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April 2011

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GEORGIA Magazine is published by
Georgia Electric Membership Corporation.
(www.georgiamemc.com), and is read by
more than 1.5 million Georgians each month.
For information call (800) 544-4362. In
Georgia, or visit www.georgiamagazine.org

TREVOR HARRIS

Southern, in a snap

Rebecca Lang's cookbook offers Southern recipes for those short on time

BY JENNIFER J. HEWETT

Come sit a spell, there's no rushing "Southern"—especially when it comes to time at the table with a good meal.

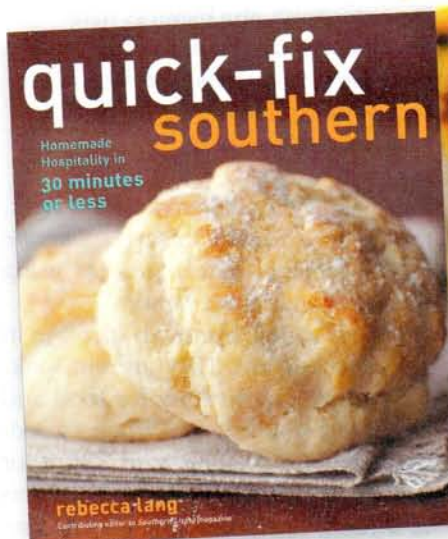
But with Chef Rebecca Lang's latest cookbook, "Quick-Fix Southern," released in March (Andrews McMeel Publishing; \$16.99), this Athens-based chef shares her secrets for serving great Southern favorites with grace, and time saved.

Growing up "below the gnat line," Lang learned her love of Southern cooking from her grandmothers, Claudia Thomas ("Tom") and Sarah Dopson ("Sa"), who passed along their passion for great food and big family gatherings. In "Quick-Fix Southern," Lang shares memories of Friday night fish fries at Sa's house, and big Sunday lunches at Tom's after church.

Her favorite Southern go-to meal is macaroni and cheese, fried chicken and biscuits—"the kind of comfort food I grew up on," Lang says. Inspiration for "Quick-Fix Southern" came from her love of these types of foods and the need to feed her family—husband Kevin and little ones, Camden, 5, and Adair, 18 months—in a short amount of time, to accommodate their busy lifestyle.

Lang's career as a cookbook author, chef, cooking instructor and food writer keeps her busy balancing multiple projects and deadlines. She is also a contributing editor for *Southern Living* magazine, writes a monthly "Girls Night In" column for *myrecipes.com*, and is featured in cooking segments on the nationally syndicated television show "Daytime."

"I need to make dinner in 30



minutes, or it's not happening at my house," she jokes.

With that in mind, her cookbook is divided into 10 themed sections, from "Sipping on the screened porch" to "Comforting casseroles," helping guide readers through scenarios from breakfast to the finishing touch of dessert, with ease. The cookbook features 115 easy-to-make recipes that can be prepared in about 30 minutes or less.

Throughout the book, Lang also offers up "cooking school" tips and friendly anecdotes before each recipe to share a memory, give the recipe's history, serving hints or to clarify a step in the cooking process.

Lang's early career began as an apprentice with noted Southern chef Nathalie Dupree during her senior year of college.

"I don't think I'd be doing anything like this had it not been for Nathalie," Lang says. "She showed me how to set up a recipe, and encouraged me to attend culinary school.



DENNIS MCDANIEL

Food writer, instructor and cookbook author Rebecca Lang, of Athens, recently released her third cookbook, "Quick-Fix Southern," featuring easy, time-saving recipes.

She's been my biggest cheerleader."

From there, Lang landed at Johnson & Wales University in Charleston, S.C., and earned her culinary arts degree. Building on her previous degree in journalism from the University of Georgia in Athens, Lang honed her editorial skills as an assistant food editor for Oxmoor House, working on several cookbook projects. She has served on the board for the Atlanta Chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier, and is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the Southern Foodways Alliance, and Georgia Organics.

"Quick-Fix Southern" has been a five-year endeavor for Lang, who wrote and produced the cookbook in between the births of her children and ever-growing culinary career.

"I go to the Atlanta food community for career advice—those who have been at it longer than I have, or who've had more success. And they encourage me to never give up, and keep trying until you get a 'yes,'" Lang says. "My family's been really supportive over the years, and my mom



For cooking tips from Lang, plus her Chilled Strawberry Peach Soup recipe, see page 50B of the April 2011 digital edition, online at www.georgiamagazine.org.

is on duty all of the time to help out.”

In addition to upcoming cooking classes scheduled this month at Whole Foods Market in Duluth and Kitchenware Outfitters in Savannah, along with book signings around the Southeast in between, Lang is looking forward to meals from her summer garden, where she'll be growing heirloom tomatoes, okra, squash, red onions and herbs. And, no doubt, trying out new recipes with what she grows.

“The best thing, though,” she confides, “is still a tomato sandwich on sliced white bread, where the tomato is still warm from the sun.”

Visit www.rebeccalangcooks.com for Lang's upcoming cooking classes, book signings and her blog, where she shares more recipes and talks about her culinary adventures.

Below Lang shares a few recipes from her “Quick-Fix Southern” cookbook.

“I like to save any leftover baked sweet potatoes I have for biscuits the next day,” Lang says. “But you have to have a baked sweet potato. On most days, you won't have a baked potato, and there are no canned, unsweetened sweet potatoes at the grocery store. So, stroll on over to the baby food aisle and pick up some sweet potatoes, ready and perfect for the job.”

Sweet Potato Biscuits

- 1/2 cup buttermilk
- 2 (6-ounce) jars sweet potato baby food
- 4 cups all-purpose flour (White Lily or Martha White brand), plus more for the counter and your hands
- 2 tablespoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.

Stir together buttermilk and baby food in a small bowl; set aside. Combine flour, baking powder, salt and butter in the bowl of a food processor fitted with the metal blade. Pulse 7 times or until the butter is cut into

very small pieces. Add buttermilk mixture and process until dough comes together, about 15 seconds. Sprinkle some flour on the counter-top. Turn the dough out onto floured counter. Flour your hands well and pat the dough to about 3/4 inch thick.

Cut biscuits with a floured 3-inch round cutter. Flour the cutter again before cutting each biscuit. Place biscuits about 2 inches apart on the prepared baking sheet. Bake for 16-18 minutes, or until slightly browned. *Makes 13-15 biscuits.*

Lang's “Cooking school” tip: *Twisting the cutter as you cut a biscuit can produce lopsided biscuits. Cut straight down as you slice through the dough.*

“Pickled okra and ham wheels have graced Southern party tables for years. They are often made with prepackaged, flavored cream cheese and packaged ham. I like to freshen them up by mixing up my own cream cheese and using ham sliced fresh at the deli,” Lang says.

Pickled Okra and Ham Wheels

- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives

- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 3 tablespoons finely diced Vidalia onion
- 1 (16-ounce) jar pickled okra, drained (about 18 okra pods)
- 1/3 pound thinly sliced Virginia ham (about 8 slices)

Combine cream cheese, chives, parsley and onion. Trim both ends off each okra pod. On a large cut-



JENNIFER J. HEWITT

The addition of sun-dried tomatoes, fresh rosemary and goat cheese for Rebecca Lang's Stuffed Corn Bread recipe (found in “Quick-Fix Southern”) turns this Southern staple into a party food that's great served alongside soup or even on its own.

Washington Youth Tour expands delegate's horizons

Each June, electric cooperatives all over Georgia send a group of select high school students on a weeklong, all-expenses-paid trip to our nation's capital to see our government at work. Known as the Washington Youth Tour, this top-notch leadership experience and tour of Atlanta and Washington, D.C., includes meetings with state and national leaders, leadership training and the formation of lifelong bonds with other delegates, as well as visits to all the major sights.

In 1994, Rebecca Lang was selected as a Washington Youth Tour delegate to represent Little Ocmulgee Electric Membership Corp. (EMC), based in McRae.

“It was a great experience! The Washington Youth Tour allowed me to see more past the piece of the state I

knew then. I grew up in the little town of McRae and attended a tiny high school,” Lang recalls. “The Youth Tour trip was my first time on an airplane, and probably the first time I was anywhere north of South Carolina. I still keep in touch with Misty Blizzard (then Mangum), of Birmingham, Ala., and enjoy catching up with her over dinner.”

Today, Georgia's Youth Tour participants join more than 1,500 other students from around the nation for their weeklong journey.

For more details, see the national Electric Cooperative Youth Tour website at www.youthtour.coop, and contact your local EMC.





This snapshot captures one of Rebecca Lang's fondest cooking memories while apprenticing in Nathalie Dupree's kitchen in 1999 in Social Circle, when her mother and grandmother came to visit; from left are Lang, Chef Nathalie Dupree, Lang's grandmother Claudia "Tom" Thomas and mother Mandy Dopson.

ting board, lay out each slice of ham. Spread about 2 tablespoons of the cream cheese mixture on each slice of ham, leaving a border of about 1/4 inch. On the long side of each ham slice, lay the okra pods, end to end. Depending on the size of the ham slice, 2 to 3 okra pods will be needed. Roll the ham over the okra. Cover and chill the ham rolls for 3 hours. Slice the rolls into 1-inch-thick slices and serve. *Makes about 40 pieces.*

"Chess pie has been around the South since blue and gray were the most popular wardrobe colors. Origins for the name are widely disputed, but the most fun version is that when a cook on a Southern farm was asked what dessert she was cooking, she answered, 'Jes pie,'" Lang says. "The chocolate wafer on top gives the little pies the crunch of a traditional crust without the cooking time. Chess pie is traditionally very sweet. My small version is just the right size for this rich confection."

Upside-Down Chess Pies

6 chocolate wafer cookies
1-1/4 cups sugar
1 tablespoon cornmeal
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
3 eggs
1/4 cup milk
1 tablespoon white vinegar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 cup unsalted butter

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Lightly spray 6 (4-ounce) ramekins with nonstick cooking spray. Arrange ramekins on a rimmed baking sheet. Place 1 cookie in the bottom of each ramekin.

In a medium mixing bowl, whisk together sugar, cornmeal and flour; set aside. In another medium mixing bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, vinegar and vanilla. Pour egg mixture into the sugar mixture and whisk until combined. Melt butter in microwave and slowly add to the filling. Whisk thoroughly. Pour filling into ramekins. The cookie will float to the top of the filling. Bake for 22 minutes, or until lightly browned around the edges. Serve warm or at room temperature. *Serves 6.*

"Supper doesn't get much fresher and more flavorful than these tacos. Loaded with fresh veggies and tangy lime juice, the salsa is extraordinary on its own too. If you cannot find catfish, try tilapia or another firm, white fish," Lang suggests.

Soft Catfish Tacos

6 (6-inch) flour tortillas
1 cup chopped tomato
1 Hass avocado, chopped
1 teaspoon lime zest
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice
2 tablespoons finely chopped red onion
2 cloves garlic, minced
3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
1/4 cup pickled jalapenos, drained, chopped
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 pound catfish fillets
2 cups shredded lettuce, for serving
Shredded cheddar cheese, for serving
Sour cream, for serving

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Wrap tortillas in foil and warm in the oven for 10-15 minutes, or until heated.

Meanwhile, make the salsa. Mix tomato, avocado, lime zest, lime juice,

onion, garlic, cilantro, jalapenos and salt in a medium mixing bowl; set aside.

Place catfish fillets in single layer on a rimmed baking sheet. Move oven rack to a position about 5 inches from the broiler. Preheat the broiler. You can move the tortillas to the bottom rack of the oven to keep them warm. Broil catfish for 6-8 minutes, or until it flakes easily when tested with a fork. The pan will have some liquid that was released from the fish. Cut the catfish into strips.

Top each tortilla with 1/3 cup lettuce, then fish strips, evenly divided among the tortillas. Top tacos with salsa and shredded cheese. Serve with sour cream. *Makes 6 tacos.*

Lang's "Cooking school" tip:

Finding a perfectly ripe avocado in the grocery store is sometimes hard. Try to shop for the creamy green fruit a couple of days before you need it. That way, you'll have time for it to ripen. They ripen faster in a paper bag. Look for ones that are slightly soft to the touch. If the stem pops off easily and reveals a green spot, it's probably ripe. 🍌 🌱



JENNIFER J. HEWETT

Cook's Warehouse's Renée Jackson plates up Rebecca Lang's recipe for slow-cooked Short-Cut Barbecue as an appetizer on French bread rounds for guests at Lang's cookbook debut and signing in March. The recipe can be found in "Quick-Fix Southern."