

Hogtown HomeGrown™

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A seat at the counter and in history

Growing up in Southeast Florida, segregation was not something I saw in my every-day life, but when we visited my grandparents in Georgia the world was literally divided into black and white. Even though the struggle for civil rights was ongoing, the practical reality of Sparta, Georgia in the Sixties was separate, but not equal. The poor public school got by on inadequate public dollars, while the “private” school for whites, was supported by public and private dollars. The public swimming pool which closed during the polio epidemic, never reopened, so it never had to integrate. On Saturday afternoons the downtown shops were open for business, but the white families stayed away because it was the one time of the week when black families came to town to get their shopping done. Even when I went to college in 1975, the signs of segregation in Georgia were not completely gone; a very thin coat of paint covered the words “Coloreds sit in the back” inside Macon’s city busses.

The changes brought about by the men and women who fought for civil rights did not come easily, quickly or completely. A recent trip to Nashville took the civil rights struggles and protests out of the realm of history into reality. As I researched online, imagining all the wonderful restaurants we could visit, a new place to eat in downtown Nashville kept popping up in my feed. Opened just this past February, Woolworth’s on 5th not only piqued my culinary taste buds, but fired my ongoing quest for unusual and historic locations.

In a building dating back to the 1890s, a variety store known as a five and dime, F.W. Woolworth Company, opened in 1913. Adding a lunch counter in 1925, it became one of many department store luncheonettes in fashionable downtown Nashville. While black customers could shop in the department stores, only white customers were allowed to sit at the counters or tables in any of the restaurants. In a few restaurants, counter service was available for black patrons in a standing-only snack area, but never a seat at the counter.

The people who started the movement for change in Nashville were mostly students from four Nashville colleges. Their leaders were trained in non-violence and they practiced their civil actions for months, learning how to not react when taunted or worse. These trained protestors began unsuccessful trial ‘sit-ins’ at downtown Nashville lunch counters in November and December, 1959. The following February, twelve days after sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins began at three lunch counters in Nashville, McClellan’s, Kress’, and Woolworth’s. John Lewis, future civil rights leader and Congressman, and his roommate were among the first to sit-in and to get arrested as the protests continued for weeks.

Enhanced by a black shopper boycott of downtown stores, the protests impacted merchants where it hurt—their cash registers. The bombing of a black lawyer’s home precipitated a march of over 2000 people to City Hall where a Mayor ready for change met his city demanding it. After negotiations with the merchants, on May 10, 1960, the city’s lunch counters were desegregated and had to seat and serve black patrons, including Woolworth’s.

And now that historic lunch counter is a restaurant again—Woolworth’s on 5th. The food is Southern with African influences. The counter looks the same, although the stools have been updated. Up the stairway with the curved brass rail, you can sit in one of the original stools and gaze at enlarged photographs of the day, just 58 years ago, when those brave people, knowing change would not be easy or quick, took a seat at the counter.

What's Fresh Right Now?

- Bananas
- Beans—green, purple, yellow, roma
- Bitter Melon
- Bok Choy
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Chestnuts
- Citrus—satsumas, kumquats
- Cucumbers—slicers, kirby
- Eggplant—oriental, italian, fairytale, long
- Garlic—chives
- Greens—collards, kale, chard, summerfest, mizuna, mustard
- Herbs—italian basil, lime leaf, curry leaf
- Honey—orange blossom, gallberry, wildflower, tupelo
- Kohlrabi
- Moringa
- Mushrooms—shiitake, oyster, lion's mane, dried shiitake
- Onions—green
- Pecans
- Peppers—red/green/yellow/orange sweet bell, aji, poblano, cayenne, shishito, jalapeño, serrano
- Pineapple
- Potatoes—red/white, sweet
- Radishes—daikon, globe, french breakfast
- Roselle
- Shoots and Sprouts
- Squash—butternut, spaghetti, kabocha, seminole pumpkin, acorn, yellow crookneck, gold/ green zucchini, pattypan
- Turnips—tokyo
- Turmeric
- Yuca

Local and Fresh— Sweet Potatoes

Granddaddy used to give us a basket of cured sweet potatoes every fall, because it never hurts to put a little food by. While I only buy them when they are in season, sweet potatoes are a staple in our recipes from breakfast to dessert.

The dense flavorful flesh can be slightly fibrous, but is easily mashed with a fork or pureed. Full of vitamins and antioxidants, sweet potatoes are good for you and make a great substitute for their less nutritious friend, the white potato. Try substituting sweet potatoes in your favorite pumpkin recipes for a new taste treat.

Sweet Potato and Beet Salad

INGREDIENTS

- 1-2 sweet potatoes, roasted, peeled and cubed
- 3-5 beets, roasted, peeled and cubed
- 4 ounces feta, cubed
- 1 Tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 2 Tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1 Satsuma or tangerine, juiced
- 2 Tablespoons each olive oil and sherry vinegar
- Pinch of salt and pepper
- 1 Tablespoon cane syrup

DIRECTIONS

In a shallow serving bowl, layer sweet potato cubes, then beet cubes and top with cubes of feta. Sprinkle with thyme and parsley.

Whisk together remaining ingredients until combined. Pour dressing over salad and gently swish bowl until ingredients are covered.

Cover and refrigerate at least 30 minutes before serving. Salad can be made a day ahead.

Swish bowl to distribute dressing before serving. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

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Jeff's Sweet Potato Cake

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cups gluten-free flour (we prefer King Arthur's Measure for Measure)
2/3 cup unsweetened shredded coconut
2 teaspoons ground ginger
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1 cup packed dark brown sugar
1 Tablespoon grated lime zest
12 ounces sweet potato, cooked
3 large eggs
3/4 cup plant-based milk (try unsweetened coconut or almond milk)
1 Tablespoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup coconut oil, melted and warm, plus more to grease pan
Glaze: 2 Tablespoons fresh lime juice whisked with 3/4 cup powdered sugar

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 10 inch springform or 9x13 metal pan.
Combine flour, coconut, ginger, baking powder, baking soda and salt in food processor and process until coconut is finely chopped. Remove to bowl.
Combine dark brown sugar and lime zest in food processor and process until fragrant. Add cooked sweet potato and process until completely smooth.
Add eggs, milk and vanilla and process to combine. Leave processor on and stream coconut oil into batter through feed tube. Process until fully incorporated. (If your food processor isn't large, whisk eggs, milk and vanilla into sweet potatoes, and then whisk in coconut oil.)
Pour liquid ingredients into dry ingredients and gently whisk until combined. Spread in prepared pan.
Bake until golden and toothpick tests clean, about 30-35 minutes. Cool cake in pan on a rack for 15 minutes.
Make glaze and brush on warm cake. Cool cake for at least two hours before serving.

NOTES ON THE RECIPE

Described as a cheesecake-like cross between pound cake and pumpkin pie, this recipe originates in Macau, off the coast of southern China. The colonizing influences of the Portuguese, combined with the local tropical foods, created a true fusion.
There are many versions of this dessert and some traditional versions use white potatoes instead of sweet potatoes. Coconut is always included, sometimes the shreds are left whole, but recipes always specify unsweetened, since the sweetened type makes the cake too sweet.
Inspired by a Milk Street Kitchen recipe, substituting gluten-free and plant-based dairy products in the cake did not change the final product.

Ave's Pumpkin Custard with Sorghum Syrup

INGREDIENTS

2 c cooked, mashed pumpkin
1/2 c sorghum syrup
3 eggs
1 c whole milk
1/4 t salt
1/2 t vanilla
1 t cinnamon sugar

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
Beat sorghum syrup into mashed pumpkin.
Add eggs, milk, salt and vanilla and whisk until completely combined.
Pour into deep dish pie pan. Place pie pan on cookie sheet and bake 30 minutes or until center is set.
Sprinkle top with cinnamon sugar while custard is hot.
Serve warm or cold.
Cover and refrigerate leftovers.



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Is it really Southern Cornbread if it has sweet potato in it?

A recent "lively" discussion reminded me that the Southern vs. Northern cornbread debate is still alive and well. There are those who see sugar as the Mason-Dixon line, but I am a little more hard-core than that. To me, a truly Southern cornbread has no sugar and has only cornmeal—no flour at all.

Flour and sugar may belong in corn muffins, but not in cornbread. If you strive for complete authenticity, the cornmeal should be stone-ground and the pan should always be preheated cast iron.

Sweet Potato Cornbread

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup cooked, mashed sweet potato
- 1 egg
- 1 cup buttermilk (non-dairy milk may be substituted)
- 3 Tablespoons oil, divided
- 1 cup finely ground cornmeal
- 1/2 teaspoon each baking soda and salt

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place small cast iron skillet* in oven to preheat.
- Beat egg into sweet potato. Mix in buttermilk and 1 tablespoon oil.
- Mix together corn meal, baking soda and salt.
- Add 2 Tablespoons oil to hot cast iron pan and return to oven for 5 minutes.
- Remove pan and carefully pour hot oil into wet ingredients. Return pan to oven.
- Completely mix oil into wet ingredients. Pour wet ingredients into dry ingredients and stir quickly to combine until no large lumps remain. Be sure to scrape bottom of bowl so that all dry ingredients are incorporated.
- Remove pan from oven and immediately pour batter into hot pan. Lightly smooth top and return to oven.
- Lower temperature to 350 degrees and bake about 30 minutes, until cornbread is firm to the touch in the middle.
- Remove from oven, cut into wedges and serve hot.

*NOTE ON CAST IRON SKILLET SIZES

The numbers on cast iron skillets most often refer to the size of the "eye" the pan would fit into on a wood-burning stove. For example, the skillet I use for this recipe measures 7 1/2 inches across the top and 6 inches across the bottom of the pan, but is labeled 5 Z. The most accurate way to measure is volume. The pan for this recipe holds 4 cups when completely full.