

805 LIVING

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*Food &
Wine*

Southern Exposure

CENTRAL COAST CHEFS OFFER UP THEIR
RENDITIONS OF CLASSIC COMFORT FOODS
WITH ROOTS BELOW THE MASON-DIXON LINE.

BY JAIME LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

The Central Coast is a long way from the American South, but soulful, sultry Southern cuisine is turning up on menus from Calabasas to Paso Robles. Chefs take advantage of the local abundance of produce in classics like hoecakes, shrimp and grits, and fried green tomatoes—dishes borne, ironically, out of scarcity. “So much of Southern cooking comes from resourcefulness and scraps,” says Tracy Lippert, owner of Santa Paula’s Rabalais Bistro & Bakery (rabalaisbistro.com). Here, local chefs share some of their favorite recipes for serving up true Southern charm.



FRIED CHICKEN AND SCALLIONS
WITH BISCUITS AND COUNTRY GRAVY

The Hungry Cat, Santa Barbara

Pair it with Section Wines 2014 Il Buttero GSM Demetria Vineyard, Santa Ynez Valley



FRIED GREEN TOMATOES
Rabalais Bistro & Bakery, Santa Paula

Fried Green Tomatoes

Rabalais Bistro & Bakery, Santa Paula

Rabalais Bistro & Bakery owner Tracy Lippert has to special-order firm green tomatoes from Los Angeles for her popular Fried Green Tomatoes platter. "Especially in summer, everyone wants heirloom and beautifully vine-ripened red tomatoes," she says. Lippert recommends using garden or farmers' market tomatoes that are as green as a Granny Smith apple—truly unripe—to avoid mushiness. At Rabalais, she serves them with a side of secret-recipe rémoulade sauce but admits to eating them plain, straight from the pan.

Serves 6 as a side (makes approximately 30 slices)

2 cups yellow cornmeal
2 cups masa harina corn flour
2 cups all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons salt
¼ cup black pepper
1 tablespoon ground cayenne pepper
1½ teaspoons garlic powder
2 cups buttermilk
10 large green tomatoes, cut crosswise into ½-inch slices
Vegetable oil

In a large bowl, combine cornmeal, masa harina, flour, salt, black pepper, cayenne, and garlic powder. Set aside. In a separate bowl, pour buttermilk. Form an assembly line and dip each tomato slice in buttermilk, then dredge in cornmeal mixture. Pour ¼-to-½-inch of vegetable oil into a cast-iron or nonstick skillet. Heat until oil temperature reaches medium high (350°F on a cooking thermometer). Working in batches, pan-fry battered tomato slices about 2 minutes per side or until golden. Transfer to a rack or paper towels and let drain. Serve warm, drizzled with lemon juice or with your favorite rémoulade sauce or Ranch dressing.

**Rabalais Bistro
& Bakery owner
Tracy Lippert
admits to eating her
FRIED GREEN
TOMATOES
straight from the pan.**

PIMENTO CHEESE

The Hatch Rotisserie & Bar, Paso Robles



Pimento Cheese

The Hatch Rotisserie & Bar, Paso Robles

"I grew up spending summers in the South, and we always had pimento cheese," says Maggie Cameron, co-owner of The Hatch Rotisserie & Bar (hatchpasorobles.com) in Paso Robles. "It's a thing from my childhood." When she and business partner Eric Connelly spoke with executive chef Mateo Rogers about including the classic Southern spread on the menu, Rogers developed a recipe with Peppadews rather than pimento that Cameron calls "one of those iconic items that will be on the menu for a long time." For extra Southern-style indulgence, The Hatch serves its Pimento Cheese with bread that's brushed with chicken fat and olive oil and toasted over a wood fire.

Serves 10 as an appetizer

1 pound white cheddar cheese, shredded
½ cup white onion, peeled and minced
½ cup mayonnaise
2 tablespoons cream cheese, softened
¼ cup dill pickles, chopped
½ cup Peppadew peppers, chopped
2¼ teaspoons champagne vinegar
2½ teaspoons garlic, minced
½ teaspoon guajillo chili powder (available at well-stocked grocery stores, Mexican markets, and amazon.com)
½ teaspoon smoked paprika
¼ teaspoon black pepper

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl. Mix well. Serve cheese spread with crackers or on slices of toast.

Shrimp and Grits With Bacon, Kale, and Cajun Butter

Wildwood Kitchen, Santa Barbara

The grits in this dish from chef Justin West of Santa Barbara's Wildwood Kitchen (wildwoodkitchensb.com) require two hours in the refrigerator to firm up, so allow plenty of time to make it.

West grew up at the elbow of his father, who owned and operated West Brothers BBQ in Eugene, Oregon, for 15 years and passed away in 2011. Five years later, West opened Wildwood Kitchen. "The smell of the smoker, the barbecue vibe, having access to fresh-smoked meats, it's a sort of soul food," he says. "When it comes to barbecue, there's a little spark in each person in this country. It's our food. And, not to sound too sappy about it, but [opening Wildwood Kitchen] brought my dad back to life, in a way."

The formula for West's Blackening Spice—the magic behind this dish—was his father's, as was West's method of setting, cubing, and pan-frying the grits. The recipe makes 1½ cups of Blackening Spice and ¼ pound of Cajun Butter—much more than is needed for one batch of shrimp and grits, but both keep well and have many uses. West recommends melting the Cajun Butter on grilled steaks or corn and using the Blackening Spice to season ribs or locally caught white fish.

Serves 2

BLACKENING SPICE

Makes 1½ cups

- ½ cup paprika
- 4½ tablespoons salt

- 1¼ tablespoons onion powder
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 2¾ teaspoons cayenne
- 1 tablespoon white pepper
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- ¾ teaspoon dried thyme
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano

CAJUN BUTTER

- 2 tablespoons Blackening Spice
- ¼ pound (1 stick) butter, softened

FRIED CHEESE GRITS

- 4 cups water
- 1 cup quick-cooking grits
- 1½ cups grated sharp cheddar cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Vegetable oil

SHRIMP

- 2 bacon slices, chopped
- ¼ cup diced onion
- 12 wild extra-jumbo (16 to 20 per pound) shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 8 stalks kale, large center ribs removed and leaves chopped
- Pinch of salt
- Splash of white wine or beer (optional)
- 2 tablespoons Cajun Butter

For Blackening Spice: Combine all ingredients in a large bowl and mix thoroughly. Set aside. (Remaining spice can be stored in an airtight container in a cool, dry place.)

For Cajun Butter: Mix 2 tablespoons Blackening Spice into softened butter. Place in a clean, airtight container and store in refrigerator.

To prepare Fried Cheese

Grits: Bring water to a boil in a medium saucepan. Whisk in grits and reduce heat to low, stirring constantly until grits are smooth and thick, about 6 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in grated cheese, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Pour grits into a small or medium-size casserole dish and refrigerate until firm, about 2 hours. When grits are completely set, remove from dish by inverting on clean, dry surface. Cut grits into 1-to-1½-inch cubes. Set aside.

To cook shrimp: In a heavy-bottomed sauté pan over medium-high heat, cook bacon until it browns, 3 to 5 minutes. Add onion and stir for about 1 minute or until just starting to brown. Add shrimp and sauté for 30 seconds until slightly pink. Add garlic and kale, followed by a pinch of salt. (The salt will immediately extract water from the kale.) Simmer bacon, vegetables, and shrimp in sauce until shrimp are firm, pink, and opaque, about 3 to 4 minutes. Add a splash of white wine or beer, if desired, for additional flavor. Stir in Cajun Butter and sauté until it melts.

Meanwhile, finish grits:

Fill a large skillet with ½-inch vegetable oil over medium-high heat, until a drop of water sizzles on the surface of the oil. Add cubed grits and fry for 2 to 3 minutes per side until they are heated through and become toasted on the outside.

To serve: Place fried cheese grits in center of large platter. Cover with shrimp and sauce.

The magic to this dish is chef Justin West's **BLACKENING SPICE**, a heady blend of herbs and spices that is mixed into the butter used to sauté the **SHRIMP**.



SHRIMP AND GRITS WITH BACON, KALE, AND CAJUN BUTTER

Wildwood Kitchen, Santa Barbara

Pair it with The Paring 2013 Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County

Skillet Corn Hoecakes

Saddle Peak Lodge, Calabasas

Hoecakes were the creation of slaves working in the fields of the American South, who cooked the sweet cornbread cakes over hot coals on the flat-sided hoes they used for tending crops. This recipe comes from executive chef Chris Kufek of Saddle Peak Lodge (saddlepeaklodge.com) in Calabasas, who recommends serving hoecakes as a side for lunch or dinner, as a complete Southern breakfast layered with bacon and eggs on top or as a dessert. He serves them in 6-inch mini skillet. If using a larger baking dish, allow more time in the oven and check frequently with a cake tester until hoecake is done.

Serves 4 as a side

- 6 ounces butter, melted, plus 2 tablespoons butter, cold**
- 4 large eggs**
- 8 ounces buttermilk**
- 1¾ cups sugar**
- ¾ cup bread flour**
- ¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons white or yellow cornmeal**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- ½ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**

Place four 6-inch cast-iron skillets in oven and preheat to 350°F. In a medium bowl, whisk melted butter, eggs and buttermilk together. In a large bowl, combine sugar, flour, cornmeal, salt, cayenne, and baking powder. Fold wet mixture into dry mixture until just combined. Do not over-mix. With oven mitt, remove cast-iron skillets from oven. Coat skillets with remaining 2 tablespoons cold butter. Pour batter into skillets until it reaches about halfway up sides. (Any remaining batter can be used to make more hoecakes.) Bake in oven until cake is firm to the touch and a toothpick or cake tester inserted in its center comes out clean, about 15 minutes.

Peach Crumble

Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars, Oxnard

When asked about the inspiration behind this boozy peach dessert, executive chef Gabe Garcia of Oxnard's Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars (tierrasuratherzog.com) laughs. "I 100 percent love Southern food," he says. "I love comfort food and comfort dessert, and I like it simple and seasonal."

When he and pastry chef Kristen Ofeldt put their heads together to design a flourless, seasonal, farmers' market-driven dessert, heady peaches and prosecco came to mind for the filling, under a topping of home-style rolled oats.

This recipe is designed to be made in a large skillet, pie pan, or other oven-safe dish. At Tierra Sur, the crumble is served in individual seasoned mini cast-iron skillets each with a scoop of vanilla-bean custard, but either vanilla-bean ice cream or whipped cream would also be an apt complement. Because Tierra Sur is a dairy-free restaurant, this recipe calls for margarine, however, butter can be substituted.

Serves 8 to 10

CRUMBLE TOPPING

- 1½ cups (3 sticks) margarine or butter**
- 2 cups sugar**
- 2 cups all-purpose flour**
- 3 cups rolled oats**

FILLING

- 10 firm, not overly ripe peaches, sliced into wedges**
- 1½ cups prosecco or Champagne**
- 1 cup sugar or to taste**
- ½ cup packed brown sugar**
- Juice of 1 lemon**
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch**
- Water**

Place a 20-inch skillet, pie pan, or casserole dish in oven and preheat to 350°F.

For the topping: Place margarine, sugar, flour, and oats in the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Mix on low until ingredients come together to form evenly mixed moist crumbs about the size of peas. (Alternatively, the mixture can be combined by hand.)

For the filling: Place peaches in a Dutch oven or large pot, along with prosecco, sugar, and brown sugar. (Use less sugar depending on the sweetness of the peaches and prosecco.) Cook over medium heat stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon until mixture reaches a simmer and peaches are slightly tender, about 10 minutes. Add lemon juice and stir to combine.

In a separate bowl, mix cornstarch with enough water (1 to 2 tablespoons) to make a thin slurry without lumps. Add slurry to peaches and cook, stirring constantly until cornstarch is completely incorporated and sauce is clear, about 4 minutes. The mixture will be very thick. More cornstarch slurry can be added to further thicken the filling if the peaches are extra juicy. Remove from heat and allow mixture to cool.

To assemble: Remove hot dish from oven. Carefully pour peaches into dish until it is three-quarters full. Sprinkle topping over peaches until filling is no longer visible. Filling will absorb a large amount of topping as it bakes. Place dish on top rack of oven and bake for 15 to 20 minutes, turning halfway through. Topping should be deep golden brown and cooked through completely. Serve warm, topped with custard, ice cream, or whipped cream.

SKILLET CORN HOECAKE

Saddle Peak Lodge, Calabasas



Chef Gabe Garcia tops this PEACH and PROSECCO meal-closer with sweetened homestyle rolled oats. “I love comfort food and comfort dessert, and I like it SIMPLE and SEASONAL,” he says.



PEACH CRUMBLE

Tierra Sur at Herzog Wine Cellars, Oxnard

Pair it with Herzog 2014 Late Harvest Orange Muscat, California



Fried Chicken With Scallions

The Hungry Cat, Santa Barbara

The fried chicken at The Hungry Cat (thehungrycat.com/santa_barbara) in Santa Barbara is made with boneless, skin-on chicken thighs. Chef de cuisine Chanel Ducharme says that chicken legs or breasts can also be used, but she recommends using boneless cuts because bones can split during frying.

Serves 6

- 2 cups all-purpose flour, divided
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon ground cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- 2½ to 3 pounds boneless, skin-on chicken thighs (about 6 six-ounce pieces), legs, or breasts (butterflied)
- Vegetable or canola oil
- 3 scallions, trimmed, green and white parts sliced on the bias
- Paprika, for garnish
- 1 tablespoon chopped chives, for garnish

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Place 1 cup flour in a bowl. Place buttermilk in a second bowl. Combine remaining flour with garlic and onion powders, paprika, cayenne, salt, and black pepper in a third bowl. Form an assembly line and dredge each piece of chicken in flour, then dip into buttermilk, and dredge in flour and spice mixture before placing on baking sheet.

Fill a medium-size sauté pan or pot with ½ inch of oil and heat on medium-high. Oil is ready when a drop of water spatters and evaporates on the surface. Working in batches, add chicken pieces slowly to pan, being careful not to spatter oil. Fry pieces for 8 minutes, turning once, or until golden brown on all sides. Check for doneness by piercing chicken with a knife. It is cooked through when meat is opaque and juices run clear (a light pinkish-brown for thighs and legs; white for breasts). If, after frying, chicken is not cooked through, transfer pieces to baking dish and bake in a 375°F oven for 5 to 10 minutes, until done.

To serve: Place each piece of chicken on a biscuit, ladle gravy over, and sprinkle with scallions, a dusting of paprika, and chopped chives.

Biscuits With Country Gravy

The Hungry Cat, Santa Barbara

Flaky, tender biscuits are a good test of a home cook's mettle. At The Hungry Cat chef Ducharme uses a foolproof trick for fluffy biscuits: "I freeze and grate my butter," she says. "If you use regular refrigerated butter, it will start to soften and the biscuits will be less flaky. And don't cube it; grated butter is just the right size." Serve this dish individually on plates or family style, on a large platter, along with The Hungry Cat's Fried Chicken and Scallions.

Serves 6

BISCUITS

- 5¼ cups all-purpose flour plus ¼ cup for rolling
- 2¼ tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons baking powder
- 1¼ tablespoons salt
- ¼ pound (1 stick) unsalted butter, frozen for at least 1 hour, plus 4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted (optional)
- 2 cups buttermilk

COUNTRY GRAVY

- 1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup onion, diced small
- ½ cup celery, diced small
- ¼ cup garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 sprig rosemary, leaves removed and chopped
- 2 dried ancho chilies
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 cup chicken stock
- ¼ cup rendered chicken fat or butter (1 stick)
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon ground cayenne pepper
- Salt and black pepper to taste

To make biscuits: Preheat oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Measure out 5¼ cups flour on a clean dry work surface. Add sugar, baking powder, and salt and mix lightly with your hands. Grate frozen butter over flour mixture, incorporating it with

your hands. Pour ½ to 1 cup of buttermilk into flour mixture, turning and folding the dough with a spatula, dough scrape, or table knife until well combined. Continue adding remaining buttermilk, ½ to 1 cup at a time, incorporating each addition by turning and folding the dough. As you do this, dough may separate into small balls. Pull these to the side. (This prevents overworking the dough, which can make it tough.) When all buttermilk has been incorporated, combine all dough balls into one large ball.

Spread remaining ¼ cup flour on work surface and roll dough out with a rolling pin until it is 1 inch thick. Using a 2½-inch-round or square mold, cookie cutter, or drinking-glass edge, cut dough into six large biscuits. Transfer to baking sheet. For a darker biscuit, brush tops with melted butter. Bake biscuits for 12 minutes, rotating the pan halfway through.

While biscuits bake, make

gravy: In a medium pot, heat olive oil at medium-low. Add onion, celery, garlic, rosemary, chilies, and bay leaf and sauté for about 10 minutes, until vegetables are soft and onion starts to sweat. Add heavy cream and chicken stock. Reduce heat to low, bringing mixture to a low boil.

In a separate small saucepan, make a blond roux: Melt rendered chicken fat or butter over low heat. Alternate additions of heavy cream-vegetable mixture and flour, adding just a little at a time and whisking constantly to eliminate any lumps of flour and form a creamy mixture. Once all flour and liquids are added, season with cayenne, salt, and black pepper to taste. Remove bay leaf and chilies and discard.

Serve biscuits and gravy with fried chicken and scallions. ♦