

Skillet Rules Southern Cooking

Practical And Tough, The Cast-Iron Skillet Remains Pan Of Choice For Cooks

BY BILL DALEY
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As interest continues to grow nationwide in all things Southern food — restaurants, chefs, cookbooks — there's a "natural curiosity" about the humble yet iconic cast-iron skillet, says Virginia Willis, the Atlanta-based authority on the region's cooking. The cast-iron skillet's virtues, and utility, can't be underestimated, in her view.

"If you have a cast-iron skillet, you can make so many things in it for breakfast, lunch and dinner," says Willis, author of "Basic to Brilliant Y'all" (Ten Speed, \$35). "It's a roasting pan. It's a baking dish. It's a skillet."

So symbolic is the cast-iron skillet in the South that Paul and Angela Knipple chose to title their new book after it: "The World in a Skillet: A Food Lover's Tour of the New American South" (University of North Carolina, \$35). The book tells the stories of people from around the world who've settled in the South and are helping to change how the region's food is defined. Although not every recipe calls for a skillet, each has "the same sense of enduring heritage and family," according to the authors.

Cast-iron skillets become seasoned with time and use, evolving into virtually no-stick cookware. Memories accrue over decades of cooking in it, of memorable meals and of loved ones now gone. It's a connection Willis feels whenever she cooks in her beloved grandmother's skillet.

"It's about 75 years old and I use it every day. It's a talisman of sorts for me," she says.

Cindy Schoeneck of San Diego, a registered nurse who grew up in the South, prizes her collection of cast-iron cookware, especially her great-grandmother's skillet. "Cast iron means a lot to my family, that's the one heirloom that was passed down," she says.

Schoeneck contributed two recipes, tomato grits and hush puppies made with squash, to the "The Lodge Cast Iron Cookbook: A Treasury of Timeless, Delicious Recipes" (Oxmoor, \$24.95). The cookbook was published on behalf of the Lodge Manufacturing Co., which began making cast-iron cookware in 1896 in South Pittsburg, Tenn.

That Lodge is an old-time Southern company accounts for some of cast iron's popularity in the South, Willis notes. That cast iron is inexpensive, tough, an excellent heat conductor and readily available, sold even in hardware stores, counts too.

"Cast iron is easy to take care of. It's not temperamental," Schoeneck says. "It's not a piece of \$400 cookware you're afraid to use because if you burn the bottom you have to throw it out."

BOLIVIAN-STYLE CORN PIE

Prep: 30 minutes
Cook: 1 hour, 35 minutes
Servings: 8

Note: This casserole, from Luna Maya, a Bolivian-Mexican restaurant in Norfolk, Va., is adapted from "The World in a Skillet." Its international flavor evokes the New South, but cooked in the traditional Southern skillet. Luna Maya calls for a baking pan to finish the dish, but we used the same 12-inch cast-iron skillet throughout.

Ingredients:

1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons olive oil
1 pound Mexican pork chorizo, skins removed
1 white onion, diced
6 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon each: ground ancho chili, sweet paprika
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground chipotle pepper
1/2 teaspoon each: thyme, ground allspice
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves
1 teaspoon salt
2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cubed
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
Juice of 1 lime
1 yellow onion, chopped
8 ears corn, kernels cut from cobs (or 5 cups frozen)
1 cup milk
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
8 ounces mild cheese, such as Chihuahua or Oaxaca cheese
1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Crumble in chorizo. Cook, stirring often, until browned, about 10 minutes. Transfer chorizo to a bowl, leaving fat in the skillet.
2. Add the white onion, garlic, ancho, paprika, cumin, chipotle,

thyme, allspice, cloves and 1/2 teaspoon salt to the skillet; stir. Cook, stirring often, until onion is translucent, 5-8 minutes.

3. Stir in the chicken; cook, stirring often, until the chicken is cooked through, 15 minutes. Remove skillet from heat; transfer contents to a bowl. Stir in the reserved chorizo, cilantro and lime juice.

4. Wipe skillet clean; heat 2 teaspoons oil in skillet over medium heat. Add the yellow

onion; cook, stirring frequently, until translucent, 5-8 minutes. Remove skillet from heat. Combine onion with the corn and milk in a food processor; puree until smooth. Return skillet to medium heat; add corn mixture. Cook, stirring, until the mixture has thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and the black pepper. Remove skillet from heat.

5. Transfer corn mixture to a bowl. Spread the chicken-chorizo

mixture in the skillet. Spread the corn mixture over the meat. Bake 30 minutes. Remove dish from oven; turn on the broiler. Spread the cheese over the casserole. Broil until cheese melts and begins to brown, 3-5 minutes.

Nutrition information:

Per serving: 631 calories, 37 g fat, 15 g saturated fat, 145 mg cholesterol, 26 g carbohydrates, 47 g protein, 1,232 mg sodium, 4 g fiber.



The venerable cast iron skillet can be used as a braising dish, frying pan or baking dish for making foods such as Pastel de Choclo, a Bolivian-style corn pie. (Bill Hogan/Chicago Tribune/MCT)

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