



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SAVANNAHBLUE

A beefsteak tomato topped with balsamic and fried leeks.

RECIPE

Elegant Southern Hospitality in Detroit

The lyrical flavors of SavannahBlue—plus a savory end-of-summer tomato recipe

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With a menu of catfish fritters and braised oxtail, ribs, collard greens, and black-eyed peas, [SavannahBlue](#) relies heavily on Southern favorites. But the restaurant sits in the heart of downtown Detroit. “I didn’t set out to create a Southern restaurant,” says restaurateur JD Simpson. “Southern food was simply what I knew.”

Southern flavors are more ubiquitous in Detroit than many would guess, thanks to an influx of Southerners who arrived here during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Simpson traces his roots to Yazoo City, Mississippi. His business partners include Roger Yopp, who is originally from Georgia, and Ron Scott, from South Carolina. To provide the restaurant with its own identity, the kitchen gave its menu a “Detroit twist.” The shrimp and grits include shiitake mushrooms. The mac and cheese incorporates parmesan, and the jambalaya sits on farro instead of rice.

SavannahBlue, which opened in 2016, takes its name from Simpson’s favorite Southern city. But like the menu, the restaurant’s décor is decidedly Detroit. Framed artwork of and by locals depicts scenes and faces from across the city. The dining room features stylish navy-blue walls, exposed buff-colored brick, tables set with crystal and silver, and a soundtrack of African American music that ranges from Etta James to The Roots.

It was a tradition of graceful hospitality—which Simpson sees as directly linked to the South—that propelled him, a business and entertainment lawyer by day, into the restaurant business. “I remember very clearly as a kid watching my parents and grandparents entertain,” he says. After a day spent cooking a scratch-made feast, his elders cleaned the house top to bottom, then greeted their guests clad in sophisticated dinner attire. “I would sit on the stairway, watching between the stair rails as my parents’ friends arrived, all of them dressed for these elegant parties,” Simpson reminisces. “That stayed with me.”

Simpson reproduced those stylish dinner parties when he became a teenager, inviting classmates that included the children of Motown greats like Gladys Knight, the Four Tops, and the Miracles, and insisting his friends dress for dinner. He has continued the practice at SavannahBlue, where a posted dress code requires diners to ditch their casual gym wear and to avoid overly revealing clothing. “We want dining at SavannahBlue to be an event for our guests, a pleasant and memorable experience,” Simpson explains.

Simpson and partners Yopp and Scott were recognized for their restaurant management style earlier this year when the James Beard Foundation listed the trio as semifinalists for Outstanding Restaurateurs. (The category honors restaurants which have been open for at least five years and who leverage their businesses to build community, among other things.) “The nomination boosted attention to SavannahBlue, and we greatly appreciate that. We didn’t think it was in the cards for restaurateurs who looked like us,” says Simpson, referring to the fact that he and his partners are Black. “But being nominated doesn’t change anything for us. We have always strived to provide opportunities for a diverse staff and to deliver hospitality to diverse guests, and we’ll continue to do that.”

A seasonal favorite are the beefsteak tomatoes on the late summer/early autumn menu. “This menu really highlights the flavors of vine-ripened tomatoes that we have in abundance this time of year,” Simpson says. “When the tomatoes are this good, all they need is a little embellishment to shine.”

INGREDIENTS

BEEFSTEAK TOMATOES WITH BALSAMIC AND HONEY (SERVES 2-4 AS AN APPETIZER)

2-4 vine-ripened beefsteak tomatoes

2 cups garlic-infused olive oil

Fresh rosemary and thyme

1 cup balsamic vinegar

Honey, to taste

Salt and pepper, to taste

1 leek, thinly shredded

Olive oil

Blue cheese crumbles

PREPARATION

Core tomatoes and slice in half. Marinade them in a mixture of the garlic oil, rosemary, and thyme for up to 24 hours.

In a small saucepan, reduce the balsamic vinegar down to ½ cup. Add honey, salt, and pepper to taste and allow to cool.

Crisp the leek shavings in a sauté pan with oil. Top tomato halves with blue cheese and melt with a kitchen torch or under the broiler.

To serve, place each tomato half in a puddle of balsamic reduction and top with the fried leeks.