



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

## Flavors from the South

This elegant salad from Alexander Smalls is built around the childhood flavors of pears, field greens and black-eyed peas. It's tossed in a sweet, savory citrus vinaigrette.

Former opera singer Alexander Smalls explores his childhood foods in his cookbook

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

**P**ITTSBURGH — Alexander Smalls was a professional opera singer before he reinvented himself as a chef and restaurateur.

So it's no surprise he brings an artist's eye to the recipes he created for his 2020 cookbook, "Meals, Music, And Muses: Recipes From my African American Kitchen" (Flatiron, \$35).



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Alexander Smalls' deviled crab cake recipe comes with a spicy Creole mayonnaise.

He brings a pretty good ear to the Southern dishes featured in the book, by offering a "soundtrack" of the bold and flavorful Gullah Geechee foods he grew up eating and learned to cook in Spartanburg, South Carolina — some of which were featured at the Declaration & Resistance dinner he curated April 23 at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art to celebrate an exhibition of Baltimore artist Stephen Towns.

Each chapter pays homage to a genre of music tied to a category of food. Starters, for instance, are likened to the improvisation, blues and swing found in jazz while rice, pasta and grits — "lean on me" dishes that are often the backbone of a home cook's repertoire — represent the comfort of spirituals.

As he notes in the cookbook's forward, food and music are inextricably linked in the U.S., especially in African American culture. "Both Southern music and Southern food are rooted in a knotty lineage that connects West Africa and Western Europe," he writes.

Smalls spent years traveling the world as a young artist, and won both Grammy and Tony awards for the cast recording of "Porgy and Bess," by George Gershwin, with the Houston Grand Opera. Yet he was never able to break opera's glass ceiling as a Black man; his last audition with the

Metropolitan Opera in New York, he recalls, resulted in an offer to be part of the chorus instead of the prime role he'd made his debut to, to rave reviews.

"So I left devastated," he says, "but really determined to get on with my life," by opening the small, intimate restaurant he'd always dreamed of in the back of his mind.

Cafe Beulah, one of the forerunners of the soul food revolution in New York City, opened in 1994 to rave reviews. Four more restaurants followed, including The Cecil in 2013, which highlights the interplay between African and Asian cuisines, and the jazz bar and restaurant Minton's next door.

"I needed to own not just a seat at the table," Smalls says, "but the whole table."

His first cookbook, 2018's "Between Harlem and Heaven: Afro-Asian-American Cooking for Big Nights, Weeknights, and Every Day," won him a 2019 James Beard Foundation Book Award for best American cookbook. It explores the immense influence the African diaspora has had on global cuisine.

With "Meals, Music, and Muses," Smalls hopes to continue the conversation about the unsung contributions people of the African diaspora have made to American cuisine.

"It's essentially my sort of

ode to the African-American kitchen, and my pathway if you will," he says. "The lens to which I've been the creative person that I am."

### DEVILED CRAB CAKES WITH SPICY CREOLE MAYO

"Crab cakes are an essential part of Southern coastal cooking," Alexander Smalls writes in "Meals, Music, and Muses," which is why the chef and restaurateur has had them on his restaurant and catering menus for more than 30 years. This "Jazz" starter, which can be made larger for a plated entree or smaller as an appetizer, features a robust Creole mayonnaise brightened with cayenne to lift the flavor profile.

If you're trying to cut back on fried foods, you can bake the crab cakes in a 400-degree oven until browned, about 5 minutes.

- For crab cakes**
- 1 pound lump crabmeat, picked over for shells
  - 2 tablespoons finely chopped onion
  - 2 tablespoon finely chopped red pepper
  - 2 tablespoons finely chopped celery
  - 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
  - 2 large eggs, beaten
  - 1 cup small cubes white bread, toasted
  - 1/2 cup plain bread crumbs, plus more for dredging
  - 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh thyme
  - 1 1/2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

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## Spending time in parks good for the brain, study suggests

By **DOUGLAS PERRY**  
oregonlive.com

Living around greenery modestly fuels the brain in middle-aged women, helping to ward off depression and dementia, a study concludes.

The research builds on earlier work that showed spending as little as 20 minutes in nature can cut one's stress hormone levels. The benefits of this have been called the "nature pill."

"Some of the primary ways that nature may improve health is by helping people recover from psychological stress and by encouraging people to be outside socializing with friends, both of which boost mental health," the new study's lead author, Marcia Pescador Jimenez, told a Boston University publication.

Pescador Jimenez is an assistant professor of epidemiology at the university's School of Public Health.

In the study, published in

the medical journal JAMA Network Open, researchers measured "psychomotor speed, attention, learning and working memory" in more than 13,000 women, with an average age of 61, who had completed self-administered online cognitive testing. The researchers estimated the subjects' green-space exposure through a satellite imagery tool that detects and quantifies live green vegetation.

Adjusting for age, race and socioeconomic status, the study found "higher residential surrounding green space" is associated with higher scores of overall cognitive function, psychomotor speed and attention.

"Cognitive function at middle age is considered a strong predictor of whether a person may develop dementia later in life," Boston University's The Brink publication points out.

The reason for this improved brain power appears straightforward:

Being around green spaces promotes physical activity and calming thoughts — and reduces exposure to air pollution.

Spending time in nature has been shown to reduce inflammation in the body, aid the ability to sleep well and improve immune function.

"Based on these results, clinicians and public-health authorities should consider green space exposure as a potential factor to reduce depression, and thus, boost cognition," Pescador Jimenez said. "Policymakers and urban planners should focus on adding more green space in everyday life to improve cognitive function."

Pescador Jimenez said her next step in this research would be to "apply deep-learning algorithms to Google Street View images to better understand which specific elements of greenery, such as trees or grass, could be the driving factors for health."



Living near greenery boosts cognitive function, a recent study shows.

Shane Dixon Kavanaugh/TNS