

INTRODUCTION

Is there such a thing as an Atlanta classic... anything? Sometimes it seems the speed and fervor with which we tear down the old and replace it with something new might make even our city's symbol, the phoenix, fear he may be next.

What Sherman started we've continued—sometimes to the point of losing small bits of our collective heart and soul. Sure, there's plenty to celebrate—the Braves, the revered universities, the Martin Luther King Center, the Jimmy Carter Center, CNN, Coca-Cola, our bustling airport, and leafy, walkable neighborhoods. But, aside from change itself, one of Atlanta's most enduring cultural legacies is its food.

For almost 20 years, I've had the privilege of sampling and observing Atlanta's restaurants, and being paid to write about them. With a cloak of invisibility Harry Potter couldn't duplicate (I'm a white woman in my 50s), I've had a discreet view of this difficult, heart-breaking and occasionally very lucrative business. The food scene is a fascinating microcosm of what Atlanta has become: sophisticated, wildly diverse, malleable enough to bear the marks of other cultures, but with an identity strong enough to withstand a global onslaught. I could never have dreamed how far and how fast Atlanta's dining scene would progress, so that it now rivals that of much larger American cities like Chicago or Los Angeles. Today our mosaic of immigrant restaurants includes Eritrean, Moroccan, Peruvian and Slovakian.

Despite my Southern family and schooling, there are a few things I missed when I moved here from New York in 1988: A good bagel. Chow fun. Jewel-box specialty shops like Dean & DeLuca and Balducci's. And, especially, exotic ethnic restaurants such as the Burmese place next door to me in SoHo, or the Cuban-Chinese joints in the West Village.

While in New York, of course, I longed for tastes of home. And when I did, the bites I craved most were the sweets. Each city or region has its specialties, and it seems Atlanta's most popular are the fodder of most recipe books—cakes, pies, cookies and pud-

dings—but with a twist. Leave the beautifully layered trifles and gorgeous soufflés to Charleston and New Orleans, and from Atlanta make way for the specialty cake—created by professionals, layered with berries, frosted in butter cream, pooled in chocolate sauce. Most of us stuck-in-traffic folks have a jones for those banana puddings and Hummingbird cakes of our youths, but Atlanta is the City Too Busy to Bake. Perhaps syllabubs, pandowdies and ambrosias once ruled here, but the cake has outlasted them all, surviving in ever-more glorious forms. Even the old-fashioned recipes from Mary Mac's and the Colonnade have a once-in-a-blue-moon quality of fussy richness—and one of my great regrets was learning that the Varsity Drive-In never, ever gives out its fried pie recipe.

Atlanta's first Grande Dame of cookery was Mrs. Henrietta Dull, a widow who turned to cooking to raise her children, and in 1928, compiled one of the first basic Southern cookbooks, *Southern Cooking*. Though it's often short on details (one cake's directions read, simply “Mix as any cake. Bake 1 1/2 hours in tube pan.”), Mrs. Dull's cookbook arrived just in time to rescue a generation of cooks who had no servants, no skills, and no guidance. The cookbook is still in print, and the largest portion of its dessert chapter is taken up with pies and cakes.

Even today in Atlanta, when we sample another culture's cuisine, we use the familiar as a touchstone. We want to try Taqueria Los Hermanos' Tres Leches Cake, layered with fresh fruit. We indulge in the Ritz-Carlton Dining Room's elevation of our native muscadines to a world-class delicacy. And, we want our own specialties revised into something familiar, but entirely novel, like Richard Blais' Pecan Cake with Sweet Tea Ice Cream.

It makes perfect sense that Atlantans would fall in love with these re-invented sweets and baked goods. After all, we've become expert at using fire to transform the old into something entirely new.

—Krista Reese