

Southerners are the American equivalent of the French when it comes to an ardor for food. So when Virginia Willis brought France back home to her Atlanta kitchen, it was a match made in culinary heaven

Review by
PENELOPE GREEN



“As a Southerner and a graduate of both L’Academie de Cuisine and École de Cuisine La Varenne, my own style of cooking combines my Southern heritage with classical French training.”

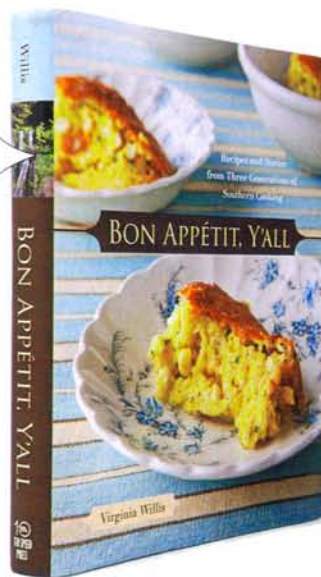
VIRGINIA WILLIS

YOU CAN SEE VIRGINIA WILLIS’S FAMILY INHERITANCE PRINTED on the endpapers of her new book: there you’ll find a photograph of the inside of her grandmother Meme’s cupboard, wallpapered with recipes handwritten on scraps of paper or straight onto the wood and torn from newspapers with notations in Meme’s old-school cursive in the margins. Buttermilk biscuits, fried green tomatoes, funeral grits—these are the rich and lusty gifts of Ms. Willis’s Georgia and Louisiana childhood, much of which she says she spent “in the kitchen with Meme and Mama,” making down-home Southern food.

In *Bon Appétit, Y’all*, Willis has updated and revised her regional legacy with “a heavy dose of classic French technique” and a modern approach to health and practicality (using less fat, when she can, and a keep-it-simple methodology). Her recipes are scrupulously clear and foolproof: She was an apprentice and collaborator of PBS chef Nathalie Dupree (a pioneer of what’s known as new Southern cooking), a student and collaborator of Anne Willan (founder of the celebrated La Varenne cooking school in France), and a kitchen director for *The Martha Stewart Show*—which means Willis supervised the food parts (and got to cook for folks like Aretha Franklin and Bill Clinton).

She describes her style as “refined Southern cuisine.” I’d say she combines nostalgia with fresh and vivid flavors. Fresh Summer Vegetable Succotash with Basil is a lovely dish right now (make it with edamame if you can’t find butter beans); so is Meme’s Pound Cake (make it with White Lily flour, a Southern staple).

Willis promises that hers are “recipes for families, for displaced Southerners yearning for a taste of home, for aspiring cooks, and for anyone who simply wants to spend some time in the kitchen working and playing with food.” Whisking grits until they are creamy and thick (the act itself a collision between her Southern upbringing and French training) and tasting the fine results, I felt how well she delivers on that promise. >>



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