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Mississippi Cooks

Building A Culinary Collection

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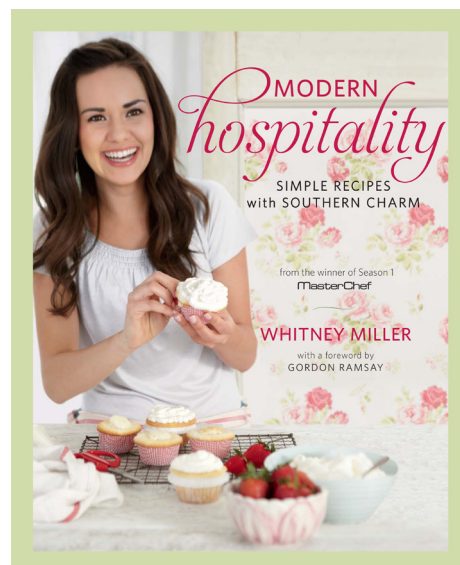
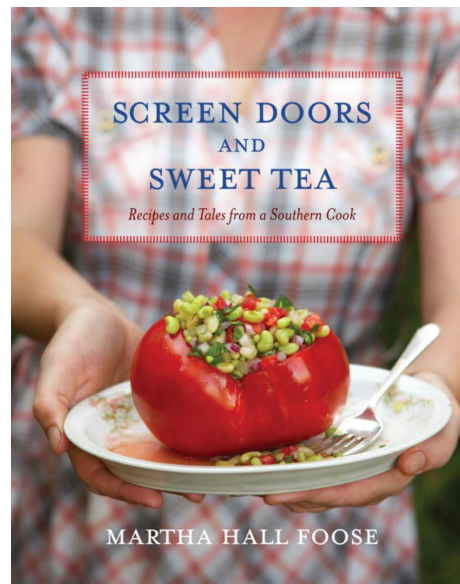
When I first visited the state of Mississippi twenty six years ago, the food was one of the first things I noticed. Every restaurant table had a bottle of pepper sauce, the portion sizes were generous, and the food was almost always excellent! With the bounty of culinary expertise in the state, it was surprising how few books produced by national publishers focused on Mississippi cooking. Luckily, the last decade has seen a renewed interest in regional cooking and Mississippi authors are beginning to take their rightful place in the national spotlight.

This creates an opportunity to build a culinary collection with a focus on Mississippi cooking. While community and church cookbooks can be a significant component of both a culinary and a genealogical collection, the focus of this column is on commercially produced cookbooks. All are available either as currently in-print titles or through the out-of-print market.

While some of the titles that follow focus more generally on southern or Mississippi cooking, many reflect the regional diversity that can be found throughout the state. A swift perusal of the titles shows a common thread throughout this type of cookbook: the mixing of stories, local histories, and cooking. This makes the collection attractive not just to cooks but anyone looking

to explore Mississippi customs and traditions.

No collection of Mississippi cookbooks would be complete without at least one title from Martha Hall Foose. Born in Mississippi, Foose is a noted food writer and served as the food stylist for the movie *The Help*. Foose gained national attention when she won the James Beard Award for *Screen Doors and Sweet*



Tea: Recipes and Tales from a Southern Cook (Clarkson Potter, 2008; ISBN: 978-0307351401).

The text reads like a good conversation from homecoming: lots of good recipes interspersed with community gossip and culinary wisdom. For example, her “Sold My Soul to the Devil-ed Eggs” (pg. 18) includes useful information on avoiding the green ring that sometimes appears in boiled eggs. Foose followed this up with another cookbook, *A Southerly Course: Recipes and Stories From Close to Home* in 2011 (Clarkson Potter, 2011; ISBN: 978-0307464286.) This collection of recipes is peppered with family stories and reflections on southern cooking along with extensive illustrations.

Southern cooking is in the national spotlight and this was certainly assisted by Whitney Miller winning the first MasterChef competition. Her book, *Modern Hospitality: Simple Recipes with Southern Charm* (Rodale Books, 2011; ISBN: 978-1609613525) is another good addition to a Mississippi cookbook collection. The collection of recipes is somewhat small (75) but richly illustrated and also includes numerous suggestions for hosting events and setting a welcoming table. Recipes such as “Collard Green Dip” (pg. 21) highlight local ingredients that are presented in new and innovative ways. Miller published a “sequel” with her 2015 *Whitney Miller’s New Southern Table: My Favorite Family Recipes with a Modern Twist* (Thomas Nelson 2015; ISBN:

978-0718011604). This collection is also richly illustrated and is a more traditional collection of recipes themed around key meals: Sunday dinners or family get-togethers. Dinners such as “Spice-Rubbed Venison Roast” (pg. 185) nicely illustrate traditional Southern ingredients with a newer, often spicier, interpretation.

While not technically a Mississippi cookbook, Faye Porter’s *At My Grandmother’s Table: Heartwarming Stories & Cherished Recipes from the South* (Thomas Nelson, 2013) is a true representation of Mississippi and Southern cooking. No “nuevo” Southern cuisine here, just stick to your ribs biscuits, giblet gravy, and fried chicken! The author solicited recipes and stories from throughout the South and asked contributors to remember the culinary contributions from their grandmother. Although the collection is heavily weighted toward Tennessee, there are ten recipes with a direct Mississippi connection. Like any good Southern cookbook, over one third of the content is devoted to some type of sweets. Anyone looking for

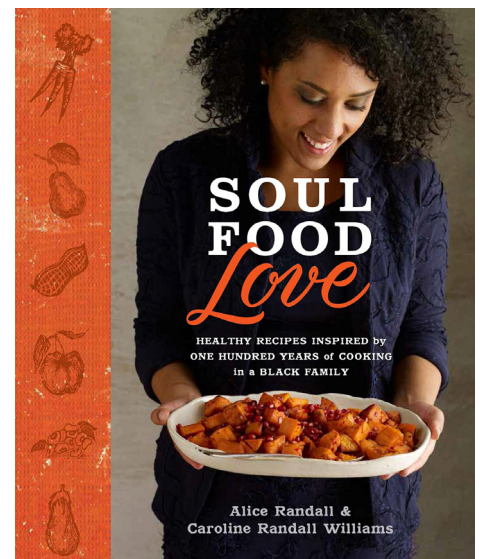
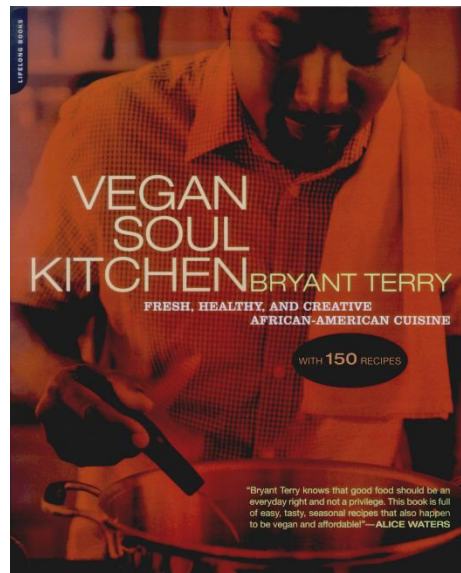
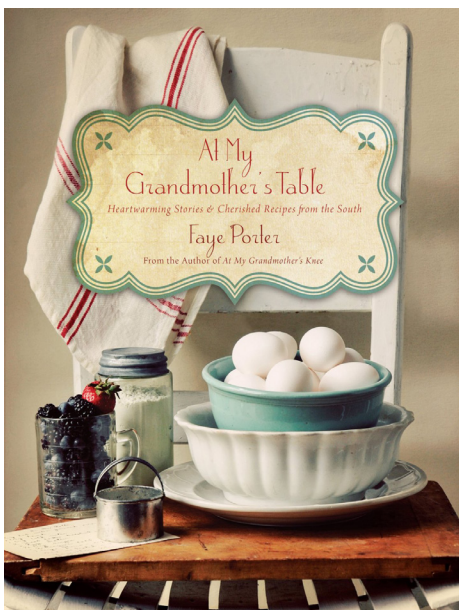
a good story to go along with their fried chicken, fried corn, and biscuits will find the collection of use.

No collection of Southern cookbooks is complete without a section on soul food. While Bryant Terry is not a Mississippian, his use of ingredients and modern interpretations of traditional foods will delight audiences looking for alternatives to more traditional Southern cuisine. His widely recognized *Vegan Soul Kitchen: Fresh, Healthy and Creative African-American Cuisine* (Da Capo Press, 2009; ISBN: 978-0738212289) combined vegan cooking with ingredients often found in Southern kitchens. His “Citrus Collards with Raisins Redux” (pg. 4) served as the inspiration for the rest of the volume. And while his “Open-faced Tempeh Sandwich with Carrot-Cayenne Coleslaw” (pg. 12-13) will not win a barbecue cook off, it offers those looking for alternatives to pork or meat based meals an option that incorporates many of the original flavors of Southern cooking.

Likewise, Alice Randall and Caroline Randall Williams’ *Soul Food Love: Healthy Recipes Inspired by*

One Hundred Years of Cooking in a Black Family (Clarkson Potter, 2015; ISBN: 978-0804137935) interpret traditional soul food but with a decidedly healthy spin. They draw upon their own family’s culinary history and health challenges to produce such new classics as “Sweet Potato, Kale, and Black-eyed Pea Soup” (pg. 138). As with many other titles in this genre, the recipes are richly interspersed with family culinary history and food lore.

Southern literary works are known for their sense of place; southern cookbooks likewise celebrate place as part of the Southern culinary legacy. One great example is Alexe Van Beuren’s *The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook: Recipes and Stories from a Southern Revival* (Clarkson Potter, 2014; ISBN: 978-0385345002). Van Beuren teams up with local cook Dixie Grimes to present both a collection of recipes and the story of the development of a small business in Water Valley, Mississippi. Traditional recipes like “Red-eye Gravy” (pg. 22) and new interpretations of local ingredients such as those in



“Roasted Pear and Zucchini Soup” (pg. 48-49) make this a useful addition to any collection.

John Currance also builds a strong sense of place into his work. The award winning chef runs a number of restaurants in Oxford, Mississippi, and published his first cookbook, *Pickles, Pigs, & Whiskey: Recipes from My Three Favorite Food Groups* (Andrews McNeel Publishing, 2013, ISBN: 978-1449428808) in 2013. In addition to having quite possibly the best cookbook title ever, the eclectic collection provides both innovative recipes and an introduction to Currance’s philosophy of cooking. This is not traditional Southern fare, but recipes such as “Bourbon-Braised Pork Cheek” (pg. 186) will challenge Southern cooks to try both new ingredients and new techniques. Inspired by his restaurant of the same name, Currance followed up his success with his first cookbook with his second, *Big Bad Breakfast: The Most Important Book of the Day* (Ten Speed Press, 2016; ISBN: 978-1607747369). The books are similar, in that both are richly illustrated and include vignettes

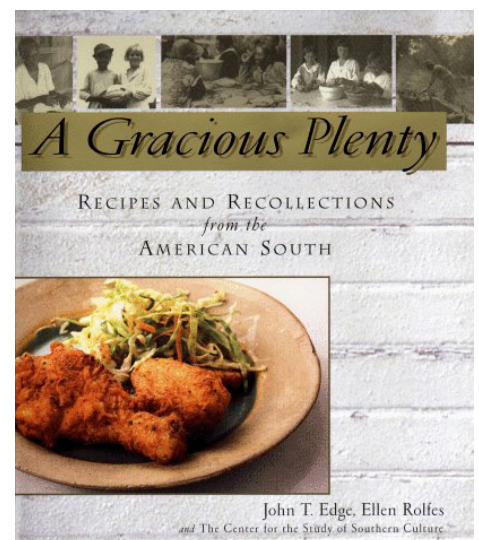
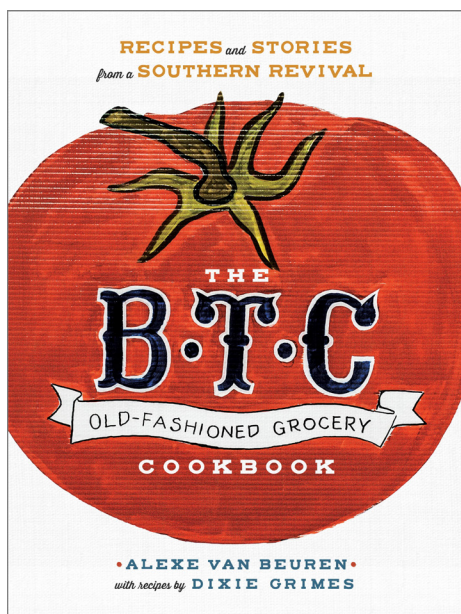
about cooking. Of course, the 2016 work focuses on breakfast foods such as “Grits and Collards Soufflé” (pg. 155), proving that all good Southern cookbooks include at least one recipe using collards even when discussing breakfast!

A more traditional collection can be found in John T. Edge and Ellen Rolfes’ *A Gracious Plenty: Recipes and Recollections from the American South* (Putnam, 1999; ISBN: 978-0399145346). Edge and Rolfes have strong Mississippi ties, with John T. Edge serving as the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Many of the recipes are drawn from other published sources, including community cookbooks. Many of the recipes, such as “Fried Okra” (pg. 95) are very traditional fare but some are a little more unusual like the “Casserole of Possum” (pg. 185-186). The inclusion of a number of short original essays about food traditions makes the book a valuable addition to a culinary collection.

Another highly recommended

title is not strictly a Mississippi cookbook: *The Southerner’s Cookbook: Recipes, Wisdom, and Stories* by David DiBenedetto, Phillip Rhodes and the editors of Garden and Gun Magazine (Harper Wave, 2015; ISBN: 978-0062242419). The richly illustrated recipes focus on “Southern foodways” and include such basic staples as “Pimento Cheese” (pg. 13 but be warned: they use Duke’s mayonnaise!) and fun exercises such as making your own moon pies with their “Mardi Gras Moon Pies” (pg. 194). The collection is augmented by entertaining culinary essays by notable Southerners, including Rick Brag’s “Your First Oyster” (pg. 101-102) and John T. Edge’s “Condiments” (pg. 227-228).

Culinary collections can serve as the focus of library programming and community outreach. They fill a need in our collections to document past and current food traditions and also the broader context that foodways entail: family and community history and the social influences that manifest themselves in food. And they fill a need for our users to explore food traditions in a state with a rich culinary heritage.



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