**Trends in Southern Cuisine**

When most Northerners think of Southern food, they imagine biscuits and fried chicken, barbecued pork, collard greens, and mac 'n' cheese. If they’ve actually traveled below the Mason-Dixon line, they might add in grits and hush-puppies. Back about a decade ago, a fad for “Southern” food started hitting trendy restaurants and bars around the rest of the country—but most of this food was stereotypical and had little to do with what’s been happening in actual cooking in the South since about the same time. The major changes are parallel to those taking place in other cuisines—a return to the roots and a concern with health and good nutrition.

The roots of Southern cooking are threefold—Native American, African, and European. For centuries before the Spanish landed in what is now Florida, the Indians there had hunted and fished. What they didn’t roast, they dried or smoked into jerky for eating later. As farmers, they cultivated beans, squash, and most importantly, corn—the vegetable tripod on which much Southern regional cuisine rests. They stewed the beans and squash, sometimes with meat, and made their own forms of cornbread.

In the sixteenth century, the Spanish explorers brought pigs, which became immediately popular with the local tribes. In the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the French brought new ways of preparing seafood as well as sauces. The English brought dairy cattle and cheeses, the Irish brought corned beef and soda bread. And when Africans were imported as slaves to work on the plantations, they and the traders who sold them to the planters brought foods as well—okra, peanuts, eggplant, and others. Slaves from West Africa were prized for their knowledge of how to cultivate rice, which likewise became a Southern staple and the basis of Gullah and Geechee cuisine—the foundation of soul food. The slaves learned how to use every part of the pig as a food source, and also how to prepare highly nutritious greens like collard, mustard, and kale that were otherwise used to feed farm animals.

As food writer and TV personality Anthony Bourdain notes, some of the best dishes in the world are the inventions of poor and downtrodden people getting creative with what they have—and Southern food is no exception to this rule. (Think of greens with ham hocks, or pickled pig-foot, or for that matter the quintessentially Southern bowl of grits.) Now chefs across the region are honoring not only those ingenious recipes and techniques, often handed down through many generations, but the raw materials as well, bringing out flavors too often leached away by overcooking or obliterated by heavy, floury gravies and too-sweet sauces. They insist on fresh, locally grown produce and properly raised and cut meats. Alice Waters may be a Northerner, but her attitudes to food are a comfortable fit with the traditions of an agrarian region whose cooks have long served dishes made from ingredients pulled straight from the garden or freshly caught or butchered that same day.

This renewed emphasis on freshness goes hand in hand with a concern for health. Sure, the deep fryer is still there in the kitchen, but the sauté pan is busy, and the grill is playing a much larger role. Innovations like blackened redfish have given rise to a whole new approach to preparing seafood. Vegetables are likewise being highlighted, whether raw in vivid salads, steamed or sautéed as sides, or as accents in meat or seafood creations. Mac ‘n’ cheese is still on many Southern menus, but in some eateries the noodles are being replaced by artfully cut vegetables or spaghetti squash, even as grits receive a flavor upgrade from white cheddar or (a current favorite) smoked gouda or gruyere. The South has been renowned for a cuisine that, while tasty, is not exactly good for the body, and especially not the circulatory system, earning the region the nickname of the “Stroke Belt.” Today’s chefs are helping to undo that reputation.

The new Southern cooking shows that the essence of a regional cuisine can be preserved and even restored by attention to sourcing, by letting food’s native flavors speak for themselves while juxtaposing and blending them creatively, and by lightening up on artery-clogging oils and saturated fats—really, three interdependent aspects of the same approach. Time to explore!