

A taste of Southern hospitality

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The Savannah Cookbook

By Damon Lee Fowler

Gibbs Smith, 222 pp., \$34.95

Screen Doors and Sweet Tea

By Martha Hall Foose

Clarkson Potter, 248 pp., \$32.50

As our temperatures and humidity climb toward something that might pass for a cool day in Alabama, people start craving mint juleps, fried chicken, angel biscuits, hush puppies, and other typical Southern specialties. Except for the julep, however, they're labor-intensive, heat-happy recipes that are hard on the cook. But it's no surprise that food this good has remained popular. It has to be, for people to return to that hot stove again and again.

This year brought a bumper crop of Southern cookbooks. I fell instantly for "Screen Doors and Sweet Tea: Recipes and Tales from a Southern Cook," a showcase for Delta cooking and snappy, wise-cracking cooking school chef Martha Hall Foose. After a week of recipe testing, many of the dishes proved harder to love.

A recipe called "all for okra & okra for all" is that staple of Southern cookbooks: a formula that claims it will finally win over your okra-hating friends. Soaking them in vinegar, slicing them on a mandoline, then flash-frying did indeed remove most of the okra's slime, leaving them faintly acerbic and crunchy. Our two littlest okraphobes still scorned them roundly.

Sunflower squash fritters were OK, in the way fried bread is OK. But with 1 cup of grated squash for eight servings, you couldn't call it a vegetable.

Clearly, "big black skillet cornbread" is for the purist - dry, high, and smoky with bacon drippings. Even with extra butter, the pale crumbles are hard to swallow, and I started missing the soft, sweet yellow sponge cornbread we know and love. There is no prettifying red beans and rice, a sloppy brown ambrosia made on Mondays from Sunday's leftover hambone. But it delivered on flavor.

Paper sack catfish, an easier, older version of fish in parchment paper, was more successful. Saturated in lemony dill butter and sealed in an ordinary paper bag tied with string, the fillets were rich yet delicate. And the "darkness on the Delta" dessert redeemed many of my doubts about this book. It was little more than bittersweet chocolate softened with butter, then chilled with a slap of bourbon and vanilla, but my fork kept mindlessly going back for more.

Damon Lee Fowler's "Savannah Cookbook" is equally decadent, though a lot easier to approach.

Savannah's coastal, seafaring cuisine centers around shellfish, cream, and warm seasonings, while gracious sides and snacks balance the plate. (As usual, vegetables are an afterthought.) Fowler is an award-winning author of several Southern cooking volumes.

Butter-roasted pecans cook low and slow, with frequent stirring. After an hour, any raw or bitter traces vanish, leaving behind a mellowed, crisp nut - instantly addictive once salted.

Cream of crab soup is rich and powerful, the crab soft and sweet, the cream luscious. Though it's delectable, it defied the urge for seconds. After the initial work of slicing and salting, cucumber salad with dilled sour cream dressing comes together in a flash, a perfect cool side for hot summer dining.

Savannah's seafaring plantation economy meant that Eastern spices and flavors came early to the city. The well-known chicken "country captain" captures the essence of a curried tomato sauce with onions and peppers, garnished with coconuts, peanuts, and chutney. Curried shrimp are smothered and pampered in half a stick of butter and a giant dose of half-and-half. A half-cup of sherry dilutes the gravy and dominates the dish, but the thick textures and flavors are still worthy of plate-scraping with rice.

Not everyone will succumb to the charms of black skillets and hot stoves. If you're worried about how you'll look in a swimsuit, or if you hate washing dishes, walk on by and get a salad book. But if you believe a bit of toil in the kitchen is worth it for a tour in soul food's heartland, dive in. The water's warm, and the eating (if not the cooking) is easy. ■