

SIGNATURE DISH

The Other Southern Comfort

Eddie Blyden takes an international journey to succotash.

By S. Rufus

In Eddie Blyden's case, "culinary journey" isn't just a euphemism. It's real.

Before he became executive chef at The Terrace Room overlooking Lake Merritt, that journey led him around the world.

Nigerian-born Blyden grew up loving — and learning to prepare — tropical-fruit-rich Sierra Leonean cuisine. Family travels unveiled earthy, elegant European and American fare.

Pursuing his passion, Blyden cooked at prestigious New York City restaurants such as Alison, Café Metro, and Bouley — then at Michelin-starred Tantris in Munich, Nouvelle in Zurich, and the Rendezvous Bay Hotel on the island of Anguilla.



It was hardly his first Caribbean trip. The great-grandson of celebrated St. Thomas-born author/professor/pan-Africanist Edward Wilmot Blyden, he traveled yearly in his youth to the British Virgin Islands — "meeting and spending time with other Blydens, a lot of whom were into fishing.

"We'd catch snappers and groupers off the rocks," said the chef, whose impressive resumé also includes San Francisco's The Alembic and Magnolia Pub as well as Henry's in Berkeley's Hotel Durant.

"I love fish. I love cooking fish whole — grilling them, or roasting them in the oven, head-to-tail. That's something you learn in West Africa and the islands: You don't waste any part of it. You don't see locals in those areas eating fillets.

"I also love comfort food."

That's why one of his favorite ways to serve fish, especially California white seabass, is atop a bed of Southern-style succotash, adorned with tomato coulis. His succotash varies seasonally, entailing "corn and tomatoes and different types of beans: We can be a little creative with the bean aspect," Blyden said.

"I don't cook mine way down. I keep it light, and use a little marjoram. I'm very into spices. Some people call me 'the spiceologist,' because I'm not afraid to use them, and they make everything so much more interesting. We have so many amazing places to shop for spices around here, and when you walk into those stores, it's another world of aromas and possibilities."

To complete the succotash-bedded fish dish, "I create a little pool of coulis around it, rather than on top of it. I don't cover the fish with anything, because I want people to see it."

Now living in Berkeley, he recently began fishing local waters.

"It's like meditation," he said.

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