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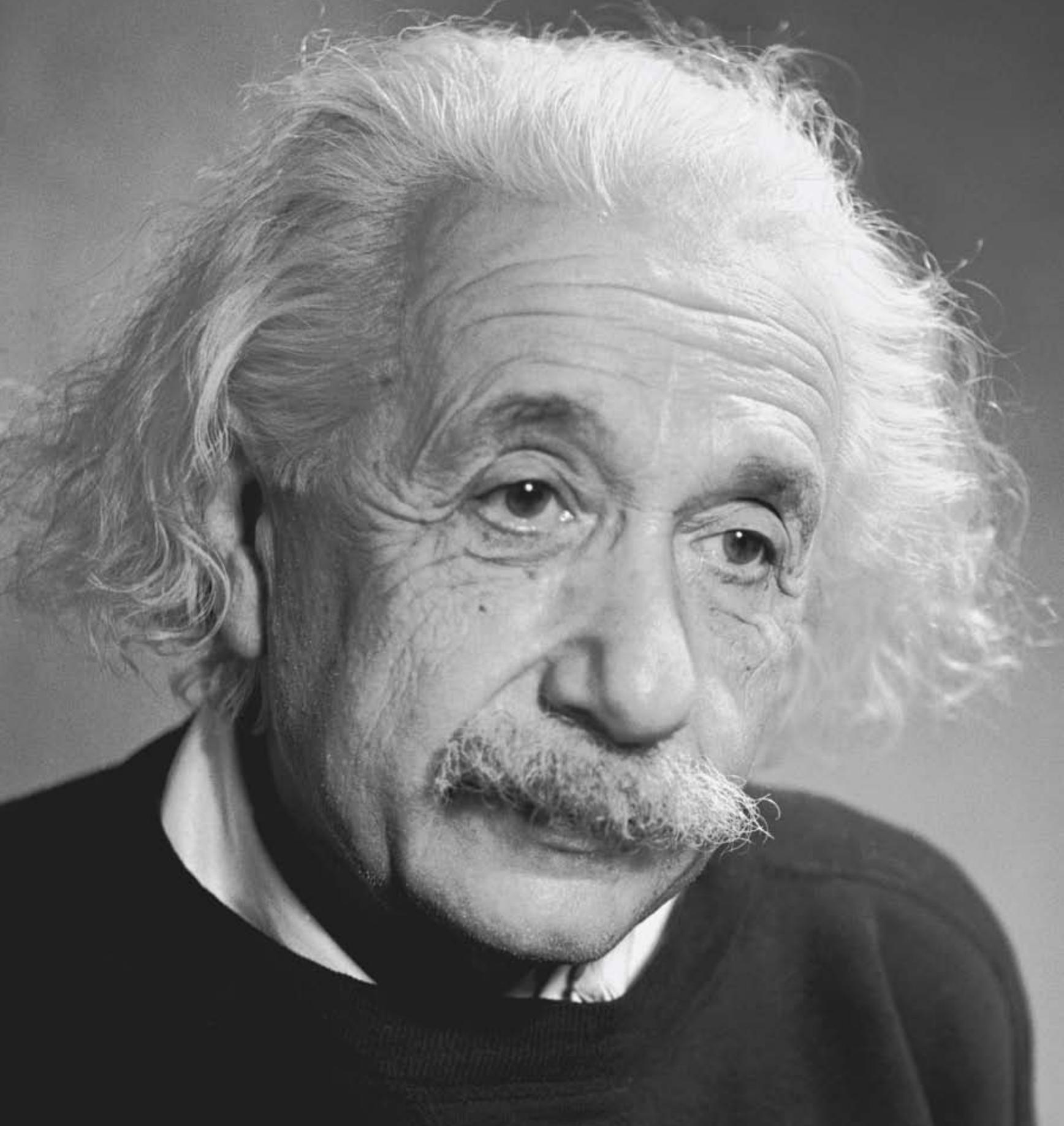




Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island

SOUTHERN CHARMS

Spring Island, South Carolina to Savannah

by **Cindy Clarke**

American history is written in the wind in the Old South. It whispers tales of plantation soirees and seductions, of live oaks draped in Spanish moss standing sentinel for a hundred years, and sportsmen who share their playgrounds with wildlife equally at home in wooded forests, salt marshes and wild flower fields.

That the storied breezes find their way north carrying neighborly invitations to head south is no surprise. Boundaries of past conflicts are indistinguishable now, especially when it comes to flights of fancy in natural wonderlands like Spring Island, South Carolina.

No matter where you come from, the southern lifestyle inspires images of gentility. Think languid afternoons cooled by soft breezes and romantic notions of gentlemen tipping their hats to ladies dressed in their feminine best, gracefully fanning away the heat under parasols, silk and decorous, mint juleps in hand, on wide shady porches that look out over settings straight from movies like *Gone with the Wind*.

When I ventured south earlier this spring, preconceived visions in hand, I did find the graceful Antebellum mansions I expected, enormous white pillars and all. Magnolias, fragrant and elegant, had blossomed as if on cue and horse-drawn carriages, still plodding along the city streets of Savannah and Charleston, carried my thoughts right back to scenes I had imagined. But I found something unexpected while I was there, an island, only five miles long and two miles wide, protected and perfectly hidden from the rush of life around it, dressed in sensibilities of an era long gone that evoked undeniable southern charm. It totally charmed me.

Gated and private with a single paved road, Spring Island sits at the end of a long causeway, where houses, thoughtfully tucked into the wooded landscapes, seem purposely built for entertaining. That is another of my foregone impressions of the south, a place where parties and houseguests don't need a special occasion and invitations come in hand-addressed notes that are still personally delivered and graciously accepted. No matter that I arrived at this wondrous place in the middle of the night, my flight from New York having been delayed for hours by an inconvenient snowstorm, I was greeted with polite and genuine warmth by Jim, my driver, who was summoned to the airport past midnight to fetch me for the hour drive to a resident's guest house. Tired as I was, I did not tire of his stories about the history of the places I was



Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island

about to discover firsthand. He was a wealth of knowledge about the landowners who settled here, British royalty Lord Colleton, the infamous Indian trader John Cochran, Sea Island cotton magnate George Edwards, William Copp livestock farmer and Elisha Walker, passionate quail hunter. Ruins of the magnificent tabby mansion and out buildings stand today as reminders of days past when these lands flourished as a sea cotton plantation.

We drove through neighboring Callawassee Island, speed limit 27 mph, en route to the gatehouse for Spring Island. The darkness draped our car with a cloak of midnight black. The island eschews lights, bothers the wildlife I was told. I saw eyes glowing from the side of the road, some high up, the deer here aren't afraid of cars said Jim so you have to be extra careful driving, and some closer to the ground, raccoons Jim explained. I felt my heart quicken with delight as I learned that the animals, not the cars, ruled the road.

My sister met me with a glass of wine. Having spent three weeks here already, she was comfortably in sync with the unabashed hospitality that spread through this community like one big all-embracing smile and didn't mind that it was close to 3 am. She bubbled with plans for the weekend, having filled my dance card with a plethora of resident-only delights. First up was a croquet tournament, seriously a step back in time, and a tour of the fitness center, an immaculate state-of-the-art gym, eye-candy for fitness buffs that overlooked a swimming pool and the river beyond. Next a visit to the educational nature center, a visual catalog of the creatures of this great maritime forest, would reveal the four-footed, furred, feathered, finned and reptiled locals who thrive in the woods, salt marshes and ponds. I was fascinated by the fox squirrels, super-sized tree climbers who donned reddish brown, black and striated coats that were arguably more stylish than their grey brethren up north. I paid scant notice to the snakes, several poisonous, but I did pause at the armadillo, a curious sight considered a garden pest here. Birds of all size and manner, owls, hawks, migrating shorebirds and colorful songbirds, perfectly posed and stuffed in flight, gave insights to the vast array of birdlife that flourished naturally in this coastal reserve. An abundance



Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island



Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island

of nesting boxes, planted by residents, ensured the annual return of bluebirds, long considered harbingers of happiness.

Set amidst the wooded plots of the 200+ nature-loving homeowners are ponds, saltwater nurseries for shrimp, crab, oyster and sea trout, and freshwater playgrounds for largemouth bass, bream – and alligators. A stop at the shrimp pond, tended to by avid fishermen who relish fresh seafood, hinted at the sustainable ecological practices that residents here hold dear, and a later walk on footpaths that threaded between picturesque ponds and neighboring homes took me a little too close to the alligators that lay submerged in the reeds. I made a point of asking about the danger that lurked in the pond waters or on shore where the gators like to sun themselves, only to be assured that part of the beauty of this place was the freedom to co-exist peacefully with nature.

A golf cart ride, gamely offered by a longtime resident who shared our New England ties, confirmed the residents' commitment to living >



Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island



Photo: Courtesy of Spring Island

as one with nature. The stunningly designed 18-hole Arnold Palmer golf course shared the sand pits and water hazards with migrating herons, egrets, eagles, pelicans – and more alligators.

Then there were the horses, beautiful high stepping steeds who promised a great ride along trails that meandered through thousands of acres of wonderland. Who wouldn't love it here? Whether you were a golfer, equestrian or weekend quail hunter, Spring Island is a gift, heaven sent. Even my sister, who is not a golfer, an equestrian or a hunter, found paradise here. Why? "It's the people and their appreciation of the beauty of nature," she said. "Everyone is truly happy just to be here."

Then it hit me. Houses built to entertain. Welcomes warm and all embracing. Nature, naturally inviting. This is where the term southern hospitality lives on.

I had a chance to experience it firsthand at an impromptu luncheon my sister orchestrated during my 36-hour weekend. Heartfelt hellos and handshakes with the residents turned into extended invitations to meet their family in places we frequented... Massachusetts, Long Island, Connecticut... and those I had not yet visited... Montana, and Savannah.

Upon hearing that we were stopping in Savannah en route to our flight back home, one of the ladies we met at lunch insisted we call her sister, Susan, when we arrived in Savannah. Even though we were short on time, we did call her and we were promptly invited to lunch.

Unbeknownst to us, her sister Susan was a culinary celebrity, a vivacious one-of-a kind treasure who has Savannah society eating out of her hand... literally. As Savannah's most coveted caterer, Susan Mason is a chef for the stars and the Old Guard. She has the unique ability to please palates at the city's most important soirees with her fabulous cooking while becoming the life of the party itself. Her goal: to pull off a party that is both delicious and gorgeous. Her recipes, whether for the table or for the soul, are gems of the southern lifestyle. (See her famous Tomato Pie recipe here; and savor it!)

I have always maintained that the magic of travel is found in the people you meet on your journey. Susan Mason, noted author of the perfectly presented *Silver Service* cookbook, and a popular TV personality – you may have seen her on Paula Deen's southern cooking show – turned our impromptu lunch into a festive occasion. She regaled us with stories about her adventures and her star clients, Tom Hanks, Ben Affleck, Julia Roberts and Oscar de la Renta among them.

After lunch, Susan breezed us past storied city mansions steeped in history, revealing more intimate tales about the parties, people and passion found behind the most elegant doors, to her own Victorian townhome, nondescript on the outside, a treasure trove on the inside. Old spaces house new flavors in Savannah, and Susan's house was living proof of that.

Original oils lined the soaring walls of her two-story nest, each hand painted for Susan by students of the Savannah School of Design and

each visually capturing the fabulously fun and tastefully talented charms of its owner. Her bookcases overflowed with fascination, her kitchen exuded creativity. True to her southern heritage she surrounded herself with beautiful things that she treasured. But it was her dining room tables, round, cheerful and impeccably dressed with party-ready place settings that impressed me most.

The best parties, she explained, whether grand or intimate, are all about the connections you make with the guests. A round table inspires wonderful conversation all around, without leaving anyone out.

I got the feeling that Susan was invited to cater parties not just for her cooking, but for her ability to charm everyone she meets with her spirited personality and unabashed southern hospitality. And I found myself charmed yet again. □



SUSAN'S TOMATO PIE

(Serves 6-8)

I served this at an out of town luncheon for a wedding when the groom was from New York City. 20 guests asked for the recipe and I envision all those tomato pies being served all over Manhattan.

- 1 9-inch shell, precooked and cooled
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 4 tomatoes, peeled and sliced
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 4 ounces white cheddar cheese, grated
- 4 ounces cheddar cheese, grated
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1/3 cup parmesan cheese

Preheat oven at 350 degrees. When pie shell has cooled, spread the piecrust with Dijon mustard. Layer sliced tomatoes, salt and pepper and cheeses. End with cheese. For top layer, mix mayonnaise and parmesan cheese together, spread on top of pie and bake until bubbly, about 20 minutes.

Serve at room temperature.

Learn more about Susan Mason at www.susannmasoncatering.com and take a virtual trip to Spring Island at www.springisland.com