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JUNE 2014

[editorial]



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VEGETABLE PLATES

OF THE SOUTH

Forget steam table cookery. From delicate bites to boldly composed plates, it's a vegetable revolution. • BY PHILIP MALKUS

LIKE PULLED PORK and fried chicken, the vegetable plate is embedded in the South's culinary DNA. In times when meat was scarce, savvy cooks tended fertile patches behind their homes to nourish their families with seasonal bounty. The practice is budding once again, as the earthen jewels at flourishing green markets entice us to cultivate our own backyards. And the baseline definition of the vegetable plate has started to shift. It once conjured the sprawling steam tables at our meat 'n' threes, where counter staff waited as we studied the daily selection: perhaps turnip greens or collards, fried green tomatoes or crispy okra. And if these regional staples sometimes came out of the

kitchen cooked to pap? Well, we were still proud of ourselves for eating our veggies.

But now, inspired by the surging interest in farming, a hotbed of forward-looking chefs is retooling the (ahem) garden-variety vegetable plate. In the same way our kitchen masters embraced snout-to-tail, whole-animal cookery over the last decade, they're forging close relationships with local growers and composing symphonies of produce that show off the region's year-round harvests

in center-stage glory. And this isn't a reaction to any kind of health craze: It's really about the ingredients' deliciousness. Welcome to the vegetable renaissance.

At Atlanta's **Miller Union** (millerunion.com), executive chef Steven Satterfield leads the charge with a plate whose humble appearance—four ever-changing dishes mounded into quadrants like an edible pie chart—betrays its sophisticated preparation. He considers contrasts in color, flavor, and texture: A succotash of corn and field peas bound with a splash of cream may sidle up to okra fried to order in a sheer cornmeal crust. To cut the richness, he'll also include, say, pickled beets punched up with ginger or sautéed zucchini tossed in a vinaigrette with garlic and just-picked mint. **Bottega**

(bottegarestaurant.com), one of Southern food icon Frank Stitt's destination eateries in Birmingham, similarly elevates a seemingly unassuming plate. The Thursday night special in Bottega's café is a montage of vegetables—this time of year expect summer squash, creamed corn, crisp-tender green beans perked with sweet onion, and braised collards—so farm-fresh, the sunshine still practically radiates off of them. The finishing touch: a wedge of jalapeño cornbread baked by the restaurant's beloved pastry chef, Dolester Miles.

Some of our best upscale restaurants reimagine the vegetable plate in bold new visual directions. At **Husk Nashville** (husknashville.com), chef-partner Sean Brock and his team present "A Sampling of Summer Vegetables" on a platter carved from a tree trunk. Each dish looks like edible sculpture: charred carrots dappled with their own leafy tops, fried cauliflower sweetened by seared petals of baby onions, butter beans dotted with purple and white garlic flowers. A hearty side bowl of grits in tomato broth with a preserved egg ensures you leave the table full.

It's certainly not easy to finish the cornucopia bursting from a handsome handled pan at Atlanta's **Restaurant Eugene** (restauranteugene.com). A dozen or more individually prepared vegetables—from seared okra to delicate stewed cherry tomatoes to a tempura squash blossom tinted mauve from beet juice—huddle together and flaunt the kitchen's technical prowess.

Obviously, Restaurant Eugene and the other restaurants still serve plenty of meat. Their next-gen vegetable plates, though, enlighten us to the ways that the South's agrarian abundance can star in modern meals. We'll never give up on pork, but we can concede that produce—locally farmed, dazzlingly prepared—might pull focus now and again.

A HOTBED OF FORWARD-LOOKING CHEFS IS RETOOLING THE (AHEM) GARDEN-VARIETY VEGETABLE PLATE.

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**VEGETABLE
PLATES 2.0**

*Glockense, from top left:
Miller Union in Atlanta;
Atlanta's Restaurant Eugene;
Bollegi in Birmingham;
Ilusk in Nashville*

