

Atlanta's Virginia Willis poised to become next celebrity chef



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Rainwater wasn't supposed to be an ingredient in the milk sauce for the pork loin.

Water, however, is willful, storms are hot-tempered, and on a recent night a gully-washer doused the Salud Cooking School at Whole Foods in Alpharetta. Inside, in the school's demonstration kitchen, chef Virginia Willis — fresh off the second printing of her new book, “Bon Appetit, Y'all” — was turning a hefty loin in a simmering pan of milk. Perfectly cooked pork should be pale pink inside, she told the class of 13 9-to-5ers and housewives.

“If it's white and has no juice, it's overcooked,” she said, advising the group not to be overly paranoid about contracting a food-borne illness.

The audience stared back at Willis with a pinch of incredulity.

Right about then, thunder clapped and rainwater began drizzling through a roof vent and down the side of the mammoth stove hood like a stream of extra-virgin olive oil. All eyes registered shock. The burners hissed. Oh, Lord, the loin! With a magician's speed, Willis slid away the pan of pork.

“Wooo, we don't want any of that in there,” she said.

Danger averted, the pork was sliced, plated and served.

This is how it happens in real life for a real-life chef. You have to be ready for anything and respond accordingly. Virginia Willis is ready. And right now she hears opportunity knocking.

At 41, the buzz is all over Willis and “Bon Appetit Y’all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking,” which blends the Southern cooking traditions she learned as a child in Montezuma, Ga., and Louisiana with the classic French technique that is her foundation. So collard greens are sliced in chiffonade style. Mayonnaise biscuits are composed with homemade mayo and White Lily flour.

After years of providing the assist to others off-screen, she seems ready to join the realm of celebrity chefs. She is in talks with three production companies to create her own television show, and last month she met with producers in Los Angeles. “Bon Appetit, Y’all” (Ten Speed Press, \$32.50), released this spring, is about to go into its third printing. Publishers Weekly called it “an original and welcome newcomer to a classic cookbook library.”

Willis seems a woman on the verge.

More than qualified

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you say, her and every other “reality” cooking show hopeful. Except Willis ain’t them.

For sure she is camera-ready, with her salt and pepper hair pulled into her signature ponytail and a slick of red lipstick revealing a full, sly smile. She is sturdy. Not a tight-sweater chef like Nigella or Giada, but just as beautiful. And her voice rolls along like a Patsy Cline tune.

But this woman has her bona fides: Her degrees are from L’Academie de Cuisine; she came of age in the French chateau kitchen of the venerable Anne Willan; she was apprentice, caretaker (and sometimes gofer) for Nathalie Dupree, then learned to out-exact the exacting Martha Stewart as kitchen director for Stewart’s first television series in New York.

Along the way, Willis traveled the globe, became a food writer (she writes occasionally for the AJC), produced a Discovery Channel show and “Home Plate” for Turner South, taught cooking classes, co-authored cookbooks and worked with chef Bobby Flay back when he was but a wee thing on the Lifetime network. And then there was that magical week in France with Julia Child.

Following her mentors’ paths, the Atlanta-based Willis hopes to build a powerhouse empire on three things: proper technique; Southern food, a genre that seems to be gaining steam rather than losing it; and that most quaint Southern phrase, “y’all.”

“I’m comfortable with who I am now, and I’ve worked hard and worked with the best,” Willis said recently, as she tested a recipe in her own, modest kitchen. “I know what I’m doing.”

Those who know her say that ultimately she is just who she appears to be: a Southern girl who knows how to cook and is determined to make good. But at the heart of her ambition is the desire to take the cherished family recipes and regional food that nourished her and bring them to the masses in a different, slightly more refined way. A mission to give fried fatback dignity, even elegance.

“I missed the crest of the wave, but for Virginia, a lot of this is luck, of being in the right place at the right time,” said her former boss, Dupree. “She’s made a lot of decisions to put herself there on the crest. She’s been exposed to the front and back of the house long enough now.”

Late to the kitchen

One early decision came in high school, when she insisted that her grandmother Meme teach her how to dress a deer a neighbor had given the family. If you don’t show me, I’ll never know, Willis recalls saying. She wanted to master the method. Yet while curious about process, other than shelling butter beans, catching fish and making biscuits with her grandmother, young Virginia Willis never showed a real interest in cooking as a life’s work.

“We thought she’d be a schoolteacher or a researcher,” said Willis’ mother, also named Virginia, who lives in Augusta.

For a while Willis thought she’d teach as well, majoring in history at the University of Georgia. But after graduation, she and her partner, Becky Minchew, moved to Charleston, S.C. Willis seemed to drift. She waited tables, got a job at a department store, ate some, drank some, cooked some and let her early 20s happen. The culinary school Johnson & Wales University had a Charleston campus then. Minchew suggested she enroll.

“But she wasn’t interested in pursuing it as a career choice,” Minchew said. “Back then it wasn’t as glamorous as it is now. It was considered a trade. If you weren’t smart enough for college, then you went to cooking school.”

Around that time, Nathalie Dupree was using Charleston as a base to introduce the rest of the country to her brand of new Southern cuisine. She’d written the definitive “New Southern Cooking,” had a show on PBS and a sparkle that looked to Willis like opportunity. Here was someone taking the food she’d grown up with, reinterpreting it and getting paid to do it. Willis wrangled an unpaid apprenticeship to test Dupree’s recipes, help cater her parties and style food. She wanted some of that sparkle.

“I was intimidated because she was a celebrity,” Willis said. “I mean she was the doyenne of Southern cooking, and I was literally learning how to cook in her kitchen.”

Dupree was impressed with Willis’ diligence and her willingness to accept any assignment, even what might seem like drudgery, like helping to care for Dupree’s aging mother. They were traits that would later serve the apprentice well.

Dupree told Willis that if she didn’t want to spend her life slicing fennel in someone else’s kitchen, she should get formal training in the classic French method at L’Academie de Cuisine in Maryland. Willis heeded the advice and graduated from L’Academie with honors.

Schooled in France

Cooking with French technique in Maryland, however, is not quite the same as doing it in France. Nearing 30, Willis made the decision to apprentice herself, again, for no money. This time in the kitchen of Anne Willan, the grande dame of French country cooking, at LaVarenne Cooking School in Burgundy.

To make ends meet, she found work in a nearby restaurant. Early on, she slept in the deserted dining room on the floor between shifts. At the end of a grueling night of service she and the other staff would clean the kitchen

with alcohol, inch by inch.

The LaVarenne program was supposed to last a summer. She stayed nearly three years.

“When she arrived she was good at cooking, but her range of cooking was narrow,” Willan said. “She didn’t know the history of food. But she was eager to learn. She always volunteered and worked very long hours, but she always had a joke to keep up spirits.”

So when Julia Child came to visit Willan and needed an assistant, Willis was the first choice. “I treated her like my grandmother,” Willis said of Child. Eventually they cooked a rabbit together.

It was there, in Burgundy, that the idea for “Bon Appetit, Y’all” took seed. Willis had to test a recipe that called for a few pods of okra, but she could only buy it by the flat. Willan hated to see so much go to waste. Willis recalled Grandmother Meme’s fried okra recipe and whipped it up. Willan dubbed it “okra popcorn” and devoured it.

After returning to the States, Willis landed a job as kitchen director for Bobby Flay’s Lifetime TV series. Then one day she got a call. Dupree had passed her name along to another producer. Martha Stewart was looking for a kitchen director. Would she be interested?

Brand it like Martha

“I had been trying to get on with Martha Stewart for years,” Willis said.

Be careful what you wish for.

“Martha tells you from the get-go, ‘If you’re not A-plus, you don’t belong

here,’ ” Willis said. She was determined to make the grade. In the three years she worked on Stewart’s “Martha Stewart Living” show in New York, she cooked for Bill Clinton and Aretha Franklin, among others.

Yet, after all that, she was still working for someone else, cooking their recipes. So after Sept. 11, she moved to Atlanta, began her own production company and taught cooking classes. She and Minchew bought a house near Oakhurst and put a chicken coop in the backyard next to a vegetable garden. Willis began collecting her family’s recipes, testing them, bending them to French rule. If Willan had taught her to cook, Stewart had taught her the importance of branding.

She wrote in her dining room at a dining table that once belonged to Meme. When the time came to select an image for the book’s inside cover pages, a sepia picture of Meme’s handwritten recipes filled the bill. Willis cried when she held the first copy in her hands.

“This is a book written by someone who knows Georgia well enough to connect Valdosta, Ga., to Valle d’Aosta, Italy,” said John T. Edge, contributing editor at Gourmet magazine and director of the Southern Foodways Alliance. “Her approach is informed by tradition, but not restricted or bound by it, but enlivened by it. She doesn’t plow the same furrow over and over. It’s not a paean to all things lard.”

Teaching roots show

Willis is in talks to write a second book. She's ready, she said, for her own TV show, which would be more educational rather than reality-based. Willis has no interest in making somebody cry on television for choosing a yellow shallot rather than a white one. Sadism is not an ingredient to be sprinkled in her kitchen.

"The point of it all is to get people in the kitchen and to the table," Willis said. "Some of the most meaningful conversations I've ever had have been with my family in the kitchen."

In the crowded field of celebrity chefs, she plans to claim her space and "do what I do," she said.

Stewart recently had Willis on her show as a featured guest. When her old boss remarked on camera how gray her hair had gotten, Willis, just as she had with that pork loin sauce, made a skillful save.

"Well," she said, "I've gotten older." Then she smiled that sly, soft smile.



Virginia Willis (left, with friends Lisa Ekus-Saffer and Mary Moore) shot to fame with her cook book, about to go into its third printing.