

## Southern Exposure

The North puts a little of the South in its mouth

BY LIZ JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER DENNEN

Faded vintage tablecloths and mismatched sterling silver dress the tables in the cozy dining room at Nebo Lodge, an inn and restaurant on North Haven Island, off the coast of Maine. A family fresh off the yacht, wearing blue blazers with brass buttons, orders thin-crust pizzas. Meanwhile, gruff-looking young men in flannel shirts, their faces hardened by the sea air, drink from lowballs at the bar.

We are perusing the menu at a table for two near the fireplace, gleefully anticipating a meal that will give us as keen a sense of place as our surroundings do. The chef, Amanda Hollowell, is known for using local ingredients, and her kitchen offers Maine on a plate, from the baby lamb raised on the island to the briny oysters harvested off of it.

But one appetizer looks out of place: fried green tomatoes.

Here we are, 12 miles off the coast, on an island where rocky inlets reveal views of schooners and lighthouses around every corner, and Hollowell is serving a dish more at home in my grandmother's Southern kitchen?

Well, yes. And who can blame her? She's keeping in step with modern chefs up and down the Northeast Corridor: She's looking south.

Southern influences have been showing up north of the Mason-Dixon line for at least a decade now, but today you

might as well throw a full-blown coming-out cotillion for them. The regional culinary traditions of the South are becoming mainstream everywhere, from Bangor to Baltimore.

### Doing the Wave

Barbecue? That's so 2001. Ted Lee, who cowrote with his brother, Matt Lee, the cookbook *Simple Fresh Southern* (Clarkson Potter, 2009), keeps a timeline of Southern dishes becoming trendy up north, from grits in 2006 to ham in 2007 to fried chicken in 2008.

"We're definitely in a major Southern wave of awareness," says Matt Lee. "Chefs are becoming much more educated about Southern foods, and they're excited about by it the same way they might be excited by Italian ingredients back in the 1980s."

If you'd been paying attention as closely as the Lee brothers, you would have noticed, too. Platters of country ham from Tennessee, sliced like prosciutto and served with red-eye gravy, fly off the menu at Momofuku Ssäm Bar in Manhattan. Modern but homey restaurants such as The Redhead in the East Village and Topsy Parson in Chelsea are serving Southern staples, including pimento cheese, catfish, and shrimp and grits. Hungry Mother, the Southern restaurant in Cambridge, Mass., for which chef-owner Barry Maiden was named







Left: Hand-battered onion rings. Right: A view of North Haven Island.

## Going South

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914-930-1880; [birdsallhouse.net](http://birdsallhouse.net)

### Hungry Mother

233 Cardinal Medeiros Ave.,  
Cambridge, Mass.; 617-499-0090

### Nebo Lodge

11 Mullins Lane, North Haven, Maine;  
207-867-2007; [nebolodge.com](http://nebolodge.com)

### The Redhead

349 E. 13th St., Manhattan;  
212-533-6212; [theredheadnyc.com](http://theredheadnyc.com)

### Tipsy Parson

156 Ninth Ave., Manhattan;  
212-620-4545; [tipsyparson.com](http://tipsyparson.com)

one of *Food & Wine's* 2009 Best New Chefs, has boiled peanuts on the menu.

New restaurants that opened last year include Po' Boys & Pickles in Portland, Maine, and Hill Country Chicken and Lowcountry in New York. *Bon Appétit* named Resurrection Ale House in Philadelphia one of the top 10 places in the country for fried chicken. And—get this—there are so many versions of fried chicken in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint that *New York* magazine, in a feature titled “The Fried Chicken Craze of 2009,” dubbed it Buttermilk Brooklyn.

So, yes. The North is onto these dishes. And we are embracing the flavors of the South not as a trend but as an important part of our American heritage.

“Awareness of regional food and the importance of regional foods is here to stay,” says John T. Edge, the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi. “I think it is the next step in our American education about food culture.”

If the fried chicken at The Redhead is my homework, I'm definitely OK with that.

### The True South

Ted Lee may think that fried chicken reached the pinnacle of its popularity in 2008, and *New York* magazine proclaimed it so in 2009, but I say crispy-on-the-outside, juicy-on-the-inside fried chicken never gets old.

The version at The Redhead is killer. It's brined for eight hours, soaked in a buttermilk bath and fried just before it's served. It's pull-apart tender and moist, with bubbles of golden crunchy goodness and a hint of spice.

Meg Grace, The Redhead's chef, used to cook at the Modern in Midtown. While she was still working there, she and her partners, Rob Larcom and Gregg Nelson, opened The Redhead as a bar—a neighborhood spot with a tin ceiling, wood floors and a big, red banquette in back. She started serving a prix fixe menu on Thursday nights only. To the owners' surprise, the Southern dishes were the most popular.

“Shrimp and grits and fried chicken weren't supposed to stay on the menu,” Grace says. “But it became really obvious that it would be a mistake to take them off.”

The popularity of fried chicken also came as a shock to Matt Hutchins, the chef at Birdsall House, a cozy tavern with a 1940s art deco feel in Peekskill, N.Y. Hutchins, originally from Florida, served an all-local farm-to-table menu when the restaurant opened in early 2010. By the fall, however, he was serving an almost entirely Southern menu, from fried chicken with collards and black-eyed peas to blackened shrimp and grits.

“I'm happy people enjoy it,” he says. “My influences come from a lot of different areas, not the least of which are my

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mother and grandmother. It's touching that the kind of cooking I grew up doing with my family is now being embraced up here in New York."

Hungry Mother's Maiden also is humbled by Northerners' show of faith. He grew up in Marion, Va., where he and his family would sit on the porch and shell beans for a supper with potatoes. As a child, his favorite thing to eat was "the big biscuit," which his grandmother made by gathering all the leftover dough scraps after she'd cut out the regular-size biscuits.

"I wanted to change people's perspective on what Southern food was," he says. "I wanted to have a place that would educate people on what true Southern Appalachian cooking was all about—and not do any fried chicken. [None of] the all-around comfort food people think about when they think Southern."

The restaurant, which has walls of white bricks accented with brown, green and black, also serves pimento cheese, shrimp and grits, and a cornmeal-crust catfish—but with a New England twist. Those boiled peanuts, for example, are dusted with sea salt from Maine. Most folks are familiar with the dish, but one customer recently sent his order back.

"These peanuts are disgusting!" Maiden remembers the diner saying. The staff explained that peanuts are prepared this way in the South and instructed him how to eat them: Break open the shell and then, as with edamame or an oyster, suck the peanuts out of the moist shell. You also can scoop them out with your hands.

"Oh, boiled peanuts?" the man exclaimed. "I thought you said broiled peanuts."

"Some people are still clueless," says Maiden, with a laugh.

But most are willing to learn.

### Educating Eater

The education has been slow in coming. When the Lee brothers were hawking boiled peanuts in New York in 1994, they had no luck at all.

"Peanuts are something you think you know—you've grown up with them tasting one way your whole life," says Matt Lee. "And you taste a boiled peanut

The ultimate comfort food: fried green tomatoes.



and you realize it can taste more like a chickpea? It's disturbing."

Or take dessert. Topsy Parson in Chelsea is named after the old Southern trifle called tipsy parson. At the restaurant, it's a sponge cake soaked in brandy and served with berries, pastry cream and almonds. At first, says chef-owner Julie Wallach, no one understood the name—of either the restaurant or the dish. These days, they have a regular who loves the tipsy parson dessert so much that he orders it before his meal.

"As an appetizer!" Wallach says.

Edge, who also has written many books on Southern cuisine, including *Southern Belly: The Ultimate Food*





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*Lover's Companion to the South* (Algonquin Books, 2007), says that the recent Northern discovery of Southern food is part of an evolutionary process that speaks to American insecurity.

"We're a young country still in the throes of defining itself, and we think the food is better and matters more elsewhere," he says. "And then we start to realize that that's not the case."

"Back to Matt's analogy of the Italian thing," says Ted Lee. "Once people get over the misperception that Southern food is all barbecue and fried chicken, traveling around the South is akin to traveling around Italy. You taste the differences in the cuisine as you travel."

Restaurants celebrating regional cuisines, such as Charleston in Baltimore, Egg in Brooklyn, Johnny's Half Shell in Washington, D.C., and Bar Americain in Manhattan and at Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, Conn., are certainly helping.

It's that focus on one region, says Bar Americain chef-owner Bobby Flay, that helps define our food culture more clearly.

Chefs "confused the public for a while by calling lots of restaurants 'new American,'" Flay says. "And that doesn't mean anything except 'I'm going to do what I feel like.' That's OK, but I like my restaurants to have a singular focus so I can go back to the core and reinvent them from there."

As it turns out, the fried green tomatoes on Hallowell's menu at Nebo Lodge are terrific. The tomatoes are lightly crusted in panko bread crumbs and served with a chive dressing. Hallowell was inspired by visiting her sister-in-law in New Orleans, where they would eat fried green tomatoes for breakfast, but she also thinks that people in Maine are "comfort food people at heart."

"And that's what I think about Southern food," she says. "It's comfort food with a little more gusto."

"Food is entertainment," says Walach. "But it's also a way to get people to know other cultures. It's great that we are seeing the Southern resurgence. It's fun and it's approachable and it's fairly inexpensive—and you get sick of eating the same food all the time."

Except maybe fried chicken. 🍗



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