



a french twist

Meet Georgia girl Virginia Willis. She puts a French twist on Southern favorites.

If you had to distill my story, even as widely traveled as I am and as much French cuisine experience as I've had, then my food would be fried chicken," Virginia says. "It's the fabric of my life." Born in the South, in Augusta, Georgia, Virginia began cooking when she was 4 years old. She learned the basics from her mother and her grandmother early on. "My grandmother was the love of my life," she says. "I just wanted to be with her, and she was always in the kitchen." Virginia still uses her grandmother's cast-iron skillet in her Atlanta kitchen, bringing back the comforting, sweet memories from years ago.

At age 7 Virginia was baking chocolate chip cookies, using her first cookbook from her Aunt Louise. At 10, she was baking and decorating her own cakes and gaining customers in her neighborhood. As she grew up, the love of cooking only deepened, and the food industry has been her path all the while.

Virginia takes pride in her Southern upbringing. "I'm proud of the education I've received from the cooks in my family," she says. "I'm also happy about the other experiences I've been blessed with."

Virginia was often "behind the scenes," but her accomplishments

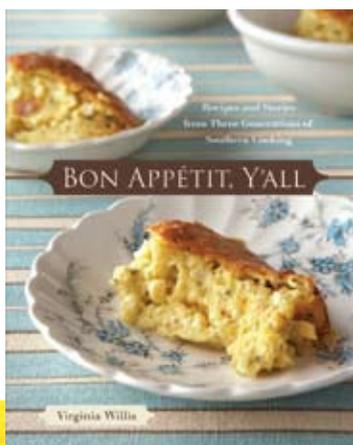
are many. She started as an apprentice under Nathalie Dupree and worked with her on four PBS series and cookbooks. "Nathalie took me out of the kitchen and exposed me to things I'd never seen before like food television and the art of writing cookbooks," Virginia says. After her days with Nathalie, Virginia studied at L'Academie de Cuisine in Maryland. Next, Virginia worked for Nora Pouillon in Washington, D.C., who taught her about organic and sustainable products. Then she studied at Ecole de Cuisine La Varenne in France, working under Anne Willan and other talented chefs. She also served

BY **MAY KNOWLTON** / FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ELLEN SILVERMAN** / PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CANOLAINFO.ORG**

as Kitchen Director for Martha Stewart Living Television. “I’ve had a series of all of these strong, talented women in my life, and I’ve learned something from each one,” she says.

Virginia went on to produce a number of cooking shows including *Epicurious* on Discovery Channel and *Home Plate* on Turner South. She has cooked for many prestigious people, among them, Aretha Franklin, Julia Child, and President Bill Clinton.

After years of producing food television and taking the time to contribute to cookbooks and other publications, Virginia has written her first cookbook—*Bon Appétit, Y’all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking*. It combines her Southern background with her French techniques. It’s a dream, she says, that has been a long time coming.



FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

Adapted from Virginia Willis

Makes about 8 servings

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup firmly packed brown sugar
- 1 loaf brioche or challah bread, sliced $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds)
- 8 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground ginger
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped pecans
- Confectioners’ sugar
- Sorghum, cane, or maple syrup (optional)

In a 13x9-inch baking dish, combine melted butter and brown sugar. Arrange bread slices evenly in baking dish.

In a medium bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, vanilla, cinnamon, ginger, and salt. Pour over bread, letting egg mixture soak in. Top evenly with pecans. Cover, and refrigerate for at least 3 hours or up to 12 hours.

Preheat oven to 350°.

Let chilled casserole stand at room temperature for 20 minutes. Bake until browned and set, about 30 to 45 minutes. Remove to a wire rack to cool slightly. Sift confectioners’ sugar over casserole. Serve hot or warm with sorghum, cane, or maple syrup, if desired.

“There’s an honesty in my book, and my passion really comes through,” she says. “The whole concept is to take good ingredients and do as little to them as possible. Many of the recipes are six to eight ingredients or less and take 30 to 45 minutes or less. People have busy lives. I want them to get into the kitchen, so I try to create recipes that they’re actually going to do.”

Virginia enjoys teaching and traveling the country to meet new people. “I just love talking about food,” she says. “I love to teach

soufflés in my classes. People are so scared of them, but it just takes hitting a couple of key points and they’re good to go. I don’t want people to be fearful of cooking.”

Virginia travels about two weeks out of nearly every month, teaching at least one cooking class each week. She still writes for magazines and newspapers and styles food photography and is working on her own cooking show pilot. She also consults with people who want to delve into the business. “It’s a mixed bag every week, but I love it because it’s exciting and it keeps me stimulated,” she says. “I feel so thankful and blessed.”

Perhaps Virginia learned early on to keep her perspective. “I’m a cook, and this is cooking. I’m not saving lives. This is not brain surgery, but it’s still important,” she says. “Sharing food and time and table is very important. I love what I do so much, and that’s why I aspire to keep doing and keep learning.”

For more information on Virginia, visit virginiawillis.com. 🌿

