

GARDEN & GUN



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FOOD & DRINK

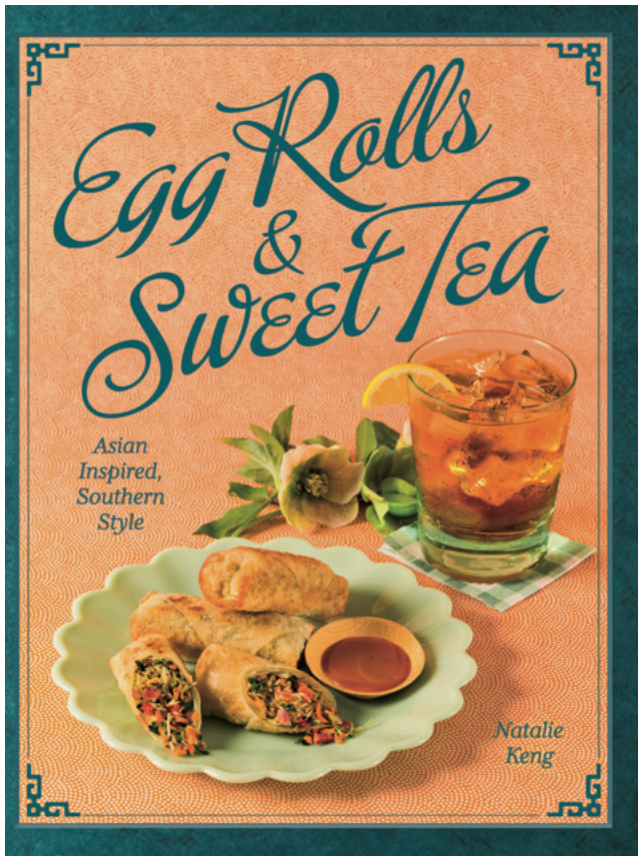
Egg Rolls & Sweet Tea: A New Fusion Cookbook Gives the Best of Both Worlds

“Sauce Maven” Natalie Keng talks Georgia roots, Atlanta favorites, and food’s connective power

By **CORA SCHIPA**

June 7, 2023

“Can food be the catalyst for accepting diversity? Can it help break down barriers and stereotypes? I’ve spent my adult life trying to prove that the answer is yes,” writes food educator and author Natalie Keng in her new cookbook, *Egg Rolls & Sweet Tea: Asian Inspired, Southern Style*, which illuminates



delicious recipes from her Deep South upbringing and Chinese ancestry with full-hearted stories and pictures straight from the family photo album. Sections like “Wild About Rice,” “Gone Fishin’,” and “Tea Time, Sips, and Toddies” showcase an impressive array of what she calls “Buddha-Bubba” flavors—dishes that celebrate both tradition and innovation. (These include the Oven-Baked Country Bacon Collard Egg Rolls, Georgia Bourbon and Coca-Cola Meatloaf, and Okra and Tomato Stir Fry she shared with *G&G*.)

We talked with Keng about her outdoorsy Georgia childhood, her corporate-turned-entrepreneurial career, and how she found her calling.

How did you become a food educator?

My culinary journey wasn’t straightforward. After I received my master’s degree in public policy, I ended up working in recruitment and diversity at Fortune 500 companies. We’d do hundreds of meetings in the office, but it was over food where we would be the most productive. I often joke that if Congress had potlucks, there’d be less gridlock. At company dinner parties I’d throw, everyone would gather in the kitchen and ask me questions. I had the nickname “sauce maven” because people loved my commitment to good sauces with real ingredients. My background moves me to challenge stereotypes, break down barriers, and create bridges, and food has the power to do those things.

So I started teaching classes and leading food and supermarket tours through my company, Chinese Southern Belle. I created the first Buford Highway food tour ten years ago when the area was overlooked and nondescript but home to a lot of immigrant businesses and families, so it was very rich in culture and tradition. Now it's a foodie destination. I realized I really love facilitating connection and education about these communities, supporting local businesses, and making taste buds happy.

The cookbook takes us throughout the Southeastern United States and 8,000 miles away to Taiwan and China. How are you influenced by setting?

I love to enjoy the food and culture and community wherever I travel, so I think the cookbook draws from those influences. Sometimes there's this perception of the South as one-dimensional, but typical Southern dishes are really a blend of diverse influences, like Native American, African American, even Asian American, Spanish, French. I think of setting as something more dynamic than just a place.

My grandparents are actually first-generation Americans; they came over as graduate students on scholarships in the sixties, a time when they still found segregation posters in the closet of their first house. But between the two cultures there's exciting intersections and parallels and commonalities. When I do my Asian and international supermarket tour, I highlight local and imported ingredients, and people don't realize that peaches can be traced to South Asia, and black-eyed peas actually have a history in Malaysia, and sesame can be traced back to Africa.

When we've had exposure to a culture's cuisine, we're more open to the culture's people. The magic and power of food is that it really helps connect us in ways that are sometimes surprising.

In many ways, the book is a love letter to Georgia. Tell us about some of your favorite spots in your hometown.

I'll give a shout-out to Buford Highway because it's full of culinary gems. The sprawling Plaza Fiesta has everything you could want from Latin American cuisine, from fresh churros to Mexican barbecue. We hosted our Lunar New Year community banquet at Canton House, where you can get dim sum any time of day. Off of Memorial Drive is Wyatt's Barbecue, a little spot that's been there for over thirty years. My mom loves the pig sandwiches, but they also have great rib tips, and I've actually ordered their smoked turkey for Thanksgiving. Another great barbecue place is Daddy D'z. Atlanta has a great energy and diversity for foodies and restaurant entrepreneurs. Southern hospitality is part of the reason I came back from up north and stayed here, even though I've traveled around the world.

***Egg Rolls & Sweet Tea* often harkens back to both your and your parents' upbringing. What's one memorable childhood memory around food?**

Well, ironically, I was allergic to a lot of things when I was little, so I couldn't eat hardly anything. When I grew up and could try foods again, I got the nickname of "raccoon foodie," trying to eat everything to make up for lost time. But lots of my childhood memories are from being outdoors in Smyrna, Georgia, like making dandelion mud pies, sucking the nectar out of honeysuckle flowers, or playing "hide and seek" in the muscadine vines that my dad planted for us. I'd get distracted and start eating the juicy little gems.

My parents really liked to fish, so I grew up swimming and catching bream at Lake Allatoona. I remember the smell of the dock, of fish cooking on the Coleman stove. If I grew up in Los Angeles or New York City, I probably wouldn't have those special experiences. My parents really liked Southern living, from the food to the sports to being outdoors.

What's your favorite part of the work you do?

I have the best job in the world. In my workshops, tours, and presentations, I get to see people enjoy themselves and connect with other people. I love seeing people's creativity shine through food, and I hope my cookbook encourages that. It's not meant to be like, "You have to do it this way." I could've included some blank pages for folks to have fun with it.

You're sharing three recipes with us today. Tell us a bit about them.

Oven-Baked Country Bacon & Collard Egg Rolls: I mean, who doesn't like a fried egg roll? Historically collards were considered low-class, and now, along with bacon, they are part of the South's premier comfort foods. Frying them in an egg roll makes them even better.

Georgia Bourbon & Coca-Cola Meatloaf: Georgia is the home of Coca-Cola, and meatloaf is a classic Southern comfort food. Ketchup has some really interesting Asian origins. It started out more like a soy sauce and developed a tomato base as its popularity expanded. Using two different meats makes this meatloaf really nice and tender, and I try to source local beef. I also try to get bourbon from a local distillery.

Okra and Tomato Stir Fry: Okra is quintessentially Southern in a lot of ways, but it's featured in many other countries and cultures. Here, we love fried okra, but it's also great in stir fries and curry. I like this colorful, healthy dish because okra is not as slimy when you keep it whole, and the tomatoes impart a really nice flavor without additional sodium. My mom liked this simple stir fry when she needed something quick after long workdays as a schoolteacher.