

# LIFE



## Giving Thanks

Some of chef and cookbook author Virginia Willis' favorite things include a cigar box filled with recipes, cookbooks by women whom she admires, and beloved kitchen wares. They are what make her cooking so personal.



# BON APPETIT, Y'all

Virginia Willis Talks Holiday Recipes with a Side of Memories

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Macaroni and cheese, collard greens and celeriac puree are comforting holiday side dishes. Virginia is the ultimate hostess, and there is always a smile on her signature red lips. Warm crab dip serves as a hearty appetizer. Ambrosia freshens the palate with its citrus tang. ■ OPPOSITE: Willis says that fresh, local ingredients are key to good taste, and it doesn't get any fresher or more local than the eggs from her own backyard chickens or the vegetables from her garden. She sets the table with her collection of heirloom china, mixed with pieces collected on her travels.



“THESE ARE FRENCH YOGURT JARS—I’m obsessed with them. Oh, and here is my grandmother’s rolling pin. See the burn on it? It rolled over too close to the stove a long time ago—still works, though.” Cookbook author and Atlanta resident Virginia Willis is pulling out items from her kitchen cupboards and drawers. Virginia knows that, when preparing for a celebratory meal, everything from the butter dish to the pan the food is cooked in plays an important role.

“When I roll out biscuits with that pin, I am conjuring the soul of every person that has used it before. And those yogurt jars? I collected those when I was living in France, attending École de Cuisine La Varenne. Using those jars for cocktails or receptacles for jam reminds me of my time and experience there,” she explains.

Virginia continues to extract interesting items, placing them on the counter to be considered. Emmylou Harris can be heard in the background, and Willis alternates between singing along and letting out a sigh or giggle as she regards each special piece. Stepping back, she looks over the collection and tears up. “That stack represents my life,” she says. “It’s so much of what made me who I am.”

Now that Willis is on a book tour for her latest tome, *Bon Appetit, Y’all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking* (Ten Speed Press), she is busier than ever. She understands how hard it is for the rest of us to keep up with our own careers and families, much less prepare a meaningful meal. That is why Willis teaches. Her stories don’t make you feel overwhelmed or jealous; Virginia tells the story of her own experience, which all but begs you to relate and draw inspiration. She may mention her three years in France as she explains a classic recipe such as celeriac puree, but she will add that this is a simple, country recipe, just like the ones we enjoy here in the South.

“Once a cook understands that each element of the process is important and can be fun, the recipe takes on more meaning,” she points out. “Some say they don’t enjoy washing and

trimming vegetables, but taking the time to care for the process makes me feel like I have put together a thoughtful dish. I love washing giant leaves of collard greens and pulling out the ribs. It gives me time to think or bond with a friend who might be visiting.”

In fact, Willis was a fixture in her family kitchen from the time she was 4 years old, and she credits those early experiences as the beginnings of her career. “Putting together a menu—thinking about textures and color, but also memories and stories that go with the recipe—that’s important. For instance, this macaroni and cheese from my Aunt Lee is a recipe that shuns béchamel sauce and cuts right to the chase with whole milk, eggs and a good amount of the sharpest cheddar cheese. I love French-style potato purees like this one that has celeriac smoothed into it. And while most Southern tables boast a hearty winter green like collards, I took to the habit of cutting the leaves into a chiffonade [thin strips]; they cook faster and look beautiful on the plate.”

Willis believes that knowing who you are and where you have come from puts soul into food. She understands that an old church cookbook-style recipe like ambrosia may elicit smirks, but as she tells the story of why she serves it, you can’t help but begin to crave it, too. “My grandfather would grate the fresh coconut on a box grater. Then he would peel and segment enough oranges to make gallons of the exquisite concoction. Although my grandfather did all the work, I named the recipe after my grandmother because she loved it and he made it for her.” With that, Willis pulls out of the cabinet glass bowls that will hold the ambrosia, and again she gets a little emotional thinking of her grandparents and the holidays while Emmylou is singing, “*Our love is like a burning ember; it warms us as the cold wind blows. We had sunshine in December and grew our roses in the snow.*”



FOR A SAMPLING OF RECIPES FROM WILLIS’ BOOK, *BON APPETIT, Y’ALL*, VISIT [ATLANTAHOMESMAG.COM](http://ATLANTAHOMESMAG.COM)