

The Southern Food Issue

GARDEN & GUN

SOUL of the SOUTH
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Let's Eat!

105 Recipes,
Restaurants,
Drinks &
More

For a homemade
country ham breakfast,
turn to page 93



Roy
Blount
on the
Perfect
Biscuit

John T.
Edge
Explores
Hidden
Atlanta

Rick
Bragg's
Grouper
Sandwich
Cravings

The
South's Most
Unsung
Chef

by
Adam Sachs

Page 114

Best Dishes in Dixie

Plus: Alton Brown, Kings of Leon, Cast-Iron Classics,
and the Ultimate Breakfast Guide



Shrimp on the Rocks

Forgo the fry basket in favor of salt-baked shellfish dipped in tangy comeback sauce *by* KIM SEVERSON

ADAM EVANS HAS A DEEP AND abiding relationship with Gulf shrimp. This is not uncommon for people who grew up in Alabama, where drives to the shore punctuate nearly every childhood. “We would always go down there,” he says. “It became part of our vacationing, and we would do seafood the whole time.”

Evans first cooked professionally in his home state and went on to learn in some great kitchens in New Orleans and New York, once getting schooled by a seafood chef so intense he broke the young cook’s spatula in half because it was not the correct one for maneuvering delicate fish in a hot pan. Now he’s one of Atlanta’s best chefs, serving signature dishes such as head-on Gulf shrimp drowning in a sauce of dried chile and lime at the Optimist, a neo-seafood shack routinely packed with local and out-of-town crowds.

Evans also puts fat Southern crustaceans to use in

this salt-baked shrimp, a dish that is as simple to prepare as it is spectacular to serve. The genius marriage of salt, heat, and spices produces perfectly seasoned, moist shrimp that even novice cooks can master the first time. The trick is to get the freshest shrimp you can find, with the heads on. (Though the dish works fine with cleaned shrimp, as long as they still have their shells.)

You bake three pounds of rock salt tricked out with coriander, star anise, garlic, and a few other intense flavors, then bury the shrimp in it. Pop the whole thing back in the oven for ten more minutes or so, and it’s done. “I like the idea of baking seafood in salt,” Evans says. “It’s a great technique and it’s underutilized. It makes so much sense, though. You have seafood in whatever form—a whole fish or whole shrimp—coming out of salt water.”

Once you have a big platter of hot, salt-baked shrimp, you will want to bring out a bowl of comeback sauce. It takes the shrimp, already delicious and tender beyond any reasonable measure, to a higher place. The sauce is all over Mississippi, where it was first mixed up in a Greek restaurant in Jackson in the 1930s. Traditionally made with mayonnaise, chile sauce, garlic, a touch of onion, and a little Worcestershire, it falls somewhere between a classic rémoulade and McDonald’s secret sauce.

Evans whips up a more sophisticated version, with cornichons and fresh horseradish (though a couple of spoonfuls of the prepared kind will do just fine). And though he prefers you make it with homemade mayonnaise, Duke’s will do, too. **Ⓞ**

Salt-Baked Head-On Shrimp with Comeback Sauce

(Serves 4)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 **tbsp.** whole coriander
- 2 **tbsp.** black peppercorns
- 3 **lbs.** rock salt
- 4 bay leaves
- 3 star anise
- 10 **sprigs** of thyme
- 1 **head** of garlic,

smashed, skin removed

- 1 jalapeño, sliced, with seeds
- 2 lemon wedges
- 2 **lbs.** head-on shrimp (20–25 count)

Comeback sauce, for dipping (recipe follows)

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 475 degrees.

Place coriander, peppercorns, rock salt, bay leaves, star anise, thyme, garlic, jalapeño, and 1 lemon wedge into a large bowl and mix well.

In a large oven-safe dish, put in half of the salt-spice mixture and preheat in oven for 10–12 minutes until salt becomes hot. Remove from oven, lay shrimp in the salt, and add remaining salt to cover.

Return pan to the oven and bake for an additional 8–12 minutes, or until shrimp are just cooked through. With tongs, remove shrimp from salt and transfer to a plate. Garnish with lemon and serve with comeback sauce.

Comeback Sauce (Yields ⅔ quart)

INGREDIENTS

- ½ **quart** mayonnaise
- ¼ **cup** fresh or jarred horseradish
- 2 **tbsp.** whole-grain mustard
- ½ **bunch** celery, outermost stalks removed, leaves removed, and diced
- ½ large shallot, diced
- 1 **lemon**, juiced and zested
- ½ **tbsp.** chopped garlic
- ¼ **cup** chopped parsley



- ¼ cup chopped cornichons
- 2 tbsp. capers
- ½ tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. fresh-cracked black pepper
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper

PREPARATION

Combine all ingredients in a blender and pulse until mixture is incorporated.



MEET the CHEF:

ADAM EVANS

Current restaurant: The Optimist, Atlanta, GA

Hometown:

Muscle Shoals, AL

Age: 34

The trick to good cooking: "Cooking is thermodynamics. It's all about transferring heat."

Why he doesn't have music in his restaurant's kitchen: "I like to keep the conversation about food, not about music."

What he listens to at home: Bob Dylan.

Why he doesn't usually like to cook with tongs: "Once you start using tongs, they become like your hand and you lose the feel for your food. I learned that from Tom Colicchio."

