

IT IS EARLY AFTERNOON IN BIRMINGHAM, Alabama, and Chef Frank Stitt is hard at work in the kitchen of historic Bottega Favorita, preparing for the evening's meal service. Pots of pink-eyed peas and potatoes are boiling on the burners, and all around, his fellow white coats are chopping, dicing, and slicing onions, radishes, mushrooms, and more. Frank picks up a bunch of collard greens and uses four of his five senses to ensure their quality. Only the best will do.

That motto has served the James Beard–award-winning chef well. In the heart of the Magic City, he has built his culinary empire, one marvelous dish at a time.

His affinity for food can be traced back to Cullman, Alabama, the small town in which he was born and raised. On his grandparents' farm, lunch meant a table laden with fresh-from-the-earth vegetables, sometimes stewed, sometimes fried, and always delectable. Says Frank, "All of those things are at the core of my culinary foundation."

A third-generation Alabamian, he spent years traveling the world, perfecting his skills and refining his palate. After studying under the likes of Alice Waters and Richard Olney in San Francisco, Frank expanded his areas of expertise by exploring and working in the south of France, as well as other culinary capitals. The eventual return to his native state resulted in his first restaurant, Highland's Bar and Grill, where the French-infused menu planned around regional staples reflected his love of "both souths."

ROOTS REFINED

THE CULINARY ARTS OF FRANK STITT

Born and raised on Alabama clay, world-renowned chef Frank Stitt combines down-home ingredients with international flavors to create dishes that have redefined the meaning of Southern food.

BY ANDREA FANNING / RECIPES EXCERPTED FROM *FRANK STITT'S BOTTEGA FAVORITA* BY FRANK STITT (ARTISAN BOOKS, COPYRIGHT 2008) / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS HIRSHEIMER
FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIMBERLY FINKEL DAVIS / FOOD STYLING BY LOREN WOOD / PHOTO STYLING BY MOLLY SMITH

Whether you're in Alabama or New York, sourcing from local farms and farmers' markets whenever possible just gives you better flavor.

The year was 1982, and Frank's innovative approach to fine food catapulted Birmingham into the national spotlight. Awards and accolades followed, as did an occasional attempt to weave in Italian foods that he loved to cook and eat. In 1988, he opened Bottega Restaurant and Café—two different dining experiences with a shared kitchen inside a 1920s limestone structure dubbed Bottega Favorita. He says, "It gives me the opportunity to take what I've learned about Italian foodways and reinterpret them with the upbringing I had in the Cullman countryside."

What does that mean for the lucky dinner guest? Complete and utter deliciousness.

"There are actually a lot of common ties between the South and Italy," notes Frank. "Our love of butterbeans, lady peas, pink-eyed peas, and crowder peas is unique for the United States, but it's similar to the way the Italians revere their fresh, in-the-shell beans, such as cannelloni and gigantes, which are like big, white limas." He adds, "The greens we use in the South—collard, turnip, and mustard greens—are much like Swiss chard, Tuscan kale, and rapini, bitter, hearty greens that the Italians live for."

Chef Stitt's ability to make these associations and adaptations results in dishes such as Sweet Potato Ravioli. "Would you find that in Italy?" he asks. "Probably not, but you would find a pumpkin ravioli. Since I've visited the places where that is served and tasted it there, I can bring it to others in a way that works for this part of the world."

His desire to share good food with others has stretched far beyond the walls of his Birmingham dining rooms. In 2002, he released *Southern Table*, a coffee-table-style cookbook that tells the secrets behind Highlands Bar and Grill. With more than 150 recipes and 150,000 copies sold, it's clear that people far and wide yearned for Frank's signature flavors. Now, there's more to crave, and this time it's all about Italian fusion.

Frank Stitt's Bottega Favorita (Artisan Books, 2008) recounts the chef's extensive travels and studies in Italy, from early mornings at the fish market to afternoons tasting gelato. "This project was especially interesting for me because I come at cooking from more of a historical, cultural, anthropological angle," explains Frank. "I'm interested in individual regions, in how and why a dish evolved."

One sampling of his Parmesan Soufflé or Shrimp Salad Portofino, and it's clear that his time and observations



Owner of three restaurants and author of two cookbooks, Alabama-born-and-raised Chef Frank Stitt creates dynamic dishes by combining Southern ingredients with global flavors.

have been worth the effort. Like Bottega itself, the recipes in the book range from café standards, such as pizzas and sandwiches, to more sophisticated dishes like Lamb Spiedini with Sicilian Couscous and Yogurt Sauce. Though the gourmet flair may seem somewhat intimidating to the average cook, Frank insists, "Anyone can put these dishes together."

According to Frank, no matter the skill level of the one in the apron, there is one thing every recipe needs to be successful: quality ingredients. "We've got to rethink where our food comes from," he says.

Frank takes great pride in working with local farmers, and his restaurants all rely on local ingredients for their daily menus. "Whether you're in Alabama or New York, sourcing from local farms and farmers' markets whenever possible just gives you better flavor."

Another secret to palate-pleasing dishes, he notes, is paying attention to "the rhythm of the seasons, using ingredients when they're at their best."

Part of the slow-food movement and the Southern Foodways Alliance, Frank has colorful hopes for the future. "I would like to see our urban areas surrounded by green belts of small farms that practice sustainable farming, growing heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables for flavor rather than convenience—a return to the old-fashioned ways of farming."

Literally planting his passions, Frank, along with his wife and business partner, Pardis, has started a little farm in Harpersville. Their efforts have already produced crops that are served in their family of famous restaurants, and though the Stitts have also begun searching for ways to use restaurant compost to fertilize the farm, they would like to do more.

Chef Stitt envisions young cooks coming to Harpersville to experience food on a deeper level, just as he did back in Cullman. "I'd like to impact young people by leading them away from the fast-food mentality and encouraging them to enjoy foods that are locally grown. Hopefully, this would help them become the next generation of people who take pride in the South, who enjoy good food, and..." He laughs, then adds, "Who eat at my restaurants."

Frank Stitt's Bottega Favorita is available in bookstores nationwide. For information about Bottega Restaurant and Cafe, go to www.bottegarrestaurant.com. Call 205-939-1000 for reservations.

This spicy dip is the perfect thing to serve on game day for a crowd or with drinks before dinner. "Don't be afraid of really blackening the onion slices," Frank Stitt says. "The deeper the char, the more flavorful and smoky the dip." The dip is great right away, but the flavors are even better the next day.



charred onion dip

Yield: approximately 3 cups or 8 servings

Preparation: 5 minutes

- 2 cups sour cream
- 1 tablespoon mascarpone cheese
- 1 scant tablespoon whole-grain mustard
- 1/4 teaspoon hot pepper sauce, such as Tabasco, or more to taste
- 1 tablespoon thinly sliced chives
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- 1/4 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 (1/2-inch-thick) slices Charred Red Onion, 1 outer ring and 1 inner ring reserved for garnish, remaining onions finely chopped (Recipe follows.)
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

COMBINE sour cream, mascarpone, mustard, hot pepper sauce, chives, lemon juice, and Worcestershire in a medium bowl. Fold in chopped onions, then taste and season with salt, pepper, and more hot pepper sauce, if desired.

TO SERVE, put reserved grilled outer onion ring on a plate and spoon dip inside it. Garnish with remaining inner ring. Serve with potato chips.

charred red onion

Preparation: 12 minutes

- Olive oil
- Red onions, sliced 1/2 to 3/4 inch thick

PREPARE a hot fire in a grill or heat a cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat until hot.

RUB the grill grate or brush the grill pan with olive oil. Add onion slices and cook, turning once, for 6 minutes per side, or until charred and just tender. Transfer to a plate to cool.

Something wonderful happens when thick-sliced onion rings are given a dark char on the grill or in a cast-iron skillet. Sweetness overtakes their sharp bite, and subtle burn marks add a flavorful smoky dimension. At Bottega, they toss these charred onions in salads and put them on pizzas and in sandwiches.

Bottega Chicken Scaloppine

is the most-ordered dish at Bottega Café—it's just the right combination of crisp, golden crust and juicy, moist chicken. The café serves it on Creamy Polenta with a little salad of tender lettuces, and the acidic tartness of capers and the lemon sauce brings it all together. The chicken can be breaded well in advance: Place on a small parchment-lined baking sheet and refrigerate until ready to cook. To make a lighter breading, be sure to dust off excess flour before dipping the chicken into the egg. And pay attention to the bread crumbs—not too fine, not too coarse, but a good mix of irregular sizes.

Polenta is a hearty side dish, a perfect stand-in for the more usual starches. It's critical to season this creamy version assertively in order to balance the richness of the butter and the Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Both yellow and white corn are used for polenta—the white is preferred in the Veneto when the polenta accompanies seafood, but otherwise they're used interchangeably. The white grain yields a slightly more delicate polenta.

bottega chicken scaloppine

Yield: 4 servings

Preparation: 25 minutes

Cook: 1½ hours

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, preferably from naturally raised chicken, rinsed and patted dry

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

½ cup all-purpose flour

2 eggs, beaten

1 cup Bread Crumbs

(Recipe follows.)

2 tablespoons olive, canola, or grapeseed oil

1 cup dry white wine

½ cup sherry vinegar or champagne vinegar

1 shallot, finely chopped

1 dried red chile pepper

1 bay leaf

1 tablespoon heavy cream

¾ cup unsalted butter

Juice of ½ lemon

2 tablespoons diced tomatoes

1 tablespoon capers, rinsed

PREHEAT oven to 350°.

SEASON chicken on both sides with salt and pepper. Set out 3 shallow plates in assembly-line fashion. Put flour in one, beaten eggs in the next, and bread crumbs in the third. Dredge each seasoned chicken breast in flour, shaking off the excess, then dip in eggs, and finally press into bread crumbs to coat thoroughly on both sides. Set breaded chicken on a plate.

HEAT a large ovenproof sauté pan over medium-high heat, and add oil. Brown chicken breasts for approximately 3 minutes per side, or until golden. Regulate heat as necessary to achieve a uniformly browned crust.

TRANSFER pan to the oven and cook chicken for 10 to 15 minutes, or until cooked through. (Chicken should reach an internal temperature of 165° when tested with an instant-read thermometer.) Transfer chicken to a rack to rest briefly.

MEANWHILE, combine wine, vinegar, shallot, chile, and bay leaf in a saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and cook until pan is almost dry. Add cream and simmer until it reduces to about 1 teaspoon. Whisk in butter little by little over medium-low heat until sauce is creamy and emulsified. Strain sauce through a fine-mesh strainer into a bowl. Add salt and pepper to taste and lemon juice. **SLICE** chicken on the bias and arrange on serving plates. Spoon sauce over the top and garnish with diced tomatoes and capers.

BRING WATER to a boil in a large pot or heavy saucepan over high heat. Add salt and reduce heat to medium. Slowly pour in polenta, whisking constantly. Turn heat to medium-low and continue to cook, stirring with a wooden spoon, for 30 to 40 minutes, or until polenta has thickened and pulls away from the sides of the pot but is still pourable.

REMOVE POT from heat and whisk in cream (if using), cheese, butter, pepper, and pepper sauce, if desired. Taste and adjust seasonings to your liking. Serve hot.

bread crumbs

Yield: approximately 2 cups

Preparation: 5 minutes

8 slices baguette or other crusty bread, preferably 1 day old

REMOVE crust from bread and cut it into chunks. In the work bowl of a food processor, pulse bread until you have an amalgam of fine, medium, and coarse crumbs ranging from the size of a lentil to that of a juniper berry.

creamy polenta

Yield: 4 servings

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cook: 40 minutes

4 cups spring water

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1 cup polenta

2 tablespoons heavy cream (optional)

¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or grana padano

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Hot pepper sauce such as Tabasco or Cholula, to taste (optional)

Like a hidden cave filled with riches,

the Bottega cooler reveals a myriad of colors and textures, including veal chops, guinea hens, cuts of pork and venison, and tray after tray of vegetables. Frank Stitt's daily routine that includes having a cappuccino, surveying the morning's shipments, reviewing the previous night's sales, adjusting the day's menu, and coaching and encouraging the chefs actually leads back to the cooler, where his passion for food really comes into play. "Isn't it inspiring?" he asks with a gleam in his eye. "Nosing around in here gets me excited about what we're going to cook today."

warm cream-cheese tart with cinnamon and almonds

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

Preparation: 20 minutes

Bake: 25 to 28 minutes

- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened
- ⅓ cup sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 baked Sweet Pastry Tart Shell (Recipe follows.)
- ½ cup confectioners' sugar

- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons hot water
- 1 cup sliced almonds, lightly toasted
- Whipped cream (optional)

PREHEAT oven to 350°.

IN THE WORK BOWL OF A FOOD

PROCESSOR, combine cream cheese, butter, and sugar for filling and process until light and creamy. Add eggs and vanilla and process until smooth. Spread filling evenly in prepared tart shell.

BAKE for 20 to 25 minutes, or until center is set and edges are light golden.

Remove pan from the oven and allow

tart to stand for 2 to 3 minutes while you prepare glaze.

IN A SMALL BOWL, combine confectioners' sugar, cinnamon, and hot water for glaze, whisking until smooth.

SPREAD glaze over top of tart. Sprinkle top with sliced almonds. Serve warm, with whipped cream, if you like.

sweet pastry tart shell

Yield: 2 (10½-inch) tart shells

Preparation: 15 minutes

Refrigerate: 1 hour

Bake: 25 minutes

- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup unsalted butter, cut into cubes and chilled
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 3 large egg yolks

IN THE WORK BOWL OF A FOOD

PROCESSOR, combine flour and salt and pulse to mix. Add butter and pulse until mixture resembles coarse bread crumbs. Add sugar and egg yolks and pulse again, just until mixture comes together and pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Transfer dough to a sheet of plastic wrap, divide in half, shape into 2 disks, and wrap in plastic. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or overnight.


PREHEAT oven to 350°.

ROLL pastry rounds out on a lightly floured surface into 2 (12-inch) circles. Fit dough into 2 (10½- to 11-inch) fluted tart pans with removable bottoms, pressing evenly over the bottom and up the sides. Line tart shells with foil and fill with dried beans or pie weights.

BAKE tart shells for 20 minutes, or until edges are very light brown.

Remove parchment paper and weights.

BAKE tart shell for 5 to 10 minutes more, or until lightly golden. Cool on a rack before filling.



Frank Stitt and his pastry chef, Dol Miles, often shake their heads about this dessert—how can anything so simple and easy be so good? With just the right balance of buttery crust, creamy filling, and sweet and spicy topping with a bit of almond crunch, it stands out on Bottega's dessert menu.

Since this recipe makes 2 tart shells, make 1 tart shell to use now and freeze the remaining dough, wrapped in several layers of plastic wrap, for up to 3 months. Just let the dough thaw in the refrigerator before rolling out and baking.