

WE DIDN'T INVENT
AGING GRACEFULLY



ANATOMY OF A CLASSIC

Fire and Ice Cream

WITH WOOD CHIPS AND
INGENUITY, A SOUTH CAROLINA
CHEF PUTS A SMOKY SPIN ON
A CLASSIC SUMMERTIME TREAT

By Kim Severson

For Shaun Garcia, boredom has led to some of his favorite culinary inventions. One slow day, he decided to throw some vanilla beans into a smoker at Soby's, the Greenville, South Carolina, restaurant where he works as executive chef. "We were knocking around some ideas on how to get a little more out of vanilla but stay true to our Southern roots," he says. "I wanted something unique, so I thought why not get a little smoke on them."

The next logical step was to make vanilla ice cream.

"You get ice cream that has the sweet, musky smell of vanilla but follows up with this little bit of smoke." It's a natural on top of cobbler, of course, but Garcia says you don't even need to get that fancy. "It'd be great in a root beer float, too."

Garcia learned the simple pleasures of cooking and serving country food early. He grew up in Startex, a tiny community in Spartanburg County. It was named for the fabric milled there but became a ghost town after the mill closed in 1998. His grandmother ran a meat-and-three, using recipes that had been in the family for years. Garcia paid close attention to how she treated customers. "If some people showed up and my grandmother had already closed, she would turn the fryer back on to make another mess of chicken," he says. "It ingrained a lot into me at a young age."

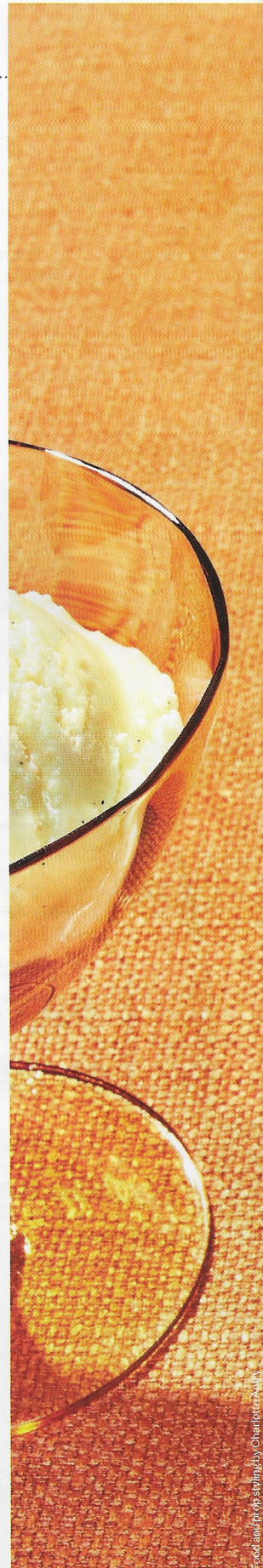
He spent summer vacations and school breaks working in the family business, but as a teenager began to long for something else. "I was embarrassed about it," he says. "And I was just so bored. I wanted to get as far away from the restaurant as I could." He tried a few other jobs but soon realized that restaurant work had been baked into his DNA. "You're absorbing all this stuff and you don't realize it until you leave," he says. So he rededicated himself to cooking, working his way up at a handful of restaurants before landing a job on the line at Soby's in 2003.

Garcia is something of a Renaissance man. He makes his own leather aprons, paints with acrylics and oils, and grows heirloom vegetables. He collects books, too, and will sometimes create menus inspired by literature (apple slump for *Little Women*, or fried chicken for *To Kill a Mockingbird*).

Figuring out how to smoke vanilla beans wasn't hard, but it required a little trial and error. Key, Garcia found out, is using the freshest, most pliable beans you can because the smoke adheres to the stickiness of the bean. Stay away from strongly scented wood like hickory, and make sure there is plenty of smoke circulating around the beans, whether you're smoking them inside a Big Green Egg while a pork shoulder cooks or on a gas grill outfitted with a container of wood chips.

If you have enough smoke going, it takes only about fifteen minutes to get a good result. Just don't put the beans over direct heat, Garcia says, or they'll get too crispy. Once the beans are smoked, scrape their insides out and steep in the ice cream base. His is rich with egg yolks and cream, which provide a nice counterpoint to the flavor of smoke.

And like every good country cook, Garcia doesn't want to waste anything. "After you take out the seeds," he says, "throw the split beans into some bourbon and just let them steep. You won't believe how good that is." ☐



Food and props styling by Charlotte Ault

Smoked Vanilla Ice Cream

Yield: 2 quarts

INGREDIENTS

2 cups milk
4 cups heavy cream,
divided
1½ cups sugar
¼ tsp. salt
2 smoked vanilla beans
(recipe follows)
12 egg yolks

PREPARATION

Whisk together milk, 2 cups cream, sugar, and salt in a saucepan over medium heat. Remove from heat just before the mixture comes to a boil. Split and scrape the seeds from the smoked vanilla beans and add to the mixture. Cover and let steep for 30 minutes.

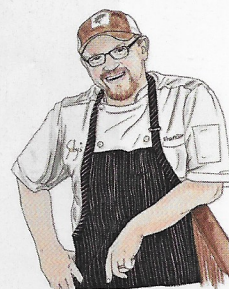
Meanwhile, whisk egg yolks in a large bowl. When the cream mixture is finished steeping, rewarm it over medium heat. To temper the egg yolks, slowly pour half of the cream mixture into the egg yolks in a steady stream, whisking constantly to warm the yolks. Pour the egg mixture back into the cream mixture on the stove. Reduce heat to medium-low. Using a heat-resistant rubber spatula, stir constantly, scraping the bottom and sides of the pan until the mixture thickens and coats the back of the spatula or a spoon.

Once the mixture is thick, remove from heat, pour through a fine-mesh strainer, and whisk in the remaining cream. Refrigerate until thoroughly chilled and then churn in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's directions.

For the smoked vanilla beans:

Get a fire going on one end of a grill. Add a handful of soaked

pecan, cherry, or other mild wood chips. Put the vanilla beans on the other side of the grill. You want the smoke to circulate but don't want the beans over direct heat. Close the grill and let the beans smoke for 15 minutes, checking to make sure the wood is still smoldering and producing plenty of smoke. The beans can be smoked up to a week in advance; seal tightly and refrigerate until ready to use.



MEET THE CHEF: SHAUN GARCIA

Hometown:
Startex, South
Carolina

*Favorite first-
edition books in his
collection:*

*Mastering the Art of
French Cooking and
To Kill a Mockingbird*

Knife philosophy:
"I'm not one of those
chefs who have to
have fifteen Japanese
knives that have to
be hand sharpened
and carried in some
special way. I'm kind
of a minimalist."