

# Southern Accents

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## INVITING STYLE INDOORS & OUT

**24** IDEAS  
TO FRESHEN UP  
YOUR BATH

CHOOSE THE  
BEST LAMPSHADE

DINING IN THE  
GARDEN  
WITH FRANK STITT

MAY/JUNE 2009  
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Inside the  
HGTV  
Green Home



## LOCAL FLAVOR



Birmingham's Slow Food convivium gathers  
on a rural Alabama farm for an alfresco meal prepared  
by award-winning chef **Frank Stitt**

*by Katherine Cobbs photographed by Monica Buck and Karen J. Downs styled by Rebecca Sowell Hawkins*



## THE MIDDAY SUN SHINES BRIGHT

as I travel south with members of Birmingham's Slow Food chapter through the undulating hills of kudzu-covered pines to the town of Jemison, population 3,350. Just off the exit, we follow signs to Petals From the Past. At the nursery's entrance, tidy rows of muscadine and scuppernong vines ripple outward from the bank of a pond, and a veritable field of potted plants—flowering annuals and perennials, antique roses, an array of fruit trees and Alabama natives—flanks the gravel parking lot. The owners, horticulturists Jason and Shelley Powell, lead us to the blackberry brambles, where we will enjoy a garden lunch prepared by one of our local leaders, chef Frank Stitt.



The mission of Slow Food, which began as a movement in the late '80s and is now an international organization with more than 850 chapters, is "to defend biodiversity in our food supply, spread taste education, and connect producers of excellent foods with co-producers through events and initiatives." Today's meal is a celebration of summer fruits harvested at their sweet prime, and we must do the picking. Armed with buckets and appetites, we wind our way through trellised rows of 'Kiowa' blackberries, a hybrid that produces fruit the size of a quarter.

After eating a fair share of berries on the job, we take our buckets to a long farm table dressed in a crisp white tablecloth and set with china and silver. Frank's wife, Pardis, arranges bundles of blackberry canes, heavy with fruit, in small vases to pair with the blue hydrangeas bursting from galvanized pails that line the center of the table. Nearby, Frank muddles a few blackberries with sugar and brandy, divides the resulting syrupy liquor between glasses, and tops each off with Champagne for an Alabama Sunset, one of the signature refreshers at his restaurant Highlands Bar and Grill.

Bees buzz around a bowl of fragrant peaches picked for our dessert. Here in

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: A cool, crunchy salad is a refreshing lunch. This blushing cocktail combines blackberries, brandy, and Champagne. OPPOSITE PAGE: The table is nestled between an orchard of fig trees and rows of berries. PREVIOUS PAGES: 'Kiowa' blackberries are a great choice for backyard gardens. Edwin Marty of Birmingham's Jones Valley Urban Farm gathers the ripest fruit for the meal's sweet finale. Like the lunch itself, arrangements are created from what can be plucked from the field. Frank and Pardis Stitt meander through the garden with goodies for the table in hand.

Chilton County, acres and acres of peach orchards surround us, as the nearby water tower shaped like a giant peach suggests. Tasting such fresh, warm-from-the-sun fruit is an almost otherworldly experience. Slow Food events are all about a return to such simple pleasures. Frank and Pardis got involved in the movement because it reflects their own philosophy of food. "It gives us yet another opportunity, beyond our restaurants, to celebrate farming, cooking, and savoring newly harvested garden delicacies with friends," Frank says.

The sun and wine make us lazy, and we are content to sit and sip while Jason tells us about the fig trees that shade our table and how they are ideally suited to our Southern climate and clay soil. At the other end of the table, the McEwens, who run a farm supply store in Wilsonville, have brought baskets of fresh farm eggs to share. In shades of pale blue, dusty green, and tan, they look hewn of polished



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—chef Frank Stitt

ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: A toast is a customary part of the ceremony of the Southern table. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Slow Food events connect participants with local growers and fellow foodies. Hydrangeas complement the blue-and-white china. Free-range farm eggs combine with homemade olive tapenade for a devilishly delicious appetizer. Blueberries are one of the natural treats offered for picking at Petals From the Past. Seeing the fruits of his labor topped with zabaglione elicits a grin from this growing boy. Peaches from Alabama's Chilton County are ripe for the taking.

marble. Some have been deviled with a zesty olive tapenade. We nibble on these as we watch the chef whip up lunch.

Wedges of frittata and a cool salad of fat Gulf shrimp make an ideal repast under the hot sun. Frank raises his glass: "Let us toast the vitality of the South, the fruits of the fields that surround us, and the joy of gathering at the table together." Glasses clink, and we begin to eat, slowly savoring every tender bite. There is a dreamlike quality to summer afternoons in the South. Working up an appetite before a relaxing gathering with food, wine, and friends only adds to it.

"Dessert!" someone exclaims, as if we had forgotten. Frank brings the day's harvest to his place at the table and begins slicing peaches and layering them in bowls with blackberries and blueberries. He reaches into a cooler and takes out a bowl of billowy custard that he spoons over each serving. Bowls are passed down the table in assembly-line fashion until all are served. One bite is all it takes to realize that this isn't a dream ... it's heaven. ♦

