



ICONIC INGREDIENTS

GEORGIA'S BEST FOODSTUFFS GRACE ATLANTA MENUS. BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

“It’s a celebration of ingredients we can find whether it’s the best local carrot or wonderful crabmeat from the Georgia coast.”

—Linton Hopkins, *Restaurant Eugene*

RIGHT: CHICKEN PONTALBA WITH ANDOUILLE HASH AND HOLLANDAISE FROM PARISH FOOD & GOODS.



The local food movement has made it more interesting to travel—at least from the perspective of taste buds. Rather than feasting on food you can readily find at home, each trip is an opportunity to seek out local culinary treasures. While in Georgia, savor seasonal sensations like greens grown in our red clay, tomatoes ripened under our sun, beef that grazed our local grass and shrimp that swam off our coastline.

Some Georgia foods like Vidalia onions, peanuts and peaches are famous throughout the world. Others may be less well known, especially outside the southeastern U.S., but are prized by residents and hold a prominent place in our food traditions and developments. Georgia-grown ingredients are routinely transformed into world-class cuisine when placed in the hands of talented chefs—and the great news is that Atlanta is home to many chefs who rank among the nation's top culinary talent. In short, you couldn't be in a better place to taste the best of what Georgia has to offer.

"Georgia is an exciting place to be, especially as far as food is concerned," says Executive Chef Robert Gerstenecker of Park 75 at the Four Seasons Atlanta, who has previously worked in Hong Kong, New York, Toronto and Palm Beach. "When people come to Georgia they want to see something Southern on the menu. It's exciting. New York is a big melting pot; here there's Southern pride. Food is part of our lifestyle."

Others agree. "Southern culture as a whole is very committed to food," says Ryan Turner of Muss & Turner's, where the philosophy is to source as much locally as possible. And it's a devotion that consumers and food producers share. "The Georgia suppliers we work with are passionate and committed to producing great food," he says.

Quality ingredients at the peak of seasonal freshness are a key reason chefs buy local. "We try to buy as much locally as possible," says Ford Fry, chef and owner of JCT. Kitchen & Bar, who selects suppliers as close to his restaurant as possible to maximize freshness. "When you get fresh peanuts that weren't sitting around in a warehouse somewhere there's truly a difference," he explains. Other benefits include shorter transportation routes that help decrease oil consumption and lower pollution, a greater investment in and economic benefit to the local community, and stronger relationships throughout the supply chain.



"We choose to use local ingredients because the quality is better than something shipped across the country or from another country," says Todd Rushing, partner at Concentrics Restaurants, which includes ONE.midtown kitchen, TWO.urban licks, Murphy's, 30 Tables and others. "Being able to shake the hand of the farmer who raised the food is a benefit," he says, because it builds relationships that support the local community and help ensure quality.

When local foods are the foundation, menus change frequently. "We have to be flexible with the seasons," says Turner. "And working with small farms means you don't have a running constant supply." While local chicken, beef, lamb, pork, shrimp, trout and even arugula may be more consistently available throughout the year, fruits and vegetables such as Vidalia onions, strawberries, blueberries and more have specific—and often limited—harvest times.

One way chefs respond is to get creative. "We start not with what we want to make but with what's available to us," says Chef Kevin Gillespie of Woodfire Grill. "The most influential thing about the way we cook here is what's available." So while he may serve pink-eyed peas alongside pork in early summer, in fall that side dish may be squash. The good news is that both

LEFT: ROOM'S SUMMER HEIRLOOM TOMATO SALAD WITH SUGAR SNAP PEAS, MUSHROOMS, RANCH DRESSING AND BASIL. ABOVE: THE CRACKER JACK SALAD FROM JCT. KITCHEN & BAR INCLUDES ARUGULA, COUNTRY HAM, APPLE VINAIGRETTE CARAMEL CORN, SPICED PEANUTS AND BLEU CHEESE.



ABOVE: ALASKAN HALIBUT WITH LADY PINK EYE PEA SUCCOTASH FROM ROSEBUD. RIGHT: WATERHAVEN'S FRIED GREEN TOMATOES WITH POBLANO GOAT CHEESE AND PUMPKIN SEED PESTO.

combinations are tasty: "I'm a firm believer in 'what grows together goes together,'" he says.

Many Atlantan restaurateurs agree. "It's local-ingredient driven," says Chef Linton Hopkins of his menu at Restaurant Eugene. "It's a celebration of ingredients we can find whether it's the best local carrot or wonderful crabmeat from the Georgia coast."

Many chefs stock up on seasonal foods while they can. Fry adores Georgia strawberries. "They're so sweet they're amazing, and completely red all the way through the middle," he says. "When strawberry season comes, I buy all I can and freeze them or preserve them in some way."

To ensure he has year-round access to Georgia peaches, arguably Georgia's most iconic food, Gerstenecker plans to can a total of 1,200 jars of peaches this year "to capture a bit of Georgia summer." The peaches are destined for chutney, barbecue sauce, muffins and more.

And Georgia boasts some unique peaches. "There are some varieties in Georgia not readily available in other places," says Gillespie. What's more, "our climate produces a sweeter peach that I prefer the taste of—we get quite a bit of rain here and heat during the day to concentrate the sugars." He buys peaches from an orchard that has been operated by a family for over 100 years and specializes in certain heirloom varieties. Dedicated producers of unique foods can be found across the state.

"Variety is the spice of life and we ought to celebrate Georgia's regional character," says David Harris, winemaker and owner of Blackstock Vineyards & Winery in Dahlonega. "Our wines won't and shouldn't taste like French or Californian wine, and that's what's so interesting about tasting. We have a different regional flavor." And if you think "regional flavor" sounds like a euphemism for "sub-par," think



again: Several award-winning Georgian wines are featured on wine lists throughout the nation.

There is much talk among winemakers and connoisseurs about how each wine reveals its terrior—that is, the place where it was grown. Can the term be applied to other foods? “I think that you get an aspect of that with pecans,” says Gillespie. “I just had some California pecans other day and they just don’t have same sugar content as their Georgia counterparts. Georgia pecans are sweeter, perhaps a touch more tannic, but with an underlying sweetness that I really like.”

Vidalia onions may be the most dramatic example of the impact of Georgian terrior on food. Southeast Georgia’s mild climate and sandy, low-sulfur soil contribute to onions so sweet that some folks bite into them as eagerly as apples. Vidalia onions appear on local menus in onion rings, savory cheesecakes, salads, ragouts and much more.

Influences of Georgia’s terrior are evident not only in crops rooted in our land but even in the livestock that grazes it, whether what rests on your plate is a juicy steak or dense cheese. “At Sweet Grass Dairy in Thomasville, all the goats are just roaming, nibbling on local vegetation and that translates into the flavor profile,” says Gerstenecker with evident enthusiasm.

Gillespie agrees: “With free range poultry and beef you can definitely taste a difference. The taste of the grass here is unlike anywhere else and you’re getting flavor from that.” That Georgian essence in foods can win folks over. For example, Gerstenecker was not a fan of pickled okra until he tried some using fresh, local

okra. “I’d been turned off by what you get in the store,” he admits. “It’s amazing how different the flavor profile is when done fresh. Now I can’t stop eating it.” He’s made it a menu standard.

Grits, too, are quintessentially Southern, and many chefs favor Georgia producers. “Georgia grits have more texture and more starch so they tend to get creamier, too,” says Chef Greg Sears of Corner Café. Diverse preparations of grits include plain, jalapeño, cheese, gumbo, barbecue, Prosciutto and Parmesan, and more.

“Georgia grits are incredibly nutty and reminiscent of popcorn with subtle sweetness,” says Ron Eyester, chef and owner of Rosebud. “When I get grits on a Wednesday typically they were milled on a Tuesday. Grits will eventually go flat and not as vibrant if they sit in a warehouse for three weeks.” Eyester estimates that 60 percent of his produce is locally sourced, including tomatoes, arugula, lettuce, radishes, chicken, trout, shrimp and more.

Creative combinations of Georgia ingredients showcase the state’s agricultural diversity as well as chefs’ creativity: Perhaps you’ll be tempted by the tempura-fried squash blossoms stuffed with Sweet Grass Dairy goat cheese and drizzled with Savannah Tupelo honey at Park 75. Or wood grilled Berkshire pork with yellow sweet corn, pink-eyed peas and tomatoes at Woodfire Grill. Or the “Cracker Jack” salad with spiced Georgia peanuts, blue cheese, country ham, arugula and apple vinaigrette at JCT.Kitchen & Bar. Or a barbecue pork sandwich at Muss & Turner’s. Or another tasty creation.

Your mouth watering yet?

ON THE MENU

While many Atlanta restaurants showcase Georgia products on their menus, these are some locals’ favorites:

- **4th & Swift** 678-904-0160, www.4thandswift.com
- **5 Seasons Brewing Company** 770-521-5551; 404-875-3232; 404-255-5911, www.5seasonsbrewing.com
- **30 Tables** 404-469-0700, www.30tables.com
- **Aria** 404-233-7673, www.aria-atl.com
- **Atlanta Grill** 404-659-0400, www.ritzcarlton.com
- **Bacchanalia** 404-365-0410, www.starprovisions.com
- **Bluepointe** 404-237-9070, www.buckheadrestaurants.com
- **Buckhead Diner** 404-262-3336, www.buckheadrestaurants.com
- **Chops** 404-262-2675, www.buckheadrestaurants.com
- **Corner Café** 404-240-1978, www.buckheadrestaurants.com
- **Dogwood** 404-835-1410, www.dogwoodrestaurant.com
- **Holeman & Finch Public House** 404-948-1175, www.holeman-finch.com
- **JCT. Kitchen & Bar** 404-355-2252, www.jctkitchen.com
- **Murphy's** 404-872-0904, www.murphysvh.com
- **Muss & Turner's** 770-434-1114, www.mussandturners.com
- **ONE.midtown kitchen** 404-892-4111, www.onemidtownkitchen.com
- **Parish** 404-681-4434, www.parishatl.com
- **Park 75** 404-253-3840, www.fourseasons.com/atlanta
- **Rathbun's** 404-524-8280, www.rathbunsrestaurant.com
- **Repast** 404-870-8707, www.repastrestaurant.com
- **Restaurant Eugene** 404-355-0321, www.restauranteeugene.com
- **Room at Twelve Centennial Park** 404-418-1250, www.roomattwelve.com
- **Rosebud** 404-347-9747, www.rosebudatlanta.com
- **Social House** 404-350-1938, www.socialhouseatl.com
- **South City Kitchen** 404-873-7358; 770-435-0700, www.southcitykitchen.com
- **Tap 1180** 404-347-2220, www.tapat1180.com
- **TWO.urban licks** 404-522-4622, www.twourbanlicks.com
- **WaterHaven** 404-214-6740, www.waterhavenatl.com
- **Woodfire Grill** 404-347-9055, www.woodfiregrill.com