



GRAVY **BBQ** SPECIAL

Recipes and text by
SHERI CASTLE

Photos by
FORREST MASON



CONTRIBUTORS	2
INTRODUCTION: A LITTLE SIDE HUSTLE	3
FIRE AND ICE REFRIGERATOR PICKLES	4
RED SLAW	6
SOFT, MUSTARDY POTATO SALAD	8
CREAMED CORN	10
TEXAS-STYLE PINTO BEANS	12
GREENS	14
BAKED MACARONI AND CHEESE	16
BANANA PUDDING	18

CONTRIBUTORS

Sheri Castle is the host of *The Key Ingredient*, a cooking show from PBS. She's also a writer, recipe developer, and author of many cookbooks, including *The New Southern Garden Cookbook*. She hails from the Blue Ridge Mountains, right on the North Carolina–Tennessee line, which explains why she cut her barbecue teeth on east Tennessee–style pork shoulder and didn't partake in a whole-hog pig pickin' until she went to college. Her Appalachian roots also established a lifelong loyalty to beans—she never passes them up as a barbecue side. Sheri's next big culinary and personal goal is to visit her beloved daughter in New Zealand and introduce those folks to Southern biscuits and gravy as an instrument of global goodwill. Check her out at shericastle.com.



Forrest Mason is a food-focused photographer, video producer, and documentary filmmaker based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Quick to crack a joke—or a crab claw—Forrest has been moseying around the country making friends and art for many years. You can find his work in *Garden & Gun*, *Ebony*, *The Local Palate*, *Eater*, and around town. Of his barbecue preferences, he says, “Being a Carolina guy, how can I not go with whole-hog barbecue? Pile my plate high with pulled pork and fried okra, toss me an ice-cold beer, and point me to some shade. I’ll take it from there.”

TOP: Baxter Miller; BOTTOM: Forrest Mason



WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT BARBECUE,

both the rendition and consumption. We know there are regional specialties, fierce loyalties, and spirited debates. Like a Proust questionnaire with a single query, you can gain insight into people by asking what they will even acknowledge as barbecue, much less eat. Barbecue sides can be just as evocative and map-dot specific. Few of us will ever attempt pit-smoked barbecue at home, much less expect to master it. The sides, on the other hand, are reassuringly accessible.

There's little consensus (no surprise there) on what exactly constitutes a barbecue side, but there are common denominators, especially among places that take barbecue seriously. They don't fiddle with dishes that draw undue time and attention away from the pit. There's no à la minute in the world of barbecue. Sides are usually made in large batches that keep a day or two, or don't need much minding once underway. Their quality can't fade during service hours or during a stint on a steam table. Seasonal specials might come and go, or not come at all, but the core lineup is made from inexpensive ingredients that are readily available year round.

This throughline doesn't imply that all barbecue sides are the same. Far from it. We count on the meat, but we anticipate the sides. (For those who don't eat meat yet find themselves at a barbecue restaurant, the sides are everything.) We expect slaw, for example, but we marvel at the various

ways different cooks will make it. We look forward to beans, and we know those beans will change as we eat our way westward from the Atlantic to the other side of the Mississippi. We delight in novel dishes found in only a handful of places, or perhaps only one location, such as the orange-hued hash of South Carolina that's pretty much unheard of in other states. I admire the forthright nature of barbecue sides and appreciate that we get to pick what we want. Barbecue places fix us a plate; they don't plate our meal.

Side cooks are on a par with the pit cooks when it comes to putting their local spins on menu items we deem essential to the overall barbecue experience. The pitmaster might get the hype as the front man, but the side cooks deserve love for being the tight house band.

Taking inspiration from classic Southern barbecue joint sides, I developed eight recipes that we can cook at home. I chose dishes that can go together and complement all types of barbecue. Some are common. Others you might not have heard of. Of course, these recipes are not the final say on barbecue sides, nor the only way to make them. Just as there will never be consensus on barbecue, there is no single recipe for any side dish. We all get to talk about our favorites, but none of us gets the last word. I made these sides the way I would if I could have y'all over to my house. You can bring the barbecue.

BBQ SPECIAL



FIRE AND ICE REFRIGERATOR PICKLES

BECAUSE WE CAN'T BUY A SERVING OF THEM, SOME PEOPLE WOULD ARGUE THAT pickles are a barbecue condiment rather than a side. That's accurate in barbecue places that originated as butcher shops looking for another way to sell meat and then morphed into restaurants over time, as we find in parts of Texas. Sometimes the only flourish on the order is a few pickles stabbed on a toothpick. (And maybe a slice of pillowy-soft light bread that serves as an edible finger bowl.) Those are good pickles, though, and the barbecue experience isn't the same without them. Who's to say there isn't a tipping point at which they become a side, if you eat enough?

Fire and Ice Pickles are spicy, tangy, sweet, crunchy, cold, and irresistible. But the best part is that anyone can make them, perfectly, even if they've never made pickles before. This recipe doesn't require processing or canning, only a few simple steps that transform store-bought dill pickle chips into (mostly) homemade sweet-hot pickles that'll keep in the refrigerator for weeks, if they last that long. Be sure to start with dill pickle chips, sometimes called hamburger dills. Kosher dills do not work. (I'm not sure why, but trust me.) Sometimes I mix equal parts pickled jalapeños and dill pickles to increase the fieriness in the ice-cold jar.

Makes 1 pint (easily doubled or more)

- 1 (16-ounce) jar dill pickle chips**
- 1 cup granulated sugar**
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, or to taste**
- 1 teaspoon mixed pickling spice**
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced**

Drain the pickles and discard the brine. Set the jar and lid aside.

Place the pickles in a medium bowl, cover with ice water, and let stand for 15 minutes. Drain well and return the pickles to the bowl.

Stir in the sugar, pepper flakes, pickling spice, and garlic.

Pack into the reserved jar, cover, and let stand until the sugar dissolves, about 1 hour, gently shaking the jar from time to time to help the sugar dissolve.

Refrigerate for at least 1 day before serving, although the flavor continues to deepen for a few days. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 1 month.

BBQ SPECIAL



RED SLAW

MADE FROM PLENTIFUL, INEXPENSIVE CABBAGE, COLESLAW MIGHT BE THE MOST COMMON barbecue side dish. Most can be sorted into two camps. There's mayonnaise-based slaw that's a creamy, cooling contrast to the barbecue; or vinegary, marinated slaw that leans into the flavors of the smoked meat and pungent sauce. Red slaw is among the latter.

This slaw is an example of intensely regional style of barbecue side that garners loyalty akin to the barbecue itself. It hails from western(ish) North Carolina, the land of smoked pork and red sauce—called a mop—that's a nuanced blend of ketchup-sweet and vinegar-tang. Red slaw is red from that same mop, or from some of its components. (The exact recipe for a barbecue place's signature mop is a matter of conjecture and taste sleuthing. They ain't saying.) When making red slaw with bottled barbecue sauce, it's vital that you use a legit western North Carolina-style barbecue sauce. Alternatively, you can use ketchup jacked up with hot sauce or cayenne, and more black pepper than you'd think. Thick, dark, syrupy bottled sauce will be a disaster. We're making slaw here, not slathering ribs.

Red slaw needs to marinate at least overnight to come into its own. This slaw is notably free of onion, although I encourage you to add a little carrot and/or red cabbage for color. The salting and squeezing step keeps the slaw from turning watery, which is all the more important because red slaw is just as likely to go onto a barbecue sandwich as on a tray.

Makes 8 servings

- 2 to 2 ½ pounds green cabbage**
- ½ cup very finely chopped carrot and/or red cabbage**
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt**
- ⅓ cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar, divided**
- ½ cup cider vinegar**
- ⅔ cup tomato-based, slightly sweet, western North Carolina-style barbecue sauce (or ketchup)**
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper**
- Several shakes of hot sauce or pinch of cayenne, especially if using ketchup**

Core the cabbage and cut it into wedges. Grate it on the large holes of a box grater, or pulse the cabbage in the bowl of a food processor until very finely chopped. (Depending on the size of your food processor, you will probably need to work in batches.) The bits of cabbage should be about the size of rolled oats.

Toss together the cabbage and other vegetables, if using, with the salt and 1 tablespoon sugar in a colander set over a bowl or in the sink to catch the drips. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Meanwhile, whisk together the remaining ⅓ cup sugar, the vinegar, barbecue sauce, and pepper in a large bowl.

With clean hands, squeeze the cabbage mixture dry one small handful at a time and add it to the bowl. Stir until well combined. Cover and refrigerate overnight before serving. For the best flavor and appearance, refrigerate for 1 to 2 days so the cabbage marinates in the dressing. Stir well and taste before serving. It often needs a tad more barbecue sauce.

BBQ
SPECIAL



SOFT, MUSTARDY POTATO SALAD

WHEN I RECALL THE BEST POTATO SALADS I'VE HAD WITH BARBECUE, ESPECIALLY AT the old-school places, appearance comes to mind as much as flavor. Most could be served with an ice cream scoop, creating a little dome that holds its ground. This one can do that.

Potato salad is usually made with waxy potatoes that don't crumble when cooked, such as Red Bliss or fingerlings. This recipe is made with good old brown russets, preferably the size of a fist instead of whopper baking potatoes. Yukon Gold potatoes are another option, although the potato salad won't be as creamy. Crush at least half of the cooked potatoes, as though making rustic mashed potatoes, so that they can soak up the delicious seasonings.

This potato salad dressing takes its cues from barbecue restaurants in parts of South Carolina where neon, ballpark-style mustard is also a key ingredient in barbecue sauce. If your potato salad isn't tinted yellow, you didn't add enough.

Makes 8 servings

- 3 1/2 pounds medium-size russet potatoes**
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt, plus more to taste**
- 1/4 cup rice wine vinegar or distilled white vinegar**
- 3/4 cup mayonnaise**
- 1/4 cup yellow ballpark-style mustard**
- 1/2 cup pickle relish (dill, sweet, or sweet-hot)**
- 1 tablespoon not-too-hot sauce, or to taste**
- 1 teaspoon celery seed**
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 1 teaspoon paprika**
- 4 large eggs, hard-cooked, peeled, and coarsely chopped**
- 3/4 cup diced red onion**
- 1/2 cup diced celery**

Peel the potatoes and cut them into 1 1/2-inch chunks. Place in a large saucepan, cover with water, add 2 tablespoons salt, and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat and simmer until tender enough to pierce with a knife, about 25 minutes. Don't let the potatoes get waterlogged or start to fall apart. Remove from heat, drain well, and return the potatoes to the warm pot. Let stand uncovered (off the heat) until they steam dry and the edges look chalky, about 3 minutes.

Pour the potatoes into a large bowl and crush them with a large spoon or potato masher. Drizzle the vinegar over the warm potatoes and let stand until lukewarm, about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir together the mayonnaise, relish, mustard, hot sauce, celery seed, pepper, and paprika in a medium bowl. Pour over the potatoes and mix well.

Fold in the eggs, onion, and celery. Add a little more mayo or relish if the salad is too dry to hold its shape on the spoon, although it shouldn't be gloppy. Taste to make sure the seasoning pleases you. Potato salad almost always needs more salt. Dial up the acidity with a few more shakes of hot sauce, if needed. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, preferably overnight. Check the seasoning again before serving lightly chilled.

BBQ SPECIAL



CREAMED CORN

CORN IS A MUST-HAVE SIDE IN CERTAIN PARTS OF THE SOUTH, AND NOT JUST IN CORN-bread and hushpuppies. In a swath across Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and parts of Louisiana—areas that, not coincidentally, excel in meat-and-threes and steam-table plate lunches—we find a lot of corn pudding and creamed corn. While it's true that straight-up corn on the cob is so much fun to eat that it qualifies as entertainment, it's food of the moment. Creamed corn made from those freshly shucked ears makes more sense as a barbecue side. Once cooked, all it needs is for someone to look in on it once in a while, to keep it stirred up. For the best creamed corn, track down local sweet corn in season. Choose ears so fresh that if you nick the raw kernels, you'll see beads of milky corn liquid, full of natural starch that helps thicken the dish without having to add so much flour that it turns pasty.

Makes 8 servings

- 8 ears of corn, freshly shucked with silks wiped away**
- 3 tablespoons salted butter, plus more to taste**
- 3 tablespoons instant flour (such as Wondra) or all-purpose flour**
- ½ cup heavy cream**
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar**
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to taste**
- ½ to ¾ cup whole milk, as needed**
- Ground black pepper, to taste**

Working in a large bowl, cut the kernels off the cobs. Don't go all the way down to the cob on the first pass; make shallow cuts that remove the tops of the kernels, and then use the back of the knife or a spoon to scrape off the remaining corn and the milky liquid. You should have about 6 heaping cups of corn. Pulse 1 ½ cups of the kernels in a food processor until very finely chopped and add them back to the bowl. (If you don't have a food processor, hold back 2 ears of corn to grate on the small holes of a box grater.)

Warm the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. When it begins to sizzle, whisk in the flour and cook for 2 minutes, whisking continuously. Do not let the flour brown.

Add the cream and whisk until smooth.

Stir in the corn, sugar, salt, and ½ cup of the milk. Cook only until the corn loses its raw taste and the mixture begins to bubble and thicken, 5 to 8 minutes, stirring slowly and continuously. Add more milk, if needed. The fresher and juicier the corn, the less milk you'll need.

Season the corn with pepper and taste for salt. Serve warm, topped with another pat of butter, if you like.

BBQ
SPECIAL.



TEXAS-STYLE PINTO BEANS

TRAVERSE THE SOUTH FROM EAST TO WEST AND YOU'LL NOTICE A SHIFT IN THE TYPE of beans served with barbecue, especially after you cross the Mississippi. Up to that point, the word “barbecue” implies pork and you’re most likely to be served sweet and sticky baked beans made from dressed up canned beans, even though the finished dish is deemed homemade.

These are not baked beans. Texas-style pinto beans are brothy, cooked from scratch with dried beans. Unlike most dried bean recipes, however, these turn out better when you don’t soak the beans so that they can absorb the liquid as they cook, ensuring that they are deeply flavored. Part of that flavor comes from smoky, fatty, salty, meaty seasoning. Once you’re in brisket country, the pintos are often seasoned with burnt ends, so I encourage you to use those dark and smoky bits if you can get them from a local barbecue restaurant, or from a brisket you smoke at home. Otherwise, smoky bacon is a good substitute.

The type of fresh, fragrant chili powder you use will determine the heat level of the finished dish. No matter your choice, don’t go overboard; use only enough to flavor the beans without making them fiery hot.

Although dried beans last a long time, they are not immortal. At some point, they’ll be so dried out that no amount of cooking can soften them up. Fresh-crop dried beans that are no more than a year old cook quickly and beautifully. (I order mine online from Rancho Gordo.)

A pot of pintos is impressive when you know what you’re doing.

Makes 8 servings

- 1 pound dried pinto beans**
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped (about 2 cups)**
- 2 cups coarsely chopped brisket burnt ends, divided**
- 3 garlic cloves, chopped**
- 1 tablespoon chili powder**
- 1 tablespoon onion powder**
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder**
- 1 tablespoon ground black pepper**
- 1 tablespoon salt**
- 2 teaspoons dried Mexican oregano**
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin (optional if your chili powder includes cumin)**

Pour the beans into a large bowl and cover with water. Stir them with your fingers and discard any chaff or broken beans. Drain the beans and pour them into a Dutch oven or other similar large, heavy pot. Add enough water to submerge the beans by a depth of 1 ½ inches.

Add the onion, 1 cup of the burnt ends, garlic, and all of the spices. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer gently until the beans

are tender, 1 to 2 hours. The fresher the dried beans, the more quickly they will cook. Do not let the beans boil.

Remove the pot from the heat, stir in the reserved 1 cup burnt ends, let stand uncovered for 1 hour, and then check the seasoning. The rest gives the beans time to absorb more seasoning from the delicious broth. Reheat gently before serving. (You can prepare the beans up to 2 days ahead. Cool, cover, and store refrigerated.)

VARIATION:

To use bacon instead of burnt ends to season the beans, cut **8 to 12 ounces smoky, thick-cut bacon** crosswise into 1-inch pieces. Cook in the large pot you’ll use for the beans over medium-low heat until crisp and rendered, about 20 minutes, stirring often. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the bacon to a separate bowl and set it aside. Stir the beans to coat them in the drippings before adding the water at the start of cooking. When the beans are cooked, stir the reserved bacon back into the pot just before you check the seasoning. As with the burnt ends method above, let the finished beans rest before serving.

GREENS

POPULAR SOUTHERN SIDE DISHES OFTEN MAKE THEIR WAY ONTO BARBECUE MENUS because the preparation fits into the pace of low-and-slow barbecue. Once a pot of greens is on the stove, it can simmer unattended for a while. Greens and potlikker not only keep for a few days, they improve with a little aging and reheating, meaning that they don't necessarily have to be tackled daily.

Big, leafy greens are common in the South. They don't have to be tracked down or shipped in. We sometimes say collards almost generically, when what we really mean is a mess of cooked greens. Map the braising greens of the South and you'll see zones where mustard or turnip greens are more popular than collards. For this recipe, I combined the big three into one pot. Each adds its own flavor and texture, making the whole thing better.

A pot of greens benefits from judicious seasoning with something smoked. Pork is traditional, although smoked turkey wings or legs infuse smokiness and depth of flavor. Don't skip making the stock. It's the bedrock of good potlikker that's integral to good greens, as fully wrought as a fine soup. Although, as good as potlikker is, there is an art to serving greens in a way that keeps those juices from sloshing into anything else on our plates, including the barbecue—which is why greens often come in their own bowl or Styrofoam nook.

It's important to taste the greens to ensure the flavors are balanced when you make them and each time you heat them up. Even after *you* think your mess of greens is just right, set an array of hot sauces and vinegars on the table so your guests can tinker with their individual servings. People are like that.



Makes 8 servings

- 12 to 16 ounces smoked turkey wings or legs**
 - 4 cups richly flavored chicken broth, preferably homemade**
 - 4 cups water**
 - 2 ½ pounds mixed sturdy, leafy greens, such as collards, mustard, and turnip**
 - 2 tablespoons unfiltered apple cider vinegar**
 - 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar, sorghum, or cane syrup**
 - 2 teaspoons seasoned salt or kosher salt**
 - 2 teaspoons ground black pepper**
 - 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes**
 - 1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped (about 2 cups)**
- Serve with: vinegar, pepper vinegar, and assorted hot sauces**

FOR THE STOCK:

Place the turkey pieces, broth, and water in a large pot. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer until the liquid reduces to 6 cups, about 2 hours. Strain and return to the pot. Discard the turkey pieces.

FOR THE GREENS:

Strip the leafy greens from the tough stems and discard the stems. Cut or tear the leaves into bite-size pieces. To remove the inevitable grit (even if you don't see any), swish them in a sink full of cool water, let stand for a couple of minutes so that the grit will sink to the bottom, then lift out the leaves to drain in a large colander or on a clean towel. Let the clinging water drip away, but you don't have to dry them.

Bring the stock to a simmer and stir in vinegar, sugar, salt, pepper, and pepper flakes. Stir in the onions. Begin adding the greens a large handful at a time, letting them wilt a bit before adding more. It will look like too many greens to fit in the pot, but they cook down considerably, soon turning a mountain into a manageable hill of greens.

Reduce the heat and simmer gently until the greens are tender, but not slick or slimy, 30 to 45 minutes.

Taste the potlikker and adjust the seasoning to your liking, making sure that it's bold and balanced. If you need more heat, it's preferable to use hot sauce at this point rather than more pepper flakes because the liquid mixes in immediately and adds nice acidity.

It's fine to serve the greens right away, but for the best flavor, make them a day ahead. Let the greens cool, then cover and refrigerate overnight. Reheat gently before serving with vinegar, pepper vinegar, and hot sauce on the table.

BAKED MACARONI AND CHEESE

MERCY. MACARONI AND CHEESE IS THE BARBECUE OF BARBECUE SIDES: PEOPLE HAVE their ways and unwavering preferences, and they're not interested in what you think.

We find mac and cheese on the menus of barbecue joints, meat-and-threes, diners, and soul food restaurants. We also find it on holiday tables and other high-stakes family gatherings. Given its popularity, you'd think there would be some overlap among styles and techniques. Nope—other than the near-universal use of elbow macaroni that ensures we never mistake mac and cheese for a pasta dish. Some barbecue sides reflect a region, state, or town. A dish of baked mac and cheese is statement of personal beliefs.

I make this recipe most often at home because it incorporates my core mac and cheese principles. I believe that at least three types of cheese are preferable to only one, but each must bring something to the party. I always include a little Velveeta. Don't scoff; its processed creaminess helps the other cheeses (I'm looking at you, Cheddar) melt smoothly without separating into chunky bits in an oil slick. I contend that bland macaroni and cheese is unforgivable, so I generously season my recipe and offer hot sauce on the table. I stand by my practice of sprinkling extra cheese on top before popping the dish in the oven. That thick veneer of deeply browned and slightly chewy cheese on top is sublime. It takes great restraint to not peel it off and eat it gone while the macaroni rests.



Makes 8 servings

- 8 ounces elbow macaroni**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- 2 tablespoons instant flour (such as Wondra) or all-purpose flour**
- 2 cups whole milk**
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt**
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder**
- 1 teaspoon onion powder**
- 1/2 teaspoon mustard powder (preferably Colman's)**
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika**
- 1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg**
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cayenne pepper**
- 4 ounces freshly shredded extra-sharp white Cheddar cheese**
- 4 ounces freshly shredded Monterey Jack or Gouda cheese**
- 4 ounces freshly shredded Colby Jack cheese**
- 1 ounces freshly shredded Parmesan cheese**
- 4 ounces Velveeta, cubed**

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Mist a shallow 2 1/2-quart gratin or baking dish with cooking spray.

Cook the macaroni until al dente according to package directions. Drain in a colander and let stand until needed. Do not rinse.

Meanwhile, warm the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for 2 minutes, whisking continuously. Do not let the mixture brown. Whisk in the milk and cook until bubbling and thickened, stirring slowly and continuously with a heat-proof spatula. Remove from the heat and stir in the salt, garlic powder, onion powder, mustard powder, pepper, paprika, nutmeg, and cayenne.

Toss the shredded cheeses together in a bowl. Set aside about 1 1/2 cups to go on top. Add the rest of the shredded cheese and the Velveeta to the sauce, and stir until melted and smooth. Stir in the macaroni.

Pour into the prepared dish. Sprinkle the reserved shredded cheese over the top. Bake until bubbly and deep golden brown on top, about 30 minutes. For a firmer top crust, pop the dish under the broiler until the cheese is nearly blistered in spots, 2 to 3 minutes.

Let stand for at least 15 minutes before serving warm.

BANANA PUDDING

NOT EVERY BARBECUE PLACE SERVES BANANA PUDDING, BUT MORE BARBECUE PLACES serve banana pudding than any other single dessert. It's a creamy cool-down after a smoky, robust meal. Some places scoop individual servings into grab-and-go cups, given that portability is a plus for barbecue desserts, especially in places that focus on lunch or take-away service. Folks need to get back to work or hit the road. But that doesn't mean we should rush when making our banana pudding. Some places have taken so many shortcuts that all that's left is instant pudding, Cool Whip, busted cookies, and wishful thinking. This is the real deal, featuring rich, silky homemade custard and real whipped cream. But do buy the Nilla Wafers; they can't be improved on.

Banana pudding is likely a distant cousin of British trifles made of stale cake, custard, cream, and fruit. Bananas have sailed into our deep Southern ports for generations, initially making their way inland by train to small-town whistle stops in the days before refrigeration. Today, bananas are inexpensive, available year-round, and easy to find, even in a basket near the register at the corner quick mart.

For banana pudding that's show-off special, use bananas that are golden yellow with a smattering of light brown freckles, the sure sign of perfect ripeness. I recommend taking the extra step of infusing the milk for the custard with bananas as well, to enhance the flavor.



Makes 8 servings

- 3 cups whole milk**
- 4 to 6 ripe bananas**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup granulated sugar**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cornstarch**
- Big pinch of kosher salt**
- 6 large egg yolks**
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pats and chilled**
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract**
- 5 to 7 ounces Nilla Wafers**
- 1 cup whipping cream, chilled**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup powdered sugar**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla extract**

Pour the milk into a small saucepan. Peel 2 bananas, cut them into chunks, and add them to the pan. Bring to a bare simmer over medium heat, stirring gently. Remove from the heat and let stand at room temperature until cool, about 2 hours. Do not let it stand so long that the bananas darken the milk. Strain the milk and discard the bananas.

Sift the granulated sugar and cornstarch together into a medium saucepan. While whisking, add the milk in a slow, steady stream, and whisk until smooth. Strain the egg yolks through a mesh sieve into the milk. Whisk until smooth. Drop in the butter. Place over medium heat and cook until the custard thickens, 8 to 10 minutes, stirring slowly and continuously with a heat-proof spatula. When ready, the custard will coat the back of the spatula. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla.

Spread a thin layer of warm custard over the bottom of a shallow 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -quart dish. Cover with a single layer of Nilla Wafers. Peel and slice 1 or 2 bananas (depending on their size and how much banana you like) over the wafers. Cover with custard. Add another

layer of Nilla Wafers and bananas, and then pour the rest of the custard into the dish, making sure the bananas are covered. (If you like firmer, cakier pudding, make 3 layers of wafers, bananas, and custard.)

Press a sheet of plastic wrap directly onto the custard to keep a skin from forming. Refrigerate the pudding until completely chilled, at least 4 hours and preferably overnight.

Just before serving, whip the cream, powdered sugar, and vanilla to stiff peaks and spread over the top of the pudding. Serve chilled.

VARIATION:

Some people prefer meringue on banana pudding. However, baked meringue can quickly turn soft and sticky on hot, humid days, making it a risky venture in the South. If you want to give it a go nonetheless, here's one way to do it. Know that the meringue must go on while the pudding is still warm, so have the ingredients prepped and don't tarry.

Assemble the pudding in a heatproof dish. Position an oven rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat to 400°F. With a mixer on low speed, beat **$\frac{1}{2}$ cup room temperature egg whites** (from about 4 large eggs), **$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cream of tartar**, and **$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt** in a squeaky clean glass or metal bowl until frothy. Increase the speed to medium and add **$\frac{1}{3}$ cup granulated sugar**, 1 tablespoon at a time. Increase the speed to high and continue beating until stiff peaks form. Spoon the meringue on top of the hot custard and spread it all the way to the rim of the dish. Make pretty whorls and peaks with the back of a spoon. Bake until the meringue is golden brown, about 15 minutes. Cool to room temperature, about 1 hour, and then refrigerate until chilled.