

by Ron James

THE LEE BROS.

Matt Lee and Ted Lee were in a New York funk. Holed up in a tiny tenement on the Lower East Side during a 1994 blizzard, the Ivy League graduates were unhappy with their mundane jobs and homesick for Charleston, S.C. So they decided to make a batch of boiled peanuts - a snack pretty much unknown out of the South.

TED AND MATT LEE - Ted and Matt Lee are the brothers behind the "Boiled Peanuts Catalog" and "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook: Stories and Recipes for Southerners and Would-be Southerners." CNS Photo. Finding raw peanuts took some detective work, but they managed to track down a 50-pound bag in the Bronx. After boiling the nuts in salted water, the Lees slurped the contents from the wet shells - and had a life-changing insight.

"This was the time when boiled edemame (soy beans) was a trendy bar snack," Ted Lee said, laughing. "Boiled peanuts would become the next hip bar snack! We figured that the place to start would be the new Southern restaurants popping up all over the city. It was a brilliant strategy, except what we didn't factor in was that the Southern restaurants were owned and operated by New Yorkers."

The entrepreneurs spent a week knocking on restaurant doors offering their boiled peanuts in sandwich bags.

"It was kind of a disaster," chuckled Matt Lee. "They thought it was a joke - like they were on candid camera. We didn't get one sale. We decided that we needed to find folks like us - Southern expatriates that needed boiled peanuts as badly as we needed them."

Hoping for some publicity, they mailed a bag of the soggy nuts to a New York Times' food writer. She hated them. But a friend of hers from Virginia explained why the snack is so loved in the South and two weeks later a short item on the business venture appeared in the Times. Hundreds of calls poured in from homesick Southerners.

"People wanted boiled peanuts and they wanted them right away," Ted Lee said. "And then they started asking us if we could get them other Southern favorites like fig preserves, stone-ground grits or sorghum syrup."

So the Lee Bros. Boiled Peanuts Catalog was born. Today, the mail-order business has grown to more than 6,000 clients worldwide. The brothers also write for magazines like Food & Wine, and their cookbook, "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook: Stories and Recipes for Southerners and Would-Be Southerners" (Norton, \$35), was just published.

THE DISH

Shrimp burgers are a somewhat unusual dish that reflect the cuisine of Southern shrimping towns.

SHRIMP BURGER - The Lee brothers'™ shrimp burger recipe calls for corn to add texture and a sweetness that draws out the shrimp flavor. Fresh ginger is added to give it complexity. CNS Photo."Every place that serves them has a different 'secret' recipe," the Lees write in their cookbook. "Some shrimp burgers are chunky with diced shrimp and herbs, loosely bound, and pan fried. Others are like an enormous shrimp dumpling, with a smooth, shrimpy paste enrobed by a crunchy, deep-fried crust.

"We tested six shrimp burger recipes for a story and found the one Robert Stehling makes at Charleston's Hominy Grill to be the finest, to our tastes. It's the chunkier style of burger, and its genius is its use of lemon zest. When we developed our own shrimp burger recipe, we added corn for texture and a sweetness that draws out the shrimp flavor, and added fresh ginger to give it complexity. Use a gentle hand when flipping the burgers in the skillet."

THE WINE

Shrimp burgers definitely want a white wine to enhance their delicate flavors. A medium-bodied Chateau St. Jean 2004 Chardonnay Robert Young Vineyard (\$25) is a great match for this regional dish. The fruity flavors of the wine contrast with the tarter sauce, and its citrus flavors complement the lemon zest.

This Sonoma wine is a great value for a chardonnay of this caliber. It received 92 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate. It is a fresh crisp wine with citrus, pear and floral flavors.

SHRIMP BURGERS

2 quarts water

1 package shrimp boil seasoning mix

1 pound headless large shrimp, shells on

2 tablespoons chopped scallions

1/4 cup fresh corn kernels, cut from cob (about 1/2 an ear)

2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger

1 1/2 teaspoons lemon zest

3 tablespoons high-quality mayonnaise

1 cup bread crumbs, preferably fresh

Kosher salt, to taste

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 egg, beaten

1 1/2 tablespoons canola oil

Yields 4 servings.

In 3-quart saucepan, bring water and shrimp boil to a boil over high heat. Turn off heat. Add shrimp and let stand until just pink, about 2 minutes. Drain and run under cold water to stop cooking. Peel shrimp (and devein, if you wish) and chop coarsely. You should have 1 3/4 cups chopped shrimp.

In large bowl, mix shrimp with scallions, corn, parsley, ginger and lemon zest. Stir in mayonnaise and bread crumbs, and season with salt and pepper. Add egg and gently fold with wooden spoon or rubber spatula until evenly distributed.

Form shrimp mixture into 4 patties, each 3 1/2 inches in diameter. Wrap patties in plastic wrap and refrigerate 30 minutes.

Remove burgers from refrigerator and unwrap. Place oil in 12-inch skillet and heat over high heat. When it shimmers, add burgers and saute until both sides are gently browned, about 3 minutes per side. Drain on dinner plate lined with paper towel.

Serve on toasted hamburger buns with lettuce, tomato and tartar sauce.

- Adapted from "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook: Stories and Recipes for Southerners and Would-be Southerners."

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Food and Wine: Shrimp burgers and chardonnay make quite a catch by Ron James