

Favorite Restaurant Desserts Across the South

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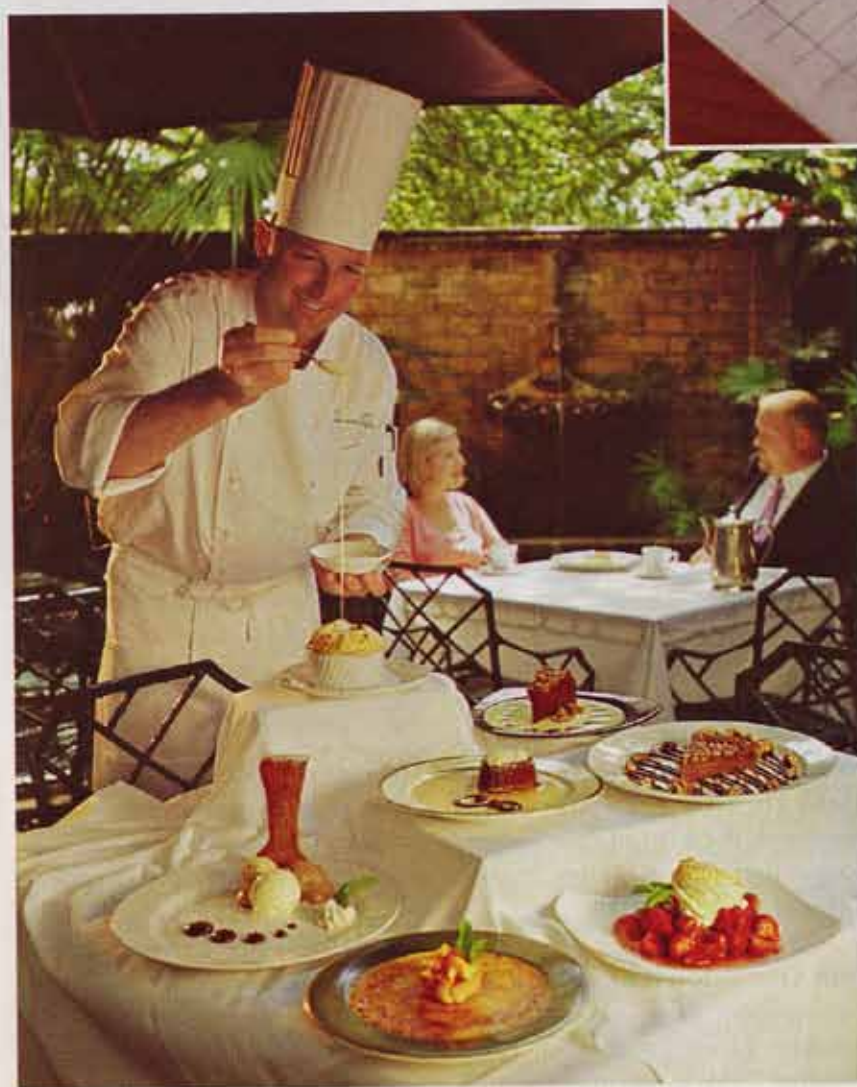
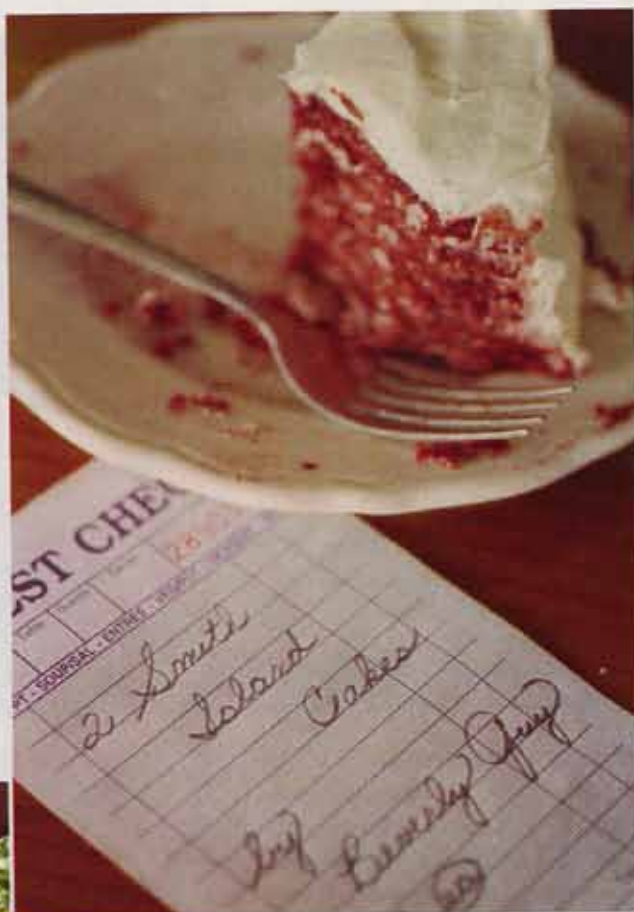
Grab a fork, and come along. From Texas to Maryland, these places serve our region's most popular cakes, pies, and more.

by CASSANDRA M. VANHOOSER
photography ART MERIPOL

For more than a year now, I've been eating dessert first. Not just any dessert, mind you. I've been on a quest to find those rich, showy favorites that satisfy the South's legendary sweet tooth—those confections that tell us a bit about the region we love so much.

When I started this journey, I feared that the old-fashioned homemade dessert had gone the way of the country store, struggling for survival in a mass-marketed, mile-a-minute world. But there are those who keep the flame burning, who carry on the sweet traditions of hospitality and showmanship.

So cinch up your girdle, and sample some Southern classics. If it makes you feel any better, you can read this while walking on the treadmill tonight.



far left and above: "There is a lopsidedness to it, but that adds to the cake's specialness," says Smith Island, Maryland, baker Beverly Guy. *left:* Creole Bread Pudding Soufflé drizzled with whiskey sauce steals the show at Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

Rebirth in New Orleans

After suffering extensive damage during Hurricane Katrina, Commander's Palace ([504] 899-8221) reopened last October and again ranks among New Orleans's brightest culinary stars.

The turreted Victorian, located in the heart of the Garden District, still boasts the same turquoise-and-white awnings and gingerbread trim outside, yet everything inside has been masterfully updated.

Despite being closed for more than a year, each and every dessert here is still exceptional. I should know. I tried them all—twice. The pecan pie à la mode is rich and buttery, and the crème brûlée approaches perfection, yet the masterpiece remains the



above: At Charleston's Peninsula Grill, each piece of coconut cake weighs nearly a pound. *right and far right:* Owner Charlotte Freeborn and baker Doris Hicks make everything from scratch at Fredericksburg Pie Company. The Bourbon Orange Pecan Pie is a favorite.

famous Creole Bread Pudding Soufflé.

Anticipation is half the fun. Diners must order this confection 20 minutes in advance. When it finally arrives, a server pierces the golden dome and drizzles it with a creamy whiskey sauce. The dessert is light as a cloud on top, dense and spicy on the bottom. When you take a bite—whether it's your first soufflé or your 31st—you'll offer a prayer of thanks that this New Orleans landmark lives on.

Maryland's Luscious Layers

Made with stacked pancake-thin layers slathered with frosting, this cake (pictured on page 82) is a specialty of the people who live on Smith Island, an isolated dot of dirt in the Chesapeake Bay.

Some cakes have as few as 7 layers; others boast up to 14. The range of flavors is limited only by the cook's imagination, but the traditional yellow cake with chocolate icing is the favorite.



If you plan to visit the island, wait for spring's more pleasant temperatures. Many Crisfield restaurants offer Smith Island Cake, as do several local bakeries. If you want a whole cake, call ahead. The bakers will send one to the mainland. For a list of cake makers, contact the Somerset County Tourism Office at 1-800-521-9189.

Visit Charleston for Coconut

"It's coconut cake in Charleston," *Southern Living* Editor John Floyd declared. "This is one of the South's

Tell Me More

Did I overlook one of your favorite desserts? I'd love to hear about it. Drop me a line at cassandra_vanhooser@timeinc.com.



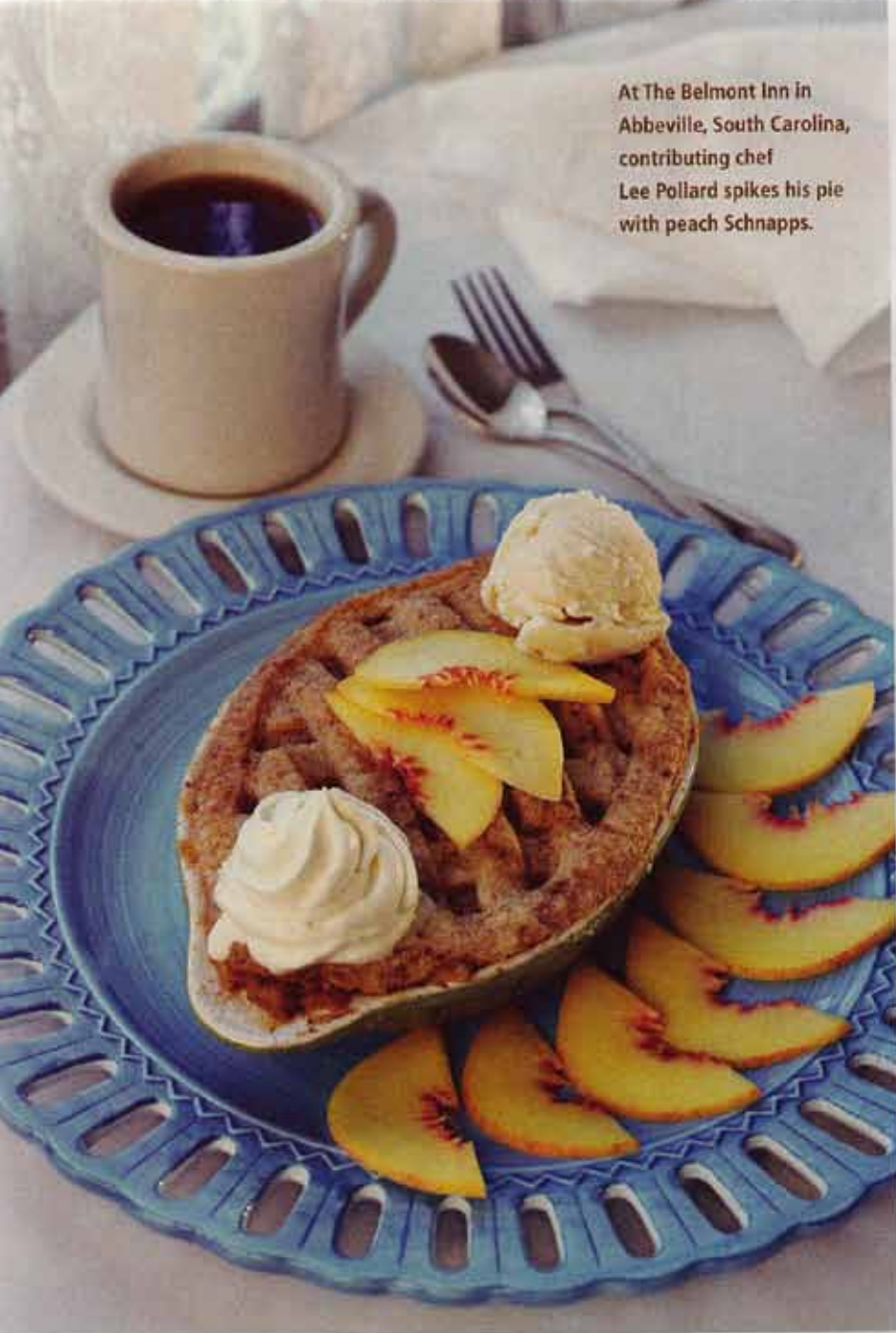
grand desserts." A number of restaurants have it on the menu, but none compare to the six-layer coconut cake at the Peninsula Grill ([843] 723-0700), located inside the Planters Inn on North Market Street.

A creamy coconut filling cushions the layers, while cream cheese frosting covers the outside. Freshly grated coconut—some toasted golden brown, some raw and translucent—ties it all together, like a bow on a very special package.

The Pies of Texas

When you see a roadside sign boasting homemade pies in the Lone Star State, stop. You'll discover places such as Bevers Kitchen ([979] 836-4178) in Chappell Hill, where a neon sign over the pie case challenges you to "Try the Pie." At The Texas Pie Company ([512] 268-5885) in Kyle, they bake dozens of old-fashioned fruit and nut varieties

At The Belmont Inn in Abbeville, South Carolina, contributing chef Lee Pollard spikes his pie with peach Schnapps.



More Southern Classics

Apple Stack Cake: This traditional Appalachian dessert has all but disappeared from households and restaurant menus. But we found it among the homemade delights at Early Girl Eatery ([828] 259-9292) in Asheville, North Carolina. Call ahead to be sure it's on the daily dessert menu.

Banana Pudding: Almost every barbecue joint worth its sauce serves some version of this regional favorite, still we located a truly exceptional recipe at Galax Smokehouse ([276] 236-1000) in southwest Virginia. Co-owner Ron Passmore says he uses three ordinary yet nontraditional ingredients to make his creamy pudding.

Beignets: At Café du Monde (1-800-772-2927) in New Orleans, doughnuts dusted with powdered sugar and dunked in chicory coffee remain a classic. At Washington's D.C. Coast ([202] 216-5988), New Orleans native David Guas serves his beignets with a petite cup of Café au Lait Crème Brûlée. At nearby Acadiana ([202] 408-8848), they're accompanied by coffee-laced chocolate panna cotta.

Fried Pies: Roadside signs point the way to Original Fried Pies, located in a Sinclair gas station at Exit 51 off I-35 near Davis, Oklahoma. Try the fried pecan or chocolate cream. Call ahead ([580] 369-7830), and they'll have fresh, hot pies waiting for you.

Key Lime Pie: The Blond Giraffe Key Lime Pie Factory ([305] 293-6667) makes us smile with their chocolate-covered Key lime pie on a stick. Blue Heaven ([305] 296-8666) gets an A for their tangy pie topped with waves of golden brown meringue.

Derby Pie: This Kentucky dessert was created 50 years ago at the Melrose Inn in Prospect, Kentucky. Today, the walnut-and-chocolate chip pie is a trademarked product of Kern's Kitchen in Louisville ([502] 499-0285).

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and have recently added cream pies.

Still, I found none better than the Fredericksburg Pie Company ([830] 990-6992). Their best-seller is owner Charlotte Freeborn's tasty Bourbon Orange Pecan Pie, but the chocolate and coconut—both topped with mile-high Italian meringue—may be the most impressive.

South Carolina's Peachy Dreams

I nearly swooned when I tasted the delectable cobbler at The Belmont Inn ([864] 459-9625) in Abbeville, South

Carolina. The recipe features a filling made of fresh peaches, peach puree, and peach Schnapps. The tender, flaky crust includes just a hint of cinnamon. Each one-serving cobbler is topped with a latticework of pastry and then finished with homemade peach ice cream and whipped cream infused with—what else?—peaches.

✨ For More Info

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