

Kale Salad

by Nicole Cabrera Mills



Photo by Abraham Rowe

My husband likes to say that I went from the South to the South.

I grew up in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Mindanao has a large Muslim population, which makes the food very different from the rest of the Philippines. My father is a farmer. My mother has been in the food business for most of her life. In 2001, I moved to New York to go to culinary school at the French Culinary Institute. I met my husband, a New Orleans native, in New York. After several years of working around New York, Los Angeles, and the Philippines, fate brought us back to New Orleans in 2011.

I joined the opening team at Pêche in 2013 and became the chef de cuisine in 2019. Even before that promotion, I was given the freedom to create specials, which allowed me to push the boundaries of a New Orleans seafood grill and see what our diners liked or didn't like. For the most part, I found that they liked just about anything. Naturally, because of my background, Asian flavors came through—and they worked surprisingly well with the ingredients we sourced at the restaurant. I never have to force anything when it comes to developing dishes for the Pêche menu. The focus has always been Gulf seafood and farm produce. What can I do with what's available? The result is usually a combination of the South I grew up in and the South I live in.

Southern food has evolved a lot in the last decade. How many rice dishes can I make? How many vegetables can I fry, and how many ways can I fry them? I've been a part of that evolution, even though I didn't recognize it right away. I don't conform to the norm of what people think Southern food should be. I take Southern ingredients and turn them into dishes I like to eat, often incorporating inspiration from my past. I'm not afraid to use fish sauce, soy sauce, and vinegar. I often cook with shrimp as a flavoring agent, and I use a lot of herbs and pickles to enhance the flavors of dishes. When people come to Pêche, I don't think they are expecting a specific cuisine. I think they expect big flavors and they expect the food to taste bright and fresh. Some of the flavors may be surprising though not completely unfamiliar.

In a predominantly white male-dominated industry, I am a female Asian immigrant running a restaurant in the South. The gravity of this work often escapes me. At the end of the day, I just enjoy cooking good food.

Kale Salad

Serves 6

16 ounces baby kale*

1 cup crispy rice (recipe follows)

1 cup salted peanuts, toasted

2 apples (Pink Lady, Fuji, or Jonagold), sliced thin

1 cup thinly sliced or julienned radishes (Purple Daikon, Watermelon, or Breakfast)

1 cup julienned kohlrabi

6 tablespoons chili garlic crisp (may be store-bought or homemade; recipe follows)

3 teaspoons lemon juice

Salt

In a large bowl, combine kale, crispy rice, peanuts, apples, radish, kohlrabi, chili crisp, lemon juice, and a sprinkle of salt. Mix well and adjust seasonings to taste.

**If baby kale is not available, use lacinato kale and cut into ribbons (1 inch thick).*

Crispy Rice

Makes approximately 1 pint

2 quarts soybean oil

1 pint cooked popcorn rice

1 pint rice flour

Salt

In a deep pot, heat the oil to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Make sure the pot is filled no more than halfway.

In a mixing bowl, toss the popcorn rice with rice flour. Make sure each grain is individually coated with flour. Strain off the excess flour using a fine mesh strainer. Once excess flour is sifted out, fry the rice in 2 batches until golden brown, about 3 to 5 minutes. Season with salt. Allow the rice to cool before using.