

# SPELLBOUND IN THE KITCHEN

Across the South, occult practitioners  
cook with a dash of magic.

BY NEELY MULLEN

HOME COOKS AND ENTHUSIASTIC EATERS alike understand well-loved kitchens and thoughtfully prepared meals to be more than the sum of their parts. In many Southern households, it's nearly impossible to avoid the cliché “cooked with love.” The kitchen is often referred to as the “heart of the home.” And for some women, this symbolic altar, and the alchemy that takes place there, is more than a metaphor—it's literal.

When Michelle Baker was growing up, kitchen magic was both sacred and quotidian.

“This kind of goes back generations in my family,” Baker, who was raised in the Druid tradition, said. “It's just like if somebody was raised as a Christian, or as a Buddhist. So for me, I've always been taught this way.”

Baker and her husband, chef Greg Baker, owned and operated The Refinery, a beloved Tampa restaurant, from 2010 until 2019. She is part of a community of people who self-identify as “kitchen witches.”

For Baker, magic in the kitchen looks like a familiar prayer, a process worn smooth and fluid by years of repetition and intention.

“Even just knowing where every one of your ingredients is, it's like you could be blindfolded

and cook in your own kitchen,” she said. “That's your sacred space. And everything in it has purpose and meaning. You have your favorite burner. Have you ever noticed that? You have your favorite spoon.... I have probably over \$25,000 worth of knives in my home, and I have one knife that I use all the time.”

Kitchen magic, or conjure cooking, is an umbrella term for a diverse array of rituals that combine food with the occult. The term is shorthand for a myriad of individual, specific traditions practiced across the sprawling field of witchcraft and spirituality. These practices have been intertwined for generations in the South, and they are enjoying increased popularity and visibility today.

“Thousands of years ago, the hearth of the home was the kitchen, and it's where all the magic happened,” Shawmarie Jeffery, owner of Mooringsport, Louisiana-based Inexplicable Things Apothecary, said. “They said their blessings there, they prepared food there. I mean, you name it, that's where it happened. The kitchen is a huge part of most magical traditions.”

Just as an individual's religious and spiritual practices are influenced by her cultural background and personal perspective, kitchen magic

Illustrations by Lindsey Bailey





put into it.... Conjure cooking is a really cool thing. And when you see the blessings manifest onto the people you've given them to, it's a really good feeling."

Kitchen magic has been a way of life for longtime practitioners like Rose, Baker, and Jeffery. And awareness is growing online, providing budding kitchen witches across the globe with vast and thriving communities to explore different practices.

One cursory search on Facebook finds dozens of groups dedicated to conjure cooking, with names like "Kitchen Witches" (45,000 members), "The Witches' Kitchen" (10,000 members), and "Solitary, Eclectic Kitchen Witch" (27,000 members). This spike in popularity does more than spread the ideas of kitchen magic—to Baker, it's a modern version of ancient traditions.

"I love seeing so many younger generations interested in this," Baker said. "It's been a really

great experience having an ability to share knowledge. For me, with my Pagan roots in that ancient Nordic tradition based on the Druids, there are no written documents from Druids. Zero. Everything was shared through storytelling. This is just kind of another fashion of storytelling."

The growing popularity and conversation surrounding the kitchen magic could inspire everyday home cooks to think more deeply about what makes food and cooking special. They might be attracted to the sense of power and possibility inherent in the quotidian act of preparing a meal, even if they don't want to self-apply the "witch" label.

"It's funny, because especially Southern cultures have always used it, they just didn't know it," Jeffery said. "That's what they were doing when they put so much love and feeling into their comfort food. It's being brought to the forefront of everybody's brains that, hey, this is kind of kitchen magic. And everybody does it." ♡

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# BARBECUE

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This year, we ask questions about what barbecue is, who makes it, and how the craft is changing. From sliced beef brisket to pulled pork, from tacos to fire-roasted vegetables, barbecue speaks to the past, present, and future of the South and to the stories of pitmasters—the places they work, the smoke they conjure, and the sauces they stir. Our year-long exploration of barbecue culminates at the Fall Symposium. Meanwhile, stay tuned for barbecue-themed podcasts, oral histories, documentary films, recipes, and more.