

Table Talk: Cookbook Author Alex Hitz on Holiday Entertaining

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Photographed by Robert Fairer, *Vogue*, February 2009

“I wanted Southern food, but I wanted it on my terms,” explains **Alex Hitz** in the introduction to his recently published cookbook, *My Beverly Hills Kitchen* (Knopf). “The strict European standards of quality and technique applied to those grand old traditions.” Hitz, whose sharp and snappy Southern lilt will persuade you to take his word for it when it comes to cuisine from the South (if his Baked Cheddar Grits, Pecan-Crusted Salmon with Sauce Gribiche, Shrimp Bisque, and Molten Chocolate Cake don’t persuade you first), drew from the varied chapters of his life and the legacy of the world’s best hosts to compile recipes for his tome. There are punched-up versions of Bill Blass’s Sour Cream Soufflé, Nan Kempner’s Baked Potatoes with Caviar, and Connie Wald’s Chocolate Sauce, alongside everyday fare like Silver Queen Corn Pudding and Cold Avocado Soup. The son of a prominent Southern family, Hitz’s kitchen is an amalgam of skills he honed as a student at Le Cordon Bleu, his experience owning and cooking at a bustling Atlanta restaurant, his global travels, and his observations of his mother and beloved family cook in the kitchen. Now based in Los Angeles, Hitz typically plays host in a twinkling hills retreat overlooking the ocean. With holiday entertaining on the horizon, *Vogue* asked him what to keep in mind when one opens her house to dinner guests.

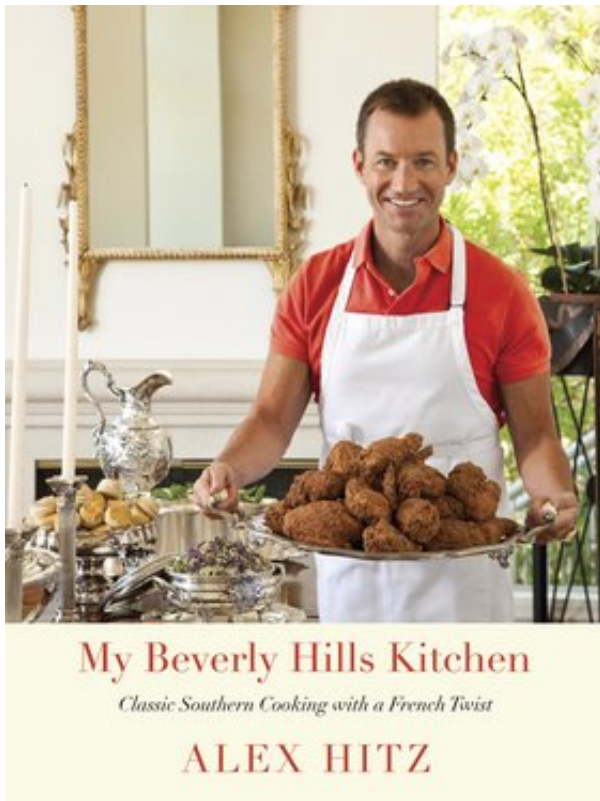


Photo: Courtesy of YC Media

1. Make a schedule and stick to it. Don't punish those who are on time by waiting for the ones who are late. Nothing can ruin an event quicker than a cocktail hour that's too long. Your guests will then eat quickly and then leave. If you keep cocktails to 45 minutes, they will be ready for dinner and happy to stay for a while afterward. Remember: A party is like an evening at the theater, a concert, or the movies—no one's happy when it goes on and on and they feel forced to stay.
2. I find that Southern food, especially in circles known for their eating neuroses, is a total icebreaker. Everybody—tycoons, heads of state, artistic luminaries, and the average Joe—bonds over a good piece of fried chicken. Never underestimate the power of superdelicious comfort food. It's a great equalizer.
3. A truly successful dinner should always feel like a bit of a splurge. I find that when people come for dinner, they're ready to eat what they really want— and I always like to give people what they want. They can diet the rest of the week.
4. Switch up notions of traditional hospitality. I love to set a fairly formal table—lots of silver, gorgeous flowers, and linens—then tell guests no ties, no jackets, and serve chicken pot pie. Conversely, I think it's fun to have a buffet for 150 that runs, two-sided, down the middle of my kitchen. People love being in the kitchen, no matter if they go there in their own houses or not.
5. Don't skimp on anything. Whether it's frozen pizza, chicken, or caviar, make sure it's the best quality possible and that there's plenty of it. I'm not a believer in the "Family hold back" theory. No one, but no one, should ever have to do this when they're a guest at a party—family or not!