You can’t beat a Southerner when it comes to ingenuity, especially in the kitchen. Here, five chefs and culinary authorities from around the region share the surprising staples—from Bloody Mary mix to saltines—that they turn to time and again to make dishes that really sing.

BY KATHLEEN PURVIS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HÉLÈNE DUJARDIN
**CANE SYRUP**

**SOURCE:** ISAAC TOUPS  |  **CREDENTIALS:** CHEF, TOUPS’ MEATERY, NEW ORLEANS; AUTHOR, CHASING THE GATOR

Boiled sugarcane juice adds sweet and smoky flavor to grilled meats—or anything else.

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**DOUBLE-CUT PORK CHOPS WITH CANE SYRUP GASTRIQUE**

**Yield:** 4 servings

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 gallon water
- 1 cup dark brown sugar
- 1 cup kosher salt
- 4 bay leaves
- 2 tbsp. whole black peppercorns
- 2 (20-oz.) bone-in pork chops, double-cut and unfrenched (bones untrimmed)
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 cup cane syrup
- 1 cup cane vinegar (can substitute cider vinegar)
- 4 tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1 green onion, sliced, for garnish

**PREPARATION**

**Prepare the brine.** Combine the water, brown sugar, salt, bay leaves, and peppercorns in a large pot and bring to a boil. Simmer 20 minutes. (Adding ice to help cool faster, if desired, and pour into a stockpot or a food-safe bucket.) Once the brine is cooled, place pork chops in the brine, cover, and refrigerate for 24 hours. Remove the pork chops from the brine and pat dry with paper towels. Season with salt and freshly ground pepper.

**Prepare the gastrique.** In a saucepan, make the gastrique by combining the cane syrup and the cane vinegar in a saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium heat and cook until the liquid has reduced to 1 cup. There’s no need to stir but watch closely so it doesn’t burn. If you have extra, store in a sealed jar. Grill all sides of the pork chops, even the bone side, for 2 to 3 minutes each to get clear grill marks. Put the pork chops in a roasting pan. Top each with 2 tablespoons of butter. Place in the oven and roast for 8 to 10 minutes, to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F.

Remove from the oven and let rest for 3 minutes in the pan. Before serving, dip all sides of each chop in the cooking juices in the pan. Serve immediately with the gastrique spooned over each. Garnish with sliced green onion.

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**SOURCE:** ISAAC TOUPS

**CREDENTIALS:** CHEF, TOUPS’ MEATERY, NEW ORLEANS; AUTHOR, CHASING THE GATOR

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**3 MORE WAYS TO USE IT:**

1. **PECAN PIE:**

   Toups’s book includes a recipe for cane syrup hand pies, with a filling that’s similar to pecan pie filling. “Have I put it in a pecan pie? No. Would I? Yeah.”

2. **TURKEY BRINE:**

   If you want a beautifully caramelized turkey, add cane syrup instead of sugar to the brine.

3. **MINT JULEP:**

   “Replace the sugar syrup with cane syrup,” Toups says.
Maneet Chauhan took a very long route to Music City. Born in Punjab, she immigrated to the United States at age twenty to pursue a degree at the Culinary Institute of America. After that, she found critical acclaim as the chef of Vermillion, first in Chicago and then in New York City, before heading south to Nashville to open Chauhan Ale & Masala House in 2014. It’s one of three restaurants Chauhan has since launched in the Gulch, which is a thirty- to forty-minute drive from her home in Franklin, where she and her husband, Vivek Deora, are raising two children. “And that’s on a good day,” Chauhan says of the commute. “That’s one reason I’ve really come to appreciate a slow cooker.”

When time is tight, the set-it-and-forget-it appliance helps get dinner on the table, like this three-bean chili perfumed with ginger, cumin, and paprika. The recipe also features another of Chauhan’s favorite discoveries: Bloody Mary mix. “I think it was osmosis,” she says. “Bloody Marys are one of Vivek’s favorite drinks.” That the ingredient is a time-saver only adds to the appeal. “The flavor of the mix—celery, onion, garlic, and jalapeño, for the kick—is perfect for a spicy chili.”

**BLOODY MARY CHILI**

**Yield: 6 servings**

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 red onion, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 cup chopped assorted sweet bell pepper
- 1½ lb. ground turkey
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 cloves minced garlic
- 2 tbsp. grated fresh ginger
- 2 tbsp. tomato paste
- 4 cups Bloody Mary mix (Chauhan prefers Charleston Mix Bold & Spicy blend)
- 1 (15-oz.) can cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 (15-oz.) can pinto beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 (15-oz.) can black or garbanzo beans, rinsed and drained
- 2 tsp. smoked paprika
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 2 tbsp. chopped cilantro
- 1 cup chopped green onion, plus more, for garnish
- Shredded cheddar, for garnish

**PREPARATION**

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high. Add onion, celery, and pepper and cook until they begin to soften, about 4 minutes. Add ground turkey and cook, stirring occasionally, until the turkey is golden (it doesn’t have to be completely cooked through at this point). Season with salt and pepper, then stir in garlic, ginger, and tomato paste and cook until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Transfer mixture to a slow cooker.

To the slow cooker, add the Bloody Mary mix, beans, chicken broth, paprika, cumin, and green onion. Cook on high for 4 hours, until the chili has thickened.

Check for seasoning and season with salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with more green onion and cheese.

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**BLOODY MARY MIX**

**SECRET INGREDIENT:**

**SOURCE:** Maneet Chauhan

**CREDENTIALS:** Chef, Chauhan Ale & Masala House, Nashville

A spicy tomato blend can provide the base for much more than cocktails.

**3 MORE WAYS TO USE IT:**

1. **CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA:** Bloody Mary mix is a natural for this Indian classic. “Mix it with a little cream or yogurt for the base before cooking the chicken,” Chauhan says.

2. **FRIED CHICKEN:** Instead of soaking chicken in buttermilk before flouring and frying, Chauhan uses Bloody Mary mix for a tasty twist.

3. **RICE:** Sauté rice in oil and then add Bloody Mary mix instead of water or broth as the cooking liquid.
he best dishes in the world are leftovers,” says Todd Richards, the chef-owner of Rich-ard’s Southern Fried in Atlanta and author of Soul: A Chef’s Culinary Evolution in 150 Recipes, published earlier this year. “The flavors meld and come together, or the food can completely evolve into something else.” Before Richards became a respected chef with two James Beard Award nominations, he was a boy growing up in Chicago, where his parents would pull out whatever was in the refrigerator to mix and match with whatever else they were having for dinner, a lesson that fed Richards’s inventiveness. His recipe for fried rice with collard greens blends Japanese technique with classic Southern ingredients and the frugality Richards learned from his father. “We never threw anything away,” he says. The secret ingredient is cooked rice. “You always have leftover rice,” he says. And fried rice is one of the best ways to use a surplus of it. The cooked rice needs to be dry and stored for a day in the refrigerator, allowing the starches to firm up, so the grains don’t turn to mush when recooked. “If it’s still lukewarm, it doesn’t caramelize,” Richards says. “It gets too sticky and absorbs too much liquid.”

Turn yesterday’s side dish into the main event for supper tonight

**Ginger and Collard Green Fried Rice**

*Yield: 2 servings*

**INGREDIENTS**
- 1 bunch young collard greens (½ lb.)
- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil, divided
- 1 duck egg or extra-large chicken egg
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 thinly sliced shallot
- 2 garlic cloves, smashed and very thinly sliced
- 1 (1-inch) piece of fresh ginger, peeled and grated (about 2 tsp.)
- 3 tbsp. rice wine vinegar
- 2 tbsp. reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 1 tbsp. mirin
- 2 cups cooked white rice
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- For garnish: 4 green onions, thinly sliced
- 1 jalapeño, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp. sesame seeds
- Lime wedges
- Red pepper flakes

**PREPARATION**

1. **Fill a sink with cold water. On a nearby cutting board, stack 4 collard leaves on top of one another. Remove the stems with a sharp knife, then trim 2 inches from the bottom of each stem. Cut the remainder of the stems into ½-inch pieces. Cut the leaves into 2-inch squares. Repeat with remaining leaves. Rinse the leaves and stems in cold water. Drain.**

2. **Heat 1 tablespoon of vegetable oil in a skillet over medium. Break the egg into the pan and cook 4 minutes, gently shaking the pan occasionally to ensure that the egg doesn’t stick. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Turn the egg and cook 2 minutes longer. Transfer to a plate and keep warm.**

3. **In the same skillet, heat the remaining tablespoon of vegetable oil. Add the shallot, garlic, and ginger. Cook, stirring occasionally, until shallot is translucent. Add the collard leaves and stems to the pan; cook, stirring constantly, 1 minute. Stir in the vinegar, then the soy sauce and mirin. Stir in the rice and cover. Simmer until the rice is heated through, about 2 minutes. Uncover and drizzle with sesame oil. Remove from heat and let stand 2 minutes. Transfer the fried rice to a serving bowl, top with egg, and garnish with green onions, jalapeño slices, sesame seeds, lime wedges, and red pepper flakes.

**3 MORE WAYS TO USE IT:**

1. **BREAKFAST RICE:**
   Richards’s mother served leftover rice with honey, butter, and salt in the morning. “We never did oatmeal or things like that,” he says.

2. **PORRIDGE:**
   It’s a little like congee, the Chinese breakfast dish: Stir cooked rice into chicken stock, heavy cream, cumin, curry powder, and honey, then simmer until it’s creamy, about 30 minutes.

3. **RICE CAKES:**
   Mix cooked rice with an egg, grated cheese, and diced onion, then chill for 30 minutes before forming into patties and frying.
or one of the first cookbooks in the University of North Carolina Press’s Savor the South series, each of which focuses on a single ingredient, author Debbie Moose was happy to take on buttermilk, an ingredient she grew up with in Winston-Salem. “My mother wasn’t much of a cook,” Moose says, “but every time she made cornbread, even from a mix, she used buttermilk. I even remember what kind: Sealtest. In the evening, my father would crumble the leftover cornbread into a glass and pour buttermilk over it until it became like a pudding.” Moose’s research for the book ended up giving her even more respect for buttermilk’s place in home cooking and for the science of what it does to food, particularly the way its acidity helps to tenderize and add tangy flavor to dishes both savory and sweet. Her variation on buttermilk pie might be one of the most Southern dessert pairings ever: She steepes tea leaves in buttermilk before making the pie. Though she has moved on to other books, most recently Carolina Catch, which celebrates Tar Heel State seafood, buttermilk will always have a special place in her kitchen. “To me,” Moose says, “it’s such a part of Southern cooking.”

**SECRET INGREDIENT:)**

**BUTTERMILK**

**SOURCE:** Debbie Moose | **CREDENTIALS:** Author, Buttermilk, Carolina Catch, Raleigh

## SWEET TEA BUTTERMILK PIE

Yield: One 9-inch pie

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 tbsp. loose black tea leaves
- 1 prepared piecrust, unbaked (either a frozen ready-made 9-inch crust or refrigerated dough)
- ½ tsp. grated lemon zest
- ¾ cup sugar
- 2 tbsp. all-purpose flour
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ tsp. vanilla
- ½ cup melted unsalted butter
- Fresh mint leaves, for garnish

**PREPARATION**

1. Warm the buttermilk in a small saucepan over medium-low heat until it begins to simmer. (Don’t allow it to boil or it may curdle.) Remove from heat and stir in the tea leaves. Let sit at room temperature for about 1 hour. Strain out the tea and reserve the infused buttermilk.

2. Preheat oven to 425°F. Line a shallow 9-inch pie pan with foil or parchment paper. Line a shallow 9-inch pie pan with foil or parchment paper. Line a shallow 9-inch pie pan with foil or parchment paper.

3. Use a fork or whisk to combine the lemon zest, sugar, and flour in a large bowl. In another bowl, whisk together the eggs, vanilla, infused buttermilk, and melted butter. Add the buttermilk mixture to the flour mixture and whisk to combine well.

4. Pour the filling into the shell. Bake for 10 minutes, then reduce heat to 350°F and bake until the edges puff and the center is no longer liquid, about 30 minutes longer. If the crust begins to overbrown before the center is set, reduce the heat to 300°F.

5. Cool to room temperature on a wire rack. Garnish with mint leaves before serving.

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6. **INDICATIONS:**

   - 1 FRIED CHICKEN: Soaking chicken in buttermilk before you fry it will not only add flavor, the acidity in the buttermilk also tenderizes the chicken.
   - 2 POACHED FISH: It reduces the fishy flavor in strong fish, such as wild caught catfish. “Buttermilk will even out the flavor and add a little richness,” Moose says.
   - 3 WHIPPED CREAM: To top a dessert, whip ¼ cup buttermilk and ¼ cup heavy cream. “It can balance the sweetness of super sweet pie,” Moose says.
Georgia born and French-trained, Virginia Willis has built a career out of turning Southern ingredients on their heads with the techniques of fine cuisine in books such as her James Beard Award–winning *Lighten Up, Y’all* and her most recent, *Secrets of the Southern Table*. She has also directed TV kitchens for the likes of Martha Stewart and Nathalie Dupree. But that doesn’t mean she’s all about crème fraîche on truffle biscuits; her recipes are firmly grounded in the kind of home cooking she grew up with. So perhaps it’s fitting that saltines, not buttery Ritz crackers—“the ones that have topped a thousand ‘cream of ‘ casseroles”—rank among her favorite ingredients. Plain, they are anytime nibbles. Dressed up, they’re the foundation of a classic Christmas candy—saltine cracker toffee, a recipe Willis can’t resist “cheffing up.” She spices the toffee with cayenne, adds black pepper to the dark chocolate, then tops it all off with dried cherries and pecans. And there’s one more secret: “Placing the saltines salt down might seem a bit OCD,” Willis says, “but it allows for the brightness of the salt to hit the tongue first, which is then followed by sour, bitter, sweet, and savory.”

**GINGREDIENTS**

- 1 sleeve of saltine crackers (about 40)
- 1 cup (2 sticks) plus 1 tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1 cup light brown sugar, firmly packed
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper, or to taste
- 12 oz. finely chopped 70 percent dark chocolate or dark chocolate chips
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup dried cherries
- ½ tsp. flaky sea salt, such as Maldon

**PREPARATION**

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a rimmed 13-by-9-inch baking pan with nonstick foil or spray with cooking spray. Arrange the saltines, salt side down, in a single layer in the pan. Set aside.

Melt 1 cup butter in a large heavy-duty saucepan over medium. Add the brown sugar and cayenne pepper and raise temperature to high to bring to a boil. Cook for 3 minutes. Immediately pour toffee mixture over the saltines and bake for 6 minutes. Remove from oven andudge the saltines back together if they’re floating in the toffee. Set aside for 3 or 4 minutes.

Melt the chocolate over medium heat in the top of a double boiler set over a pan of simmering water. (Or place the chocolate in a microwaveable container and melt on low power until smooth, about 3 minutes, stirring every 30 seconds.)

Add the remaining tablespoon of butter and black pepper to the melted chocolate. Pour over the toffee and spread in an even layer with an offset spatula. Top with pecans and dried cherries. Let cool to cool slightly, then sprinkle with sea salt. Transfer to the refrigerator to harden completely, about 1 hour.

Pop loose from the pan, break into pieces, and store in an airtight container separated with sheets of waxed paper or parchment paper.

**SECRET INGREDIENT:**

**SOURCE:** Virginia Willis

**CREDENTIALS:** Chef, Atlanta; Author, *Secrets of the Southern Table*

**Transform a basic cracker into a classic holiday treat**

**SPICED DARK CHOCOLATE CHERRY SALTINE TOFFEE**

Yield: 40 candies

3 MORE WAYS TO USE IT:

1. **BUTTERED AND BAKED:** Brush saltines with clarified butter and bake until they’re a deep brown.

2. **PIECRUST:** Inspired by chef Bill Smith, of Crook’s Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Willis adapts a saltine crust for almost any tart. Mix ¾ sleeves of crushed crackers with ¼ cup melted butter and 3 tablespoons of sugar, press it into a pie plate, and bake for 15 minutes before filling.

3. **MOCK SHRIMP SALAD:** For this old-school favorite, mix crumbled saltines, chopped fresh or canned tomatoes, and mayonnaise.