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Best of 2012: A Southern cookbook sampler

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As 2012 draws to a close, we pause to remember some of the best Southern cookbooks of the year, and we include a delicious and easy-to-prepare recipe from each. Want to get a cocktail party off to a fabulous start? Send out a tray of Alex Hitz's Gougères – from "My Beverly Hills Kitchen: Classic Southern Cooking with a French Twist." Want to reward Santa for staying up all night? Make him Debbie Moose's Sweet Potato Pancakes with Orange Butter, from "Buttermilk."



Looking for an elegant holiday side dish? Creamed Spinach and Pearl Onions, from "Fred Thompson's Southern Sides," goes with anything from turkey to steak. Perhaps you prefer to read now, cook later. No problem. These delightful volumes will bring pleasure for years to come.

"My Beverly Hills Kitchen: Classic Southern Cooking with a French Twist" by Alex Hitz (Knopf, \$35).

With 175 meticulously tested recipes and a memoir that recalls the gilded age of Buckhead, Atlanta-born Hitz gives Southern food a

much-needed shot of glamor. Son of the late Caroline and Robert Shaw, Hitz sprinkles his name-dropping cookbook with photographs from the Carter White House and shares a recipe for the chicken pot pie he cooks today for Nancy Reagan at his home in Beverly Hills. With a nod to “The Help,” he writes lovingly of long-time family cook Dorothy Williams Davis (not to mention her cheese straws, fried chicken, coconut cake and the turkey hash she prepared for Mr. Shaw after his Atlanta Symphony Orchestra concerts). The Hitz wit is as sparkling as his silver Cartier tureen. He calls his Low Country and New Orleans-inspired repertoire “punched-up” plantation cuisine, and his legendary dinner parties are a mixture of the splendid and the down-home. Former owner of Atlanta’s The Patio by the River (now Canoe), Hitz studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. Though he dispenses plenty of decadence (Bill Blass’s Sour Cream Souffle, Nan Kempner’s Baked Potatoes with Cavier, Billionaire’s Meatloaf), his mantra is simplicity. Hitz’s Parmesan Tuiles are nothing more than cheese and black pepper — baked to a wafer-thin crisp