



Roll-up garage doors in Watershed's main dining room are reminders of the space's former life as a gas station.

## A Southern Staple

Executive chef Scott Peacock and Watershed celebrate a decade in Decatur.

Opening a restaurant in Decatur 10 years ago probably would have been considered a bold move because, 10 years ago, Decatur was nothing like the thriving neighborhood it is today. But that's what executive chef Scott Peacock and part-owner Emily Saliers (she's also one half of the Indigo Girls) did in the fall of 1998 when they opened the doors to Watershed.

Well, not exactly. Saliers and her business partners were opening a simple wine bar and retail shop in an old converted gas station on West Ponce de Leon and wanted the place to offer food as well. "They contacted me, and I agreed to help out for four weeks," explains Peacock, who's settled into a corner table, eager to talk about the 10-year anniversary of his neighborhood eatery. "People started responding and lining up outside the door. Eventually we realized that [the food] was what was working so it became a restaurant."

Fast-forward 10 years and a lot has changed in Decatur. Watershed's West Ponce de Leon address is about as prime as it gets,

and its neighbors include everything from high-end lofts and condominiums to eccentric boutiques and restaurants. And Watershed has evolved from a simple wine bar and flower shop concept to one of the country's most acclaimed Southern food restaurants run by one of the country's most acclaimed, James Beard Award-winning chefs.

But, through it all, Peacock's philosophy has stayed the same. The food at Watershed is straightforward Southern cuisine. "This is home cooking. There are no garnishes, no fancy concoctions," he explains. "I want yellow squash to taste like yellow squash ... to show it in its simplest form." Order just about anything on the menu, and you'll get a good idea of why that's worked since day one. The pimiento cheese epitomizes his simple-is-better ideal (see side bar for recipe), and the tangy spread is an absolute must-order appetizer. The shrimp and grits is a creative twist on this Southern staple: Instead of plopping the shrimp on top of the grits, Peacock purees the shrimp right into the grits, creating a creamy blend that's



The restaurant's charming exterior faces West Ponce de Leon in Decatur.

Peacock's fried chicken is some of the best in the city, but it's served only on Tuesday nights.

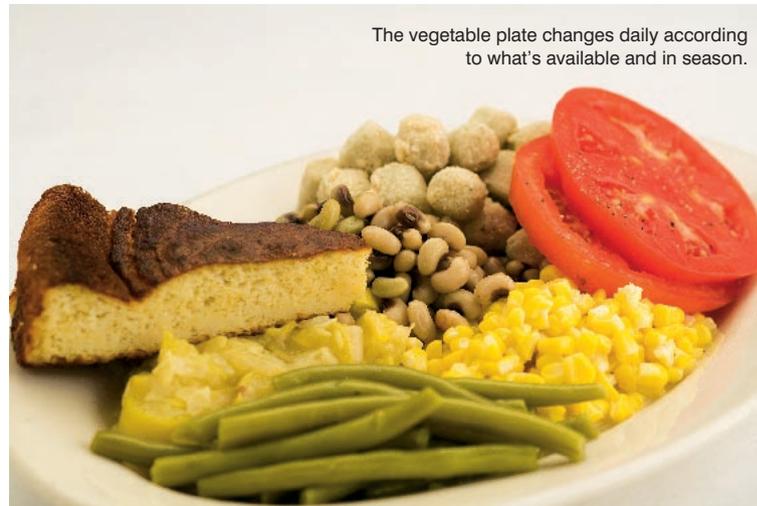


served with a buttery toasted plank of Pullman bread for dipping.

Watershed regulars probably would riot if Peacock ever pulled longtime favorites like the salmon croquettes, grilled pork chops or fried catfish off the menu. Of course we'd have to join the rioters if the hot veggie plate ever gets 86ed. It's like a little surprise every time you dine, because you never know what you can get. It could be heaps of creamed lima beans and stewed yellow squash with green beans, fried okra and black-eye peas, or it might be braised cabbage and fresh corn with glorious collard greens, mac and cheese, and onion rings, all served with a corn muffin or biscuit for good measure.

And, if you don't know why Tuesday nights at Watershed have become legendary over the course of the restaurant's 10 years in Decatur, we can sum it up in two words: fried chicken. Just getting the chicken to the frying stage is a two-day process of salt-water soaks and buttermilk baths. So you'd think they serve this Southern specialty only one night a week because it's such a pain to prepare,

The vegetable plate changes daily according to what's available and in season.



but it's really not about that at all. "It's just more special that way," Peacock says. "I think people enjoy it so much more. But my advice is you better be here by 6:45 because we always run out."

After 10 years as top toque at Watershed and a James Beard Award winner for Best Chef Southeast in 2007, it all might seem second nature now, but Peacock's heart wasn't always rooted in Southern cuisine. "When I was 28, my plan was to move to Italy and study cooking there," he says. But while working as chef at the Governor's Mansion, he was invited to New York to meet the famed Southern chef Edna Lewis. "Even though she lived and worked in New York for 50 years, she knew what was so unique about being Southern and she was so proud of that," Peacock says. "After that visit, I had my 'aha' moment and realized that if I approached Southern food the way [chef] Alice Waters approached her California cuisine, it could really be something special."

Some might say special is an understatement. Watershed



Boutique and hard-to-find wines like Turley Cellars and Pax flow at Watershed's intimate wine bar.



Executive chef Scott Peacock.

always has been on the cutting edge of the sustainable and organic food movement. Since opening, the restaurant has worked with local, organic farmers before it was ever trendy to do so. “I’ve always had an interest in organic farming, something Alice Waters definitely influenced,” Peacock says. “Recycling and being green was always a part of Watershed since the beginning.”

Peacock continues to count both Waters and Lewis as major influences in his culinary career, and he and Lewis published *The Gift of Southern Cooking* together in 2004. But he also says that growing up in rural Alabama and doing things like cutting okra twice a day so it wouldn’t grow past its prime was also equally important. “I finally realized that at one time there were standards about freshness and quality ... you ate corn the day you picked it or you froze it or you canned it. That wasn’t coming from elitist people,” Peacock says. “And I think my goal and philosophy at Watershed has always been about trying to get back to the way things used to be done. I just can’t believe it’s been 10 years. Decatur and Atlanta have been so good to us.” —SARAH GLEIM

## SCOTT PEACOCK’S PIMIENTO CHEESE

Yield: 2 cups (8 1/4-cup servings)

Peacock makes his own mayonnaise, but you can substitute with a good brand such as Duke’s or Hellmann’s.

2 1/2 cups (10 ounces) grated extra-sharp cheddar cheese

1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste

Salt to taste

5 or 6 grinds of black pepper

3/4 cup mayonnaise

3 tablespoons finely chopped roasted red bell pepper or pimiento (see instructions below)

Stir together cheese, cayenne, salt, pepper, mayonnaise and roasted pepper in a mixing bowl until well-mixed and creamy. Taste carefully for seasoning and adjust as needed. Cover and store, refrigerated, until ready to use.

To roast peppers: Wash and dry the peppers, and then rub each with a very small amount of vegetable or olive oil. Put the oiled peppers into a baking dish, and bake in preheated 425-degree oven for 20 minutes. The peppers will look charred in patches and be blistered all over. Remove peppers from the oven, and transfer into a bowl that can be tightly covered. Cover and let rest until the peppers are cool enough to handle. Once they are cooled, remove stems, cut peppers open and remove the seeds. Resist the urge to rinse under water to clean the peppers perfectly. It is preferable to have an occasional seed or bit of charred pepper than to wash away the delicious pepper flavor. Roasted and peeled peppers can be kept refrigerated for two to three days before using. —From *The Gift of Southern Cooking* by Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock