

**Feeding Your Soul: Exploring the Healthy Side of
Southern Cooking**



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I. “Doctoring” Southern recipes

Here are a few techniques to still keep traditional Southern foods full of flavor, yet cutting down on saturated fats, salt and relying on the natural goodness of the bounty of the South.

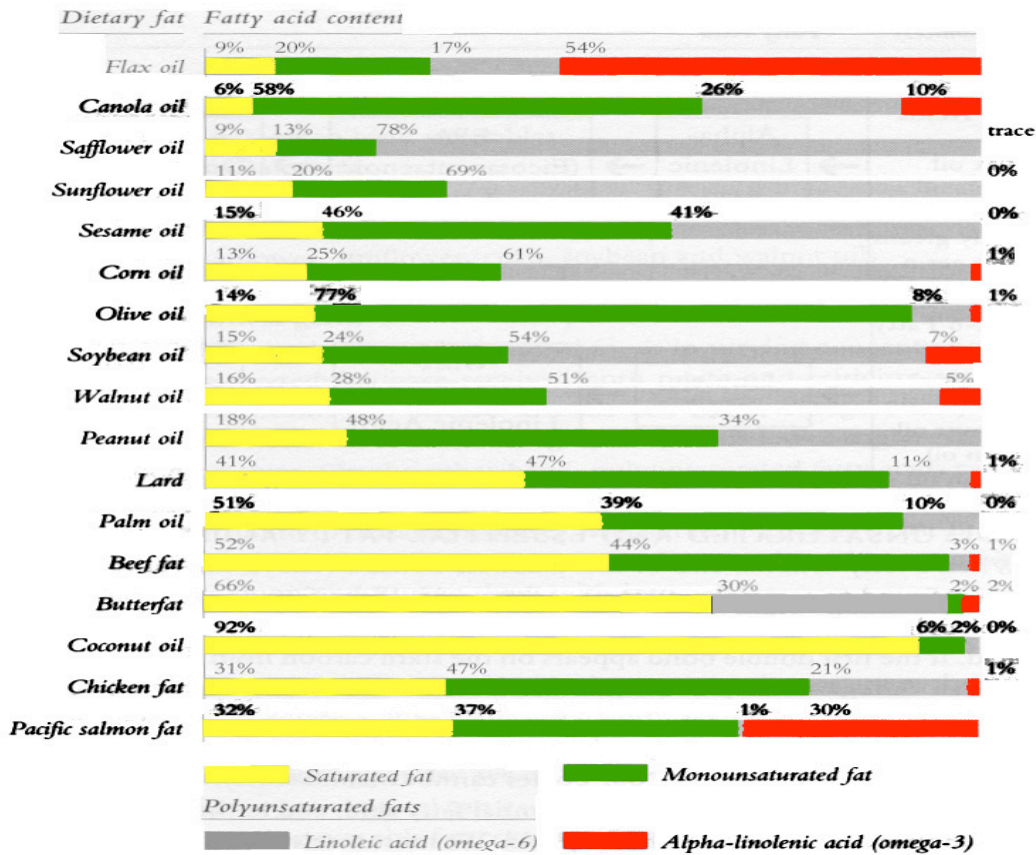
1. Choose healthier fats and cooking methods – can you actually cook with olive oil instead of butter and lard? The answer is yes. Scott uses many different types of cooking liquids, oils, and fats in his Southern cooking. He likes using a rich stock to flavor food, for example cooking collard greens in a homemade pork stock versus frying in tons of oil. [See *The Skinny on Fats* section]
2. Deep-fat frying, point/counterpoint.
 - If you fry, do it right – Use correct temperature (325-375°F) of fryer oil, keeping it consistent, which will drop after addition of food. Avoid heavy batters and drain very well. Scott suggests using a draining rack, not paper towels or a brown paper bag.
 - Oven-frying – this takes a little practice, but worth it to keep satisfaction high and calories lower. Ovens use hot air to cook food, so make sure your food is protected from drying out. Dip vegetable or meat in 1:1 milk/egg blend, then coat in breading of choice – cornmeal or breadcrumbs + Cajun seasonings. Refrigerate in single layer for 1 hour in order to help set the coating. Spray a baking sheet with oil, place the breaded food in a single layer and bake at 375 degrees. Food will brown better if you spray an additional light layer of oil (or spread a tiny dab of butter) on the food as well. Bake 5-10 minutes or until tops are lightly browned, then flip over and cook for another 5-10 minutes, depending on the thickness and type of food – shorter for green tomatoes, longer for chicken.
3. Spice it up! Southerners from Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta are famous for their creole and Cajun cooking. A blend of chiles, bell pepper, onion and celery adds zing to foods without over-relying on salt and fat.

4. How about the smoky taste of bacon and cured ham?
 - Culinary tip – Use Spanish smoked paprika to add a heady smoky flavor without the pork, suitable for vegan diets. The paprika will also add a vibrant red color to liven up in the plate. The best varieties of Spanish smoked paprika come from the de Vera region, try the dulce (sweet) variety that still has a mild chile kick to it.
 - Again, using a smoked stock can add savory, full-bodied flavor.
 - And, when taking all things into consideration, you can still add a strip of bacon, or piece of ham to a pot of beans to maximize flavor, instead of eating the ham itself as the main entrée. Or add the smoked paprika to achieve wonderful savory tones to your dish.
5. Roast it – Try Scott’s Roasted okra. Roasting vegetables concentrates their flavor by evaporating some of the natural water content. Roasting also adds flavor via caramelization, i.e. the intense heat (over 350 degrees, well above anything you cook via boiling) converts some of the naturally-occurring sugars in plants to undergo molecular reactions that makes foods more delicious-tasting.
6. Go veg – Southerners rely on fresh vegetables from the land to create home-cooked meals. Staples such as pole beans, tomatoes (green and red), cucumbers, root vegetables, mustard and collard greens are the backbone of Southern cuisine.
7. Special occasion foods, tips from the master pro, Scott Peacock. – “Use only real food, as pure and of the highest quality you can find. For example, in the collard green recipe, I use olive oil not because I think it is healthier, but because I like the flavor and lightness. I am well known for my fried chicken, but I would not think of serving it daily or even weekly. I view fried foods as an occasional treat; something to be savored and appreciated.”
8. Portions – when it comes right down to it, quantity matters as much as quality. So from a caloric perspective, it’s ok to choose richer foods, but **WATCH OUT FOR THE PORTION SIZE.**
 - Sacks et al. conducted a study last year in which overweight people were assigned to either a lowfat diet, or a low-carb diet, with high or low protein content. Conclusions after 2 years were that caloric reduction (- 350 to -550 kcals/day) produced weight loss, regardless of what diet participants were placed on. Sacks FS, et al. NEJM 2009;360:859-73. Total calories matter.

II. The Skinny on Fats

- Back to nature – the role of healthy fats. We DO need a balance of all fats in our diets – polyunsaturated (esp increased omega 3’s), monounsaturated, and saturated fats especially the shorter-chain fatty acids that are metabolized differently than the long-chain fatty acids.
- Comparing fats

Figure 6.1 Comparison of Dietary Fats



Source: Becoming Vegetarian, V. Melina, B. Davis, V. Harrison. Book Publ Co.,1995.

The nutritional quality of the fats we eat hinges on WHERE the fat is coming from, and how it’s processed.

- Unprocessed versus processed fats
 - Refined fats and oils are:
 - Tasteless -- the process of refining an oil often uses heat to maximally extract oil from seeds which can also removes some of the volatile oils that give oils their natural flavor. Manufacturers aim for “neutral” flavored products.

- Stripped and de-vitalized – refined oils are filtered which in many cases also strips away some of its fiber, proteins, and vital nutrients. Olive oil in particular contains many anti-oxidants, and NSAID-like anti-inflammatory agents that are removed during the refining process.
 - Contaminated – Fat-soluble pesticides, fertilizing agents, as well as trace amounts of the chemicals used to refine an oil still can remain in the oil despite the treatment process.
 - Chemically-altered (‘Franken-fats’) – Worse scenario, some commercial fats are hydrogenated, or partially-hydrogenated to artificially create solid fats out of liquid fats, creating unhealthy trans-fats.
- Smoke points of Various Fats
The smoke point of various fats is important to note because a fat is no longer good for consumption after it has exceeded its smoke point and has begun to break down. Once a fat starts to smoke, it usually will emit a harsh smell and fill the air with smoke. The table below lists some ballpark values for smoke points of various common fats.

Fat	Smoke Point °F
Extra virgin olive oil	320°F
Butter	350°F
Coconut oil	350°F
Lard	370°F
Refined canola oil	400°F
Cottonseed oil	420°F
Grapeseed oil	420°F
Peanut oil	440°F
Sunflower oil	440°F
Refined high-oleic sunflower oil	450°F
Refined Safflower oil	510°F
Avocado oil	520°F

III. Food & Comfort – the value of enjoyment. Hearing the stories...

IV. RECIPES

- (From *The Gift of Southern Cooking* by Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2006)

Cornmeal Muffins

(revised)

1 1/2 cups extra fine cornmeal
1 teaspoon kosher salt
3/4 teaspoon baking soda
2 eggs
2 - 2 1/4 cups buttermilk
2 tablespoons melted butter
Additional softened butter for greasing nonstick muffin tins

Put the cornmeal, salt, and baking soda in a mixing bowl and whisk to blend. in a separate bowl, beat the eggs lightly and add in 2 cups of buttermilk. Pour over the cornmeal mixture and whisk vigorously until very well blended and free of lumps. The batter should be fairly loose and pourable with a satin finish. Tf needed, whisk in a bit more buttermilk to reach the desired consistency and luster.

Whisk in the melted butter and scoop or pour into well-buttered nonstick muffin tins, or an equally well-buttered cake pan or cast iron skillet. (if using a cast iron skillet, preheat well in the oven with the 2 tablespoons of butter called for in the recipe. when hot and sizzling, swirl the butter around the pan thoroughly to coat and pour into the batter. It is okay if the butter browns, but do not let it burn. then pour batter immediately into the hot pan and put directly into the oven. you will see the batter begin to cook and set on contact with the pan, which is a delight.)

Bake in a preheated 425-450 F° oven, rotating if needed to cook evenly. Bake until a deep golden brown with highlights of mahogany--12-20 minutes, more or less. Remove from the oven and turn out immediately onto a cooling rack. Allow to cool for 3 or 4 minutes before serving.

Makes 12 muffins

Spicy Collards in Tomato-Onion Sauce

2 quarts rich smoked pork Stock --recipe follows

3 pounds collard greens, stems and ribs removed,
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
3 medium onions, coarsely chopped, about 2 cups
1 tablespoon garlic , finely chopped
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper, or more to taste
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
One 28-ounce can whole peeled tomatoes, drained

In a large pot, bring the Pork Stock to a boil.

Add the collard greens and cook over moderately high heat until tender, 15 to 40 minutes, depending on maturity of greens. Drain the greens, reserving the liquid.

Heat the oil in a large non-reactive pot and add onions. Season with salt and a few grinds of black pepper and cook over moderate heat until translucent, 5 to 6 minutes. Add the garlic, crushed red pepper. Cook, stirring, for 2-3 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook over moderate heat, breaking the tomatoes up slightly with the back of a spoon, about 10 minutes. Add the collard greens and 2 cups of the reserved liquid ("pot likker") and simmer until heated through, about 5 minutes. Taste carefully for seasoning.

FOR THE SMOKED PORK STOCK:

1 pound sliced smoked pork shoulder or country ham, or country ham seasoning pieces (NOT ham hock, unless cut from a true country ham or shoulder)

1 gallon cold water

Rinse the smoked pork pieces and put it and the water into a large stockpot or Dutch oven. Cook, partially covered, at a full simmer for 2-3 hours, or until stock develops a strong, rich smoked-pork flavor. Strain and discard the pork shoulder (it will have rendered all of its flavor). If not using immediately, cool the stock completely, then refrigerate until needed.

Pork stock may be kept refrigerated for 1 week, or frozen for up to 3 months.

Sliced Cucumbers Dressed with Vinegar and Sugar

1 cup cider vinegar

½ cup granulated sugar

½ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

4 kirby cucumbers, peeled if waxed, thinly sliced (about 4 cups)

Put the vinegar, sugar, salt and pepper in a nonreactive mixing bowl, and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Add the cucumber slices, and toss well to mix. Cover and chill for 1 hour. Taste carefully, and adjust seasoning if needed. Serve very cold.

Makes enough to serve 6-8

Roasted Okra (bonus recipe)

½ pound okra
1 small (about 6 ounces) onion, preferably red
2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
3 tablespoons olive oil
4 mint sprigs
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Preheat the oven to 375° F.

Rinse the okra under cold running water, and drain. Trim the tops off the okra by removing the stems, but don't cut the whole caps off. Cut the onion in half from stem to top, then again in thirds in the same direction. Put the okra, onion and garlic onto a Silpat pad on a baking sheet, or on an oiled pan, and drizzle the olive oil over them. Tuck in the mint sprigs, sprinkle with ¾ teaspoon salt and freshly ground pepper, toss all together lightly, and let the flavors mingle at least 20 minutes before roasting.

Place in preheated oven to roast for 5-10 minutes. Makes enough to serve 4.

“Okra invariably is deep-fried where I come from – but roasting it makes it crisp yet tender, neither mushy nor slimy, and it takes only 5-10 minutes.” – Scott Peacock

Other sources:

The Professional Chef, 8th edition. The Culinary Institute of America.

Techniques of Healthy Cooking, 2nd edition. The Culinary Institute of America.