

# Aix-en-Atlanta

With one foot in Provence and the other in the American South, chef Nick Leahy grills up a storm on his Big Green Egg

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGIE MOSIER



# FUSION CUISINE

gets a bad rap. After all, when done well, fusion is nothing more than the artful melding of complementary flavors and ingredients. Atlanta's Nick Leahy, the executive chef and partner at the new Westside restaurant AIX (and its more casual sister wine bar Tin Tin) fuses, in the most elegant way, the cuisines of southern France—specifically Provence—and the American South.

Leahy is French on his mother's side, and he spent many formative years in and around Aix-en-Provence. "That's really where a lot of my first food memories are from," he says. It was natural, then, for him to mine these memories for his latest restaurant project, especially considering the cuisine's novelty in Atlanta. "There were lots of great French restaurants, but nobody cooking specifically Provencal French food"—which is, in many ways, more fitting in a city filled with modern, farm-to-table Southern restaurants.

Both Provencal and Southern cuisines share a casual, rustic soul, with a multitude of influences from neighboring countries and conquered peoples. Both regions are agricultural at heart, and therefore strongly tied to seasonality. And both love to cook meat over a live fire. Here in the South, that open fire is more often a grill than a spit over a fire pit, but that kiss of smoke is all the same. It lends itself well to a Provence-inspired meal of summer squash flatbread, gratin-style ratatouille, rosé- and lavender-glazed hanger steak, anchoïade-rubbed swordfish, and tomatoes provencal—all cooked on a Big Green Egg.

The Egg's thick, ceramic exterior retains heat

so well that the grill can be used for everything from, well, grilling, to smoking, baking, and roasting. There may not be many in the South of France, but Southerners stateside have been singing the Egg's praises since the '70s. "You can really just do everything on there and use it for the entire meal," he says.

As with the dishes at his restaurants, Leahy finds inspiration in both classic Provencal cooking and its ingredients for these recipes—ideal for a long, lazy lunch on the patio. Take his hanger steak, for example. It is not Provencal,

per se, but, as Leahy says, "if you're driving through Provence you'll see a field of grapes right next to a field of lavender, repeated over and over again." These flavors pair well not only together, but also with the charred beef. The lavender tastes almost rosemary-like and its flavor is further amplified by a few cuttings thrown atop the coals.

His tomatoes provencal, on the other hand, is a classic. The versatile side dish is pretty much always on the table when tomatoes are in season in southern France. Stuffed

with breadcrumbs, herbs, and a pop of garlic, his Egg-roasted version is pure Provence. When cooked on the grill, the tomatoes pick up a hint of smoke, adding depth to an otherwise simple dish. "It's a really great way to highlight the beautiful freshness of the tomato," Leahy says. The same goes for his ratatouille, which becomes a more nuanced version of itself after seeing some time on the grill. But beyond the added complexity, another bonus to cooking on an Egg is the easy clean-up, Leahy says. "It definitely keeps my wife happy."





## FLATBREAD WITH SQUASH, RADISH, AND TOMATO CHÈVRE

Makes 8 flatbreads

### For the flatbread dough:

2½ teaspoons yeast  
 4¾ cups all purpose flour  
 2¼ cups whole wheat flour  
 2 tablespoons salt  
 ½ cup crème fraîche  
 Oil for brushing

### For the whipped tomato chèvre:

1 pound fresh chèvre  
 6 cherry tomatoes, charred  
 ½ cup heavy cream  
 Salt to taste

### For assembly:

4 summer squash  
 Salt to taste  
 8 radishes, thinly sliced

- 1 Make the flatbread dough:** In a large bowl, dissolve yeast in 1½ cups lukewarm water. Add both flours and mix with fingertips until a loose dough forms. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest for 20 minutes.
- 2 Sprinkle salt over dough, add crème fraîche, and knead until well mixed and dough pulls away from sides of bowl. (It will still be soft and wet.)** Cover again and let rise for 30 minutes. Knead dough again to deflate. Cover and chill for 30 more minutes.
- 3 Make the whipped tomato chèvre:** Using a

food processor or mortar and pestle, grind tomatoes down to a pulp, then strain through a fine mesh sieve. Using an electric mixer or stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip chèvre and cream. Slowly stream in tomato puree and mix until combined. Season to taste, then chill until ready to serve.

- 4 Assemble the flatbreads:** Peel squash then, using a vegetable peeler, shave into thin slices. Sprinkle with salt and set aside for 30 minutes. Divide dough into eight portions. On a floured work surface, use your fingers to press dough out into ¼-inch thick ovals. Brush with oil and grill until marked, about 3 minutes per side. Spread with tomato chèvre and garnish with squash and radish.

## ROSÉ-AND-LAVENDER-GLAZED HANGER STEAK

Serves 2 to 4

### For the steak:

1 (8-ounce) hanger steak  
Herbes de provence  
White pepper

### For the gastrique:

1 bottle rosé (minus a glass for  
drinking while cooking)  
2 cups champagne vinegar  
1 teaspoon fresh lavender buds, plus a few  
sprigs  
½ cup turbinado sugar

**1 Prepare the steak:** Remove silver skin  
from hanger steak. Rub meat all over with

herbes de provence and white pepper. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour but preferably 4 hours.

**2 Make the gastrique:** In a pot, combine all ingredients and simmer until reduced by half. Set aside.

**3 Grill the steak:** Remove steak from refrigerator 20 minutes prior to grilling to allow it to come to room temperature. Preheat grill to between 450 and 500 degrees. Season steak all over with salt just before grilling. Just before adding the steak, toss a few sprigs of lavender directly onto the coals. Transfer steak to grill and cook to desired doneness, about 4 minutes per side for medium-rare. After flipping, brush steak with gastrique to coat, reserving remainder. Remove steak from heat and allow to rest, then slice against the grain.

Pour reserved gastrique over steak and serve.



## ANCHOÏADE-RUBBED GRILLED SWORDFISH

Serves 4

30 anchovy fillets, roughly chopped  
6 garlic cloves, minced  
6 tablespoons olive oil  
¼ teaspoon espelette pepper  
¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes  
½ teaspoon herbes de provence  
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice  
4 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley  
4 (6-8 ounce) swordfish steaks

**1** Preheat grill to 450 degrees. In a sauce pot, combine anchovies, garlic, olive oil, and spices. Bring to a simmer, then remove from heat. Transfer to a blender with lemon juice and parsley and puree.

**2** Brush mixture evenly over swordfish. Grill steaks for about 3 minutes on each side.

## GRATIN-STYLE RATATOUILLE

Serves 4

### For the béchamel:

2 garlic cloves  
2 cups milk  
2 tablespoons butter  
2 tablespoons flour  
Pinch nutmeg

### For the ratatouille:

2 eggplants\*  
1 yellow squash (Leahy prefers  
Eight Ball squash)  
1 zucchini  
2 cups tomato puree (fresh,  
roasted tomatoes, pureed and strained,  
or canned)  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
Leaves of 3 thyme sprigs  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
Salt and black pepper to taste  
½ teaspoon espelette pepper

\*Use thin eggplants for evenly sized slices.

**1** **Make the béchamel:** Grate garlic into milk and set aside. In a medium saucepan over medium heat, melt butter. Add flour and stir to form a roux. Cook until it smells like baking bread, about 2 minutes. Slowly add milk mixture, stirring constantly. Bring to a high simmer, then remove from heat and set aside.



**2** **Assemble the ratatouille:** Preheat oven or grill to 375 degrees. Evenly slice eggplant, squash, and zucchini (use a mandolin for easy, even slicing). Coat the bottom of a large casserole dish or skillet with béchamel, then tomato puree. Evenly layer alternating vegetable slices on top of sauce, first forming a ring around

the outside, then another inside. Mix oil with thyme, garlic, salt, black pepper, and espelette pepper. Drizzle oil mixture over slices. Cover casserole dish with parchment and bake for 45 to 55 minutes.