



(Michelle Repiso)

Get some Southern comfort close to home

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EATING WELL

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Taste Southern comfort

Hill Country gives the casserole a decidedly upscale spin

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For the majority of us city dwellers not raised in the South, the idea of entertaining guests with a casserole seems laughable. We equate the dish with something base: processed food. In our minds, casseroles are often made with Campbell's soup. To a Southerner, however, it's standard potluck fare.

"[Back home], everyone has a bunch of Pyrex," admits Elizabeth Karmel, the North Carolina-bred executive chef at Hill Country, the city's newest barbecue hot spot.

Karmel maintains that casseroles are actually a varied and complex entrée.

"They run the gamut, from something I call cupa cupa can — a cup-a this and a can-a that — to something very sophisticated," she says.

At the Chelsea restaurant, Karmel serves up her mother's recipe for white shoepeg



Hill Country in Chelsea serves up live music and Texas barbecue. (Photos: Michelle Repiso)

corn pudding. As proof of the dish's highbrow nature, Karmel admits her mother served the dish in a soufflé dish.

Casseroles are practically

bred for entertaining. Not only are they relatively simple to prepare, but they are portable, can be made in advance and are an incredibly versatile group.

"Anything can become a casserole," Karmel says. "Just think about that. Come up with any meal, and I can make it into a casserole."

To prove her point,

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when I told her I was craving Cornish hen, Karmel came up with a recipe on the spot: Butterfly the game hen, mix it with wild rice, garlic, white wine and olive oil, then bake it for 45 minutes and, voila, a Cornish hen casserole is born.

Not only has Karmel brought her casserole to the big city, she's also introduced a countless number of women to the grill, a cooking tool that until recently was often seen as a man's domain. She is one of a handful of female grillers, and she teaches a Southern barbecue class at the Institute of Culinary Education.

"I don't know why there aren't more women in the barbecue business," she says. "It is rare, but how much fun do I have?"

Q&A

with Elizabeth Karmel

Why is barbecue seen as a man's domain?

Way back when, outdoor cooking was all about building a fire, and it was charcoal and wood, and it was messy, so women gradually gave that task to a man. Like taking out the trash. Really, what woman wants to take out the trash?



Elizabeth Karmel

When did you first get involved with barbecue?

I grew up in the South and had been away, and I missed it so much that I had to teach myself how to make it.

How did you begin working with Hill Country?

Marc [Glosserman, the owner] wanted to open up an authentic Texas barbecue restaurant, and I loved the concept and loved his commitment to keeping it authentic, which is what I'm all about. That was the biggest thing that attracted me to this project. That and that I love country music.

(Daisy Carrington)

RECIPE: Creamed white shoepeg corn pudding

Ingredients:

- 8 cups frozen white shoepeg corn, thawed
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ½ teaspoon ground white pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne
- ¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- ¼ cup freeze-dried chopped chives
- 3 tablespoons butter, melted
- 1 cup finely chopped shallot
- 2 cups finely shredded reduced fat (skim-milk) cheddar and Monterey

Jack cheese

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Par-cook and drain the corn. Reserve 2 cups.
3. Place the remaining 6 cups in a large food processor or blender and puree the corn. Add the cream and process until smooth. Add the eggs and process again until completely combined.
4. Mix the sugar, sea salt, white pepper, cayenne and nutmeg in a small bowl. Add the spices to the corn-and-cream mixture and process until combined. Add chives and process again until complete-

ly mixed and smooth. Set aside.

5. Melt the butter in a heavy-bottomed sauté pan. When it begins to bubble, add the shallots and sauté until they just begin to brown and are translucent. Add the reserved corn to the sauté pan and heat through.
6. Pour the cream-and-corn puree in a large bowl. Add the warm corn and shallots and mix well. Stir in the cheese and mix well.
7. Pour the mixture into a buttered 9-by-13-by-2-inch baking dish set in a sheet pan filled with water. Bake for one hour or until set and slightly golden on top. Serve warm.

