

GULF GOURMET

The food's haute in Low Country. SHIRA LEVINE



Southern kitchens have long produced some of the best chefs (and most delicious dishes) in America. The post-colonial influences of Creole, African, Cajun, French and Native American cultures have infused powerful, exotic flavors into what can now be considered not just southern food, but southern cuisine. Cooking pros and restaurant reviewers with a focus on this epicurean niche know that all the good grub can no longer be lumped into the 'greasy spoon and fried' category. Rather, they recognize the Low Country for its unique ingredients and ability to infuse traditional classics with cutting-edge innovation.

Historically, agriculture has thrived down in the five Gulf States — Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida — due to rich, fertile soil and the Gulf of Mexico's warm, seafood-filled waters. But despite the wealth of fresh ingredients, southern living hasn't always been easy living. The last seven years have pummeled the region with deadly hurricanes and record-breaking flooding of the Mississippi River system, not to mention one of the worst oil spills in recorded history. But business is back: docks have been rebuilt, boats restored and cleaned. Ecosystems and estuaries are returning to their former splendor.

We spoke with top chefs from Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi about their home-cooked chow and the love and passion they deliver onto our plates.



CHEF STEVE ZUCKER

Corporate chef for Aloha Hospitality based in Orange Beach, Alabama

Some of the best chefs start very young: you were 17.

Because I was extremely young and raw, I was able to fall in love with cooking and really go for it. But I had to learn the old-school way, first by watching and then working my way up. I did that before I went to culinary school and it has benefited me my whole career. I learned to have eyes in the back of my head and multitask.

You've cooked all around the world, yet you still live in a small beach town along the Gulf of Alabama.

I've traveled all over: South Korea, Taiwan, Italy, France. I've worked in Maui, Las Vegas. I went to Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island. But honestly, there is nowhere I'd rather be than here in Alabama, working with Big Bob on our good food and good hospitality. We're running 12 different kitchens. We have some restaurants that were destroyed by hurricanes. But the reality is, everywhere I've lived there has been [the threat that] something devastating can happen. Down here we have tough people who love life. They appreciate every day.

Why is the South such a special place for food?

A gumbo can change from town to town. (Our gumbo made the *Guinness Book of World Records*!) Everyone has their own unique style; I love that and I love traveling through these states learning about the history of our food. We have the best blue crabs, better than the Chesapeake's, and the most incredible oysters. Our red snapper, grouper, mahi and flounder are killer good. Then we have great dirt for vegetables and fruit, and plenty of game: deer, alligator, rabbit.

What has influenced you as a chef?

I'm influenced by Louisiana, where I'm from, but Lower Alabama is my home now. We have great people making great sauces using the greatest ingredients. Jean Louis Palladin and John Besh are chefs that have inspired me. Michel Richard changed my outlook on food. He put on a meal with texture as well as flavor, textures I'd never experienced before. I ate with him at Citrus in L.A. on my way to Taipei, and he used a lot of crazy savory stuff.

What are your favorite dishes?

I love something as simple as a Gulf oyster or a simply prepared fish. And there is nothing better than a good gumbo.

What about non-southern food? Likes or dislikes?

I love me some kimchee. I'm not a huge fan of tripe.

CHEF ROB STINSON

Owner of Salute Italian Seafood, Lookout Seafood & Steaks, and Back Bay Seafood

Tell us about what inspired you to become a chef.

I've been in the restaurant business since I was 15 working as a busboy. I moved to New Orleans at a young age to start my culinary career with Cordon Bleu Chef Gerald Thabuis at Broussard's Restaurant in the French Quarter. I furthered my education in Italy working with Master Italian Chef Ciro Cuomo, and eventually moved to Long Beach, Mississippi, where I opened my first self-owned restaurant, Long Beach Lookout.

Italy in general is my true inspiration for great food and wine. (I could retire there tomorrow and be content.) I really love Long Beach and Gulfport because it's where restaurants have prospered. I'm proud to call those areas home now. I have opened 31 restaurants, six of my own; I love the thrill and excitement of opening restaurants.

What makes Mississippi so special for you?

We have the best seafood in the world. Back in the late-1800s, Biloxi was the seafood capital of the country and had already started shipping seafood all over the country by railroad. The flavors of the South are truly different than anywhere else: spicy, flavorful, with a unique blend of immigrant influences.

You've gone to great lengths to share how healthy your food can be. What's the trick?

The trick is to package healthy in a way that makes customers feel as if they're not sacrificing taste. Great spicy, sweet and sour flavors add contrast in the dishes; texture and color give the diner the experience of eating with their eyes and taste buds, to bring about satisfaction while still eating healthy.

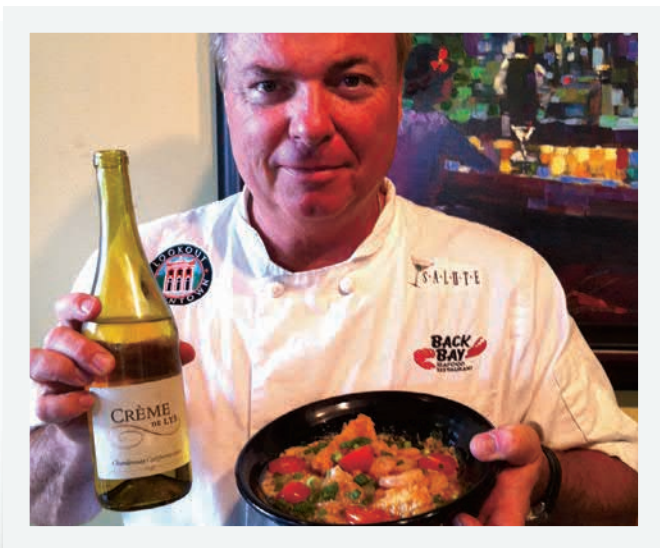
Fresh local produce, seafood and proteins help. I find that crisp, colorful veggies as additions to our fresh-seared entrees make the diner feel he's gotten his money's worth. My new show, *Fit to Eat*, which airs on Mississippi Public Broadcasting, has allowed me to showcase some of my favorite local ingredients prepared in a healthy manner.

Where do you like to eat when you're not busy cooking?

My favorite restaurant is Bayona in New Orleans. Chef and owner Susan Spicer is truly the ultimate creative talent. My favorite restaurant in Mississippi is Jordan River Steamer owned by Hank Plauche. Unfortunately, Isaac destroyed his great location, but he's in the process of rebuilding.

What are your personal comfort foods?

Shrimp, chicken and veggies prepared Asian style.



CHEFS NEALY CRAWFORD AND KEITH FRENZ

Married chef duo and owners of Lola in Covington, Louisiana

Do you like working together as a couple?

It's great, there's no question about it. We're a package. Of course we have ups and downs depending on our moods, but we know what each other needs to get the job done. There isn't a lot of talking in our kitchen. We can be at each other's throats, but 99 percent of the time we're good. We always end with a smile and a quiet ride home.

As young chefs starting to garner buzz, why did you opt to open a restaurant outside of the New Orleans-proper food scene?

We left the city because of Hurricane Katrina; we opened the January after it hit. Our restaurant is in Covington, where I'm from. The first year we opened we were voted Best Chefs of the North Shore of Louisiana. We got Chefs to Watch in *Louisiana Cooking* magazine; we were two of the five. This year we were named the King and Queen of Louisiana Seafood and we got second place in the Great American Seafood Cook-off. We do a lot of community work as well, so people have really gotten to know Lola and us.

How do you describe Louisiana food, and what makes it so special?

We *are* comfort food. We're Sunday family dinner with a fancy twist. We take those old southern recipes and use newer ingredients. We'll use different types of rice blends in our jambalaya to make a different flavor; we put mascarpone in our grits and collard greens.

We can walk to the corner fish market and buy fish and shrimp that, just hours before, were swimming in the salty water of the Mississippi Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. Simple food has developed over the years from farmers' tables. It's food that was always seasonally influenced and home grown.

What should people know about southern food that they might not already know?

You have to take your time to research a city and be food-aware of the area. Southern food doesn't have to be the tourist crap with cream sauce. At Lola, we grill, roast and braise to get away from that stigma of being fried, greasy and buttery. We let our fresh crab and shrimp speak for themselves.

What's your favorite restaurant other than your own?

We like Patois in uptown New Orleans, and also Dominica. Those are our local favorites. With our second child on the way, we haven't been traveling much! But there is this little yellow, open-air restaurant in Cozumel, Mexico that we love. It's so authentic and cool, with fresh fish and killer salsa. We are Mexican food freaks.