

World chefs: Hitz enhances southern food with French techniques

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By Patricia Reaney

NEW YORK, Oct 23 (Reuters) - Alex Hitz grew up in Georgia, was classically trained in France and uses the culinary techniques he learned in Europe to enhance the southern food of his childhood.

In his first cookbook, "My Beverly Hills Kitchen, Classic Southern Cooking with a French Twist," Hitz provides 175 recipes, an abundance of photos, menus and tips on entertaining gleaned from some of America's top hosts.

"I wanted Southern food, but I wanted it on my terms: the European standards of quality, applied to those grand old plantation traditions," he writes in the book.

Many of the recipes, including one for fried chicken, were inspired by Dorothy Williams Davis, the woman who cooked for Hitz's family for 40 years.

Hitz, a former restaurant owner, talked to Reuters about southern cooking, his culinary influences and the art of entertaining.

Q: This is much more than just a cookbook. How would you describe it?

A: "It is also a memoir. The recipes are really serious, foodie, chef recipes. I tested them hundreds and hundreds of times but it is also the story of my life told through these recipes."

Q: You're trained in France and grew up in the South and in

the book you combined both influences. How did you manage to do that?

A: "I think southern food really needs the French standards and techniques and quality. So much of Southern food has gotten bad and I think the best of all is the combination (with the French techniques). That is what I tried to do in the book."

Q: What is so special about southern cooking?

A: "It is a whole way of life onto itself. I think there are some chefs that have capitalized on it but it has never been given the sort of kudos that it truly deserves and I hope I have done that in this book."

Q: Who has influenced you most in your cooking?

A: "My mother is number one. She was just a total food person. Foodie people are a breed apart, so my mother is number one, and our family cook, Dorothy, who had a six-grade education, if that. She had what we refer to in the food world as 'the touch.' She was an intuitive cook and knew had to make food taste good. So, those two people, Dorothy's and my mother's sensibilities together, that made the food I grew up with both French and southern and just so, so good."

Q: What are your signature dishes?

A: "There are a couple of signature recipes in this book. There is an heirloom tomato pie, which is one of the standouts of the book, which I love. There is also pecan encrusted salmon and a twice-baked cheese souffle, which takes all of the guess work out of making a souffle because it is baked twice. There is also a crowd pleaser, which is salted caramel cake."

Q: Are there any ingredients you couldn't cook without?

A: "Salted butter, always."

Q: A lot of people think that southern recipes are very heavy and full of calories, how do you get around that?

A: "Some of them are. But what I find about the calories, if

the dish is made with good ingredients, regardless of the calories, you are going to be OK."

Q: You also go into a lot of detail in the book about entertaining. Do you think the art of entertaining is dead?

A: "I never thought it was dead. I thought it was on the wane. But in one way or another I think it will come back. People are excited to have a way to entertain, on whatever level, at home. It doesn't have to be a grand dinner. It could be just six people or a family dinner. That's entertaining too."

Q: When you cook for yourself at home, what is your comfort food?

A: "I have to tell you, I don't. Cooking is enough trouble and if you are going to do it you might as well have enough people there to tell you how good it is."

Butternut Squash Soup

1 1/2 pounds of butternut squash

1 1/2 pound Red Delicious apples

1 1/2 cups diced onions

1 1/2 cups of chicken stock

2 teaspoons salt

1 tablespoon dried rosemary

1 tablespoon dried oregano

1 cup of heavy cream

Pell and chop the squash into 1 1/2 inch cubes. Peel and core the apples, and chop them into pieces the same size as the squash.

In a medium-sized stockpot over a medium heat, combine the squash, apples, onions, chicken stock, salt, rosemary and oregano. Bring them to a simmer and cook until the vegetable and

apples are tender enough that you can pierce them with a fork, approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Remove the stockpot from the heat and, in a food processor fitted with a metal blade, puree all the ingredients until they are smooth. You may need to do this in batches.

Pour the pureed vegetables into a medium mixing bowl and stir in the heavy cream. Cover and refrigerate it overnight. When it's time to serve, reheat the soup to a simmer, and serve it hot.

(Reporting by Patricia Reaney; editing by Paul Casciato)