

Cookbook author Virginia Willis makes two stops in Greenville



Cooking up memories, y'all



Sweet Potato Grits is one of the recipes in Virginia Willis' new cookbook. HELEN DUJARDIN/REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

By Lillia Callum-Penso

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For Virginia Willis, comfort is fresh fruit cobbler straight out of the oven. As long as she can remember, the chef and cookbook author has turned to fresh fruit and warm crumbly dough to lift her spirits. Though caramel cake has been known to do the trick, too.

"The cobbler is dead simple, and it's delicious," Willis enthuses, speaking by phone from her home in Atlanta. "When we were growing up, we would always freeze peaches, and so we would have peach cobbler year-round."

And there it is. The makings of the story behind the recipe. Cobbler is not just cobbler for Willis; it's her memories of summers with her grandparents and walks in the woods to collect berries, memories of a time that makes Willis sigh. One bite takes her back.

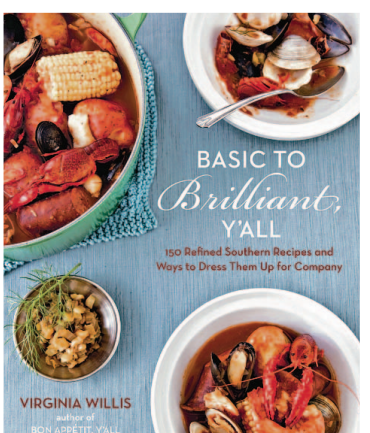
"It was so wonderful," she says slowly. Now, Willis finds fulfillment in helping others reconnect with their own comforting food memories.

"I have so much satisfaction in the fact that I can write something that touches someone or makes them hungry or makes them remember their food memory ... a food memory from their childhood."

The Albany, Ga., native's roots run deep with stories of her mother's and grandmother's kitchen and of years as a culinary student in France. And she was a history major to boot. The stories guide Willis every day, and they have given direction to every cookbook she's produced, including her newest, "Basic to Brilliant, Y'all: 150 Refined Southern Recipes and Ways to Dress Them Up for Company," released in September.

Willis will share her new book, her food memories and her wisdom Tuesday at a special Book Your Lunch event at Soby's and at a special cooking class at Foxfire that evening.

Taste



Chef and cookbook author Virginia Willis will share her Southern and French-inspired cuisine and sign copies of her new book here on Tuesday. ANGIE MOSIER

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WILLIS

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The new book comes three years after Willis' very successful "Bon Appetit, Y'all," which has been lauded as a Southern classic. But while "Bon Appetit" was a look at Willis' Southern-French roots, "Basic to Brilliant" is a look at Willis' two lives these days: teacher and chef. The book's 150 recipes are written in Willis' style — simple, fresh and with a touch of class. But at the end of each, the chef includes a "chef's touch" note, a way to take the recipe from basic to brilliant.

For example, a bitter-sweet chocolate bread pudding gets a boost from the addition of chevre caramel sauce. A warm salad prepared with shrimp, tomatoes, fresh corn and basil gets a brilliant tweak with the addition of popcorn.

"So you've got corn and corn, and then a different texture and a different temperature," Willis says, clearly excited to share the revelation. "Who would think of putting popcorn in a salad? But that's a very chef-driven thing to do."

Willis' grandmother always said her granddaughter should be a teacher, but Willis always protested. That's why it has surprised her how much she now enjoys the role. She finds infinite passion in sharing ingredients with people and then watching the understanding creep across their faces. Cooking instructor is but one of the many hats Willis wears these days, and yet it's surprisingly one of her favorites.

The teaching has translated to educating as well, which is directing Willis' next move, a possible television show. She just completed the pilot for "Cooking From Scratch." The show takes her on the road to discovering the roots of food. Not the science behind it a la Alton Brown, but rather the people, the culture and, of course, the stories that fuel the things we eat.

"There's a season to things," Willis says. "When you're buying zucchini and squash in February in the store that's from South America and that was picked half a world away. ... I think it's important for people to learn where their food comes from."

■ Reporter Lillia Callum-Penso can be reached at 864-298-3768.

Sweet Potato Grits

Serves 4 to 6

2 cups water
2 cups low-fat or whole milk
1 cup stone-ground grits
2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and grated
Coarse salt and freshly ground white pepper
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
Pinch of ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon unsalted butter

In a large, heavy saucepan, combine the water and milk and bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat. Slowly add the grits, whisking constantly. Add the sweet potato. Season with salt and white pepper. Decrease the heat to low and simmer, stirring often, until the grits are creamy and thick, 45 to 60 minutes.

Taste the grits and sweet potato to make sure both are cooked and tender. Add the ground ginger, cinnamon and butter. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and white pepper. Serve immediately.

Sweet Potato Spoonbread

To go from basic to brilliant, add a bit of technique and transform the basic country classic into a brilliant soufflé-like spoonbread. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Butter an ovenproof casserole or round 2-quart soufflé mold. To the sweet potato-grits mixture, add 2 large egg yolks, one at a time, stirring after each addition. In a separate bowl, using a hand-held mixer, beat 2 large egg whites with a pinch of salt on high speed until stiff peaks form. Gently fold the egg whites into the warm sweet potato mixture. Transfer the lightened mixture to the prepared pan; smooth the surface with a spatula. Bake until the outside is puffed and risen, the inside is firm but moist, and the top is golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Serve immediately while still puffed. Serves 4 to 6.

Source: "Basic to Brilliant, Y'all: 150 Refined Southern Recipes and Ways to Dress Them Up for Company" by Virginia Willis

YOU CAN GO

What: Book Your Lunch with Virginia Willis

When: Noon-2 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Soby's, downtown Greenville

Cost: \$25 per person. For tickets, call Fiction Addiction at 864-675-0540 or go to www.bookyourlunch.com.

What: Cooking Class with Virginia Willis

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Foxfire Gallery & Kitchen Shops, Augusta Road

Cost: \$45 per person. To register, call Foxfire at 864-242-0742 or register online at www.foxfireshops.com.