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**MENU DEVELOPMENT** > **CULINARY TRENDS**

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## French-American comfort

**Patricia Cobe**, Senior Editor

Cooking seasonally goes beyond sourcing fruits, vegetables and other ingredients that are at their peak. After all, for the next few months, local fields may be barren and fresh produce scarce in a large part of the country. But Jose Guitierrez, chef-owner of River Oaks in Memphis, Tenn., keeps his winter menu seasonal with warm, comforting stews, braises and bakes.

“Even though our growing season is a little longer in Memphis, I favor slow-cooked meals such as braised short ribs with root vegetables, pork with sweet potatoes, cassoulet, beef tenderloin with potatoes and chicken pot pie when the weather begins to turn colder,” Guitierrez says. The last dish became a signature for the classically trained French chef when he started cooking in the South 30 years ago.

Like other dishes on the menu at River Oaks, the pot pie is an American favorite with a modern French twist. It starts with the sourcing. Guitierrez buys from a local farmer who raises free-range organic chickens. He poaches the birds with carrots and celery, then uses the stock to make a sauce. Once the cooked chicken is boned and skinned, it is cut into chunks and combined with the sauce and vegetables. “In winter, we use carrots, parsnips, turnips and chestnuts, depending on what we can find,” says the chef. “Onions and mushrooms, too—they’re always available—and green beans or peas if we can get them.” The hearty mixture is spooned into an individual porcelain ramekin and crowned with puff pastry made in-house in the French style.

Although the Chicken Pot Pie is a Monday night special, guests can order it any time and chef Guitierrez will oblige. “One of our customers takes it home for dinner a couple of nights a week,” he says. “It’s a nice change from pork, which everyone associates with Memphis.”

“There’s a big hole in this market if you want to source local year round,” notes the chef. Nevertheless, he patronizes one Memphis farmers market that runs through the winter and works with several nearby farmers who make deliveries. Along with other Memphis chefs, Guitierrez gives back to the farmer community through Project Green Fork. “We save our leftover vegetables and fruits and give them to the farmers for compost,” he explains. “We try to keep our garbage cans as empty as possible. We recycle almost everything.”



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