

THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Sunrise in the rural South is an event everyone should experience at least once. There are no mosquitoes out that early, the gnats are still sleeping, and the birds are often all you hear. If you're lucky to be near the coast, you'll notice the way the Spanish moss filters the new sunlight like an old porch screen. The stillness outside welcomes the meal that the South does best.

When I was a child growing up in a small South Georgia town, there was never a special spot in the pantry for cereal boxes and granola bars. We had no such thing. Breakfast consisted of hot grits, crispy bacon, and scrambled eggs, even on the busiest of school days. My father cooked a hot meal for my sister and me every single day, and we never went to school without being stuffed to the brim. On big test days, my mom, a second-grade teacher, would add orange juice to our repertoire to make our test scores higher. When my report card was less than impressive, I could never use a lack of morning fuel as an excuse.

The first meal of the day is different in the South, in all of the very best ways. It's the first chance to sit at the table, center yourself around the one piece of furniture that holds the whole house together, and

start the day with a sense of home. Breakfast is what Southern women do to take care of those they raise and to sustain themselves.

This love affair with the first meal of the day is not mine alone. I inherited the table that my grandmother grew up around. This piece of furniture holds the women of our family together across four generations. My grandmother ate breakfast as a child on the very same stripy tiger oak that my daughter does today, over 100 years later. It's at this table that breakfast was served during defining moments in my family long before I was born.

My grandmother's brother took a train from Atlanta after coming home from World War I, arriving in Madison, Georgia, in the middle of the night. He walked ten miles to their home with just a glow from the moon to light the way. He stunned his parents and 10 brothers and sisters by strolling up the long farm driveway as the sun rose. They had no idea he was alive, much less back from war. The dogs announced his arrival and quickly awakened the entire household. I've heard countless stories of the unexpected and bountiful breakfast that my great-grandmother prepared. It was, quite possibly, the greatest meal my grandmother and her siblings ever

enjoyed. It was filled with the salted pork that was being saved for the most special of occasions, eggs from the coop, and biscuits made with the creamiest of buttermilk. It was an early morning meal where dinner plates were sprinkled with the happiest of tears as they fell in overwhelming joy and gratefulness. My table was the center of this morning rapture and held them all together as a complete family once again.

I said "I do" to my husband of 23 years at 10:30 in the morning on a mild December Saturday on a Georgia island. The decision to marry before noon was an easy one to make. We liked that eggs, mounds of bacon, scuppernong jelly, and silver dollar pancakes would outshine our wedding cake at the reception. Unlike in other parts of the country, it's not unusual for breakfast to be the highlight of just about any occasion.

Hunt breakfasts, affectionately called the Dine after the Dash, in Virginia are over-the-top ways to fill up hungry riders after their mornings of chasing fox. Breakfasts are held after the hunt, even if that falls well into the afternoon. Huge, lavish spreads filled with linens, sterling silver, breakfast casseroles, tiered cakes, stiff drinks, corn muffins, deviled eggs, and ham biscuits greet hunters with the utmost of lavish Southern hospitality.

When kickoff in Oxford, Mississippi, is before noon, breakfast takes over the most famous college tailgating locale, the Grove. Football fans do an early morning meal with sausage balls and fried chicken biscuits along with bourbon and Cokes between shouts of "Hotty Toddy" from an endless sea of red and blue.

The South's most famous golf tournament wouldn't leave patrons hungry until their pimento cheese and egg salad sandwiches are ready for lunch. A tradition of green waxed paper-wrapped breakfast sandwiches sustains devotees of the gentleman's game and those that admire azaleas nearly hypnotized to bloom on time.

No matter where in the South, or for what momentous occasion, gathering over breakfast lives on. It's a comforting and filling start that saturates the soul with a connection to the past and a craving for the day to come.

by **Rebecca Lang**

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