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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 tbsp salt
1 tbsp 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.