



For chef Dye Scott-Rhodan, the 2006 opening of Dye's Gullah Fixin's, her Hilton Head eatery, was the fulfillment of not one but two dreams. The first was to open a restaurant. "When I was small, my daddy and I would sit under the old oak tree in our yard and I'd tell him how much I wanted to open a restaurant," she recalls. "Just before he died, he made me promise that I'd stop talking about it and do it."

The second was to take an active role in keeping Gullah culture alive. An outland Gullah from Ridgeland, Dye feels fortunate to have been raised in a household where Gullah legends, traditions and customs were shared from one generation to the next. She's passionate about maintaining that connection to the past. "The younger generation needs to understand why their grandmother says things differently than they do," she explains. "It's part of our history. It can't fall through the cracks and be forgotten."

Her first step toward reaching her goals was to make a promise to herself. "I said a prayer and set the end of 2006 as my deadline to open the doors. Right before Thanksgiving that year I stepped out on faith and quit my job with the school system. There was no looking back then."

## Dye Scott-Rhodan *Keeping Gullah Culture on the Front Burner*

Article by Katie McElveen  
Photos by Stephen Berend

Within weeks she had signed a lease on a space in Pineland Shopping Center. Soon, her 10 brothers and sisters, friends and other relatives were showing up at the door armed with dishes, chairs, tables and plenty of elbow grease. “We didn’t start out with much to work with, but everyone pitched in and we ended up with all we needed,” she says, smiling. “I feel so blessed.”

Growing up in a joyful household filled with relatives, Dye learned to cook by watching her aunts, mother and grandmother. “Any one of them could whip up a full meal—and I’m talking fried chicken, biscuits, the works—in a half hour. We call them dump cooks because they never measured a thing or worked from a written recipe. They just dumped the ingredients into a bowl and went from there.”

Even as a young girl, cooking came naturally, and Dye was frying chicken and baking up blueberry muffins before she was in her teens. Like all Gullah cooks, she was taught to make everything from scratch, down to the chicken stock for soup. She never measured a thing. “They didn’t have canned soup or biscuit mix in the old days, and we never learned to cook with any of those things. It takes longer, but food tastes better when it’s homemade.”

Dye worked at the Bear Creek Club in Hilton Head Plantation and served as head chef at the Spring Island Clubhouse and food and beverage manager at Colleton River Plantation. She was with the food and beverage department of the Beaufort County School District for 15 years.

To further spread the tradition of Gullah cooking, Dye is working on a cookbook in which she’ll share some of the recipes she grew up with and continues to use in the restaurant. Since none of the recipes ever had been written down, creating the cookbook was a true labor of love for Dye. “My sister had to stand next to me while I cooked,” she explains. “When I put something in the bowl, she’d measure it and write it down. It took forever. But now we have a record.”

Dye also is researching a book that will provide information about each of the western African tribes that came to South Carolina and created both Gullah cooking and the Geechee dialect they spoke. She hopes the book will help African Americans learn more about their ancestors. “These days, we’re all part of a melting pot, but back then, each tribe had very specific characteristics. It’s amazing how different they all were.”

Three years after achieving her dream, Dye’s Gullah Fixin’s is known nationally for turning out some of the best country cooking around. Locals are regulars, and visitors drive for miles to load their plates with shrimp and grits, onion pie, pork chops, collards and corn bread, to name just a few of her



specialties. Patrons love her “dumps,” a dessert made from fresh fruit, sugar, butter and flour and cooked in a cast-iron pot. Her pound cakes are popular, too; coconut pecan and sweet potato are two favorites.

Dye thinks one reason people love her food is its simplicity and pure flavors. “Most of the recipes I use are three and four generations old, when the only seasonings available were sea salt, pepper and maybe a little brown sugar. That was all they had during the slavery days. Of course, they used onions, green onions and peppers, too, but they didn’t know what they were called because they just pulled them out of the ground and put them in the pot. That’s how I do it to this day. I cook the old-fashioned way because I want people to know what real Gullah cooking tastes like.”

Her restaurant’s success has spawned another goal—to host her own Gullah cooking show on the Food Network. Her magazine, *Gullah is Ya ‘Um* (“Gullah Is Here”), is another way she’s keeping her culture alive. It includes information about Gullah history, remedies, events and businesses. (E-mail [dyesgullahfixins@hargray.com](mailto:dyesgullahfixins@hargray.com) for a copy.)

“I asked God to show me a way that our culture can be preserved and shared with others,” the chef says. “He gave me these skills for a reason.”

**(Editor’s note:** The following recipes of Chef Scott-Rhodan are presented Gullah-style.)

## COUNTRY CORN PONE

- 3 cups fresh cut corn
- 2 tablespoons suga
- 2 cup milk
- 1/4 cup melt butter
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- Dash pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup cornmeal (yellow)
- 1 cup cheddar chez (option)

Dump all in a bowl and mix, and dump in a baking dish big enough ta hold. Bake until done about 30 minutes.



*A total comfort plate—steamed barbecued ribs, country-fried chicken, corn on the cob, collard greens with smoked turkey, homemade macaroni and cheese, and fresh speckled butter beans. Right: Old-fashioned butter sugar cane pound cake. Facing page: Dye’s Gullah novelties.*



## FRESH SPECKER BUTTER BEANS

- 4 ham hock (smoke)
- 2 quarts fresh specker butter beans
- 1/2 onion (chop up)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 tablespoons suga
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Get up ta boiling for 1 hour or til tender. Gotta add water, wen good clouded water add specker butter beans, put cover over um, cover wit water, bring ta boil for 30 minutes or put ya foot 200 times. Put in suga, pepper, and boil for 10 minutes. Enjoy!

## CATFISH OKRA SWEET TATER STEW

- 2 pounds cut-up catfish seasoned (salt & pepper)
- 1/2 onion sliced small
- 1/2 bell pepper sliced small
- 12 whole fresh okra tips off
- 1 medium sweet tater peeled & sliced in strips
- 1 medium fresh tomato diced
- 1/2 teaspoon flaked pepper
- 1 tablespoon brown suga
- 1 stick butter melted
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 1 cup water

Mix all together in bowl. Place in baking dish, cover and cook for 40 minutes at 350 degrees. Check to make sure taters are tender. Serve on top of grits or rice. Or enjoy by itself!

## OLD FASHION JOHNNY CAKE

- 3 cups all purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 big block butter
- 1 1/2 tablespoons suga
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 teaspoon baking powder

Dump all in a bowl except milk. Chop all the stuff together. Add milk. Keep mashing together until you can roll. Cut in little balls and roll. Drop in 4 or 6 balls at a time in 3 cups hot grease. Let balls float. Take out.

## OLD COUNTRY POUND CAKE (SUGA CANE)

- 1 cup milk
- 3 cup all purpose flour, sifted
- 3 cup suga
- 1 1/2 cup room temperature butter
- 1 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 6 eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 cup suga cane syrup

Cream suga an butter for 1 minute. Put eggs one at a time, beat after each one. Put flour a little at a time in between. Put in milk and the rest. Beat 3 minutes in a regular sized bundt pan. Bake for 45 minutes. ❖

*Stephen Berend is a photographer in Bluffton.*