

Southern Lights

EASIER, LIGHTER, AND BETTER-FOR-YOU
RECIPES FROM THE SOUTH



LAUREN
McDUFFIE

Southern Lights

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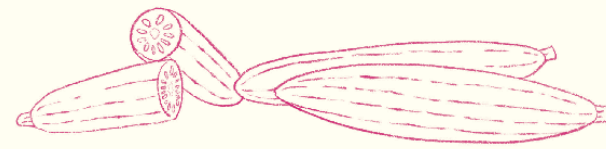
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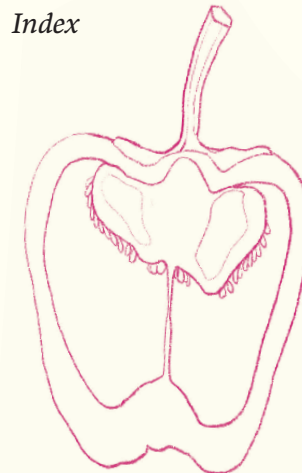
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Eggs Sardou, Sort Of

Created at Antoine's in New Orleans's French Quarter, this classic Cajun-Creole dish just has good bones. Traditionally speaking, poached eggs are served atop buttered artichoke hearts and creamed spinach, and it's all covered in a warm blanket of rich hollandaise sauce. In my lighter, healthy spin on the original, we'll make a big pan of lemony, slightly spicy spinach and artichoke hearts and a velvety tahini yogurt. Jammy soft-boiled egg yolks provide all the sauce you need for this nutritious flavor-packed breakfast that, admittedly, also resembles a spinach-artichoke dip—in the best way.

Makes 4 servings

4 large eggs
2 tablespoons olive oil
5 large garlic cloves, sliced into thin “chips” (not minced)
Chopped scallions, green and white parts separated
10 ounces fresh baby spinach
4 thin slices fresh lemon
Salt

Freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon red pepper flakes or ¼ teaspoon cayenne (optional)
6 ounces marinated artichoke hearts, drained and roughly chopped
1 cup plain Greek yogurt
1 ½ tablespoons tahini

Put a large pot of water over high heat and bring to a boil. When boiling, add the eggs (very carefully) and boil for exactly 6 minutes. Transfer them to a bowl of ice water. When they're cool enough to handle, carefully peel away the shells and cut them in half, exposing the soft, jammy yolks. Set aside.

In a large, deep nonstick skillet set over medium heat, combine the oil and garlic slices. Allow the garlic to gently toast in the oil, stirring and tossing occasionally until golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer the garlic to a small bowl and set aside, leaving the flavored oil in the pan.

With the heat still on medium, add the scallion whites, spinach, lemon, salt and black pepper to taste, and the red pepper flakes to the garlicky oil and cook, stirring frequently, for 3 to 4 minutes, until the spinach is tender and wilted. Add the artichoke hearts and let them warm through.

In a small bowl, combine the yogurt and tahini, seasoning with salt and pepper to taste. Spread this mixture on a large plate or serving platter. Top with the lemony greens and artichoke hearts mixture and the soft-boiled eggs. Garnish with the chopped scallion greens and reserved garlic chips.





Velvety Red Pepper and Tomato Soup

A bowl to warm your bones and bring a sense of calm to your days, this simple tomato and red pepper soup is as cozy and comforting as the feeling of a cool hand pressed against your forehead when you're a bit under the weather. It also gets better the longer it sits—a very attractive quality in, well, anything? If you squint, you can see the edges of a red velvet cake in the ingredients here, and though that was unintentional when I wrote this recipe, it is how the soup got its cheeky name. A splash of tangy buttermilk, some cocoa and vinegar, and, of course, a bright, vermillion hue, draw a resemblance to the South's beloved cake—though in a very different, savory way.

Makes 2 to 4 servings

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| 1 tablespoon olive oil | 2 teaspoons vegetable stock concentrate or chicken stock concentrate |
| 1 cup diced sweet onion | Salt |
| 1 (12-ounce) jar roasted red peppers, drained and diced | Freshly ground black pepper |
| 1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste | 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar |
| 2 garlic cloves, minced or grated | 1 to 2 cups vegetable or chicken stock |
| 1 teaspoon unsweetened cocoa powder | ½ cup buttermilk (or coconut milk, for vegan) |
| 1 tablespoon coconut sugar | 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes |

Pour the oil into a large pot set over medium heat. When it's hot, add the onion and red peppers. Cook until the onion is tender, about 5 minutes. Add the tomato paste, garlic, cocoa, coconut sugar, stock concentrate, and a little salt and black pepper to taste. Cook for 30 seconds more.

Add the vinegar, 1 cup of the stock, the buttermilk, and tomatoes and stir to combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Feel free to add more buttermilk to taste, too. Transfer to a blender, or use an immersion blender, and purée until totally smooth. Return to and reheat in the pot. If you think it needs a little more stock, feel free to add the extra cup now. Stir to combine.

Let the soup cool to room temperature and store in the refrigerator, covered, for up to 4 days. It will freeze well for about 1 month.

Note: Serve with *Crunchy Black-Eyed Peas* (page 121) or a salad of watercress or arugula tossed in a little olive oil and fresh lemon juice to make a light meal.

Chili-Soaked Watermelon with Smoked Almonds

This is my lighter, more healthful take on one of the most popular recipes on my website, My Kitchen Little. I have a watermelon and mozzarella recipe that features a sinfully delicious hot candied bacon dressing. It's pretty incredible, yes, but I've found this lighter version to be just as satisfying. The spicy "soak" seeps into the sweet fruit and transforms it into something that just sings with flavor—it marinates it, essentially. Smoked almonds, in my opinion, are great on everything, but in this case, they perfectly replace the fatty bacon and offer a great crunch. To lighten things up even more, simply omit the mozzarella.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

2 tablespoons Asian-style chili sauce, such as sambal olek or sriracha (you can use less, if you prefer less heat)
2 tablespoons honey
1 teaspoon apple cider vinegar
¼ cup olive oil
Flaky sea salt, for sprinkling
Freshly ground black pepper

1 small seedless watermelon, sliced into wedges
8 ounces sliced fresh mozzarella (optional)
2 shallots, thinly sliced
½ cup chopped smoked almonds
1 cup baby arugula

In a small saucepan set over medium heat, combine the chili sauce, honey, vinegar, oil, and sea salt and black pepper to taste. Let it come up to a simmer, then turn off the heat. Cool for a few minutes and then allow this "soak" to sit in the refrigerator for about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, arrange the watermelon and mozzarella slices (if using) on a large platter. Slowly pour the spicy honey soak over the watermelon and cheese, taking care to fully coat the pieces. Top with the shallots, chopped almonds, and arugula, using more of anything as you see fit.



Honey-Caramelized Tomato Upside-Down Cornbread

People get very territorial about their cornbread in the South, a fact that I have always found completely charming. Home cooks are devoted to their recipes and food traditions in a way that serves to sustain them, carrying them across generations. There is so much heart on the table, always. Cooks hold on tight to them, their family recipes, and it's really the most beautiful thing. This recipe happens to be a favorite version of cornbread in my house. The jammy, juicy-sweet tomatoes suspended on top really do steal this show, and the olive oil makes it pretty special. Feel free to sub a different cooking oil, though, as olive oil ain't cheap. I highly recommend serving this in thick slices, slathered with lots of Salty Butter-Whipped Honey (page 28).

Makes 6 to 8 servings

Natural nonstick cooking spray	1 cup cake flour
12 ounces cherry or grape tomatoes	1½ teaspoons baking powder
6 tablespoons honey, divided	1 teaspoon baking soda
1½ teaspoons salt, plus more as needed	⅔ cup olive oil or canola or vegetable oil
1 cup yellow cornmeal	2 large eggs, beaten
	1¼ cups buttermilk

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Adjust the rack to the middle position. Spray an 8- or 9-inch round cake pan with cooking spray and line with parchment paper, allowing some overhang for easy removal (think of them as handles).

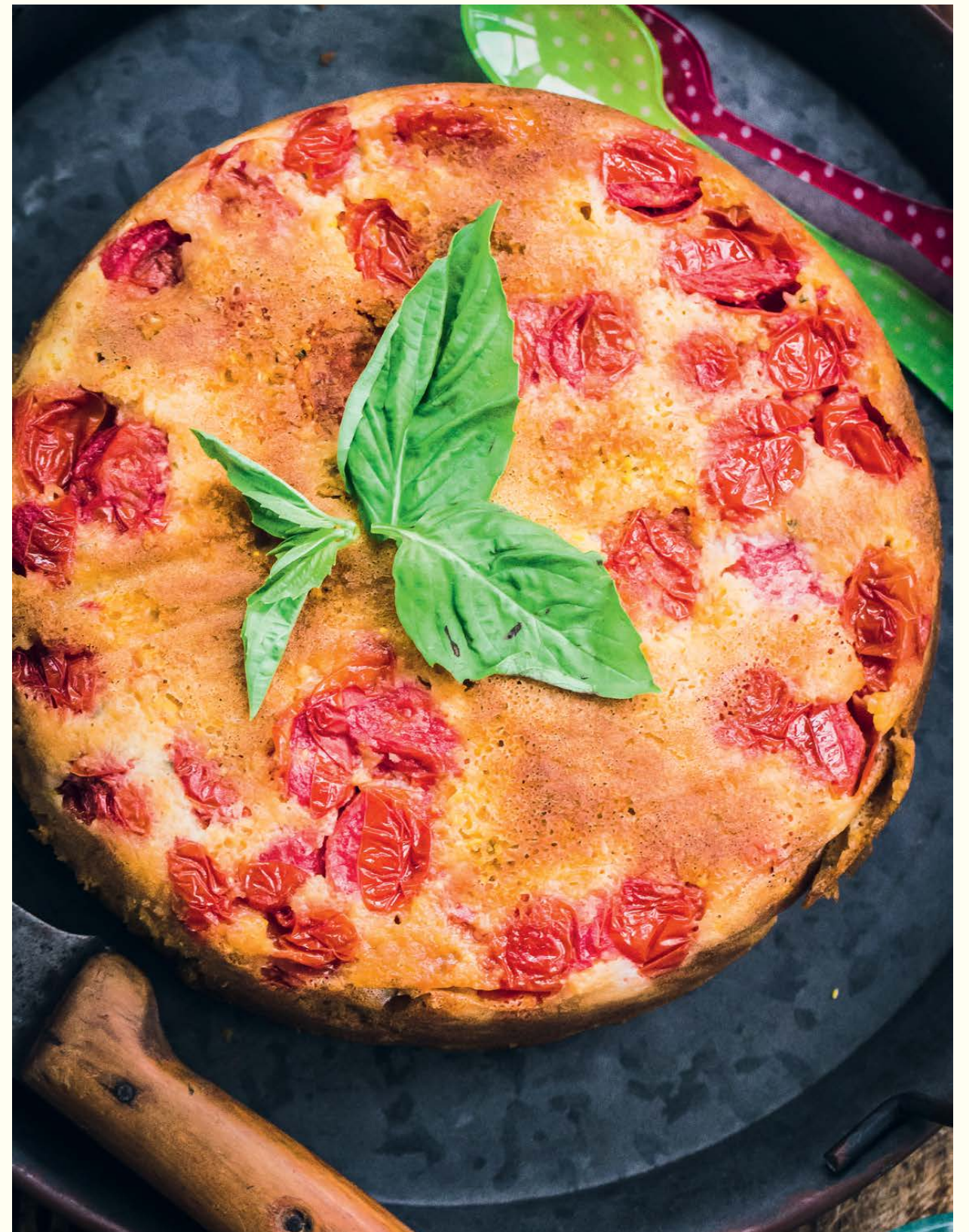
Put the tomatoes, 3 tablespoons of the honey, and a good pinch of salt in a nonstick skillet set over medium heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes just burst and are tender, about 5 minutes. Transfer to the cake pan, juices included, and spread in an even layer.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together the cornmeal, remaining 1½ teaspoons salt, cake flour, baking powder, and baking soda.

In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a mixing bowl with a handheld mixer, combine the oil, the remaining 3 tablespoons of honey, and the eggs. Add half of the dry mixture and mix until combined. Add half of the buttermilk and mix until just combined. Repeat with the remaining halves of each and gently pour the batter into the prepared pan over the tomatoes (it shouldn't be more than three-fourths full).

Bake until lightly golden and set, 35 to 45 minutes (use a knife or toothpick to test the doneness—it should come out clean). Cool in the pan for at least 15 minutes before inverting the cornbread onto a serving plate, tomatoes facing up now.

Peel off the parchment paper before serving (I'm sure you knew this already, but still). This will keep covered at room temperature for about 2 days and in the fridge for 3 or 4 days. If wrapped well, it will also freeze for up to 2 months.





Jezebel Chicken

Have you noticed that there are a lot of chicken recipes in this book? There are, I know. It is my family's favorite, and my two kids love nothing more than juicy roasted or fried chicken. Seeing as how fried chicken is rather laborious to make and not the lightest option, I really lean into the roasting of it. Managing to be both humble and unbelievably luxurious-seeming all at once, this one takes a classic fruity-sweet Southern Jezebel sauce and uses it as a twist on what is otherwise a very basic roasted chicken recipe. The difference-maker here, though, is the salt. We'll season things the whole way through, and even so, I still like to serve roasted chicken with flaky sea salt on the side. Like a potato, a simple roasted chicken goes from unnoticeable to extraordinary once the right amount of salt is welcomed into the scene.

Makes 4 servings

4 bone-in, skin-on chicken leg quarters (this works with any cut, I just like the legs here)
1 pineapple, cored and sliced into 1/2-inch rings or spears
1/4 cup store-bought hot honey (or regular honey)
1/4 cup spicy brown mustard
1/4 cup soy sauce
1 tablespoon paprika
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper
3/4 cup chopped fresh herbs, for serving (such as chives, parsley, and dill)
1 shallot, thinly sliced
Flaky sea salt, for sprinkling on top (optional)

Put the pineapple slices in a single layer in a large baking dish or sheet pan. Lay the chicken legs on top. Mix together the honey, mustard, soy sauce, paprika, garlic powder, and vinegar in a bowl and pour all over the chicken and pineapple. Rub to coat evenly and put the dish in the fridge to marinate (covered or not), for at least 1 hour and up to 4 hours.

Preheat the oven to 425°F. Adjust the rack to the middle position.

Season the chicken and pineapple with salt and lots of pepper. Cover the baking dish with aluminum foil and roast for 35 minutes. Remove the foil and roast for 20 to 25 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through and deeply browned (it will likely appear burnt in places thanks to the sugars, but worry not! It's all good).

Serve the chicken and pineapple with the drippings, a shower of chopped herbs and sliced shallot, and some sea salt if you like.



Warm Radicchio and Squash Salad with Brown-Buttered Dates

I'd initially planned to give you a healthy spin on pumpkin pie in this chapter, as it seemed obligatory. But to be totally honest . . . I'd rather eat plates of this salad than pumpkin pie. It's the textures and salty, sweet flavors for me—plus the colors aren't terrible, either. The name is a little deceiving, as there are really only two tablespoons of butter in the whole recipe. It's there to anchor the dressing and add a nuttiness that feels holiday-special to me. I think you can opt for either pomegranate seeds or chopped hazelnuts for the crunchy element here (hazelnuts and browned butter have huge crushes on each other), but if you want to use both—I say go for it. It is the holidays, after all.

Makes 4 servings

1 medium butternut squash, about 3 pounds	½ head radicchio, leaves separated (alternatively, you could chop it)
1 teaspoon plus 3 tablespoons olive oil, plus more as needed	2 tablespoons butter
Salt	6 to 8 pitted dates, roughly chopped
Freshly ground black pepper	2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoon garam masala or curry powder	⅓ cup pomegranate seeds and/or chopped toasted hazelnuts

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Place the unpeeled squash directly onto the oven rack and roast for 40 minutes. Allow it to cool until you can handle it, and then peel it (if desired—I often don't). Halve it lengthwise, scoop out the seeds, and slice into ½-inch half-moons.

Pour 1 or 2 teaspoons of the oil into a large (preferably) nonstick skillet over medium heat. If your skillet isn't nonstick, a little more oil might be necessary. Add the squash, then season well with salt, pepper, and the garam masala. Cook the squash on both sides until browned and crusty, 6 to 8 minutes per side. They're already well on their way since we preroasted. So just get things nice, tender, and beautifully brown.

Arrange the radicchio on a large plate or tray (or individual plates) and top with the cooked squash. Add the butter to the skillet along with the dates. Allow the butter to melt and then brown, stirring occasionally—this will take about 5 minutes.

When you can smell the nuttiness of the browned butter, add 3 to 5 more tablespoons of oil (depending on your preference), the balsamic vinegar, and some salt and pepper to taste. Stir to mix and to get those dates crispy and caramelized. Spoon this warm vinaigrette over the squash and radicchio and top with the pomegranate seeds or chopped hazelnuts (or both!).

Ruffled Buttermilk (Punch) Pie

The halls of classic Southern confectionery are decked with luscious, rich, sugary-sweet pies. Not a moment goes by where there isn't a warm pie cooling on a windowsill somewhere. From chess, coconut cream, and pecan to the transparent and Derby pies from my home state of Kentucky, almost every nook and cranny of the Southland is fit to burst with examples of beloved regional pies. My favorite of them all is a simple buttermilk pie, and I've long used the recipe from Lisa Donovan, the James Beard Award-winning pastry chef, food writer, and fearless leader of Nashville's former Buttermilk Road pop-up dinner series. My recipe here honors hers and my love of a simple, un-frilled Southern pie.

Makes 1 (9-inch) pie

Natural nonstick cooking spray **3 teaspoons vanilla extract**
10 sheets frozen phyllo **or vanilla bean paste**
 dough, thawed
5 large eggs, beaten
1½ cups buttermilk
⅓ cup maple syrup
2 tablespoons honey
1 ounce bourbon or spiced
 rum (optional)
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon **¼ teaspoon freshly**
 grated nutmeg
Turbinado sugar, for sprinkling
Fresh berries, powdered sugar,
 toasted almonds, and/or
Yogurty Whipped Cream
 (page 21), for topping

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Adjust the rack to the middle position. Spray a 9-inch springform pan or 9-inch cake pan with cooking spray and line with parchment paper, ensuring there is ample overhang so you can easily remove the pie after it cools (think of the overhang as your handles). Put the pan on a baking sheet.

Scrunch up the sheets of phyllo and haphazardly arrange them in the prepared pan. Just push and squeeze them in, covering the surface of the pan. There is no need for precision or perfection here, as that is not at all the point. The more jagged, jutting points and edges sticking out, the better.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together the eggs, buttermilk, maple syrup, honey, bourbon (if using), cinnamon, and vanilla. Pour this over the phyllo in the pan. Sprinkle the fresh nutmeg over top.

Bake the pie until very golden and set, about 40 minutes. Sprinkle generously with turbinado sugar right when it comes out of the oven, evenly covering the surface. Let it cool for 10 minutes before transferring it elsewhere and top with fresh berries, toasted almonds, and/or whipped cream.

