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Southern Comfort

Fried green tomatoes have become symbolic of southern cooking, and they serve as a source of ongoing inspiration for **Kevin Wilken**, the 28-year-old executive chef of **Julep's** (804.377.3968; [juleps.net](#)), in Richmond's historic Shockoe Bottom neighborhood. Wilken's take on fried green tomatoes varies a bit from the classic version; instead of using buttermilk batter, he seasons the tomatoes with rice wine vinegar and coats them with *panko*, Japanese bread crumbs.

"I like how panko gets really crispy when you fry it," Wilken says. "I like utilizing things that people don't know are there, but they make a big difference in the outcome of the dish."

That fresh twist on an old classic is a quintessential example of Wilken's style. "To me, 'New Southern' means using the foundations of Southern cooking and putting in some twists — more modern things, new ingredients," he says. "Fried green tomatoes is something we'll always carry. But we'll do something different."

Located in Richmond's oldest commercial building (built around 1817), Julep's is a far cry from Wilken's professional beginnings 12 years ago. It's safe to say that there were no white tablecloths, no polished wood or exposed brick, at the Smokey Pig, a local barbecue joint where Wilken worked for seven years. Like many great chefs, he began as a dishwasher.

After high school, Wilken continued working while taking classes at a local community college. But he found himself continually drawn to the restaurant world. In the middle of his second semester, Wilken says, "My dad asked me, 'You seem to be really interested in cooking. Why don't you dedicate yourself to that?'"

He found work at Lemaire (see "5 to Try"), Richmond's historic fine-dining establishment. "While working at Lemaire, I really understood, for the first time, what you could do with food," he says, "what you could make food look like, how you could break it down in a more complex way."

After more than a dozen years in the business, Wilken is happiest in the kitchen. "What I like about cooking is the end result," he says. "You can spend a couple hours thinking about what you want to do, putting it down on paper, then going from paper to the actual finished dish. It's really satisfying seeing how people respond."

— *Lisè Stern*

If He Weren't a Chef ...

Wilken would be "a marine biologist. I enjoy what's in the water, in nature, things undiscovered."



Yellowfin tuna with saffron butter, braised cauliflower, and jack cheese stone-ground grits with a creole sauce

5 to Try

- » **1. Lemaire.** Located in the Jefferson Hotel (see "A Storied Bar," page 50), Lemaire serves Southern food with French influences in its formal dining room. "It's a great place to have a great dining experience overall," Wilken says. 804.649.4644; [jeffersonhotel.com](#)
- » **2. Comfort.** Homey comfort food with panache. 804.780.0004; [comfortrestaurant.com](#)
- » **3. Millie's Diner.** Diner-style decor with cosmopolitan cuisine; known for its brunch. 804.643.5512; [milliesdiner.com](#)
- » **4. Can Can Brasserie.** Classic French fare with flair; includes a bakery with homemade breads. Open all day. 804.358.PARIS (7274); [cancanbrasserie.com](#)
- » **5. Europa.** Mediterranean, with tapas. Open for lunch weekdays. 804.643.0911; [europarichmond.com](#)

— *L.S.*



Photographs by: David Deal

