

ENTERTAIN YOUR GUESTS WITH SOUTHERN FLAIR

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Sure I live and grew up in Virginia, but I don't really consider myself a Southerner in the Scarlett O'Hara/Nathalie Dupree/Colonel Saunders vein. When I think of Southern foods, I think of fried chicken, fluffy biscuits and mint juleps. So "Rebecca Lang's Southern Entertaining for a New Generation" intrigued me not only because of the face of the young woman on the cover, but also the idea that Southern foods could somehow be adapted to modern sensibilities.

Lang, who graduated from Johnson & Wales University, is a food columnist and private cooking instructor and lives in Atlanta. She also apprenticed with Dupree and served as an assistant food editor and recipe developer for Oxmoore House publishers.

As grating as Lang's boasts that she is "in heaven as a hostess" and that "my guests are mystified by the fact that a young woman could successfully have a dinner party with no caterers," may sound, she does break down the mysticism and intimidation of the Southern kitchen. If Martha Stewart is unsuccessful making a comeback after she's freed from jail, I wouldn't be surprised if Rebecca Lang stepped up to fill the void.

Lang shares her favorite family recipes, passed down for generations and to her from her two grandmothers Sara ("Sa") and Claudia ("Tom"). It seems that Southern women don't feel the need to correct their grandchildren when they mispronounce their matriarch's names.

The first 20-some pages are devoted to basics and how-tos, and then chapters are organized by recipes designed for specific times of the day in which a party might be scheduled, morning, noon, mid- afternoon and evening. And then each chapter further divides four different types of a particular event. For each type of party, Lang supplies a timeline, menus, grocery list and suggested wines.

At the end of each recipe is a fun fact, hot tip or "living light" substitution. Apparently, the new generation of Southerners is keeping an eye on waistlines. Lang provides recipes for beverages such as lemonade, breakfast smoothies, comforting side dishes, flavorful entrees and desserts for every occasion.

What's great about this cookbook is that, while light on pictures, the recipes are short and simple, and the layout is easy to read.

At the end of the cookbook are helpful conversions, guides to recipes and sources for ingredients (Lang uses only White Lily Flour and Green Pepper Tabasco) and "Southern Substitutions." If you're working on a dish and find you're out of buttermilk, did you know you can produce your own by mixing one cup of milk plus 1 tablespoon of white vinegar? Or that if you're out of shallots, you can use 2 teaspoons of chopped onion plus 1 small minced garlic clove?

I'm a big fan of "Fried Green Tomatoes" the movie, so this twist on the Southern favorite sounded quite yummy:

Fried green tomatoes with goat cheese and bacon

2 tablespoons olive oil, plus some for the pan

6 ounces bacon, chopped

1 cup cornmeal

1 cup all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

2 large eggs

2 tablespoons milk

4 large green tomatoes (about 2 pounds), peeled and cut into 1/2- inch slices

4 ounces goat cheese, crumbled

In a large skillet, warm the olive oil over medium heat; add the chopped bacon. Reduce the heat to low and cook the bacon until browned and crispy. Remove the bacon from the pan, reserving the drippings in the pan. Cool. Set aside.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the cornmeal, flour, salt and pepper. Combine eggs and milk in a small mixing bowl.

If needed, add enough olive oil to the skillet with the reserved drippings to create a depth of 1/4 inch.

Heat the skillet over medium heat until the oil sizzles with a small dash of cornmeal mixture.

Coat each tomato slice with the cornmeal mixture; dip thoroughly in the egg mixture and return to coat a second time in the cornmeal mixture.

Fry the coated tomato slices in the hot oil for 3 to 4 minutes per side or until golden brown.

While they're still hot, sprinkle the tomato slices evenly with goat cheese and crumbled bacon. Serve immediately. Makes 8 servings.

Tip: To prevent "battered" fingers, use separate hands for dipping the tomato slices in the cornmeal mixture and egg mixture.