

# That's Entertainment!

He has cooked for Reagans and royals, but Atlanta-born chef Alex Hitz still likes his shrimp and grits—albeit in a creamy velouté



Alex Hitz *DEBORAH WHITLAW-LLEWELLYN*

By **CHARLOTTE MOSS**

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**AT THE START** of his new book, Alex Hitz presents a quote by the Roman lyric poet Horace: "A host is like a general; calamities often reveal his genius." If that is the case, Mr. Hitz is a five-star general. Even when faced with serving first ladies and movie stars, he manages to be cool as a cucumber.

Raised in Atlanta, Mr. Hitz learned the ins and outs of entertaining early on. A Saturday lunch hosted by his conductor stepfather and socialite mother, as he writes in his engaging new cookbook-memoir, "My Beverly Hills Kitchen, Classic Southern Cooking with a French Twist" (Knopf), might have found Leonard Bernstein, Coretta Scott King and Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter tucking into the Hitz household's Chicken Country Captain.

Today, Mr. Hitz, 43, divides his time between a house high in the Hollywood Hills and an apartment on Park Avenue. Trained at Le Cordon Bleu, he was the owner of Atlanta's Patio by the River restaurant, where he worked during college. While he would go on to be a Broadway producer, real estate developer and even a clothing designer, his stage of choice is a kitchen island. Mr. Hitz returned to cooking because, he said, "I missed the kitchen."



Cold pea soup by Alex Hitz *DEBORAH WHITLAW-LLEWELLYN*

"My Beverly Hills Kitchen" is full of classic recipes, both his own and adaptations of favorites like the sour cream soufflé his friend Bill Blass made. Straight-talking cooking tips, such as "Don't use products as ingredients. I make two exceptions, tomato paste and the occasional shot of Worcestershire sauce," and "Throw away all thin baking sheets, they burn things," mingle with sparkling tales of his many high-profile friends. In the appetizers section, he gives recipes for Nan's Bacon Sticks, a recipe from Nan Kempner's private chef ("Just like Nan was, they are very chic and razor-thin").

A measure of a good host is the ability to handle a formal dinner for 24 with the same ease as a fried-chicken buffet for a hundred. "Alex has an instinct for the right way to do things. He does things old school but in a modern way," said Betsy Bloomingdale, the department-store heiress. "He just knows that when you

serve the meat that the sauce is served with it. A subtle thing, but you would never want to embarrass anyone if they did not know what the sauce went on." Connie Wald, the Hollywood hostess known for her home cooking, agrees. "He is rare and thoughtful," she said. "His antennae work very well. He thinks of everyone and everything."

At Mr. Hitz's annual "duchess and the flower girl" affair, the crowd circles the kitchen island to pile their plates high with warm flaky biscuits and broccoli slaw. Mr. Hitz has entertained dignitaries, luminaries, actors and socialites but his feeling is this: "I treat all my guests the same and they seem to like it well enough! Nobody has a gun to your head to come to my house for dinner."

Or take it from one of his admiring guests. Said Nancy Reagan: "Alex Hitz is the most elegant host and young man with old-world taste and charm." We chatted with Mr. Hitz about comfort food, Julia Child and his problem with square black plates.



Mint and pecan-crusted salmon by Alex Hitz *DEBORAH WHITLAW-LLEWELLYN*

**Southern for me** is family silver and monogrammed linen napkins. Because of these things, every time I sit down for dinner, my mother, my grandmother and often times my great grandmother are still with me.

**My rules of thumb:** Always keep it simple, and give people what they want—comfort food, nothing trendy or pretentious. Save the test tubes for another time.

**My entertaining essentials** include 24-inch ivory candles, place cards—I prefer flat ones—and 24-inch-square hemstitched white linen napkins.

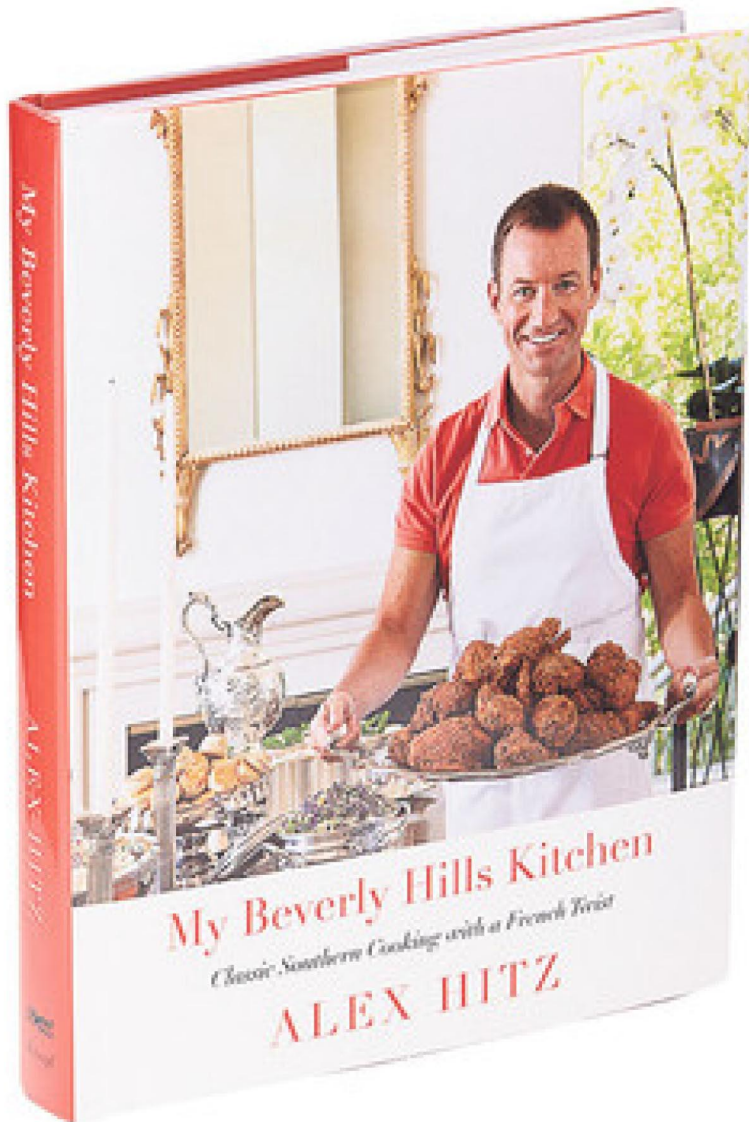
**Mixing china patterns is OK** for a buffet and OK from course to course. Otherwise, not OK.

**Make a schedule** and stick to it. Never wait on people who are late. That's like rewarding bad manners.

**Setting a table** for a control freak like me is the fun part. We even use a measuring tape so things are properly spaced and all my guests have the same amount of room, which is not a lot as my dining room is relatively small. I can seat 24 people, but they are really crammed, which is actually something that people enjoy.

**Seated vs. buffet?** The occasion dictates, as does the number of people.

**Flowers and centerpieces?** I let the pros do it. I have a conversation with David Jones, my floral designer of choice in Los Angeles. David knows me and he makes magic



'My Beverly Hills Kitchen' by Alex Hitz *F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

world.

**My mother was a** self-taught, really intuitive, fabulous cook. She came from a family where none of the women ever knew how to cook but went to school in France and fell in love with the kitchen. Although she didn't cook every day, my mother made sure that everything served in our house was nothing short of first-rate, a true combination of indigenous Southern ideas and ingredients, and European standards of technique and quality.

**The cookbook I use the most** is still Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume 1." It's based on her experience at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. I think it is so much

happen.

**Good manners** always pay off. They are one of the things in life that cost nothing. I am afraid the world we live in doesn't value these things as much as it should. What a shame!

**My go-to dessert** is Julia Child's Strawberry Cobbler. If you undercook it, it's fantastic. If you overcook it, it's delicious.

**For me, food is** art, history, economics, sociology, psychology and everything else "ology" rolled into one. It's a culmination of all the great disciplines of the



Julia Child, second from left, at the Patio by the river in 1992 *KNOPE*

better than their books and they are really great.

**Working with a caterer?** Fine, but so many people rely on them for more than they should and the result is obviously "theirs not yours." Stay away from catering trends. I never want to see another square black plate in my life.

*—Edited from an interview by C.M.*