

# Southern Cooking, Born Again

FRANK STITT PROVES THAT YOU CAN RUN ALABAMA'S MOST ACCLAIMED RESTAURANTS WITHOUT FOCUSING ON BBQ, CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK, OR HONEY-GLAZED HAM HOCKS.



Frank Stitt's southern recipes have a healthy French influence.

**We all know** the gut-busting side of southern food, artery-clogging caricatures like the Elvis Presley sandwich of bacon, peanut butter, and banana or Paula Deen's deep-fried pork chops. Less well known is that contemporary southern chefs like Frank Stitt are fast updating all the Dixie classics, turning out a regionally distinctive style as light and elegant as anything on either coast.

With four successful restaurants to his name (like Bottega and Highlands), all in Birmingham, Alabama, and a best-selling cookbook, *Frank Stitt's Southern Table*, Stitt is the undisputed dean of new southern cuisine, complete with bona fide roots: Born in 1954, the son of a country doctor, he played both linebacker and fullback for his small-town Alabama high school, and spent summers helping on the family farm. Tra-

ditional southern culture is fundamentally rural and agrarian, with a cuisine shaped not by chefs and restaurants but rather by old-time farm families cooking what they grow. "Our parents and grandparents were

marked by the Depression and the lack of food," Stitt says, "so there is this sense of

sacredness around abundance." The Stitts had a huge vegetable garden, along with apple trees, chickens, quail, and guinea hens — all of which he helped raise, harvest, and cook for his grandmother's table.

But Stitt had to leave the South "to learn a wonderful respect for humble ingredients, like collards and turnips and turnip greens."

Stitt moved to California to attend the University of California at Berkeley. He was earning pocket money at a few French restaurants when he got in- ▶

## COOKING

### ROAST QUAIL WITH FIG RELISH

For the Quail...

1 tsp olive oil  
1 carrot, 1 celery stalk, 2 shallots, peeled and diced  
1 cup crumbled corn bread  
4 tbsp unsalted butter, melted  
2 thyme sprigs, leaves removed  
1 cup walnut halves, lightly toasted (reserve ½ cup for relish)  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
4 semi-boneless quail, wing tips trimmed, rinsed and patted dry  
1 tsp canola or olive oil

For the Fig Relish...

8 figs, sliced into wedges  
½ cup walnut halves (remaining from quail)  
1 shallot, minced  
4 basil leaves, torn  
2 tsp Garnacha red wine vinegar  
1 tsp sorghum syrup or balsamic vinegar  
4 tsp olive oil

Preheat oven to 450°. In a medium sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the carrot, celery, and shallots, and sauté until softened, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and add the crumbled corn bread, then add the melted butter and thyme.

Toss thoroughly with

your hands to combine.

Season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the cavity of each quail with salt and pepper, then stuff a little of the corn bread mixture inside. Season the outside of the quail with salt and pepper and tie the legs together.

Heat the oil over high heat in a heavy ovenproof sauté pan, just large enough to hold the quail so they don't touch each other. Add the quail and sear, turning occasionally, until golden, 4 to 6 minutes. Transfer the pan to the oven, and roast the quail for 6 to 9 minutes; the breast meat should still be a rosy color.

In a medium bowl, toss the figs, walnuts, shallot, basil, vinegar, and olive oil together, and season with salt and pepper.

Remove the string from the quail. Place a spoonful of creamy grits in the center of the plate, then some collards, and top with the quail. Garnish with fig relish.



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## NOTEBOOK

terested in a then obscure Berkeley eatery, Chez Panisse, run by Alice Waters. Offering to work there for free, Stitt stumbled into work with the restaurant that introduced many Americans to the light, healthful, vegetable-centric fare of France's own deep south, Provence. Waters found work for Stitt in Provence with her south-of-France mentor, Richard Olney, the midcentury American cookbook author. Olney, in turn, introduced Stitt to Julia Child. By the time Stitt moved back to Alabama, he occupied a rare and lucky biographical niche: Fully immersed in Provençal cooking, with its emphasis on local, seasonal produce, he was just the man to lighten southern cuisine while preserving its soul.

"At that time, there was nothing high-minded, elegant, or sophisticated about southern cooking," Stitt says. "Most of it was cooked too long and with too much pork fat." Southern stews, for example, were typically served with pork fat boiled into the broth, making them greasy and indigestible. Stitt employed the Provençal technique of first chilling the broth, forcing the fat to congeal on the surface, and then skimming it off. He also paired vinaigrette sauces with southern ingredients, like rainbow trout, and he took collard greens — often overcooked into a gray-green mush — and gave them a quick blanching in salted, boiling water, preserving their color and flavor.

"Frank's been an ambassador, teaching that Alabama food is different from Florida's and that the low country is different from Memphis," says Chris Hastings, who worked under Stitt for years. Stitt brings all of those traditions together, offering faithful re-creations of pan-southern classics like fried okra and corn bread. But his food's wider appeal — the qualities that make it a perfect on-ramp to southern-style home cooking — is simple, wholesome elegance, like his roast quail with fig relish, slightly indulgent but perfectly creamy grits, and bright green collards cooked in olive oil. —DANIEL DUANE



### SOUTHERN-STYLE COLLARD GREENS

*1 bunch collards cut into 1-inch chiffonade or roughly chopped; substitute with Tuscan kale or Swiss chard (choose fresh, intensely green collards with smaller leaves, if possible; be sure to remove thick stems)*

*1 tbsp olive oil  
2 strips bacon, cut into lardons (1-inch strips)  
1 small onion, chopped  
1 garlic clove, smashed and chopped  
2 hot dried chili peppers  
1 tsp salt  
1 tsp sherry vinegar*

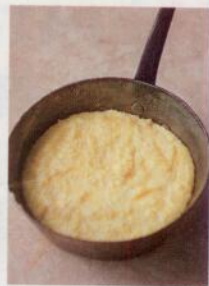
Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add 1 tbsp of salt and the collards, blanch for

1 minute, then remove and immerse in a large bowl of ice water. When cool, remove and squeeze excess water from the collard leaves.

Heat olive oil in a large, heavy pan. Add bacon, and cook until just crisp. Remove and reserve bacon. Add onion, and cook until softened, about 4 minutes. Add garlic and chilis, then cook another minute. Add greens and salt, and cook about 5 to 10 minutes. Add the vinegar, and serve with the reserved bacon.

### CREAMY GRITS

*1 cup yellow stone-ground organic grits  
4 cups water  
2 tbsp butter  
¼ cup heavy cream  
4 tbsp Parmigiano-Reggiano, finely grated  
Salt and fresh white pepper  
Hot pepper sauce (optional)*



In a small stockpot, bring water to a boil. Add 1 tsp of salt, and mix grits and water with a whisk. Bring to a boil, and simmer for about 40 minutes.

When grits get tender, add butter, cream, cheese, salt, and pepper. Continue to simmer, adding cheese and salt or butter to taste.