bourbon Street, covering the early local rhythm-and-blues hits that were only just, at the time, starting to come out of studios like Cosimo Matassa’s J&M Music Shop on Rampart Street, and on local labels like Instant, Minit, Ric and Ron — now-classic songs by Ernie K-Doe and Fats Domino and Oliver “Who Shot the La La” Morgan.

“It was an instant education,” he said. Bourbon Street in the early ’60s was teeming with music, from the traditional jazz revival at clubs like the Famous Door, Maison Bourbon and of course, Preservation Hall, to rock and roll and R&B at joints like the original Papa Joe’s, where Dr. John and Freddy Fender both put in time in the house band. There was the Sho Bar, Gunga Den and Leon Prima’s 500 Club, among others, where live combos backed stripteasers. One burlesque dancer, Reddi Flame, had a place out in Lakeview, where Benny Grunch has lived for his entire life; he’d see her car, a big, white, late ’50s Buick convertible covered in large purple polka dots, near both home and work.

The teenage future Benny Grunch — “Nobody cared in those days how old you were,” he said — played bass, guitar and harmonica on marathon sets, sometimes starting at 3 a.m., while still going to high school and later, college, as a commuter student at Southeastern in Hammond. That led to a job with a band that crisscrossed the U.S. playing contemporary jukebox hits. From 1967 until 1972, when his daughter Angel was born, he was on the road.

Back home in New Orleans, he returned to playing rock and roll in various versions of Benny Grunch & the Bunch. The first

version of that band, he said, had actually come together while he was still in college in Hammond. The name Grunch reportedly comes from a joke about a secluded area called Grunch Road — the stomping grounds, according to local lore, of a chupacabra-like animal. In a 2013 interview with *New Orleans* magazine, Benny Grunch attributed the name to a vaguely off-color joke that irritated the dean of Southeastern, and may have gotten him suspended.

And, just shy of 20 years later, he channeled his off-kilter sense of humor into holiday music — and the Grunch stole Christmas. The Yuletide oddities kept coming, from rapping elves to Elvis parody. But there must be more to the endurance of Benny Grunch & the Bunch than just leaving something silly under the tree, and the clue might be in his other long-standing local hit, “Ain’t Dere No More.” Set nominally to the tune of “Jingle Bells,” it’s less a Christmas song than a list of shuttered and disappeared local businesses and institutions — Godchaux’s, Krauss, K&B, Schwegmann’s — some of which have been gone so long that younger listeners don’t even know them to miss them.

New Orleans nostalgia has always been a big part of Benny Grunch’s repertoire. Even his non-Christmas songs celebrate local personalities and brands, like “Nash Roberts Was Our Weatherman,” “The Creature from the City Park Lagoon” or “The Hubigs Pie Boogie Woogie Sing Along Flavor Song.” In the early days — so long ago, he said, that he released it as a 45 rpm vinyl record — he wrote “The Spirit of Smiley Lewis,” a song about the musician’s hangouts and the old nightclubs, mostly already gone even at the time, that he recalled from his earliest days as a Bourbon Street sideman.

New Orleanians have always loved the romance of remembering the city’s past, and — particularly since Hurricane Katrina — more and more beloved institutions have slipped into it. As long as Benny Grunch is around, though, he’ll be keeping them alive, with a song and a smile. How’s that for a Christmas present? ■

Baked Sweet Potatoes

With Dried Bourbon Whiskey Apricots

A grown-up take on a Fall classic, these Organic Baby Sweet Potatoes (or Yams) combine to make an amazing sweet/savory side dish for that special holiday gathering.



Ingredients

1 (3 oz.) package Melissa's Dried Apricots, chopped
1/2 cup of your favorite Bourbon Whiskey
8-10 Melissa's Organic Baby Garnet, Jewel or Japanese Yams or Sweet Potatoes, peeled and roughly chopped
1/3 cup Extra Virgin Olive Oil
1/2 cup Brown Sugar, firmly packed
1/3 cup Butter, melted
1 tsp. Real Vanilla Extract
Large marshmallows, for topping

Preparation

Preheat oven to 350°F. Place apricots and bourbon whiskey in a small bowl and let soak. Toss potatoes in olive oil and place in a single layer on a baking sheet. Roast in oven until fork tender.

Remove from oven and put potatoes in large bowl. Add the rest of the ingredients, as well as the apricots. Mash until mixture is smooth and completely combined. Pour mixture into baking dish, spread evenly, top with marshmallows and bake until bubbling and the marshmallows are golden brown and melted. Makes 8-12 servings.

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Feast of the
SEVEN FISHES

by Helen Freund + photos by Sam Hanna

Christmas Eve has always been a special time for Chef Nick Lama and his family. To kick off the evening, Lama and his brother grill oysters in the backyard, maybe cracking a few beers while enjoying one of those cool and calm December evenings Southeast Louisiana so often enjoys.

As guests start trickling in, Lama's mother whips up a special cocktail for the group while his wife begins popping a few bottles of bubbly to help with the celebratory mood. Meanwhile, a buttery hot crab dip quietly makes an appearance before quickly disappearing, the way buttery hot crab dips have a tendency to do. As the guests — a collection of Lama's nearest and dearest — begin to take their seats, the wine bottles are uncorked, the glasses are topped off and the real magic begins to unfold.

A soup of some kind, maybe a seafood gumbo bobbing with shrimp and crab, will appear, followed by a pasta course like linguine with clams or mussels, and maybe a blistered pepper hot from the oven, stuffed with crabmeat and Italian sausage tucked under a bubbling cap of melted Fontina cheese. The dishes keep arriving — fried calamari, drizzled with lemon juice and parsley; a sautéed grouper framed by roasted potatoes; a salt-baked snapper stuffed with fennel, lemons and herbs — and the wine keeps flowing.

A third-generation Sicilian, Lama runs the Italian restaurant, Avo, in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. His great-grandparents left the coastal Sicilian city of Cefalù for the United States in the early 1900s, and his family eventually went on to run the original St. Roch seafood market on St. Claude Avenue, until it closed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

For years now, Lama and his family have been celebrating the Feast of the Seven Fishes, the Italian-American Christmas Eve tradition adapted by immigrants from southern Italy who came to America en masse between the 1880s and 1920s. In Italy, the event is known as *La Vigilia di Natale* or, simply, *La Vigilia*, which translates to “the eve.” It is celebrated to commemorate the wait for the midnight birth of Jesus. Catholic tradition calls for an abstinence from meat on Christmas Eve, the vigil of Christmas Day. The multi-course seafood feast (traditionally held after Midnight Mass) reflects the willingness of

the faithful to abstain from red meat until Christmas Day.

In the United States, Italian-American communities have carried the torch while imprinting their own marks on the tradition. No one really knows where the number seven came from and, while differing opinions abound, it is widely accepted to be Italian-American in origin. Some say the number stems from the seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church; others say it points to the most widely used number in the Bible, and some argue that the number points to the famed seven hills of Rome.

Naples, Sardinia and the island of Sicily — places in the southern-most regions of Italy where fresh fish and seafood are abundant — are where the Christmas Eve tradition is most widely celebrated. The more than four million immigrants that left Italy during the period of mass migration were predominantly from the South — farmers, day laborers and fishermen leaving dire economic situations in search of work and a better life.

New Orleans, in particular, had long been a desirable gateway for Sicilians, as the Port of New Orleans was America's second largest port for the Sicilian citrus trade, says Enrico Villamaino, a museum curator at the American Italian Cultural Center in New Orleans.

“New Orleans had a very close economic and cultural connection to Sicily,” Villamaino

said. “And one of the things that made for an easier transition for Italian immigrants (was) that Sicily and New Orleans had comparable climates ... similar agriculture and similar fishing industries.”

The colorful altars that spring up across the city every year to commemorate St. Joseph's Day are one example of the strong Sicilian foothold in the city. And while the Feast of the Seven Fishes isn't as widely practiced in the South as it is in Italian-American households in the North, the abundance of seafood makes the tradition especially fitting for those living in the Gulf states.

In New Orleans, restaurateurs — even those without Italian affiliations — have taken to hosting extravagant, multi-course seafood celebrations around the holidays in honor of the tradition.

Last year, Italian newcomer Josephine Estelle at the Ace Hotel hosted its inaugural take on the family-style feast, and the French Quarter seafood institution GW Fins is now in its eighth year of throwing a special holiday seafood dinner in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

At the upscale Bienville Street restaurant, diners are treated to a more relaxed and communal setting, with smaller, more intricate dishes like an oyster and artichoke bisque or fresh lump crabmeat drizzled with capers and brown butter leading the way to larger, family-style platters of garlicky



▲ Chef Nick Lama, Avo Restaurant, New Orleans, LA

linguine and clams, Parmesan-crusting flounder, lightly fried calamari, shrimp and artichokes sprinkled with lemon and parsley, and grilled sardines tucked under a bright and zesty gremolata.

Gulf standbys like pompano and cobia are tossed on the grill, and drum, sheepshead and red snapper often make appearances.

“You’ve got to do something with shrimp, because they’re just so abundant, and that time of year there’s usually a lot of flounder, too,” says Executive Chef Michael Nelson, who last year featured a dish of Gulf shrimp alongside Sicily’s quintessential dish, eggplant caponata.

The dinners have proven so popular, GW Fins now hosts the celebration two nights instead of one, and a steady flow of Italian wines are served throughout both evenings.

“After the first couple of courses and glasses of wine, everyone’s kind of buttered up a bit and gotten to know everybody at the table,” Nelson says. “At that point we put all the wine out and everyone just goes at it: It’s noisy, people are yelling and talking, and it’s

this really fun, family-style affair.”

For Chef Lama, sharing his family’s long-standing tradition with his customers at his restaurant was a no-brainer.

“I wanted to share the tradition with the people in town and at my restaurant, and with the neighbors — a lot of those people have become like family,” Lama says.

At Avo, a Feast of the Seven Fishes dinner is served throughout the month of December, with courses and menus changing to reflect what is fresh and in season at the time.

Despite the restaurant’s success with the dinners, Lama says there is still nothing like celebrating the event at home, with friends and family.

“What I really like about it is the aspect of everyone being together and cooking together,” Lama says. “And for anybody who is going to attempt it — try to enjoy it. The people you invite are going to be people who are near and dear to you — people that you love. You’re there to have a good time, to celebrate and to be together.” ■

Cin Cin!

(To Your Health)

by Helen Freund

If you’ve decided to brave throwing your own Feast of the Seven Fishes this holiday season, look no further than the tradition’s birthplace for wine pairings. Italian wines, as varied and multifaceted as they are plentiful, are perfectly suited for the seafood extravaganza.

Rouses goes directly to the source for its Italian wine selection. Christian Havener, a sommelier and wine buyer for the Rouses Market on Tchoupitoulas Street in Uptown New Orleans, and Rouses Wine & Spirits Director Sally Culver recently attended Vinitaly, the international wine competition and exposition that is held annually in April in the Italian wine region of Verona in Northeast Italy. While at the competition, which is considered one of the premier international wine events in the world, Havener and Culver met with key producers and sampled Italian wines from 20 wine regions.

The boot-shaped country, which varies widely by climate and terrain, is home to hundreds of grape varieties and is considered one of the top wine production regions in the world. From the northern highlands and the high-altitude Alps to the wine-growing regions hugging the Mediterranean in the South, the country boasts an incredibly diverse production of reds, whites, rosés and sparkling wines. The wines of Veneto, Tuscany and Piedmont are considered the highest-quality drinking wines in the country.

While there are no hard-and-fast rules about what to serve for the Feast of the Seven Fishes, there is no time of year more perfectly suited to oysters, which are a natural bedfellow to bubbly whites like prosecco, which is made in the Veneto region of Italy around the city of Treviso.

Char-grilled oysters bobbing in their own individual swamps of garlic, butter and Parmesan beg for a crisp, sparkling white like the Ferrari Brut NV Trentodoc. The grapes for this aromatic sparkling wine are grown on hills along the Adige Valley in the Dolomites, aged in steel tanks and produced

In a holiday season dominated by poultry, pork and beef, this meatless Christmas Eve tradition offers a respite from heavier fare. Find recipes for your Feast of the Seven Fishes at www.rouses.com.





by *méthode champenoise*, which requires a secondary fermentation in the bottle that results in champagne quality for a fraction of the price.

Another option is the Riondo Prosecco, which carries a hint of green apple and a crisp finish. This bubbly wine would also pair nicely with creamier menu items, or a lightly fried seafood dish like *frito misto*.

Lighter dishes with flavors of fennel and garlic pair beautifully with crisp whites, including pinot grigio and orvieto, the star of the white wines hailing from the Umbria region of Italy. A dish of linguine with clams, white wine and garlic or a plate of crabmeat drizzled with brown butter and capers would both pair beautifully with the Zaccagnini Pinot Grigio or the Ruffino Orvieto Classico, which carries notes of green apples and has a slight mineral finish.

An easy-drinking wine like the Ca de Medici Lambrusco, a fruity and fizzy wine from the Emilia-Romagna region in Northern Italy, also pairs well with heavier seafood dishes.

Rosés are another nice middle ground, and Havener suggests pairing them with dishes featuring a little spice. He recommends the 12 e Mezzo Rosato del Salento — a wine he first sampled at Vinitaly — which features light lime notes with hints of peach and a slightly effervescent finish.

In Italy, there is a common saying: “What grows together, goes together.” It’s an adage that chefs and wine lovers alike adhere to; it re-

fers to a region’s *terroir*, a term used to describe the set of environmental factors and habitat, from altitude, soil type and climate, that influence and shape the characteristics of a wine.

Dishes with Sicilian roots pair perfectly with Sicilian wines, and the Mediterranean island features varied terrains with topical diversity that drive the production of a variety of different wines and an industry over 3,000 years in the making. A dish of shrimp served with eggplant caponata — Sicily’s most beloved dish — would be a lovely match with the Stemmari Nero D’Avola, a wine carrying the name of the grape most widely planted on the island.

When you move into the heavier, tomato-based dishes, try migrating to bolder, rustic wines like the 12 e Mezzo Primitivo del Salento or the Demarie Langhe Nebbiolo, a wine from the Piedmont region that carries notes of spice, blackberries and plums.

Though the general rule of whites with seafood and fish prevails, some of the heavier courses — and some of the meatier fishes — lend themselves wonderfully to lighter reds, Havener says.

“Salmon, sardines, octopus — some of those can go great with lighter red wines,” he says. With fishes like tuna, also known as the red meat of the sea, you can go even bolder.

Whatever wines find their way to your holiday table, just make sure they keep flowing. After all, no real Italian meal is complete without plenty of wine. ■

La Vigilia

by Liz Williams

Excerpted from *My Rouses Everyday*,
November | December 2015

My Sicilian-born grandmother made the Feast of the Seven Fishes on La Vigilia (Christmas Eve) every year. She used fresh fish, shrimp, crabs — anything that came from the Gulf of Mexico — including American eel, which we caught in the waters of Chef Menteur Pass. American eels look like snakes, but taste like fish.

She bartered for the rest of the meal. My great-grandfather had been and my great-uncles were butchers at the French Market, and they would trade offal from the pigs and cows they butchered for the bycatch of the fishermen at the next stall. That’s how my grandmother got the squid, water snails and spiny lobsters she served, none of which were sold in the typical seafood market or at the French Market.

When it came to the actual seven fishes, my grandmother was very broad in what she considered fish. Frogs, turtles, even crawfish weren’t officially classified as seafood back then. (Alligators didn’t make the official cut until 2010, when New Orleans Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond decreed that, “yes, alligator is considered to be in the fish family.”)

She was also very broad in what she counted as “a” fish dish. An oyster counted as one fish, two oysters as two fish. Like most Sicilians, she changed the menu every year. And she didn’t always stop with seven fish (seven is for the sacraments, according to my grandmother). Some holidays she did 10 to mark the decades of the rosary; other years she cooked 12 for the apostles. One year she served 15 because that’s how much seafood she had on hand.

While I have yet to make my own Feast of the Seven Fishes for my husband, sons, daughter-in-law and granddaughter, Olivia (the most adventurous eater in the family), families from Sicily, Italy to Little Italy (down here, that’s Independence, Louisiana), serve the Feast of the Seven Fishes every Christmas Eve. Don’t be intimidated by the number seven: If you use my grandmother’s formula whereby one shrimp equals two fish, you can knock out the seven with one pot of gumbo! ■

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2. COMBINE THE DRY INGREDIENTS: ALMOND FLOUR, OAT FLOUR, BAKING SODA, CINNAMON, NUTMEG AND SALT. SET ASIDE.
3. COMBINE THE WET INGREDIENTS: EGGS, MAPLE SYRUP, COCONUT OIL AND VANILLA, WHISK UNTIL SMOOTH. POUR THE WET INGREDIENTS OVER THE DRY INGREDIENTS AND MIX JUST UNTIL COMBINED. FOLD IN THE APPLES, CRANBERRIES, WALNUTS AND DATES, MIX UNTIL EVENLY INCORPORATED.
4. POUR THE BATTER INTO THE PREPARED PAN OR PANS, SMOOTH OUT BATTER WITH THE BACK OF A SPOON, BAKE FOR 45-50 MINUTE FOR 9 X 13" PAN, OR 25-30 MINUTE FOR 4" PANS, OR UNTIL THE CAKE IS SPRINGY WHEN PRESSED. SPRINKLE WITH SUGAR IF DESIRED WHEN CAKE COMES OUT OF THE OVEN. LET COOL COMPLETELY BEFORE WRAPPING OR SERVING.

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1 TEASPOON GROUND CINNAMON
1/2 TEASPOON NUTMEG
1 TEASPOON SALT
2 EGGS
1/2 CUP PURE MAPLE SYRUP

1/2 CUP COCONUT OIL, MELTED
1 TEASPOON PURE VANILLA EXTRACT
2 CUPS DICED GALA APPLES
2 CUPS FRESH CRANBERRIES
1/2 CUP MEDJOOOL DATES, DICED
1 CUP WALNUTS, ROUGHLY CHOPPED
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Rum's THE WORD

by Wayne Curtis

As the holidays approach, our thoughts turn to rum. At least mine do, and if yours don't, I suggest you re-think how you've structured your life.

Rum fraternizes well with eggnog and party punches, and makes a welcome holiday gift. Interestingly, rum also happens to be the spirit of summer — lighter, brighter variations of it go into beach drinks with little umbrellas, and swizzles and Collinses. But rum is perfectly fine for sipping in the dusky winter and the blushing spring too. As a writer for *Fortune* magazine put it in 1933, “Rum makes a fine hot drink, a fine cold drink, and is not so bad from the neck of a bottle.”

Rum, in short, is the ultimate shape-shifter.

And as you reach for that second cup of punch, I'd encourage you to pause briefly to consider how rum — not bourbon, not rye — is in so many ways the spirit of America. Not only in its endless versatility, but in how it has played momentous roles in our political and cultural past. Rum was created in the New World, for the New World, by the New World. It is America in a glass.

Rum, as you may know, is a byproduct of sugar processing. Sugar making produces molasses, and molasses — when fermented and distilled — produces rum.

So rum was basically the younger sibling of the sugar industry. As the island colonies of the West Indies became sugar kingdoms in

the mid-1600s, rum was there — sales of rum and molasses provided enough capital to keep plantations running, making sugar sales pure profit. Which also means that rum is deeply connected to an unfortunate part of that boom: the slave trade. Without captive labor bought and sold, sugar would not have prospered as it did, and rum would likely have been a minor actor. As with the history of cotton, it's not a bright nor particularly noble part of the New World's history, but it's an indelible part of it, and a bit of it is also in every glass. Any effort to gloss over that fact would be dishonest.

Once established on the islands, rum proved too footloose to remain confined to West Indian grog shops, and so it made its way to



England's sister colonies to the north. As all arable island land was pretty much given over to sugar production, most sustenance had to be shipped from the mainland — dried cod, salt pork, grains. In the empty holds of the return ships, rum sailed north, and demand surged. Rum proved to be the original energy drink in a calorie-starved environment; it offered instant warmth and pep to winter woodcutters and Grand Banks fishermen alike.

Rum from the islands emerged as one of the first colonial luxuries. It offered a welcome alternative to rustic hard cider and beer, which most every British and French colonist knew how to make. Rum initially even bore the stamp of approval of the clergy. "Drink is in itself a creature

of God," wrote Puritan minister Increase Mather in 1673, "and to be received with thankfulness."

The colonies soon evolved into a sodden Republic of Rum, leaving beer and cider behind. Rum was enjoyed in growing numbers of taverns, which led to a power shift, with publican topping preacher. The pulpit had long been the broadcast network of the Colonial Era — information flowed from those stentorian voices above. But with the rise of the tavern emerged a sort of colonial proto-internet. Tavern-goers gathered and swapped information freely — on taxation, on politics and, of course, on how to drink rum.

In colonial taverns rum was drunk by the dram, naturally. But primitive production techniques (there was no scientific way to even measure alcohol content of a spirit until the 19th century) created a powerful brew, and drinkers had to seek ways to mask or improve the taste of their tipple. The modern cocktail culture has a reputation for adding everything that ever grew or moved into a glass, but the colonists arguably had them beat.

While imports like pineapples, limes and lemons were generally available at coastal ports, inland drinkers of the time proved especially adept at employing whatever they had at hand. Most early Americans lived a scrappy, hand-to-mouth existence, and those who wanted to drink had to exercise creativity. Consider these lines from a song dating to the 18th century:

*Oh we can make liquor to sweeten our lips,
Of pumpkins, of parsnips, of walnut-tree chips.*

Swedish clergyman and missionary Israel Acrelius, who traveled widely in the colonies in the years preceding the American Revolution, mentioned in his journals some 18 different rum drinks he'd observed drunk in the colonies. These included a drink made with rum, milk, sugar and nutmeg, which was regarded as a refreshing summer drink. He also noted it was "good for dysentery and loose bowels."

Rum didn't remain an exotic import for long — it soon served as the basis of a booming manufacturing industry in the northern colonies. Enterprising sorts figured out that they could import cheap molasses, run it through a still, and pocket the added value. Prior to the Revolution, rum was the second most important industry in the colonies,

after shipbuilding. By the mid-18th century, the colonies had at least 160 rum distilleries, possibly many more that went unrecorded.

The surge in rum production didn't escape the attention of the British Crown. The colonies were making and trading a product that had no benefit for the mother country, and they were often obtaining their molasses — illegally — from rival French island colonies.

This impudence would not stand. England passed the Molasses Act of 1733, hoping to end the trade of this raw material among the colonies. The act, of course, wasn't targeted at baked beans and brown bread. It was aimed squarely at rum.

The British molasses decree, in turn, performed a bit of political magic. Out of 13 disparate, often squabbling colonies, the act helped forge a unified republic. It brought together an assemblage of folks with varied interests who learned how to work together to achieve a goal. And the upstart colonists prevailed — the act was repealed. This resistance served, in effect, as a trial run for more famous rebellions to come, especially when the Crown imposed taxes on tea and paper. Irked colonists didn't overthrow the old order solely because of rum, but it taught them how it could be done, which they used to impressive effect three decades later.

In one of history's larger, less noticed ironies, the American Revolution — fueled in large part by rum — helped doom the spirit. Trade with the southern island colonies became difficult, owing to a more complex geopolitical map. And the haste of the newly minted Americans to flood through the Cumberland Gap and over the Appalachians had at least one unanticipated consequence: It opened up lands ideal for growing barley, rye and corn, all of which were economically converted to whiskey, and shipped east — often through the port of New Orleans.

Within a generation of the American Revolution, the Republic of Rum was fading from prominence. A new Kingdom of Whiskey was arising to take its place.

But that's another story. ■

➤ **About the Author**

Wayne Curtis is the author of *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails*, available wherever fine books are sold.



Baking SPIRITS BRIGHT

by Judy Walker

People who love to bake do so year-round, but the holidays are when bakers really pull out all the stops. Once a year, we indulge our families and friends by creating rich, indulgent desserts with expensive ingredients — often dishes that a great-great-grandmother or a favorite aunt made. It's the taste of tradition.

The great holiday cakes are in their own special league, and fruitcakes and rum cakes are in another category altogether. Both

use brandy, bourbon and rum to flavor and preserve them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, late-night comedians led the anti-fruitcake chorus. It became fashionable to decry the fruitcake. Some smart-alecky *Times-Picayune* reporter had the bad taste to say something snippy about fruitcake to one of Greg Sorensen's forefathers. Sorensen's family, owners of Baker Maid, has baked Creole Royale Fruit Cake in New Orleans for more than 50

years. The reporter was informed that more people would eat that fruitcake than would ever read the guy's article.

Rum cakes never got a similar bad rap. American rum cakes today tend to be pound or butter cakes with rum in the glaze and, sometimes, the batter. Compared to fruitcakes, the rum cakes we know today are mere youngsters. The incredibly popular Bacardi Rum Cake, based on a yellow cake mix, was introduced in 1976 — relatively speaking, fairly recently.

The cake was created when Bacardi's then-president William Walker was entertaining at his home in Miami, according to the best-selling *The Cake Mix Doctor*. A neighbor invited to a party at Walker's house brought a cake made with Bacardi's dark rum in the batter and glaze. It was such a hit that the company's corporate chef made one to serve to Bacardi executives. A vigorous advertising campaign ensued, and everyone was crazy for Bacardi Rum Cake.

An exceptional version of rum cake, known as Satsuma Rum Cake and created by the late Antoinette Ragas of Buras, Louisiana, was discussed by author Jude Theriot in his 1983 *La Meilleure de la Louisiane/The Best of Louisiana* cookbook. The recipe took third place in the 1976 Plaquemines Parish Fair & Orange Festival's Women's Division, and Mrs. Ragas had several other winning recipes that year, in "previous years and for many years after," according to Paula Capiello, past secretary for the annual fair and festival.

"Mrs. Ragas was a wonderful cook, baker and craftsperson," wrote Capiello.

The cake recipe includes in its ingredients the grated zest of two satsumas and a lemon in the batter, and the juice of both citrus fruits in the glaze. It tastes like a Gulf Coast holiday. Buttermilk in the batter gives it a wonderfully tender crumb.

Fruitcakes have been around since the Middle Ages and possibly even as far back as Roman times. The advantage of fruitcake is its keeping quality. They can be made up to three months in advance and aged in a tin or foil, improving with repeated spritzing or dosing with liquor.

In these enlightened times, we can appreciate fruitcake for its history, utility and, yes, its deliciousness. The haters never had a good homemade fruitcake with just

“The great holiday cakes are in their own special league, and fruitcakes and rum cakes are in another category altogether. Both use brandy, bourbon and rum to flavor and preserve them.”

enough spicy batter to hold together the dried or candied fruits and copious amounts of nuts, not to mention a judicious amount of brandy or bourbon.

I'm here to tell you: *lots* of people still make fruitcake at home. Alton Brown's Free Range Fruitcake recipe on foodnetwork.com has 257 reviews, all five-star. The *Tampa Tribune* has to print its recipe for Mrs. Harvey's White Fruitcake every year.

In 1956, Lucille Harvey won a recipe contest with the recipe known as “the fruitcake people like to eat.” She didn't use any alcohol in the recipe, but brushed bourbon on the cake with a special brush, according to Anne Byrn's 2016 masterwork cookbook, *American Cake: From Colonial to Gingerbread, the Stories and Recipes Behind More Than 125 of Our Best-Loved Cakes*.

Mrs. Harvey shipped fruitcakes to servicemen in 13 foreign countries overseas during World War II. The sturdiness of fruitcake for shipping made it especially appropriate for packages, although the rationing of many ingredients at the time made them even more prized. Assistant Director for Curatorial Services Kimberly Guise of the National World War II Museum told me last year that the museum's

archives contain many letters thanking the folks at home for the holiday fruitcakes sent to the soldiers.

The 2009 book by Robert M. Edsel and Bret Witter, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, has a passage that evokes the impact such a package could have. One of the Monuments Men, George Stout, received a long overdue package from home.

“It was an artifact from another world, a connection to his old life, and he stared at it fondly. He believed in duty and honor, but like everyone else, he was homesick. He thought of his kitchen back home and his wife over the mixing bowl, and of his sons ... The cake was still good, moist and delicious. It's amazing how the world can change, he thought, during the lifespan of a fruitcake.”

New Orleans has its own fruitcake, the one the Sorensen family has made for more than 50 years. Greg Sorensen's great-grandfather is the creator of the Creole Royale Sliced Fruit Cake, and the family's Baker Maid factory near the Superdome has been baking them for months

in preparation for the upcoming holiday season. (Baker Maid is also the developer and baker of the Love, Cookie brand, also sold by Rouses Markets.)

The Creole Royale has a unique topping layer of thinly slivered almonds. Each slice is individually wrapped, and the tin it is sold in depicts a pastel Jackson Square, with St. Louis Cathedral in the background. The image is the work of Charles Henry Reinike, who, according to *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, was one of New Orleans' most respected artists and art teachers from the late 1930s until his death in 1983.

Sorensen's great-grandfather had several retail bakeries, including Dixiana.

“He started selling fruitcake to different clubs and things, to grocery stores,” Sorensen said. “My dad grew up in all the



bakeries and he really wanted to work with department stores. At the time, their holiday programs were massive and intricate. For the next couple of decades, they really focused on Macy's, Saks, Bloomingdales and so on." D.H. Holmes and other iconic Louisiana department stores carried these fruitcakes as well.

In the 1950s, the fruitcake was sold in a "hermetically sealed can, back when that was a big thing," Sorensen said. "Before they sealed it, they would pour a shot of brandy over it, and then they sealed the can." It was opened with a can opener.

Now, the lid lifts off easily to reveal a ring of neatly wrapped slices. When a friend of the bakery wanted several to take to a Rotary Club meeting, he asked for them to be sent with the pieces individually wrapped. Eventually, that led to all the cakes being cut and wrapped that way.

"It got pretty tedious," Sorensen said. The equipment they used for wrapping the slices is now antique.

Sourcing the high-quality ingredients is a huge part of the fruitcake work, Sorensen said. "It's always quite a process. At the end of the day, it's fresh nuts, glacé fruit and the cake with the in-house glaze on top. One thing my dad does — we craft our own flavors in-house. That goes a long way with the fruitcakes. It's not some spice blend we get elsewhere. It's got rum and brandy. It's such a nostalgic item. We look at every detail of it to make it."

Sorensen thinks it's hilarious to find the tins for sale in antique stores, which frequently happens. Long after the contents are gone, that pretty St. Louis Cathedral on the top makes the Creole Royale Fruit Cake tin a popular container for sewing supplies, buttons or any small collectibles in countless homes worldwide.

While I like all kinds of fruitcake, I'm really fond of fruitcake cookies, especially the ones my sister-in-law in Arkansas makes every year. Her recipe is a favorite that's several generations old. It's sublime!

So as you can see, there's fruitcake and then there's fruitcake. Maybe the reason you don't think you like fruitcake is because you've never had a great one. Go ahead! Try one of these recipes, and you might just change your mind. ■

Satsuma Rum Cake

Makes 10 to 12 servings

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 1 cup butter or margarine, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- Zest (grated rind) of 1 lemon
- Zest (grated rind) of 2 satsumas
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup buttermilk

Satsuma Rum Glaze (recipe follows)

HOW TO PREP

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 10-inch tube pan or Bundt pan well.

In a mixing bowl, beat butter until light. Add sugar and beat until the mixture is light and fluffy. Add eggs and zest of lemon and satsumas. Beat until the mixture is very light.

In a medium mixing bowl, sift or mix together well the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Add dry ingredients to the creamed mixture alternately with the buttermilk, beginning and ending with the dry ingredients. When the batter is well-blended, spoon it into the prepared pan.

Bake for 1 hour or until a toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean. While cake is still hot and still in the pan, pour on the glaze. Cake can be left in the pan for several days before serving.



Satsuma Rum Glaze

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- Juice of 2 large satsumas
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons rum

HOW TO PREP

Combine all ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. When mixture boils and sugar is dissolved, pour evenly over the hot cake.

Fruitcake Cookies

Makes about 10 dozen

My sister-in-law, Johnnie Trower, makes this favorite cookie from a recipe that is credited to a home economics teacher. The recipe makes a lot, so you can halve it if you wish. The cookies improve with age, and they freeze well.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 3½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 pound pitted dates, cut up
- 2 cups candied red and green cherries, cut into sixths
- 4 slices red and green candied pineapple, cut up
- 1 cup white (golden) raisins
- 2 cups coarsely chopped pecans, plus some for tops of cookies
- 1 cup butter, melted and cooled to room temperature
- 1 pound box light brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup buttermilk

HOW TO PREP

Sift flour, soda and salt into a bowl. Add fruit and nuts to the mixture, and toss them lightly to dredge them.

In a large bowl using a stand or hand mixer, mix the melted butter, brown sugar and eggs until well-blended. Stir in buttermilk. Add flour, fruit and nuts mixture, blending well. Refrigerate overnight in an airtight container.

When ready to bake, preheat oven to 375 degrees. Drop dough by rounded teaspoonfuls about 2 inches apart on lightly greased cookie sheets. Decorate the top of each cookie with a pecan half. Bake 10 minutes, until lightly browned. Cool completely on wire racks. When cool, store in closed containers. Cookies improve with age.



> Panettone

Panettone are sold all over Italy, especially in Milan, where this tall Christmas bread filled with dried raisins and candied oranges was invented. Like fruitcake, which panettone resembles, the sweet treat is served during Christmas celebrations — especially on Christmas Day and Santo Stefano (the feast day of St. Stephen and a national holiday in Italy, celebrated on December 26). It is also customarily eaten on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. Our panettone was personally tasted and selected on a recent buying trip to Italy.

> Christmas on the Bayou

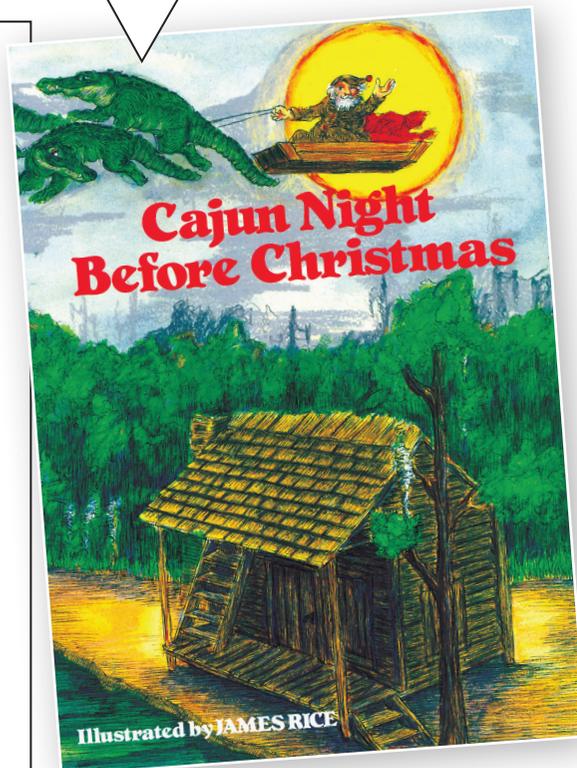
Pelican Publishing celebrates the 25th anniversary of The Cajun Night Before Christmas, the Louisiana version of Clement Clarke Moore’s classic poem, A Visit From St. Nicholas, which is more commonly known as The Night Before Christmas. Written in Cajun dialect and set in a bayou, it features Ole St. Nick “wit’ snow-white chin whisker an’ quiverin’ belly,” dressed “head to his toes” in muskrat instead of a red suit. In place of a sleigh, he drives a skiff piled high with toys, pulled not by reindeer, but by eight flying alligators: Gaston, T’Boy, Pierre, Alcee, Ninette, Suzette, Celeste and Renee.

- Copies of The Cajun Night Before Christmas are available for sale at all Rouses Markets in Louisiana.



> Local Satsumas

Satsumas — a type of mandarin citrus — are grown all over the Gulf Coast. They’re sweet, seedless and easy to peel. We buy Louisiana satsumas from father-and-son farming team Ben Becnel, Sr. and Ben Becnel, Jr., in Plaquemines Parish, and their neighbor, Matt Ranatza. Both farms also grow Louisiana sweets, navel oranges, grapefruits and Meyer lemons. Alabama satsumas come in a bit later in the season. Ours are from third-generation farmer Jeremy Sessions of Sessions Produce in Grand Bay.





White Christmas

by Judy Walker + photo by Romney Caruso

Cindy Acosta was out of town when her sister texted her. “Look what I found!” the message from Jeaneen Rouse said.

A small but important part of the Rouse family Christmas tradition had been rediscovered. Going through a stack of recipes as she packed to move into her new home, Jeaneen found her recipe for Mom’s Cocoons. It had been missing for years, and along with it, part of their childhood Christmas.

On Christmas Eve, “we used to leave (Cocoons) with a bottle of Coca-Cola for Santa,” Jeaneen said. “I don’t know why we left Coke. I guess we thought Santa wanted the best. Maybe he was tired of milk?”

“I was so glad she found it,” Cindy said. “We are going to keep up the tradition, to start it again. It’s been a long time since Mom did them.”

As the only girls in a family of six kids, Jeaneen and Cindy made Cocoons with their mother, Joyce Rouse, and Jeaneen’s godmother, Celina Rodrigue, whom they called Nanny. Celina was the wife of Wilfred Rodrigue, a close friend of their father, Anthony Sr., who worked with him at the store before it was even called Rouses.

Their mom and Nanny would set a baking date. “I always looked forward to it,” Cindy said. Cindy says they made double batches of the cookies — for the Rodrigues as well as the Rouses.

“I had four older brothers,” she said. “You know how boys eat.”

When the girls were allowed to help shape the cookies, they often would have to redo them if they were deemed too big or too small. The women were extremely particular about how the cookies looked, the sisters remember. The girls’ main job was passing the cookies through bowls of powdered sugar.

There was no heavy-duty mixer, and Jeaneen remembers how the buttery dough moisturized their hands after they had mixed it. (“It’s a lot of butter!”)

Instead of baking racks, they cut open paper bags from the family supermarket to place the cookies on for cooling. They were everywhere, Jeaneen remembers. Their mom had just one oven.

The process was labor intensive, since the cookies must be dipped in powdered sugar twice. The first coating partially melts into the cookie. For the second dipping, in the Rouse family, a fresh bowl of clean powdered sugar, sifted to make it fluffier, was always used.

Buttery and delicate, the cookies were so popular with the family that their mom would have to put some in a tin and hide it, to guarantee that the Cocoons would be part of a sweets platter on Christmas Day.

“She liked to have a cookie platter: Pecan Cups, Cocoons, Italian Anise Cookies, Fudge, that kind of thing,” Jeaneen said. Cindy recalls that it included her mother’s Pralines, too, as well as Italian Fig Cookies made by their aunt.

Cocoons are a version of a cookie popular around the world for Christmas and other special occasions. They also are known as Russian Tea Cakes, Mexican Wedding

Cookies, Sand Tarts, Snowballs, Kourabia, Melting Moments, Butterballs, Nut Butter Balls, Napoleon Hats, Moldy Mice, Italian Wedding Cookies and by many other names as well.

The nuts in the recipes can be hazelnuts, walnuts or almonds, but in this part of the country, it’s our beloved pecan. The cookie has just a few ingredients, but they are firmly in the tradition of rich baked goods for special occasions, using the best butter, sugar and expensive nuts for special treats.

Food historians cannot pinpoint it, but think perhaps this cookie originated in sugar-rich medieval Arabian cuisine, subsequently migrating to Spain with the Moors and then spreading throughout Europe. Baking historian Nick Malgieri has speculated that the recipe went to Mexico with nuns, who were known for baking in their convents. Vanilla and pecans are staples of baking in Mexico. Recipes for Mexican Wedding Cookies started to appear in American cookbooks in the 1950s.

Almost all the cookies with other names are shaped into balls, or occasionally crescents. As far as I can find, only in the South are they called Cocoons and shaped like the silken cases spun by butterflies and moths.

None of the many stories on the universality, history and names of these cookies mentions “Cocoons.” In fact, I never heard of them until I moved to Louisiana, which makes me think they may be a Creole/Cajun/South Louisiana variation of a worldwide favorite. (Anyone with a clue about this cookie, please email me!)

Recipes for Cocoons appear in Ursuline Academy’s *Recipes and Reminiscences of New Orleans*, first published in 1971, and in the NOPSI cookbook, *From Woodstoves to Microwaves*, which contains the recipes tested and then distributed on streetcars and other places by the New Orleans Public Service Company, the one-time electrical utility provider for the city.

When Joyce Rouse started to have trouble standing for long periods of time, she gave her recipe box to Jeaneen and told her daughters to take over the baking.

Then the recipe disappeared. For years.

The Rouse brothers asked, “Where are the Cocoons?” Jeaneen says.

This year, finally, Cindy and Jeaneen will bake the little white cookies again.

“We will continue the tradition with my daughters, Caroline and Madalyn,” Jeaneen says. “I am passing this on to them.”

Cindy plans to make more with her daughter-in-law as well. Her sister is the real baker, she said, but now that she’s got a small grandson, she just may bake cookies more frequently.

This year, when the Cocoons return, the group will bake them in *three* ovens in Jeaneen’s kitchen in her new home in Thibodaux.

They’ll use cookie racks for cooling instead of brown paper grocery bags. But there will be lots of butter. And tradition. ■

Find Mrs. Rouse’s Cocoon recipe at www.rouses.com/cooking/recipes/.





GINGER ALL THE WAY

by Erin Z. Bass

Carl LaJaunie arrives at LeJeune's Bakery in Jeanerette each morning at 1 a.m. That's when this master baker begins making dough for the famous bakery's ginger cakes. LaJaunie has been mixing, rolling and baking dough at LeJeune's for 16 years. He says he enjoys the repetition of baking. "You can't mess it up," he explains.

This bakery on Bayou Teche has a long history dating back to 1884. Five generations of LeJeunes have had more than 100 years to perfect their ginger cake and bread recipes.

LeJeune's breads are ready by 6 a.m. each morning, but that's only after a rigorous process of mixing, rolling, rising and, finally, baking. While LaJaunie and another employee tend to the baking in the back of the shop, customers pull up to the side door off Main Street to purchase hot dog buns, fresh bread loaves, ginger cakes and sweet dough pies in flavors from blackberry to fig.

The soft, wide French bread loaves and Original Old Fashion Ginger Cakes, affectionately known as stage planks, are also sold at

Rouses Markets throughout Acadiana, in Iberia, East Baton Rouge and Ascension parishes, positioned close to the registers.

The small bakery — which was the first bakery in Louisiana to be named to the National Register of Historic Places — houses an industrial-sized mixer that can handle 400 pounds of flour at a time, but the bakery's famed ginger cakes are made using a smaller version that resembles a KitchenAid mixer.

Mixed dough comes out of the mixer via a long metal trough; it is then transferred to a roller, where it is also broken into smaller pieces. LaJaunie lets the dough rise on a wooden table in the center of the room, then measures each piece on a scale before shaping it into a ball. The old table eventually fills up with many balls of dough, which rise for an hour and a half in stacked wooden boxes before they're ready to go into the oven.

Every loaf and ginger cake is made from scratch using recipes handed down from generation to generation. And while Jeanerette surely got its nickname of "Sugar City" from the longtime cultivation



➤ **Ginger Root**

Ginger itself comes from the bumpy root of the ginger plant, which can be found in almost any yard in South Louisiana. Beneath those striped green tropical leaves lies a spice that can be both sweet and savory. Queen Elizabeth I of England is credited with the invention of the gingerbread man — now a holiday staple.



of sugarcane in the area, there’s no doubt LeJeune’s ginger cakes contribute to the continuance of that moniker, as the sweet smell of the ginger cake wafts through the town.

A TRUE CAJUN DESSERT

Acadian Bakery in Lafayette calls its ginger cake “a true Cajun dessert.” Using a recipe that dates back to current owner Anthony Broussard’s great-great-grandmother, this bakery’s cake has a strong molasses and ginger flavor. Anthony’s mom Bonnie — whose parents Bill and Margaret Anderson started the bakery in 1980 — says, “Our ginger cake is not a gingerbread. It’s more like what was called a Rock and Roll in the ’50s and ’60s.”

The inspiration Bonnie refers to was more of a cake roll or log with a creamy filling. Today, Acadian’s cakes — also sold at Rouses Markets throughout Acadiana, in Iberia, East Baton Rouge and Ascension parishes — resemble baked turnovers and come either plain or topped with white icing.

Anthony bakes the cakes three days a week, starting around 4 a.m. The dough for the ginger cake has to be made in advance and chilled before going through the mixer and sheeter, or roller. It’s then cut and baked at 400 degrees for 18 minutes. Once the cakes cool, Anthony ices some of them by hand, leaving the remainder without icing, then moves the cakes on down the line to be machine wrapped. One batch of dough makes 2,000 cakes and uses five pounds of ginger, but that’s all the Broussards are willing to reveal about their recipe.

Acadian Bakery is a true family business. Anthony’s sister Kristen Soileau makes the pralines and works in the office with their mom, Bonnie, while both women’s husbands help out when needed. Kristen and Bonnie admit that, after all these years, they’re a little tired of eating ginger cakes, but “all of the grandchildren say their favorite is the ginger cake,” says Bonnie. “*Everybody* loves the ginger cake.” ■

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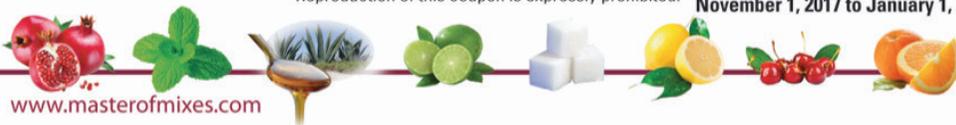
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Happy- Go-Lucky

by Crescent Dragonwagon



I've got something to say to you, 2017: Buh-bye. Please don't come again. And if you're in contact with any upcoming years — particularly the next one — and these years happen to resemble you, would you mind taking them with you? And going far, far away?

I'm not going to reiterate all the reasons why you, 2017 — I'm going to be blunt here, and use the technical term — sucked.

And I'm just going to say to you, 2018: Please be more civil, kind, thoughtful, generous and more evenhanded with all of us. We're tired. We need some seriously good mojo. Please bring us more luck — I'm talking the *good* kind, brought to more people. We need more *for* and less *against*. Please, 2018 — is that too much to ask?

Me, I'm going to do my tiny part to make that happen. And among my intended behaviors of civility, kindness, et al., will be this: to cook well, deliciously and healthfully, and to serve others what I cook. And I'd like to do this with a generous and joyful heart; because, call me crazy, but I think a heart that is more like that than like a piece of beef jerky makes me and everyone I come in contact with a little happier, and thus spreads the sense of luckiness at least a little farther.

Now, once a year, every year, we have the opportunity to do this in a unique and explicit manner: by serving and eating dishes reputed to bring good luck on New Year's Day. Fortunately — since, by the time New Year's Day rolls around, everybody is partied out and completely *over* the crabmeat puffs and similar rich fancy party food, eaten standing up — most of these traditional good luck foods are simple: uncomplicated, unfussy, as easy to serve as to eat. And as good to eat as they are reputed to be lucky.

Every culture has its New Year — a moveable feast, if that culture's calendar is lunar, as are those of most Asian countries. And most New Years, no matter when they fall, are loaded with expectations of, if not dramatic self-improvement (that seems to be primarily an American custom, vigorous self-reinventors that we are), then with the idea of using the day to predict or seek luck and good fortune. Of wishing it for others, and ourselves. Of going after it, often in some way propitiating fate, the gods or one's ancestors. Of courting it, by wearing particular colors, taking particular actions and, yes, eating particular foods.

Since I'm always fascinated by food as a window into human hopes, fears, aspirations and customs, I have offhandedly been exploring for years the traditional New Year's dishes alleged to bring luck. If you take a closer look at those dishes, you can also get a good idea of what human beings equate luck *with*. (Money is a major contender, but by no means the only one. Health and longevity, and general sweetness, also figure).

Yes, I know you almost certainly know about black-eyed peas, frequently cooked with ham hocks as in Hoppin' John. But so many of the world's cultures have cooperated in providing us with such dishes, made with established (though, okay, not proven) lucky ingredients for the various New Year's celebrated around the globe, it would be a pity not to look a little more deeply at the "what" and "why" of fortunate foods.

Beans and lentils: From Ancient Rome's lentils to the American South's black-eyed peas, legumes have spelled luck in many times and places. Some cultures hold that each bean represents a coin, bringing wealth. Others see the bean as a seed (which, of course, it is), reminding the eater of new life and new beginnings.

Greens: Leafy cooking greens — collards, kale, turnip, spinach, cabbage — are also associated with wealth — in this case, folding paper money. Although cultures other than the American one make this symbolic link, it's particularly strong in the U.S. where, of course, our folding money is green.

Golden foods: Go to a Chinese New Year celebration and you'll see pyramidal stacks of oranges and pommelos (large, round yellow citrus fruits, which look like large grapefruits). Gold — need we say again? — symbolizes wealth. In some parts of America, the gold theme is carried out in one of our native breads: cornbread (bake it in a skillet and you get double-lucky, because it becomes a round food — more on that later).

Long noodles: This one is Chinese and *only* Chinese. The long noodle promises long life. The thing is, you need to slurp it, unbroken, into your mouth. Cutting it could be dangerous to your longevity.

Pork and fat: Think

"high on the hog" and "fat of the land" and you'll get the connection. Often, in the American South, the pork is a ham hock or hambone, thrown in to simmer with the beans, greens or both. Vegetarians and non-pork-eating populations spin off with other fat foods: butter or ghee, olive oil, coconut fat or fried foods in general.

Sweet foods: At the Jewish New Year, honeyed foods ensure a sweet year. Usually, there's honey cake and/or apple slices dipped in honey. In Spain, eating one grape per chime of the clock at midnight on New Year's Eve guarantees the same sweetness. In parts of Italy, a round, almond-filled, snake-shaped cake is eaten, promising a sweet year, and one in which the less desirable parts of the past may be sloughed off as the snake sheds its skin (this pastry might be particularly appropriate at the changing of the guard between 2017 and 2018).

Round foods: Beans, the citrus, cornbread baked in a skillet and many of the traditionally lucky sweets are round. Which brings us to what may be the most powerful symbol of all: Like the circular wedding ring, roundness speaks of eternity, of the cycle of life, and how what goes around comes around. I always prepare dishes with ingredients in most of these categories at New Year's. But, because I'm a traditionalist only up to a point, more often I've just riffed off of them, coming up with my own iterations, to my own taste. Take my Spicy-Smoky East-West Black-Eyed Peas: these black-eyes, untraditionally, don't have ham or bacon in them. So what makes them smoky? A mixture of chipotle peppers and toasted sesame oil. Miso, a fermented soybean paste, is available at Rouses Markets; it and the sesame add the "East" to these delectable beans, and like so many fermented foods, a





nice savory wallop. Improbable though this combination may sound, your guests will swoon over it.

Then there's my Brazilian Style Collard Green Salad. *Raw* collard greens? A few brief years ago, the idea of eating raw collard greens would have hardly been comprehensible to most Americans, especially Southerners. But times have changed with the advent of kale salads. Many find the texture of kale objectionable — its curliness, if it is not cut finely enough, can cause it to get caught in the throat — but this is not a problem with the flat-leaved, milder collard greens, especially given the method of slicing in this recipe: very thin slices, almost threadlike. One bite of these sprightly green ribbons and their couldn't-be-simpler dressing, and you'll be a convert. Another plus: Unlike a salad of more tender greens, such as mesclun, this dish is happy to wait, just as good an hour or two after being made as it is immediately. It's positively wilt-proof!

Make sure your slicing knife is good and sharp, though; the only trick, as mentioned, is slicing the greens very, very thinly. You can do this slicing the day before. Just pack the ribboned greens into zip-top plastic bags and refrigerate until a couple of hours before serving. ■

Brazilian Style Collard Green Salad

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 2 large bunches collard greens or kale, well washed, tough stems removed
- Coarse sea salt
- Black pepper
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 to 2 lemons, halved

HOW TO PREP

1. Stack the leaves of collard or kale, and roll them up tightly the long way, making firm, green, cigar-shaped rolls. (You may have to do this in batches.) On a cutting board, with your sharpest knife, cut as thinly as possible across the greens, making thin ribbons. This can be done up to two days in advance; just store the cut greens in zip-top bags and refrigerate them until ready to finish preparing.
2. Up to one hour before you plan to serve the salad, put the greens in your largest salad bowl. Drizzle the oil over them, then salt and pepper them well, and finally, squeeze the lemons over them. (If the lemons have a lot of seeds, squeeze them through a strainer directly onto the greens.)
3. Toss well, then rub the greens between your clean hands a bit, to slightly wilt the greens and rub this minimal dressing in a bit. That's it!

Spicy-Smoky East-West Black-Eyed Peas

Serves 6 to 8

Although bean dishes in general are a great do-ahead and freeze beautifully — and this is certainly no exception — a slow cooker (with a 6-quart capacity) makes these a snap to prepare, largely the night before.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- 1 pound dried black-eyed peas
- Water
- 5 cloves garlic, 3 chopped, 2 left whole
- ½ dried chipotle pepper, broken in half
- 2 large onions, 1 quartered, the other chopped
- 3 tablespoons mild vegetable oil, such as canola, soy or peanut
- 2 carrots, scrubbed and chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, chopped (optional)
- 1 to 2 heaping tablespoons dark or light miso
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- Additional water, or vegetable or chicken stock (optional)
- Salt, to taste
- Fresh-cracked black pepper, to taste

HOW TO PREP

1. Last thing before you go to bed on New Year's Eve, rinse the black-eyed peas well and place them in the slow cooker with enough water to cover them by about three inches. Add the two whole garlic cloves, the dried chipotle and the quartered onion. Set the cooker to High, cover it, and go to bed.
2. In the morning, heat a large, heavy skillet and add the vegetable oil. Add the chopped onion. Sauté, stirring often, for about 8 minutes. Add the carrots and continue sautéing, stirring often, for another 3 or 4 minutes. Add the celery and red pepper (if using) and sauté a few minutes longer. Finally, lower heat, add chopped garlic, and sauté 2 minutes more.
3. Stir the vegetable sauté, along with the miso and sesame oil, into the simmering, now-tender black-eyed peas. Fish out the dried chipotle piece and discard it, and stir the beans very well to distribute the miso and sesame oil. If you like, scoop out ¾ of a cup or so of the beans and mash them, then add them back to the cooker, which will help to thicken the beans. Or, if you feel the beans are too thick, add a cup or 2 of water or stock. Add salt (beans need quite a bit) and pepper to taste. Turn the heat to Medium and continue simmering the beans for at least 1 hour. Your home will be filled with delicious cooking fragrances and, soon, even more delicious beans.
4. Taste and adjust seasonings if needed just before you serve the beans.

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