

## 2 - The South Rises

The nation's crush on Southern food blossoms into a more serious commitment

By Katie Ayoub

The American South is rich with wonderful things to eat. This isn't a revelation, nor a deep thought—it's just a fact. Hush puppies, fried chicken, grits, biscuits, corn fritters, popovers... And in foodservice, authentic, refined Southern food has been well represented over the last few years, usually in Southern-only settings. The likes of Sean Brock and Hugh Acheson have helped in securing the flavors and ingredients of the South as credible and worthy of discovery. But we're seeing it move beyond Southern menus, showing up in the mainstream, surprising and delighting as it makes its rounds. Indeed, American Southern cuisine is like the girl next door—always there, always appealing and folksy, often taken for granted, until one day, we see her in a whole new light.

So what's moving American Southern into menus across foodservice segments—other than the fact that it's about darn time? "Southern cuisine is the hottest regional cuisine in the United States," says Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. "It has penetrated the bar, beverage, meal and dessert scene. Born out of the recession and war involvement, consumers seek simple, authentic and native terroir to feel safe and grounded." Add to that the relentless hankering for familiar, craveable flavors.

"The honesty of the cuisine and the approachability of the locale make it easy for guests to go much closer to home, rather than across the globe, to try something new and learn about a dish that was hiding right under their noses," adds The Culinary Edge's Eric Stangarone. "The variety of technique, the history of origin and the seasonality of ingredients make it a hotbed for innovation."

### GOLDEN-FRIED OPPORTUNITY

Without being too reductive of Southern cuisine, much of its glory comes out of the deep fryer. Crisp and golden and endlessly addictive, the list of deep-fried dishes hailing from the South is long and gorgeous—hush puppies, fritters, fried chicken, chicken-fried steak, beignets, to name just a few. Southern cuisine's fried favorites bring with them tremendous opportunity, responding both to craveable and familiar cues. A quick tour reveals authentic ingredients mingling with modern preparations—a bar bite of Pork Cracklin' Hush Puppies with Maple



"American Southern is where it's at," says Tupelo Honey Café's chef Brian Sonoskus, summing up the "Nouveau Southern cuisine" like his Southern-Fried Chicken BLT.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TUPELO HONEY CAFE.

Bourbon Butter at The Roosevelt in Richmond, Va. Or perhaps Bourbon & Coke Fried Chicken Sliders at Delta Bistro in Greenwood, Miss.

Okra turns into a craveable bar bite at Cook Hall in Dallas. Brined overnight in buttermilk spiked with hot sauce and breaded with cornmeal, the Okra Fingers are deep fried and served with a cold dill sour cream and a crudité of heirloom carrots and celery. “It’s our play on chicken wings, and people love it,” says Douglas Wagenhauser, chef de cuisine. At Havana Beach in Miami’s Pearl Hotel, Executive Chef Michael Guerra serves an appetizer of Mama’s Chicken Biscuits with farm-raised chicken, artisan honey and housemade buttermilk biscuits. He moves fried chicken into a shareable by using boneless chicken thighs. Instead of a dipping sauce, he serves estate honey in a field jar with a wooden spoon for spreading. At Beignet in Kansas City, Mo., savory beignets are well represented with offerings like the Bourgeois Pig (cheddar, caramelized onion, bacon) and the Spicy Shrimp (bay shrimp, roasted peppers, Szechuan cream cheese). And Adam Gooch, executive chef at Washington D.C.’s Purple Onion Catering has great success with his bite-sized Fried Green Tomato Sliders with Sweet Onion Relish.



Southern-fried favorites are primed for takeoff on mainstream bar menus. In Chicago, Carriage House’s Carolina Gold Rice Balls are prepared with pimento cheese, sweet potato purée, smoked pork neck gravy and pickled cabbage.

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## MASH-UPS, SOUTHERN STYLE

Southern fused with other regional and ethnic influences represent the finest examples of successful national mash-ups. “American Southern food plays nice,” says Stangarone. “The idea of Southern food is big enough and is established enough to blend well and influence other food and flavor trends. Giving menus a Southern attitude can make it special without having to create a whole menu of Southern food items.” Pimento cheese, that velvety spread affectionately known as the caviar of the South, sees new life on a cheeseburger at Big Jones in Chicago. It’s served as a sandwich on toasted sourdough at Delta Bistro, where chef-owner Taylor Bowen Ricketts also melds Southern with Mexican-immigrant influences in both her Southern-Style Pork Butt with Sweet Potato Mole and her Mississippi Delta Pork Tamales.

“The South offers amazing ingredients and traditions that are very user-friendly,” says Jamie DeRosa, chef-partner of Tongue & Cheek in Miami Beach, Fla. “Pigs’ ears are the new pork belly. Grandma’s skillet cornbread is now being used to crust a fish,” he adds.

At Havana Beach, Guerra serves a grilled flatbread with Cajun shrimp, andouille sausage, charred onion, Asiago and cilantro. And diners at Tupelo Honey Café, with seven units in Tennessee and North and South Carolina, can order the No. 1 selling appetizer, Appalachian Egg Rolls. They feature slow-roasted pulled pork tossed in smoked jalapeño-barbecue sauce and combined with braised greens, pickled onions and carrots. Executive Chef Brian Sonoskus sautés the greens in soy sauce and tosses them in orange-sesame sauce.

Fusion goes even further at Big Jones with the Banh Mi Po' Boy, which boasts head cheese, liver boudin, red onion, heirloom radish, cilantro, Red Boat fish sauce and sriracha mayonnaise. Sriracha also updates Tupelo Honey's version of grits, called Encore Cheesy Grit Cakes, which are drizzled with hot sauce and served with salsa and sour cream. "American Southern is where it's at," says Sonoskus. "It's local. It's regional. It's what we've known for a few hundred years—it's good comfort food."

Mash-ups, of course, do come with a warning. "The South is a location, an attitude, and always surprising," says Stangarone. "Get to it know it well before putting your spin on it. Guests will see through inauthentic caricatures or stereotypes of the South."



At Pasture restaurant in Richmond, Va., chef Jason Alley's pork and chorizo meatballs are a brilliant blend of Southern and Latin influences, with a pozole broth over chile grits.  
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