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A Southern Sunday Brunch. The background shows several glasses of orange juice with orange slices and mint leaves. In the foreground, a white plate holds a salad of green and red leafy vegetables, topped with a purple orchid flower and almonds.

A *Southern* Sunday Brunch

Recipes by **Virginia Willis**



Virginia Willis takes a Southern moment on her front porch. The popular chef and cookbook author creates a Southern Sunday brunch just for Columbia County Magazine and shares memories of how her love of Southern cooking began in the Evans kitchen of her grandparents.

Cook, teacher, author and culinary television producer Virginia Willis is based in Atlanta now, but she can trace her Columbia County roots back to the 1700s and Daniel Marshall, founder of Kiokee Baptist Church.

As the former Kitchen Director for Martha Stewart Living Television, Virginia supervised the food segments for the Emmy-award winning television show. While she worked for Martha Stewart, she was also responsible for preparing private meals and events for Martha and her guests — including President Clinton, Aretha Franklin, and Julia Child.

As Executive Producer for *Epicurious* on The Discovery Channel, Virginia traveled the world taping fantastic stories about food — from harvesting capers in the shadow of a smoldering volcano to making authentic

mustard in Dijon. She also produced Turner South's *Home Plate* with Marvin Woods, appeared on *Real Simple Television* and can be spotted in commercials for Duke's mayonnaise and Springer Mountain Farms chicken. Her varied food career started in Atlanta when she worked with Nathalie Dupree on four PBS series and cookbooks, including the James Beard award-winning *Comfortable Entertaining*.

A graduate of L'Academie de Cuisine and Ecole de Cuisine LaVarenne, Virginia is featured in *Atlanta Cooks at Home*, a cookbook of menus from Atlanta's top chefs. The author of *Pasta Dinners 1, 2, 3* and co-author of *Home Plate Cooking*, she's currently working on her cookbook and companion television series: *Bon Appétit, Y'all! Three Generations of Southern Cooking* (Ten Speed Press, 2008).

Bourban Baked Ham

Serves 10

1 cup sweet clover honey
1/2 cup molasses
1/2 cup bourbon
1/4 cup freshly squeezed orange juice
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1 cured ham butt or shank half
(6-8 pound)

Heat the oven to 350°F. Lightly grease a roasting pan with nonstick spray. Set aside. Heat the honey, molasses, bourbon, orange juice, and mustard in a medium pot over medium heat until melted and combined. Set aside. **Remove** the skin and excess fat from the ham and discard. Using a sharp knife make 1/4-inch-deep cuts in ham in a diamond pattern. Place the ham in the prepared roasting pan. **Pour** the reserved glaze over the ham. Transfer to the oven and bake for 2 to 2-1/2 hours or until a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest portion registers 140°F, basting every 30 minutes or so with the glaze on the bottom of the pan. Remove to a rack and transfer the ham to a cutting board. **Cover** the ham loosely with aluminum foil to keep warm. Using a large spoon, remove and discard the excess fat from the collected drippings in the bottom of the roasting pan. **Transfer** the drippings to a small saucepan. Bring the drippings to a boil. Slice ham and serve with warm drippings.



Ham comes from the hind leg of the hog and can be fresh, cured, or cured and smoked. They're available bone-in or boneless, but bone-in hams are more flavorful.

Country Roads & Deep Roots

By Virginia Willis

My mother, Virginia (known as Jenny), grew up in the country when Fury's Ferry Road had just been paved. She returned there almost 25 years ago and lives once again in the home where she grew up, built by my grandfather. When asked where I am from, I generally reply, "My family is from Evans, and I live in Atlanta." Funny thing is, I haven't lived in Columbia County since I was three years old. Although my younger sister, Jona, went to Evans High School, graduating exactly 30 years after my mother did, I was already in school in Athens by the time my mother returned. Later, my career once again took me far from home. But home is far more complex than a simple mailing address. My deep roots in Columbia County and family history continually help define who I am and what I will be.

My grandparents, Sam and Louise Baston, bought 50 acres on Fury's Ferry Road in 1938, but our presence in Columbia County starts long before that. My grandfather's mother's maiden name was Marshall; our ancestor Reverend Daniel Marshall founded Kiokee Baptist Church in the 1770s. And although my grandfather was born in South Carolina, his family was originally from around Euchee Creek and Appling. According to the U.S. census, there were members of the Baston clan living in Columbia County in 1820.

This isn't to insinuate some sort of landed aristocracy. They were farmers, mostly cotton, and simple country people. His brother, Marshall, had a fish camp on the banks of



"I spent much of my childhood with grandparents, who I called Meme and Dede, in their heart of pine kitchen acquiring skills I would later develop into a profession."

the river. My grandfather drove a Greyhound bus. He was a tall, strapping man with massive biceps. He only completed eight years of school and impressed upon me at an early age the importance of education. He'd tap my head with his giant hand and say, "Get your knowledge up here — no one can ever take that away from you." My grandmother however, graduated from Young Harris College in 1927, somewhat unusual for a woman of her times in the rural South. Her diploma, a real sheepskin, has hung in the dining room for as long as I can remember. She met my grandfather at a fish fry on the Savannah River and went on a boat ride with the handsome, dark-headed Sam. They later eloped and were married for 65 years until he passed away. Together they made a family, helped start a community, gave the land to build Riverview United Methodist Church, and most

importantly, left a long-lasting legacy of what home really is.

I spent much of my childhood with grandparents, who I called Meme and Dede, in their heart of pine kitchen acquiring skills I would later develop into a profession. There are photos of me standing on a chair cooking with Meme or sitting on the kitchen counter with my feet in the cool steel sink shelling butterbeans that Dede had picked early that morning. And rolling out biscuits with Meme — I remember we'd roll out the biscuits and she'd let me make a handprint with the scraps of dough. The tiny fingers on my handprint biscuit would cook very dark in the heat of the oven, taking on

Grits are the coarser part of maize that has been ground through a stone mill. The finer part is corn meal.

a slightly bitter almost nutty taste. I know that's where my love and passion for cooking took root, working at her side on her linoleum countertop in the gentle breeze of the oscillating fan. To this day, the smell of biscuits cooking reaches into my soul.

Meme was a strong and determined lady, the president of the Evans Extension Homemakers Club for many years, and an incredible cook. Dede would sit with her in the kitchen and hand beat the dough for her yeast rolls. I was nurtured by their stories of growing up on a farm, milking cows and making butter and cheese, maintaining a root cellar, killing hogs in the fall and curing hams in the smokehouse.

My mother tells of raising chickens and cows even when she was a child, but milking the cows stopped when one surly beast kicked my grandmother. They filled the freezer with beef instead! Meme served grits every morning for breakfast and Mama said she filled the plates to the rim. The school bus would pull up at the end of the long driveway and my grandmother would make it wait until all the plates were clean. No one, including the Board of Education, argued with the forceful personality of Meme. Dede said he got the last word, but those of you reading this who remember them won't be surprised that his blue eyes would twinkle and he'd say, "My last words are always, 'Yes, beloved.'"

This is what home means to me — listening to outrageous stories told by my mother, fishing for bream in the pond my grandfather built, pulling the wishbone with my sister just like when we were young, and sharing sweet kitchen memories. My mailing address may not be in Columbia County, but this is certainly home.



Parmigiano Reggiano Grits Souffle

Serves 8

Southerners have a tendency to call anything baked with beaten egg whites a soufflé. Properly beaten egg whites are the key to the rise of this dish. While the dish is in the oven, the air trapped inside the egg whites expands, causing the dish to rise.

2 cups water

2 cups milk

1 cup coarse grits

5 large eggs, separated

1 1/2 cups freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, plus more for the dish

2 scallions, thinly sliced

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oven to 375° F. Butter a large oval casserole or soufflé dish, set aside. Using a large heavy-bottomed saucepan over high heat, bring water, milk, and 2 teaspoons of salt to a boil. Gradually stir in the grits; reduce the heat to medium, and cook, stirring often, until thick and creamy, 30 to 45 minutes. Using a large bowl **whisk** the egg yolks, temper by whisking in a spoonful of hot grits. **Stir** yolks into remaining grits. Add the cheese, garlic, and butter. Set aside to cool slightly. In the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, whisk the egg whites with a pinch of salt on medium speed until foamy. **Increase** the speed to high and whip until stiff peaks form, 2 to 3 minutes. Set aside. Add about a quarter of the beaten egg whites to the grits mixture and stir until well mixed. Pour this mixture and the scallions over the remaining whites and fold them together as lightly as possible. Pour the mixture into the prepared dish. **Bake** until the grits are set, 30 to 40 minutes. (If the surface begins to over brown, cover with foil.) Serve immediately.

Food & Wine



Asparagus is actually a member of the lily family.

Oven Roasted Asparagus with Blender Hollandaise

Serves 8

To make the sauce ahead, heat a clean thermos or coffee pot with hot water. Dry the thermos completely and hold the prepared hollandaise up to 45 minutes before serving. Note: Pregnant women, young children, the elderly, or anyone whose health or immune system is compromised should not consume raw eggs.

2 bunches asparagus, stem ends trimmed

2 tablespoons canola oil

3 egg yolks

1/2 teaspoon salt

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Dash of cayenne pepper

1 cup (1/2 pound) unsalted butter, preferably Land o' Lakes, melted and heated until bubbling, but not brown

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat oven to 425°. Spread out asparagus spears in a large shallow roasting pan. Drizzle with oil; sprinkle with salt and pepper. **Shake** roasting pan gently so asparagus is completely coated in oil. Transfer to the oven and roast until spears are just tender. Cooking time will depend on thickness of asparagus, about 10 minutes for medium-thick asparagus. Pencil asparagus will take much less time; thick stalks will take more. **Shake** pan halfway through cooking time to keep spears from sticking. Meanwhile, **place** egg yolks, salt, pepper and lemon juice in the jar of an electric blender, blend for a few seconds at high speed until you have a smooth frothy mixture. Still at high speed, **add** the hot butter in a thin, steady stream, not too slowly. As you add butter, the sauce should thicken. **Continue** blending until all butter is used. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve immediately. Does not keep. Discard remaining sauce after serving.



Quick & Easy Buttermilk Biscuits

Makes 9 biscuits

These biscuits are somewhere between a rolled biscuit and a drop biscuit. The exterior should be golden brown and slightly crisp, while the interior should be light and airy. With all biscuits, a very hot oven is essential. The steam interacts with the baking powder to create the ideal textures.

3 cups White Lily brand all-purpose flour, or cake flour (not self-rising)

1 tablespoon baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

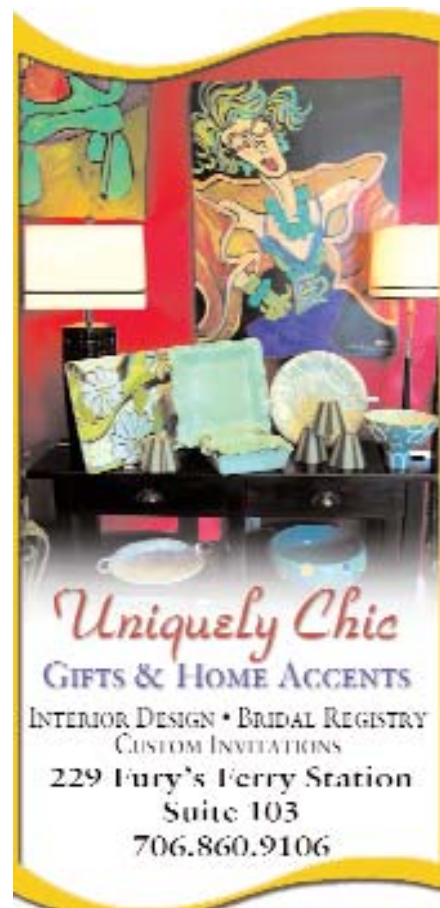
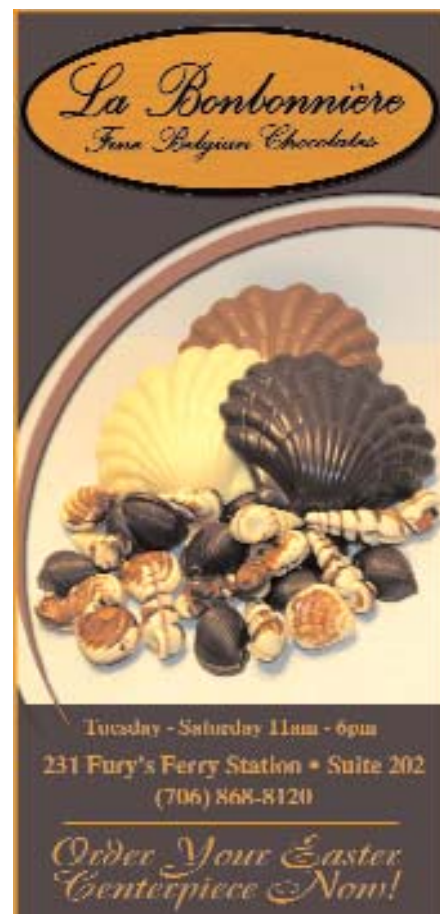
4 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes

2/3 cup buttermilk

Unsalted butter, room temperature, for serving

Honey, jam, or jelly for serving

Heat oven to 500°. In the bowl of a food processor fitted with the blade attachment **combine** 2 cups of the flour, baking powder, and salt. Pulse to combine. Add the butter and pulse until it resembles coarse meal. **Pour** in buttermilk, and mix until just combined; the mixture will be very wet. With a large ice cream scoop or by pinching a lump off with your hands form the mixture into balls and place in the remaining 1 cup of flour. Working one at a time, roll to coat in flour then place in an ungreased round 8-by-2-inch cake pan or on a baking sheet. (If the biscuits are baked close together and touching, their sides will be moist. If the biscuits are baked further apart and not touching their sides will be crisp.) **Bake** until golden brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Allow to cool to the touch and serve immediately with room temperature butter, and honey, jam, or jelly.



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Fruit Salad with Sweet Clover Honey

Serves 6

The color and flavor of honeys differ depending on the nectar source or flowers visited by the honeybees. As a general rule the lighter the honey, the milder the flavor. My grandfather, Sam Baston from Evans, had a sweet tooth for honey. When I traveled I would always bring him a jar from whatever country I visited. He's passed away, but I still carry on the tradition, literally bringing home a little bit of where I've been.

3 tablespoons sweet clover honey

Juice of 1 lemon

Pinch of salt

1 large orange

1 large Granny Smith apple, unpeeled, cored, diced

1 pear, unpeeled, cored, diced

1 cup seedless red and green grapes

1 cup strawberries, hulled, halved

1 cup raspberries and blueberries

2 tablespoons freshly chopped mint

Whisk honey, lemon juice, and a pinch of salt in large bowl to blend. Using a sharp paring knife, remove the ends of the orange. Set orange on end and **remove** the peel by cutting between the peel and flesh, rotating as peel is removed. Working over a medium bowl, **slice** between membranes to remove segments, allowing juices and segments to fall into bowl. Add apple, pear, grapes, strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. Cover and **chill** in the refrigerator at least 30 minutes and up to 4 hours. Just before serving freshly **chop** the mint and add to the salad. **Stir** well to combine and serve immediately.