

# FROM THE SOUTH TO THE SOUTH

Flavors of the Philippines find a home at Pêche in New Orleans.

BY NICOLE CABRERA MILLS

MY HUSBAND LIKES TO SAY THAT I WENT from the South to the South. I grew up in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Mindanao has a large Muslim population, which makes the food very different from the rest of the Philippines. My father is a farmer. My mother has been in the food business for most of her life. In 2001, I moved to New York to go to culinary school at the French Culinary Institute. I met my husband, a New Orleans native, in New York. After several years of working around New York, Los Angeles, and the Philippines, fate brought us back to New Orleans in 2011.

I joined the opening team at Pêche in 2013 and became the chef de cuisine in 2019. Even before that promotion, I was given the freedom to create specials, which allowed me to push the boundaries of a New Orleans seafood grill and see what our diners liked or didn't like. For the most part, I found that they liked just about anything. Naturally, because of my background, Asian flavors came through—and they worked surprisingly well with the ingredients we sourced at the restaurant. I never have to force anything when it comes to developing dishes for the Pêche menu. The focus has always been Gulf seafood and farm produce.

What can I do with what's available? The result is usually a combination of the South I grew up in and the South I live in.

Southern food has evolved a lot in the last decade. How many rice dishes can I make? How many vegetables can I fry, and how many ways can I fry them? I've been a part of that evolution, even though I didn't recognize it right away. I don't conform to the norm of what people think Southern food should be. I take Southern ingredients and turn them into dishes I like to eat, often incorporating inspiration from my past. I'm not afraid to use fish sauce, soy sauce, and vinegar. I often cook with shrimp as a flavoring agent, and I use a lot of herbs and pickles to enhance the flavors of dishes. When people come to Pêche, I don't think they are expecting a specific cuisine. I think they expect big flavors and they expect the food to taste bright and fresh. Some of the flavors may be surprising though not completely unfamiliar.

In a predominantly white male-dominated industry, I am a female Asian immigrant running a restaurant in the South. The gravity of this work often escapes me. At the end of the day, I just enjoy cooking good food.

Abraham Rowe



## **Kale Salad**

Serves 6

- 16 ounces baby kale\*
- 1 cup crispy rice (recipe follows)
- 1 cup salted peanuts, toasted
- 2 apples (Pink Lady, Fuji, or Jonagold), sliced thin
- 1 cup thinly sliced or julienned radishes (Purple Daikon, Watermelon, or Breakfast)
- 1 cup julienned kohlrabi
- 6 tablespoons chili garlic crisp (may be store-bought or homemade; recipe follows)
- 3 teaspoons lemon juice
- Salt

In a large bowl, combine kale, crispy rice, peanuts, apples, radish, kohlrabi, chili crisp, lemon juice, and a sprinkle of salt. Mix well and adjust seasonings to taste.

*\*If baby kale is not available, use lacinato kale and cut into ribbons (1 inch thick).*

## **Crispy Rice**

Makes approximately 1 pint

- 2 quarts soybean oil
- 1 pint cooked popcorn rice
- 1 pint rice flour
- Salt

In a deep pot, heat the oil to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Make sure the pot is filled no more than halfway.

In a mixing bowl, toss the popcorn rice with rice flour. Make sure each grain is individually coated with flour. Strain off the excess flour using a fine mesh strainer. Once excess flour is sifted out, fry the rice in 2 batches until golden brown, about 3 to 5 minutes. Season with salt. Allow the rice to cool before using.

## **Chili Garlic Crisp**

Makes approximately 1 quart

- 1 cup sesame oil
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 tablespoon star anise pods
- 1 tablespoon Sichuan peppercorns
- 1 quart soybean oil
- 2 cups brunoise shallots
- 1/2 cup brunoise ginger
- 1 cup chopped garlic
- 1/4 cup chili flakes
- 2 whole dried ancho or guajillo peppers
- 6 whole dried arbol peppers
- 1/2 cup sesame seeds
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup soy sauce

In a deep pot over medium heat, combine the sesame oil, cinnamon, star anise, and Sichuan peppercorns. Bloom the spices until fragrant, about 2 to 3 minutes. Heat oil to 350°F, then remove from the heat. Steep the spices for 15 minutes, then strain. Discard the spices. Puree the sesame oil with the chili flakes and dried peppers. Set aside.

In a deep pot, combine the soybean oil and the garlic. On high heat, whisk continuously until the garlic is golden brown. Remove from heat and strain the hot oil through a chinois. Press out all the oil and lay the garlic flat on a sheet pan lined with a towel. Return the oil to the pot. Carefully add the ginger and fry until translucent, then add the shallots and fry until golden brown. Quickly remove the pot from the heat and stir in the sesame seeds. Then quickly add the chili-sesame oil mixture, brown sugar, and soy sauce. Add the fried garlic and mix well. Allow the mixture to cool before storing in an airtight container.

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*Nicole Cabrera Mills is the chef de cuisine at Pêche Seafood Grill in New Orleans. She cooked the Tabasco Keynote Supper at the 2023 Southern Foodways Symposium.*