

# The Gospel of Great Southern Food

Celebrated chef Edna Lewis looks a bit wilted as she crests a steep flight of steps. She checks her flimsy plastic grocery bag. It's poised to burst like a piñata.

"Here, let me help you with that," offers chef and protégé Scott Peacock, arms outstretched at the door to his Atlanta apartment.

"No, thank you," she says—gracious, but grudging. "I can manage."

"No, you can't—*give me that,*" he gently insists, hovering about her like a basketball guard. Coyly, she slips past him. "Oh, well, *fine,*" Scott says melodramatically. "Do as you wish, Miss Lewis. *You always do.*"

With that, she drops her stubbornness and hands him the grocery bag, shooting him what he calls "that look." Watching them play out the course of a day, it's touchingly obvious they need, and love, each other.

He calls her "amazing, an incredible teacher." She calls him "the next great Southern chef." They've been almost inseparable the past eight years, via telephone or on working trips together throughout the South, even Italy. Both are devoted to the Southern foodways they hold dear, and to the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food, an organization they founded several years ago.

More than 150 cooks and authors dedicate their time to the Society by promoting the South's freshest, most flavorful cookery through conferences and field projects. Their dream is to create a Southern Food Cultural Center, with a farm filled with organic and heirloom produce, a cooking school, a restaurant, and a culinary heritage research center.

The "revival" is easy: Southern food is sought after from New York City to San Francisco, with transplanted Southern chefs no longer finding their culinary

roots a yee-haw embarrassment. It's the "preservation" part that's proving difficult. "There needs to be an understanding of where things came from," Scott comments. "That Colonel Sanders did *not* invent fried chicken, and that not all vegetables come from a can."

Like-minded food historian and fellow Society founder John Egerton agrees: "With so much bogus barbecue, so much phony pie, Southern cookery is threatened to death by default."

Not if Miss Lewis can help it. At 80, she's been the doyenne of regional American cooking for more than 50 years, with such venerable works as *The Edna Lewis Cookbook* (Ecco Press, 1972), *The Taste of Country Cooking* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), and *In Pursuit of Flavor* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). She's renowned not just in New York City for having spent a good deal of her life at legendary restaurants Gage & Tollner and Cafe Nicholson, but also throughout the Southern region, where she's made a considerable mark at such dining establishments as Middleton Place outside Charleston and

Fearrington House near Chapel Hill. In 1993, she moved to Atlanta to advise Harry's Gourmet Markets and the Horseradish Grill, write more cookbooks, and, of course, be near friend and colleague Scott.

Miss Lewis is talented but unassuming. Her presence is graceful, almost royal, in the long, colorful African batik dresses she favors. She speaks in a soft, measured voice that's soothing, sometimes cynical, and often laced with a schoolgirlish giggle. She takes comfortable pride in sharing what she learned growing up on her family's farm in Freetown, Virginia, a community founded by her grandfather and other emancipated slaves.

Like her memories, her culinary convictions run



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES WALTON IV

*Chefs Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock find friendship and fulfillment in reviving the South's rich culinary heritage.*

deep. She shudders at the idea of “soul food” (“that’s hard-times food in Harlem—not true Southern food”), marshmallows atop sweet potatoes, and barbecue not cooked on a pit. And she scoffs at what some chefs are doing with Southern food, such as serving grits with lemongrass gravy.

“When I grew up, everyone had a garden, and we ate bountiful foods—vegetables, fruits, grains, beans, and more fish than meat. People didn’t know any better than to be good cooks, and good food bonded us together.”

She pays tremendous respect to the seasons. “Nowadays you can get just about anything anytime—without its true taste, of course. It’s hard to find anyone who can tell you when asparagus season is anymore.”

At 33, Scott is of the generation she’s most worried about, though he’s a stellar exception. As one of Public Broadcasting Service’s 15 “Rising Star Chefs,” he catapulted the Horse-radish Grill into the limelight for two years by making such unadorned fare as fried chicken and greens seem, well, chic. In February, he left the restaurant to further pursue the Society’s goals, as well as his own—to write cookbooks and produce an authentic product line of Southern foods.

“Southern food is so simple. It’s either on or off,” Scott says. “You can’t hide it behind tortilla strips.” Like Miss Lewis, he emphasizes fresh, home-grown ingredients with only the barest of embellishments to enhance food’s natural flavors. “The truest Southern food is immediate. It’s harvested, fussed over, then eaten that day. I was lucky that my dad only allowed us to eat picked corn if it was less than a day old; otherwise, it went to the

horses. These days there’s no telling how old it is by the time it gets to the grocery stores. Most people miss its real flavor.”

Scott’s quick wit, dark eyes, and unruly hair draw just as much attention as his actions. He loves to talk and, more appealing, listen. He’s done a lot of that in his quest to learn “anything and everything” about regional foods.

In the South Alabama town of Hartford, his cooking life began at age 3, when he adopted his sister’s E-Z Bake Oven (“I thought it was magic”). As a teen, he kept music books (he played trombone) and cookbooks beside his bed. From the latter, he planned seven-course dinners “like the ones Darren and Samantha would throw for the Tates on *Bewitched*” (nevermind that his attempts included serving tawny port wine with Shrimp Creole and congealed salad).

“I find my fascination with Southern food a calling, not a job,” he says. He gets emotional about such things as the time he made a Lane cake the way his grandmother used to. “My grandmother died when I was in third grade, and it’d been so long since I’d tasted her cake. Tears started pouring down my face. I mean, I was laughing and crying at the same time. You really *can* taste memory,” he says. “Miss Lewis and I talk a lot about that.”

True Southern food, they both believe, is the enjoyment of such stories, and of the land. Scott says, “We’ve always thought that until you’ve tasted a tomato warmed by the sun in your own garden, you haven’t lived.”

Here we offer Scott’s favorite cake, a traditional Lane cake. For more delicious samplings of their recipes, turn to page 170—and get ready to live.

Denise Gee

## LANE CAKE

- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 2 cups sugar
- 3½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk
- 8 egg whites
- Lane Cake Filling

- **Beat** butter at medium speed with an electric mixer until creamy; gradually add sugar, beating well. Combine flour, baking powder, and salt; add to butter mixture alternately with milk, beginning and ending with flour mixture. Beat at low speed after each addition.
- **Beat** egg whites at high speed until stiff. Stir one-third of egg whites into batter; fold in remaining egg whites. Spoon into 3 greased and floured 9-inch round cakepans.
- **Bake** at 325° for 25 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pans on wire racks 10 minutes; remove from pans, and cool completely on wire racks.
- **Spread** Lane Cake Filling between layers and on top and sides of cake. **Yield:** 1 (3-layer) cake.

### LANE CAKE FILLING:

- 12 egg yolks
- 1½ cups sugar
- ¾ cup unsalted butter, melted
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
- ½ cup bourbon
- 1½ cups finely chopped pecans
- 1½ cups finely chopped raisins
- 1½ cups flaked coconut

- **Beat** egg yolks at medium speed with a mixer 3 minutes; gradually add sugar, beating until blended. Beat 3 minutes. Gradually add butter; beat at low speed until blended.
- **Pour** mixture into top of a double boiler; bring water to a boil. Cook, stirring constantly, 20 minutes or until mixture thickens and candy thermometer registers 185°. Remove from heat; stir in vanilla and remaining ingredients. Cool slightly. **Yield:** 5 cups. ◇

# Glorious Greens And Great Fried Chicken

Southern chefs Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock, founders of the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food (see "Southerners" on page 126), are committed to "keeping Southern foodways honest." One way is by "rescuing old recipes and nursing them back to healthiness."

Healthy? Using lard? "Absolutely," Scott says. "Of course, everything should be eaten in moderation. But if food fried in lard is cooked at the right temperature, it won't absorb as much oil and won't be as bad for you. It's only bad cooks who've given Southern cooking a bad rap—deep-frying foods instead of pan-frying; using canned vegetables instead of fresh."

Amen to old-fashioned finesse. These recipes, adored in our Test Kitchens, are classic Southern favorites offered to you by Miss Lewis and Scott. *Denise Gee*

## BUTTERMILK BISCUITS WITH VIRGINIA HAM

4 cups all-purpose flour  
1½ teaspoons salt  
2 tablespoons Single-Acting Baking Powder  
½ cup lard, chilled and cut up  
1½ cups buttermilk  
Unsalted butter, softened  
½ pound cooked Virginia country ham, thinly sliced

- **Combine** first 3 ingredients in a large bowl; cut in lard with a pastry blender until crumbly. Add buttermilk, stirring just until dry ingredients are moistened.
- **Turn** dough out onto a lightly floured surface; knead 3 or 4 times.
- **Roll** dough to ½-inch thickness;



*Virginia Pan-fried Chicken is perfect with whipped sweet potatoes and Edna's Greens.*

cut dough with a 2½-inch round cutter, and place on an ungreased baking sheet.

- **Bake** at 500° for 8 to 10 minutes or until lightly browned. Split and spread with softened butter; serve with Virginia country ham. **Yield:** 1½ dozen.

### SINGLE-ACTING BAKING POWDER:

¼ cup cream of tartar  
3 tablespoons cornstarch  
2 tablespoons baking soda

- **Combine** all ingredients in a jar; cover tightly, and shake vigorously. Store at room temperature up to 1 month. **Yield:** ½ cup.

### EDNA'S GREENS

*We gave this recipe a 3, the highest rating our Test Kitchens gives.*

4½ pounds fresh greens (collard, mustard, or turnip)  
1 pound salt pork (streak of lean) or smoked pork shoulder  
3 quarts water  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper

- **Remove** and discard stems and discolored spots from greens. Wash

greens thoroughly; drain and cut greens into strips. Set aside.

- **Slice** salt pork at ¼-inch intervals, cutting to, but not through, the skin.
- **Combine** salt pork, water, and pepper in a large Dutch oven; bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 1 hour.
- **Add** greens, and cook, uncovered, 17 minutes or until tender. Serve with a slotted spoon. **Yield:** 2 to 4 servings.

## VIRGINIA PAN-FRIED CHICKEN

2 quarts cold water  
½ cup kosher salt or coarse-grain sea salt  
1 (3½-pound) whole chicken, cut up  
1 quart buttermilk  
¾ cup all-purpose flour  
2 tablespoons cornstarch  
2 tablespoons potato starch\*  
¾ teaspoon fine-grain sea salt or salt  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper  
1 pound lard  
½ cup unsalted butter  
4 slices bacon

- **Combine** water and kosher salt in a large bowl; add chicken. Cover and refrigerate 4 to 8 hours. Drain chicken, and pat dry; rinse bowl.
- **Return** chicken to bowl; add buttermilk. Cover and refrigerate 4 to 8 hours.
- **Drain** chicken on a wire rack; discard buttermilk.
- **Combine** flour and next 4 ingredients in a heavy-duty zip-top plastic bag; add 2 pieces of chicken. Seal and shake to coat. Remove chicken; repeat procedure with remaining chicken pieces.
- **Place** lard, unsalted butter, and

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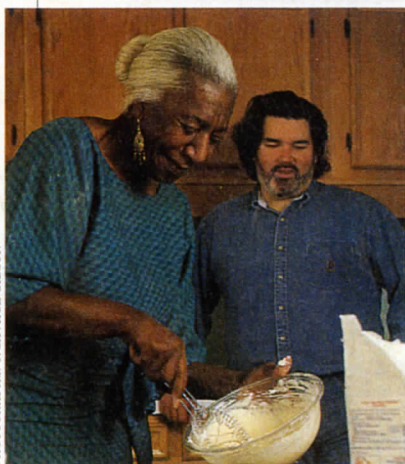
### DEFINING SOUTHERN CLASSICS

■ **Lard:** Pork fat that's used for baking, frying, and seasoning. Miss Lewis and Scott swear by it. It lends itself to flakier crusts, and it's a denser, better fat for frying foods (providing more flavor and crisper textures). It's best bought refrigerated to ensure freshness, but the sure test is smelling it to check for rancidity. Calories per tablespoon: lard—120; butter—100.

■ **Greens:** Collard, mustard, and turnip greens are traditionally boiled and seasoned with streak of lean. Miss Lewis's secret to great greens is to make a highly seasoned broth from cured and smoked pork shoulder or salt pork, and then cook the greens in that broth, uncovered (so they won't turn brown).

■ **Streak of lean:** A small portion of salted pork fat that has only a streak of lean meat. It's great for flavoring collard, mustard, and turnip greens.

■ **Virginia ham:** Also known as a Smithfield ham, it's the premier country-cured ham—much less salty and richer in color than an ordinary country ham. "If you have one in the house you can face any situation," Miss Lewis says.



Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock

PHOTOGRAPHS: J. SAVAGE GIBSON

bacon evenly in 2 large cast-iron or heavy skillets; heat to 350°. Remove and discard bacon.

• **Add** chicken, skin side down (fat will come halfway up sides of chicken). Cook over medium-high heat 10 to 12 minutes on each side or until chicken is done. Drain on paper towels. **Yield:** 4 to 6 servings.

\*We used Manischewitz potato starch, but all-purpose flour may be substituted.

**Note:** Coarse-grain sea salt may be crushed in a heavy-duty zip-top plastic bag with a rolling pin to use for fine-grain sea salt.

### CATS' TONGUES

¼ cup unsalted butter, softened

⅓ cup sugar

2 egg whites

⅛ teaspoon vanilla extract

⅓ cup all-purpose flour

Pinch of salt

• **Beat** butter at medium speed with an electric mixer until fluffy; gradually add sugar, beating well. Add