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Reap What You Sow

Belinda Smith-Sullivan reminisces on the recipes that bring her home

BY LIA GRABOWSKI
PHOTOGRAPHY FORREST CLONTS

NOW A PROFESSIONAL CHEF and three-time cookbook author, Belinda Smith-Sullivan's introduction to cooking came at just seven years old. "I had the best of both worlds because I had both my grandmother and my mother as teachers," she says.

Helping out in the kitchen became part of her after-school chores: Her parents worked full-time, but dinner was always served at 5:30. "I was like my mom's secret weapon for getting dinner on the table in time," she says. The first thing her mother taught her to make was cornbread, which she then made every afternoon. ("In Southern African-American families, cornbread is like a baguette in France," she says, "I really do believe cornbread goes with everything.")

It sparked her curiosity in the kitchen and she started taking an interest when her mom was cooking, sitting and watching while other kids played outside. By the time Smith-Sullivan



Hoghead cheese served on saltine crackers.

was ten years old, she was making all the desserts for their forty-person Thanksgiving dinner.

“My dad, on the other hand, does not cook. But head cheese is the one thing he knew how to make,” she says. He was raised on a farm in Mississippi and grew up making head cheese with his mom before moving to Chicago, where he was a stockyard butcher for more than forty years.

Souse, also known as head cheese, is traditionally made from what would otherwise be thrown away after a pig is processed: feet, ears, tails, and even snouts. “All the parts the average person would just turn up their nose at, that’s what’s in there,” Smith-Sullivan says.

“It’s combined with herbs and spices and cooked for long enough that the tough meat softens and is easily separated, and the bones release their natural gelatin into the cooking liquid. “When you’re a kid, it feels like forever, but it’s really just around four hours,” she notes.

“And then when it cools, then you just reach in there with your hands and you just start pulling everything apart and discarding the bones and stuff. As kids, that’s how we would

help—we kids would just roll up our sleeves and just jump right in.”

Smith-Sullivan spent years trying to recreate her father’s recipe, experimenting and talking to family members to piece it together. “He didn’t have a recipe, it was all in his head,” she says. “I wanted to recreate it so that I can have something to give to my family, because they all love it but no one wanted to tackle it.”

Smith-Sullivan, who now lives in Trenton, South Carolina, grew up splitting her time between Chicago and her grandparents’ farms in rural Mississippi, where she would spend her summers. She recalls her grandmother going to town once a week to buy a twenty-five-pound sack of flour and a ten- or fifteen-pound sack of sugar. “Those were the only two things she actually purchased. Everything else, they grew or made themselves,” she says.

“Succotash is a standard in the South. It’s on every Sunday table,” she says. Every family has their own iteration, but it all starts with corn and lima beans. Her family’s version, packed with okra, bell pepper, tomatoes, and onion, stems from the Mississippi farm

and her grandmother’s garden, which she recalls was about the size of a city block. “It almost replaces a salad. The vegetables should be light and crisp so it’s refreshing, not a mushy thing.”

By continuing to make and pass along the recipes she learned and honed at the elbow of the generations before her, Smith-Sullivan is crafting a legacy for the rest of her family. “That’s how we showed in our family that we love each other.”

Hoghead Cheese

MAKES 2 (8X8-INCH) PANS

“This Southern classic is a staple in most Southern country households. Made from what would traditionally be considered throw-away parts from hogs. Nothing goes to waste on the farm! Tradition has it that the only way to serve and eat this delicacy is with saltine crackers and hot sauce.”

- 5 pounds pig ears or pig feet
- 5 pounds pork neckbones
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 jalapeño, chopped
- ¼ cup minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons cajun seasoning
- 1 tablespoon dried sage
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 3 bay leaves
- ¼ cup kosher salt
- ⅓ cup black pepper
- ¼ cup pickling spice
- 2¼ cups apple cider vinegar, divided
- Saltines
- Hot sauce

1. Line two 8x8-inch pans with plastic wrap or foil; set aside. Wash meats thoroughly and add to a large pot. Add the following 11 ingredients. Add 2 cups vinegar and enough water to cover all ingredients. Cover pot and simmer over low heat until meat is tender, at least 4 hours. Allow to cool enough to handle by hand.
2. Remove meat from cooking liquid and discard any bones and bay leaves, if still whole. Separate any unusable

ing liquid. Using clean hands mash the meats into small pieces and divide into the prepared pans. Sprinkle with remaining ¼ cup vinegar.

3. Skim any residue from top of cooking liquid, if necessary. Ladle liquid over meat until just covered. Let cool completely. Cover and refrigerate overnight or 24 hours—long enough for meat mixture to gel. Un-mold onto a serving dish and slice. Serve with saltine crackers and hot sauce.

Southern-Style Succotash

SERVES 6

“Every Southern cook has their own favorite recipe and ingredients for this warm-weather classic. But all will agree that two items it must have are lima beans and corn.”

- 1 pound lima beans, fresh or frozen
- 6 thick slices bacon
- 1 Vidalia onion, chopped
- ½ cup chopped red bell pepper
- 1 large garlic clove, minced
- 1 cup sliced okra
- 3 cups corn kernels, fresh or frozen
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 pint grape tomatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons sliced fresh basil

1. In a saucepan over medium-high heat, cover beans with water by 1 inch and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until tender but not mushy, about 10 minutes. Drain and set aside.

2. In a large cast-iron skillet over medium heat, cook bacon until crisp. Reserving drippings in pan, remove bacon to a paper towel-lined plate to drain. Once cooled, crumble bacon and set aside.

3. In the same skillet with the drippings, cook the onion, bell pepper, garlic, and okra until onion is translucent, 3 to 4 minutes. Add corn, salt, pepper, and lima beans and cook until corn is tender, 5 minutes more. Add butter and stir until melted. Stir in tomatoes, basil, and crumbled bacon.

Smith-Sullivan uses fresh basil over her Southern-style succotash.

