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DINING

USA

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WASHINGTON DC

A Taste of the South

by LAURA SUTHERLAND



Washington DC

WHERE ON EARTH

HALFWAY THROUGH MY BEER, I looked across the table at the flight of bourbon sitting in front of my son. I was drinking a crisp lager, thinking it the perfect accompaniment to a rich Southern meal of broiled oysters dripping in butter and garlic, jumbo lump crab cakes with remoulade sauce and fried green tomatoes. But the beer was filling me up and there was still plenty of food left on my plate and more to come, like sweet potato cheesecake with toffee pecans.

Bourbon, it turned out, was the ideal drink to cut through any rich Southern menu, with just the right mix of sweet and savoury, snappy and sharp. And since you drink it one tiny sip at a time, it leaves plenty of room for the important things, like gumbo — or biscuits and gravy.

We were headquartered in Washington DC, and besides touring the city's superb free museums and grand marble monuments, we wanted to immerse ourselves in the cuisines of the American Deep South. After all, Washington DC is one of the US's northernmost southern cities, and it offers a full range of Southern food possibilities — Cajun and Creole from Louisiana, Low Country from the Carolinas and Georgia, and specialties from the Mississippi Delta region, like fried catfish and hushpuppies. We could sample chic restaurants with progressive menus, as well as laid-back neighbourhood joints with recipes from great grandmothers' kitchens — all in the same town.

The American South is a region where local crops have always influenced a cuisine that hasn't changed that much over the decades, or even centuries — think peach cobbler, pecan pie, black-eyed peas and cornbread. Other foods from the neighbourhood, like catfish, shrimp and crab have always been important, and a geographically varied influx of European settlers influenced how all these ingredients were used from place to place. But more than anything, the Southern table was determined by African cooks and the spices and seeds they brought along with them and the way they put everything together.

Today in Washington DC, certain traditional dishes, like fried chicken, greens and mac and cheese are found on just about every Southern restaurant's menu. But the ways they are cooked, coated, topped and combined differ considerably — from trendy and sophisticated to old-school simple. »



THIS PAGE FROM TOP Georgia Brown's; Ben's Chili Bowl half smoke with chili cheese fries; Acadiana oysters.
FACING PAGE Capitol.



SERVES 6

Louisiana Jambalaya

THIS IS A great party dish. If you want to make it a day ahead, stop at the end of step 6, cool and refrigerate the jambalaya. When you are ready to serve, rewarm gently, adding a little more chicken stock if needed, and continue with step 7.

Bacon ½ lb, diced	Creole Seasoning 1–3 Tbs, to taste
Andouille Sausage 1 ½ lbs, sliced	Dried Thyme 1 tsp
Canola Oil 3 Tbs	Dried Basil 1 tsp
Chicken Thighs 6, skinless, boneless, cut into 1" cubes	Dried Oregano 1 tsp
Salt to taste	Bay Leaves 2
Freshly Ground Black Pepper to taste	Cayenne Pepper 1 tsp
Onion 1 large, diced	Celery Salt 1 Tbs
Green Bell Pepper 1, seeded and diced	Old Bay Seasoning 1 tsp
Red Bell Pepper 1, seeded and diced	Crushed Tomatoes canned, 2 cups
Celery 3 stalks, diced	Chicken Stock 2 cups
Garlic 3 cloves, minced	Medium Shrimp 1 ½ lbs, peeled and deveined
Jasmine Rice 2 cups	Green Onions 1 bunch, chopped, including greens

- 1 SPRINKLE** cut chicken thighs with Creole seasoning mix, toss well and set aside.
- 2 HEAT** a large Dutch oven over high heat until it is hot, then reduce the heat to moderate and add the oil.
- 3 BROWN** the bacon and sausage, then add the chicken and cook, stirring, for about 5 minutes or until the chicken is golden brown.
- 4 ADD** the onions and cook for about 15 minutes until they are brown. Add the bell peppers, celery and garlic and cook for about 5 minutes more, stirring occasionally.
- 5 ADD** the rice and all the spices and herbs and cook, stirring often, for 3 minutes.
- 6 INCREASE** the heat to medium high and add the tomatoes and chicken stock. Bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer for 15 minutes.
- 7 REMOVE** the lid from the pot and add the shrimp and cook for 5 more minutes. Turn off the heat and add the green onions. If the rice is firm leave the lid on and continue to cook in for an additional 10 minutes. If the rice is soupy, remove the lid and let sit uncovered for 10 minutes until most of the liquid evaporates. Fluff and serve.

«Our first stop — Vidalia — takes its name seriously. We'd scarcely taken our seats when a basket of sweet Vidalia onion biscuits and onion marmalade appeared. Naturally, we had to order the tender baked Vidalia onion with braised oxtail, piquillo peppers, gruyère, and sherry. We'd also been firmly instructed to try their buttery shrimp and grits and their upscale twist on Frogmore stew, thick with snapper, clams, shrimp, crab, smoked sausage and potatoes.

In between lunches and dinners we walked the National Mall, visiting the Smithsonian Museum's many branches. It turned out that it was all the walking that allowed us to keep up with all the eating. And it felt good to feed some of our other senses to appreciate the treasures headquartered in this capital city.

Appetites restored, our next stop was swank Georgia Brown's. Specializing in the Low Country cuisine of Georgia and the Carolinas, this upscale restaurant knows you'll be dropping a few cornbread crumbs and sloshing your second Georgia peach martini so they top their elegant long white tablecloths with a square of paper and give you plenty of napkins. Their Devil Shrimp was hands-down my husband's favourite dish of the trip and he couldn't stop raving about the size and flavour of the tender shrimp and its savoury crab cake stuffing — but I liked my Charleston Perla with Carolina red rice, andouille sausage, duck confit, scallions, jumbo shrimp and cornbread crumble even better.

Our hotel — the Palomar in Dupont Circle — was centrally located, so we enjoyed a pre-lunch walk on one day to the U-Street neighbourhood, where we admired a mural of Duke Ellington on the side of a building in this African American neighbourhood where he grew up. Another mural featuring comedian Bill Cosby and President Obama decorated the side of Ben's Chili Bowl, a legendary hole-in-the-wall where we ordered what these famous patrons always get — the 'chili half-smoke': a smoked pork and beef sausage in a fluffy steamed bun topped with spicy chili sauce, mustard and onions.

If you happen to visit DC in the summer, stop at U-Street's no-frills Oohh's & Aahh's Soul Food Restaurant to pick up a picnic dinner. Everything comes in a Styrofoam clamshell container, whether you eat in or take it out, so it's easy to tote their popular wings, fried shrimp, collard greens and cornbread to the steps of the Capitol Building to listen to a lively band concert while you eat in the balmy night air — free concerts are held every night of the week.

Luckily I'd learned my bourbon lesson before we hit Acadiana, featuring the distinctive cuisine of Louisiana. A page and a half of bourbon choices gave me plenty to think about and so did the menu. We had to order gumbo, of course — piled high with crab, shrimp,


crawfish, oysters and redfish — and a crispy wild catfish dish garnished with killer house-made bacon that was so remarkably good it made us want to come back for their weekly Mardi Gras brunch on Sunday.

But we had plans to return to the U-Street neighbourhood to check out the historic Howard Theater's gospel brunch. The Harlem Choir was performing so we stopped in to load our plates at the buffet and listen to their celestial singing. Every Sunday, people line up before the doors even open to get a good seat.

Celebrity murmurings were always in the background when we mentioned Art and Soul. It's where Oprah Winfrey's personal chef now cooks and President Obama orders fried chicken, so we figured we had to try it. As I bit into a juicy drumstick with its delicately crispy cornmeal coating, I understood why Barack is glad the White House is just around the corner from this place.

There were other places in Washington DC we could have eaten, like popular Eatonville where all we could manage was an after-dinner drink of one of their exotic riffs on mint juleps. But on a lark one afternoon, we decided to take a side trip to nearby Alexandria to walk around its 18th-century village and check out its famous Torpedo Factory with two storeys of artist's studios.

We realized we could eat at Alexandria's Southern-style Jackson 20, so we sampled their tasty version of Carolina shrimp and grits with tasso ham and Anson Mills grits, a name we kept seeing on menus throughout our Washington DC excursion. We pulled out our smart phones to satisfy our curiosity and discovered we could order our own fresh-milled grits from the Anson Mills in Columbia, South Carolina.

As we lingered over our last glass of bourbon, we sent off a grits order right then and there. We knew we couldn't come close to recreating the talent in the kitchens we'd visited over the last few days, but we vowed to do our best. 



THIS PHOTO Dishing up dogs at Ben's Chili Bowl.

Vidalia
www.vidaliadc.com

Georgia Brown's
www.gbrowns.com

Ben's Chili Bowl
www.benschilibowl.com

Oohh's & Aahh's
www.oohhsnaahhs.com

Acadiana
www.acadianarestaurant.com

Howard Theater
www.thehowardtheatre.com

Art and Soul
www.artandsoul.com

Eatonville
www.eatonvilleresaurant.com

Jackson 20
www.jackson20.com

Anson Mills
www.ansonmills.com



KIMBERLY VARDEMAN



MAKES ONE 9-INCH PIE

Bourbon Pecan Pie

Pastry¹
for a 9" pie

Eggs 3

White Sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Light Brown Sugar $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Dark Corn Syrup
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup

Melted Butter
3 Tbs

Vanilla Extract
1 tsp

Bourbon 2 Tbs

Salt $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp

Pecan Halves
 $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups, roughly chopped

Pecan Halves
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup, for decorating

¹ Use your favourite recipe.

- 1 PREHEAT** oven to 400°F.
- 2 BEAT** the eggs in a medium bowl. Then beat in the sugar, corn syrup, vanilla, bourbon and salt.
- 3 ADD** the chopped pecans and stir to mix.
- 4 POUR** the filling into an unbaked pie shell and decorate the top with whole pecans.
- 5 BAKE** in the preheated oven for 12 minutes; then turn heat down to 350°F and loosely cover the top of the pie with aluminum foil. Bake 30–45 more minutes, until the pie is slightly puffed and the centre is firm to the touch.

LAURA SUTHERLAND is a travel writer based in Northern California. 