

A Southern Food Primer

BY THE



WHAT IS SOUTHERN FOOD?

Southern food is as diverse as the regions that make up the South.

Charles Reagan Wilson, the Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, writes, “The South can be seen more productively, perhaps, as a collection of regions. The Appalachians, the Alleghenies, the Blue Ridge, and the Ozarks are the Mountain South. The Upland South has been a place of hill-country farmers, the tobacco business, and textile mills. The Lowland South is the Deep South, a place of cotton growing, the blues, warm Gulf Coast breezes, Florida beaches and Latin rhythms. The urban South has been the center of the New South, from Atlanta newspaper editor Henry Grady in the 1880s to Andrew Young today. One could chart more specific landscapes in Cajun Louisiana, the Kentucky bluegrass, the Mississippi Delta, and the Piney Woods. Each place is defined by its food as well as its terrain. Barbecue provides a classic example. All Southern regions can affirm the importance of this gift of the hog. North Carolinians cook it so long that it falls apart, and they insist on serving it shredded on hamburger buns. South-central Kentucky restaurants often serve slices of pork shoulder as barbecue, with bones in, dipped in sauce, and accompanied by white bread. Texans barbecue sausage links. Sometimes barbecue is not even pork. Those same Texans barbecue beef brisket in tribute to the cows that have been a part of their way of life for so long, and some Kentuckians feast on mutton barbecue.”

--“Introduction”
A Gracious Plenty

Southern cooks have always creatively drawn upon the mix of cultures that once collided to create the South we know today—most notably, Native American, European, and African cultures.

Joe Gray Taylor writes, “It was from the Indians that the first settlers learned which wild plant foods were available and how to prepare them. Most importantly, of course, the Indians taught the first settlers how to grow, prepare, and eat corn. No doubt the English settlers would have preferred wheat bread, or even rye bread that had been their everyday fare in Britain, but these grains did not thrive in the virgin soils of the New World. Nor did the Indian contribution end with corn. The Irish potato did not come to the South until late, but it was an Indian vegetable. So was the sweet potato, which came early and played a most important role. The Indians gave the South squash, most of the beans that Americans eat until this day, pumpkins, all peppers except black, and probably cowpeas. Tomatoes and eggplants were developed by the Indians, but many southerners looked on them as poisonous until the twentieth century.”

--*Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South*

Of the European mark on Southern cooking, Damon Lee Fowler writes, “Baking remained a primary responsibility of the white mistress, often to the point that she did it herself. And while other aspects of the cooking changed—sometimes radically--baking, especially sweets, remained solidly English, varying little from that of other regions of the country.”

--*Classical Southern Cooking*

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the European stamp is greater in some regions of the South than in others. John Egerton writes, “If there is a single dimension of Louisiana food that sets it apart from cooking elsewhere in the South, it is without a doubt the French connection. The first eighty years of French control set the pattern, and all the subsequent influences were additions, not replacements. Other Southern states manifest the historical presence of English, Scotch-Irish, or Spanish cultures; only Louisiana is clearly a child of France—and nowhere is that parentage more evident than in the kitchen.”

--*Southern Food*

Jessica Harris discusses the ways in which Africans influenced foodways in the South: “Reports of foods eaten during the slave centuries indicate that though planters may have attempted to reproduce the cuisine of their mother country on the other side of the Atlantic, a transformation was taking place. In African hands, the recipes were being changed according to local ingredients and African culinary techniques. Spices were being used more intensively in the warmer climates both to disguise spoiled meats and to enhance flavors. Foods were being grilled and vegetables were being added to what in Europe had been mainly a protein and carbohydrate diet. One historian goes as far as to credit the slaves with adding greens and green vegetables to the slaveholder’s diet and thereby saving countless numbers from nutritional deficiencies.”

--*Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons*

THE AFRICAN CONNECTION

African traditions have had the most impact on the flavors and the methods of Southern cookery.

Jessica Harris writes, “Whatever their lot, slaves did not simply cook for their own nourishment. They also cooked most, if not all, of the meals for the Big House, and their cooking in this arena resulted in the subtle but very real transformation of the tastes of the American South. ...By the end of the eighteenth century, in the heyday of Mary Randolph, author of *The Virginia Housewife*, one of the nation’s earliest cookbooks, Africanisms had so marked the cooking of the South that she includes a recipe for gumbs, a buttered okra dish, and another for ochra (*sic*) soup, which is similar to today’s gumbo. ...These dishes as well as other culinary Africanisms such as the use of smoked meats and fish as seasonings, the use of nuts as thickeners, and the use of okra to prepare soupy stews more often than not called gumbos helped expand the planters’ culinary vocabulary. Vitamin-rich pot likker—the cooking water in which vegetables had been slow-cooked—had formerly been discarded by planters; now it was eaten and savored. These dishes...along with dishes like fried chicken, which calls on the West African art of frying; a host of fritters, which hark back to the African method of frying in deep oil; and range of nut soups, went on to represent some of the best cooking the South had to offer. ...Finally in the sixties and seventies it came out of family kitchens to be celebrated as soul food or survival food, and derided at the same time as the food of enslavement.”

Even after slavery had ended African-Americans, particularly African-American women, continued to hold dominion in the kitchen. Harris continues, “In the South and the North, many African-American women found work as housekeepers and cooks, and in other forms of domestic service. These jobs, while usually demeaning, afforded a close, oftentimes unbearably intimate look at how the other half lived. Throughout the country, these women fed their charges with homemade soups and fried chicken and freshly made African-American foods from their own family recipes. With lavish applications of food and love, they generally served as the domestic glue that soldered together countless white American families and raised more than one white child. Their culinary knowhow is largely unsung, but traces of it can be found in early community cookbooks, where recipes praise the culinary skills of Jane Smith’s Lucy, Margaret Ford’s Ida, and Irene Jones’ Bertha. Well into the twentieth century, African-Americans were still working in the countryside equivalents of Big House kitchens and still influencing the tastes of a nation. New foods came home to African-American homes with leftovers from Miss Ann’s table.”

--*The Welcome Table*

African-Americans further contributed to Southern foodways on an entrepreneurial level. It is worth mentioning that autonomous business opportunities were rare for blacks.

Jessica Harris remarks, “Many urban slaves, in fact, were noted street vendors; the money from their sales frequently supplemented the income of the mistress of the house. Their goods and their street cries brought life to the towns. A privileged few were able to use a portion of their earnings to purchase their freedom.... Their street cries have been immortalized in everything from children’s games to the literature of Langston Hughes to the music of George Gershwin. Throughout the nineteenth century and in some regions of the South well into the twentieth century, streets in residential neighborhoods would ring with the cried of various vendors hawking their wares from kitchen door to kitchen door. The watermelon man’s cry:

*Watermelon! Watermelon! Red to the rind.
If you don’t believe me jest pull down your blind!
I sell to the rich,
I sell to the po’;
I’m gonna sell to the lady
Standin’ in that do’...*

*I got water with the melon, red to the rind!
If you don’t believe it jest pull down your blind.
You eat the watermelon and pree-serve the rind!*

--*The Welcome Table*

Since Southern African-Americans felt a sense of ownership toward Southern foodways, it is not surprising to see that when many of them left the South in search of better lives, they maintained their ways of eating.

On the subject of westward migration, Jessica Harris writes, “Certainly, Texas barbecue and the cueing’ of Missouri speak of these migrations. As fully one-third of all cowboys were African American, many of them cooks and expedition guides like Jim Pierce, it is fairly safe to believe that their African American cooking styles began to spread to a wider audience. ...Others headed North following the same drinking gourd (as the constellation of the Big Dipper was called) that had led their ancestors to freedom.”

--*The Welcome Table*

In “Origins of Black Southern Urban Identity: 1915-1947” Tracy N. Poe writes, “Chicago was the second most popular destination after New York for the migrants who left their rural homes during what has become the Great Migration.” At first, citified whites and blacks ambitious to climb the social ladder looked down on the newcomers and expressed their contempt by speaking out against their foodways. Poe elaborates: “With their sidewalk barbecue pits, ‘chicken shacks,’ and public consumption of watermelon, an ugly stereotype of Southern migrants soon developed, no less among the black middle class than the white Chicagoans. Migrants could not understand what the problem was. Southern food was simply dinner. ...It was a way of preserving something that reminded them of home and family when they moved to the unfamiliar urban environment. ...Faced with inexplicable opposition from members of their race, migrants began to think of ‘down-home cooking’ as something unique and special. Migration strengthened their desire to preserve their traditions.”

--American Studies International

ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE SOUTH

Just as many African-Americans began contemplating moving away from the South, many poor immigrants began moving into the South. Like some of the poor blacks had done before them, they found a niche market in food service.

John Egerton writes, “Greeks offer an especially interesting example. Between 1865 and 1915, when about a quarter of a million Greek immigrants entered the United States, more than 25,000 of them moved to the South. ...Many of them found their way into the food business (though their prior experience in the field was limited)—but instead of transplanting Greek food traditions, they sought to cater to Southern tastes. To this day, almost every Southern state has a few Greek-owned restaurants of notable longevity and quality, most of them specializing in seafood, steaks, or even traditional Southern ‘home cooking.’ Poor as they were when they arrived, the Greeks found a home in the South—and for many of them food was the ticket to better times.”

--Southern Food

In her article “From Barbecue to Baklava: The Delta’s Culinary Crossroads” Amy Evans highlights how ethnic groups in the Mississippi Delta have both “[embraced] and [interpreted] Southern food”:

“Abraham ‘Abe’ Davis arrived in Clarksdale from Lebanon in the early part of the 20th century, a time when tamales—a food with origins in Latin America—were peddled on street corners. Perhaps Abe recognized the tamale’s similarity to a dish from his native land, stuffed grape leaves. Both are portable foods made with a meat and a starch and then rolled in small packages for convenience and portability. ‘And maybe that’s why my dad even started making hot tamales back then,’ says one of Abe’s sons, Pat Davis, Sr. ‘Because he used to love to make grape leaves and cabbage rolls and all, and then he just heard about hot tamales and then said, ‘Yeah, I believe I can do that.’”

--Delta Magazine

Leon Fink writes of Guatemalans in 21st century Morganton, North Carolina: “Ask a Guatemalan in Morganton what he or she means in declaring, ‘I am Guatemalan/Maya/Aguacateco/etc’ and the first answer was likely to be, ‘I eat *comida tipica* [traditional food],’ meaning corn tortillas and beans. First available in a little local Mexican grocery, these basic elements of the Mayan diet soon were readily purchased at any area Bi-Lo or Food Lion supermarket. Chicken was also a staple in Mayan immigrants diet, as it was for North Americans. Victor Hernandez, for example, proudly related that he fixed his own dinners, often combining tortillas and fried chicken in the same manner he was used to at home. Likewise, Transita Gutierrez Solis declared that her family was ‘never without’ tortillas and frijoles [beans] at mealtime in Morgantown.”

--*Work and Community in the Nuevo New South: The Maya of Morganton*

COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTH

Hospitality is a cornerstone of Southern foodways.

John Egerton asserts, “Whether in the home or in public places, the food traditions that had become a part of Southern culture by the 1940’s could be summarized under a single descriptive heading: hospitality. As overworked and ambiguous as the word may have been to many, it had meaning for most Southerners. It was not a myth, nor was it a hallmark of the rich alone; it was simply the way people were. Twice in their history since the Revolutionary War—in the aftermath of the Civil War and in the depths of the Great Depression—Southerners had known hunger, even starvation, and that knowledge had taught them to enjoy the moment, to feast when food was available, and to keep a wary eye on the future. Among all the classes—those who had plenty and those who had nothing and all the others in between—food was a blessing, a pleasure, a cause for celebration. The tradition of hospitality, of serving large quantities of good things to eat to large numbers of hungry people, of sharing food and drink with family and friends and even strangers, proved to be a durable tradition in the South, outliving war and depression and hunger.”

--*Southern Food*

Writer Debbie Moose remembers, “Every year, around July, the same phenomenon would take place in our neighborhood. I call it the Boomerang Vegetable Toss. This is how it worked: I’d announce that I was heading up the street to play with a friend. Mama would shout, ‘Wait!’ Then she’d grab a paper bag, throw in some tomatoes (only ten or so), and say, ‘Take these up yonder for ‘em.’ I’d hand the bag to my friend’s mother, saying my Mama sent them. She would offer a pinched smile, thinking of her own groaning tomato vines. When I was ready to leave, she would meet me in the carport with a sly smile and a bag of her own, say, squash. Destination: my house.”

--“Summer Feeding Frenzy”

Cornbread Nation 1: The Best Of Southern Food Writing

Southerners are particularly generous with their cooking in times of sorrow.

In his novel Will Campbell poignantly illustrates this reality: “As I drove in, she was walking into the house with eggs for breakfast and homemade biscuits ready for baking. Somehow in rural Southern culture, food is always the first thought of neighbors when there is trouble. That is something they can do and not feel uncomfortable. It is something they do not have to explain or discuss or feel self-conscious about. ‘Here, I brought you some fresh eggs for your breakfast. And here’s a cake. And some potato salad.’ It means, ‘I love you. And I am sorry for what you are going through and I will share as much of your burden as I can.’ And maybe potato salad is a better way of saying it.”

--*Brother to a Dragonfly*

WHAT MAKES SOUTHERN FOOD DIFFERENT FROM OTHER REGIONAL FOODS?

Cast iron is the crux of much Southern cooking.

John T. Edge writes, “Each time a Southern cook hefts a skillet to the stovetop, he or she is not alone. Trapped within the iron confines of these skillets and stewpots are the scents and secrets of a family’s culinary history. Burnished black by countless batches of fried chicken and catfish, embossed in inky ebony by the crusts of cracklin’ cornbread past, cast iron cooking utensils are meal memories in and of themselves. ...As porous as they are heavy, cast-iron skillets absorb and impart flavor with each dish prepared. ...By way of this strange and thoroughly Southern alchemy of seasoning, the basest of metals is transformed into a treasure rivaled only by the fabled Southern family silver. Like a good country ham or a single-barrel bourbon, cast-iron only improves with age.”

--A Gracious Plenty

Excluding times of abject poverty, the Southern table is usually a heavily laden table.

Joe Gray Taylor provides historical context for this custom: “The southern frontiersmen took pride in having enough and more food for his family and guests than he did in the gustatory quality of that food. The antebellum southerner thus inherited from his frontier background more respect for ‘big eating’ than for fine eating. Obviously every normal host and hostess wanted their food to be good, but like the English yeomen of Elizabeth’s time, they were more concerned with quantity and variety than with quality in the gourmet sense. Some of the dishes of the Old South were as good as any in the world, however, and this should not be forgotten.”

--Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South

Southern chef and cookbook author Natalie Dupree writes, “Southern cooking is primarily home cooking, not chef’s art. It certainly ‘ain’t nouvelle’ or precious. It’s just good food, fit for savoring, not simply pretty to look at. The foods of the South for generations were meant to nourish hardworking families as they came together at mealtimes. Foods were always served ‘family-style’ in big bowls at the table. I’ve never had a plated meal in a Southern home, except in the kitchen where you could go back to the pot for refills. Perhaps that’s poor people’s way to avoid looking stingy. We wanted to make a show of abundance and served a number of vegetables. Sometimes the only meat in our daily fare would be the fatback cooked in the vegetables because that’s all that was on hand. When I was a child, you could look into the kitchen window of each house and know what was cooking in every pot, because it was all the time.”

--New Southern Cooking

Southern food is largely seasonal and composed primarily of vegetables.

Bill Neal observes, “Whatever the source, the variety of fresh vegetables on the Southern table is staggering. Any one meal may present fried okra, corn, butter beans, sweet potatoes, sliced tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, coleslaw, cantaloupe. Such wealth often eclipses any meat served; by midsummer all vegetable meals (with biscuits or corn bread) are common. By the time the pickled beets, green tomato relish, pepper relishes, bread-and-butter pickles are out, the meal is a celebration of endless combinations, textures, and flavors—the hallmark of Southern cooking.” And, of the seasons, Neal writes, “Before the days of freon, so many foods signaled such a particular time of year that they were symbols of the seasons more reliable than any calendar. Even today asparagus heralds spring more surely than any number of robins; blackberries mean July, hot weather, and chiggers. Persimmons avenge themselves on those who try to jump into fall. And when the months of cooler weather—the ‘R’ months—return, so does the oyster.”

--Southern Cooking

HOG MEAT AND CORN

Perhaps no two foodstuffs have played a more important role in Southern foodways than hog meat and corn.

John Egerton writes, “Pigs and corn. Hog meat and hominy. Pork and pone. Separately, the meat of the hog and the grain of the cornstalk have enriched the diet of people around the world for at least eight thousand years. In combination, they have meant the difference between life and death for individuals, families, even entire communities. In the American South, no other edible substances have meant more to the populace in nearly four centuries of history than pork and corn.”

--Southern Food

Betty Fussell provides an account that highlights the significance of the hog meat-and-hominy combo in the eighteenth century: “A favorite Southern dish was hog and hominy, a colonized version of the universal Indian dish described by William Biggs when he was captured by the Kickapoos in 1788: adopted by the tribe, Biggs was given an Indian bride who made a wedding dish of ‘*hominy*, beat in a mortar, as white as snow, handsome as I ever saw, and very well cooked. She fried some dried meat, pounded very fine in a mortar, in oil, and sprinkled it with sugar.’ Gentrified, the dish became New Orleans’ grillades and grits (pounded smothered steak, fried with onion, tomato and served with grits on the side) and Charleston’s grits and liver pudding, a favorite Sunday-night supper of calf’s liver with grits on the side.”

--The Story of Corn

Corn

Joe Gray Taylor tells us, “Corn was the staff of life on the southern frontier; most southerners depended upon corn as a major part, if not the most important part, of their nourishment until World War II. It has been suggested that if the American pioneer had had to eat wheat instead of corn it would have taken another hundred years for settlement to reach the Rocky Mountains. ‘Corn will produce four times as much as wheat per acre and requires only one-tenth the seed...and only one-third the time from planting until it can be used as food.’ Wheat planted in autumn cannot be harvested for nine months, ‘whereas a woman can take a...[hoe] in April and with a quart of seed plant a patch around a cabin and in six weeks she and her children can begin to eat roasting ears; and when it gets too hard for that she can parch it.’”

--Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South

Ronni Lundy explains how to make a pan of “real cornbread”: “First get a good cast iron skillet. An old, well-seasoned, and well-used one is best. It may look greasy and caked up on the outside, but that just means you’ll get a better crust. Into this pan goes a big spoonful of drippings. Butter is good, but bacon grease is best—gritted with tiny flakes of the meat and redolent with its tangy savor. Put the skillet in an oven where the fire is already white-hot and scorching—about 450 degrees. Dump some cornmeal—about two cups worth—in a big bowl. Mountain people prefer white cornmeal because its got a sharper taste and tenderer texture. Put in some salt for savor, and a little baking soda and baking powder just for a little rise, but not too much. Remember real cornbread is never puffed-up or self-important. Crack a big egg in the middle and break it with your wooden spoon. Add milk—about a cup and a half worth. Sweet milk is just fine, but if you’ve got buttermilk you’ve got good eating. Stir it up and about then your drippings should be good and hot. Take your skillet out of the oven and swirl it to coat it. It should crackle and pop like the laughter of your cousins when your daddy just told a good one. Pour the grease into the batter, mix it quick, pour the batter back into the skillet, and pop it into the oven. Now here’s the hard part. You’re going to have to wait for twenty to twenty five minutes. And while you’re waiting you’re going to start to smell the sweet, buttery scent of the corn, the seductive salt of the bacon grease. And when you pull that skillet out of the oven, the cornbread will have a golden-brown glistening crust

that will crack crisply as you make that first slice. And when you pull that first wedge up out of the pan, a little cloud of corn-sweet steam will rise up into your face.”

--“The Tao of Cornbread”

Savory Memories

Historian Sam Bowers Hilliard writes, “In addition to the use of corn as meal, Southerners converted it into hominy and grits. Both were made from corn but the grains went through a soaking process which removed the husk (not the shuck) from the grain. Hominy consisted of whole grain corn boiled and eaten as a vegetable. When hominy grains were dried, ground into a coarse meal, and boiled, the dish was called grits.”

--*Hog Meat and Hoecake*

Whiskey is another favorite by-product of corn. Betty Fussell writes, “Two variations on pure corn liquor involved souring and aging. ...Unaged whiskey was called ‘white lightening,’ for the liquid was as clear and colorless as vodka when it came fresh from the still. The Scotch whiskey makers who invaded this country in the eighteenth century were accustomed to aging whiskey in wooden barrels or casks, since wood in symbiosis with the liquor helped to filter out impurities as the liquid evaporated and to ripen its flavor through the tannin and other extractives of the wood. The liquid also took on color and tasted as smooth and sweet as the Scotch whiskey they brewed back home from barley malt. Legend differs in which Scotsman in which county of Kentucky first aged his corn whiskey in a newly charred white oak cask to create the distinctive taste of American bourbon, but the chief contenders are both Baptist. ...[However], not until 1964 did the government legally define bourbon as a whiskey containing at least 51 percent corn and aged in new charred oak barrels. By this time, Bourbon County itself produced no bourbon at all and was, in fact, teetotaling dry.”

--*The Story of Corn*

Hog Meat

Of the hog, Bethany Ewald Bultman writes, “It wasn’t until 1493, when Christopher Columbus deposited a Spanish hog in Cuba, handpicked by Queen Isabella, that pigs arrived in the New World. Twenty-seven years later Admiral Alonso Alvarez de Pinana may have lost some of his porkers around Mobile, but it was when Hernando de Soto and his six hundred armor-clad men traversed the Gulf Coast in the early 1540’s that swine officially made landfall in our region. Pigs would arrive in the Gulf South at a time when the consumption of pork was a Christian duty for every Spanish-speaking Catholic. Reay Tannahill reveals in *Food in History* that during the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) it became obligatory to have pork simmering in a cauldron or *chorizo*, dried pork sausages, hanging from the rafters as a sure proof that no Jew or Muslim dined in the Christian home. De Soto certainly performed his Christian duty when he deposited fifteen hogs in Florida: within 5 years this herd had multiplied to more than 700 pigs.”

--“An Ode to the Pig: Assorted Thoughts on the World’s Most Controversial Food”

Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue

The late Southern chef Edna Lewis remembers, “Ham held the same rating as the basic black dress. If you had a ham in the meat house any situation could be faced.”

--*The Taste of Country Cooking*

Of the hog-killing, John Egerton writes, “On most Southern farms the first cold snap harkened the end of summer vegetables and the annual hog slaughter. Livers, cracklins, and chitterlings (small intestines), were eaten immediately. (Another favorite post-boucherie supper was brains and onions along the Cotes des Allemands of Louisiana.) Globes of hog fat were boiled in a gigantic black pot to be rendered into lard. Scraps of meat were ground up for sausages. Ribs were slowly steamed (as in the method recommended by Confederate general Stonewall Jackson, who oversaw the pork preparation for his men in gray). Sides of bacon, hog jowls, shoulders, and hams were cured in salt for weeks. Then they were hung in the smokehouse along with a variety of sausages, ham hocks, and knuckles to be smoked over hickory or pecan wood, peanut shells, or corncobs (known as meat cobs). Some farmers cured their meat with red pepper to prevent infestations of fly larvae in the era before refrigeration.” Every part of the hog was used.

--*Southern Food*

BARBECUE

Barbecue is one of the quintessential Southern foods.

Sociologist John Shelton Reed writes, “I once suggested half seriously that if the South needs a new flag—as it surely does—we could do worse than to use a dancing pig with a knife and a fork. You want to talk about heritage, not hate....That represents a heritage we all share and can take pride in. Barbecue both symbolizes and contributes to community. And it’s without even mentioning its noncommercial manifestations—for instance, in matters like fund-raising for volunteer fire departments. But there’s another side to this coin. It’s often the case, and it is in this one too, that community is reinforced by emphasizing differences from and with outsiders.

There’s no denying that barbecue can be divisive. Drive a hundred miles and the barbecue does change...Like Byzantine icon painters, barbecue cooks differ in technique and in skill, but they are working in traditions that pretty much tell them what to produce.

And those traditions reflect and reinforce the fierce localism that has always been a Southern characteristic, the ‘sense of place’ that literary folk claim to find in Southern fiction, the devotion to states’ rights and local autonomy that was an established characteristic of Southern politics long before it became a major headache for the Confederate States of America.”

--“Barbecue Sociology: The Meat of the Matter”
Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue

What do we know about the history of barbecue?

Sylvia Lovegren, offers this insight: “We do know that the Spanish conquistadors reported seeing Taino-Arawak and Carib natives in Hispaniola roasting, drying, and smoking meat (alligator, deer, and maybe even human) on wooden frameworks over small beds of coals. They called the framework a babracot, which the Spaniards turned into a barbacoa. The method appeared ludicrous to many early Europeans. Cooking over coals was not unusual, but over such low heat? An early French traveler noted incredulously: ‘A Caribbee has been known, on returning home from fishing fatigued and pressed with hunger, to have the patience to wait the roasting of a fish on a wooden grate fixed two feet above the ground, over a fire so small as sometimes to require the whole day to dress it.’ Not coincidentally, perhaps, these peoples also invented the hammock, a good place to lounge while waiting for barbecue to get done.

The European arrivals found natives barbecuing in many parts of America, at least south of the not-yet-

delineated Mason-Dixon Line. A Frenchman named Jacques le Moyne painted the Taino-Timucua of northern Florida cooking their meat and fish on a babracot in 1564. And a historian, Robert Beverley, commented in 1705 that the natives in Virginia had ‘two ways of Broyling viz. one by laying the Meat itself upon the Coals, the other by laying it upon Sticks rais'd upon Forks at some distance above the live Coals, which heats more gently, and dries up the Gravy; this they, and we also from them, call Barbacueing.’

The European colonists apparently took to this odd method of cooking with alacrity. By the end of the 1600’s barbecuing parties had become so popular that Virginia had to enact a law prohibiting the celebratory shooting of firearms during them. As the meat cooked long and slow, guests danced and socialized or played outdoor games like horseshoes, with betting and liquid refreshment. Barbecuing was already not just a cooking method but a social event. George Washington mentions in his diaries attending barbecues a number of times, including a ‘Barbicue of my own giving at Accotmck’ in 1773.”

--“Barbecue”

American Heritage

DRINKS AND DESSERT

Drinks are also an important aspect of Southern foodways.

“There can be little doubt that antebellum southerners drank too much. Temperance societies arose here and there, but the accomplished little. Protestant ministers often preached against intemperance, but those who damned all strong drink might look upon wine and beer as healthful. Most people, in fact, looked upon moderate drinking of hard liquors as beneficial, and ‘moderate’ before the Civil War would probably be considered ‘heavy’ today.”

--*Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South*

The website WhatsCookingAmerica.net speaks to the popularity of sweet tea in the South: “The American Prohibition (1920-1933) helped boost the popularity of iced tea because average Americans were forced to find alternatives to illegal beer, wine, and alcohol. Iced tea began appearing routinely in most southern cookbooks during this time.”

--WhatsCookingInAmerica.net

Buttermilk was once a popular drink in the South. In *Classical Southern Cooking*, Damon Lee Fowler writes, “In the warm climate of the South, sweet (fresh) milk would sour quickly, but buttermilk would keep for days. Therefore, it became a staple in the Southern kitchens, adding tenderness to the crumb of breads and cakes, and when combined with soda, also provided leavening.”

--*Classical Southern Cooking*

Of course, soft drinks have proved to be popular Southern exports. John Egerton writes, “The development of carbonated water and glass bottles and the coincidental rise of opposition to alcohol abuse set the stage in the late 1800’s for a surge of new or newly popular drinks, including ginger ale, root beers, and colas. Many of them originated in the South, where relief from summer heat and humidity was a constant concern. The big-league drinks—Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Dr. Pepper and RC—have been competing in a national, and even global marketplace since the 1950’s (as witness the worldwide alarm when Coca-Cola announced a change in its formula in 1985), but many small and relatively unknown soft drink companies still operate successfully in the region. Among them are Blenheim Ginger Ale (South Carolina), Buffalo Rock Ale (Alabama), Pop Rouge (Louisiana), Dr. Enuf (Tennessee), and Ale 81 (Kentucky).”

--*Southern Food*

Southerners also tend to like their sweets.

John T. Edge writes, “Pecan pie, chess pie, and meringue-crowned chocolate pie; sponge cake, pound cake, and teeth shattering peanut brittle—these were the rewards for a plate cleaned, a yard raked, a messy bedroom made neat again: Eat right, Act right. And you will receive your reward hereafter—or at least after you have finished your liver.

Writer Flannery O’Connor once observed that the South was ‘Christ-haunted.’ She was not speaking specifically of our eating habits, but she might as well have been. A raft of Southern desserts owe their naming if not their inspiration to the deeply religious nature of our region: divinity, that saccharine-sweet, well beaten, white nougat candy; heavenly hash, a kitchen sink conglomeration of marshmallows, canned fruit, and heavy cream; angel food cake, light and airy as the egg whites in the batter; devil’s food cake, rich with chocolate and dark as Satan’s own heart; and ambrosia, a jumble of fruits and grated coconut that owes its name to the Greek word *ambrotus*, meaning ‘immortal,’ the state induced by eating the food of the gods.”

--*A Gracious Plenty*

SOUTHERN FOOD AND SOUTHERN IDENTITY IN CHANGING TIMES

Cookbooks are significant, even sacred, tomes of Southern foodways.

John T. Edge writes, “Community cookbooks—those clunky, spiral-bound, gravy splattered volumes—are as Southern as sweet tea. They may get comparatively little critical respect, but they are much relied upon in Southern kitchens. Whether full of white glove standards like cheese straws, tomato aspic, and deviled eggs, or a collection of casseroles bound together by that ubiquitous duct tape of culinary creation called cream of mushroom soup, community cookbooks are a voyeur’s treat, a window into the everyday life and foods of a group of churchgoers, a clutch of quilters, or a league of ladies inclined towards service. ...At first glance, the books are almost formulaic in their intent, organization, and content. Yet a closer look at the foods selected for inclusion, the names ascribed to the dishes, and the tales told of meals past reveals as much about the community of the compilers as any local history could.”

--*A Gracious Plenty*

Today cookbooks continue to play an important role in maintaining Southerners’ sense of identity. In times of tragedy this point is especially visible. Journalist Julia Cass reports, “When [New Orleans’] bookstores began opening after Hurricane Katrina’s floodwaters receded, the first volumes residents bought to replace their waterlogged, moldy collections were often beloved cookbooks.

Philippe LaMancusa, owner of the Kitchen Witch bookstore in the French Quarter, said 70 percent of his sales since reopening in November [2005] have come from customers whose recipe books were among Katrina’s casualties.

‘People are replacing their cookbooks first,’ agreed Tom Lowenberg, owner of Octavia Books. ‘Cooking is so tied in with people’s comfort and quality of life, especially in New Orleans. I think making familiar foods helps people with the heartbreak of loss.’”

--“After Katrina, Cookbooks Top the Best-Seller List”
The Washington Post

Southern foodways are always evolving.

Bill Neal writes, “The gas stove, refrigerator, modern transportation—all improved the living conditions and changed Southern food... B.C.C. (or Before Climate Control), you might as well have gardened, for it was just as hot inside as out. Now it’s a lot harder to convince yourself it’s truly worth the venture out when the temperature is 90, and the humidity higher. There’s hardly anyone at home anymore, either, even if there were still vegetable men on their routes. Yet the demand is still there and is being met with the renaissance of farmers markets. Town, county, and state governments wisely support and encourage small rural farmers to get the best of their produce to the local populace.”

--*Southern Cooking*

Joe Gray Taylor writes, “Two very significant changes, one on food itself and the other in preparing food, took place during the later 19th century. As the result of increased wheat production and new milling methods, the great flour mills of the Middle West brought the price of flour down so low that even relatively poor southerners could afford it. ...By 1900 wheat-flour biscuits had become as common as corn bread. People [began to eat] huge quantities of biscuits. ...[However] the most basic change was the growth of ‘eating out,’ a trend spurred by the availability of reasonably good restaurants in the cities (superb ones in some cities) and, especially, by the advent of so-called fast foods. The hamburger emporium, the fried-catfish stand and the fried chicken establishment provided meals for a tremendous number of southerners everyday. It is noteworthy that two of these foods, the chicken and the catfish, have been a part of the southern diet for two hundred years. Furthermore, they are still fried!”

--“Southern Foodways”

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture

Natalie Dupree remarks of the relatively recent abundance of Southern (or at least Southern-inspired) restaurants: “Since 1986, restaurants too have adapted Southern foods in new and creative ways. It’s quite common now, for example, to see grits on menus day and night, cooked with all sorts of liquids and served with exotic combinations of foods. Some chefs even grind their own grits and make their own hominy. The demand for organic gardening and heirloom vegetables has also grown as some chefs work directly with individual farmers and growers to produce the vegetables, poultry, squab, pork, lamb, seafood, and other products for their kitchens.”

--*New Southern Cooking*

Jessica Harris speaks to the necessity of tweaking Southern foodways for health reasons: “Our traditional diet, although glorious and delicious, was evolved by a group of people who were up at dawn to plow the back forty before having breakfast. Now many of us ride cars and buses and subways to workplaces where we sit at desks exerting little if any physical energy. Certainly, our diets should change as well. However, we do not have to turn our collective back on our culinary heritage.”

--*The Welcome Table*

Regardless of the inevitable changes to Southern foodways, they remain central to the Southern identity.

John Egerton writes, “Within the South itself, no other form of cultural expression, not even music, is as distinctly characteristic of the region as the spreading of a feast of native food and drink before a gathering of kin and friends. For as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region’s image, its personality, and its character.”

--*Southern Food*

Bill Neal asserts, “The sad theme of loss runs through all of Southern culture from way back. The black spiritual and blues are its musical expression. But its counter-theme is endurance. Today, Southerners are more and more aware of their traditional foods as the rest of their culture blends into that of the nation as a whole. Certain dishes give identity to entire communities. ...When we no longer eat those foods, we will no longer be Southerners.”

--*Southern Cooking*

In an oral history for the Southern Foodways Alliance, one of its founders John Egerton remembers meeting a woman living outside the South at the organization’s annual gathering: “I remember getting in a conversation with a woman who I learned subsequently...was from California...I said, ‘Well it’s a long way to come just for--for supper.’ And she said, ‘Yeah, but it’s so Southern and you know being Southern is kind of like being Catholic. It’s almost impossible to get away from it. You can’t outgrow it or give it up or renounce it. It’s just a part of you.’”

--www.southernfoodways.com

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Films of Interest

Barbecue is a Noun by Hawes Bostic and Austin McKenna
 "The story of some very peculiar men who make a particular kind of barbecue—[Carolina barbecue]"

Smokestack Lightening by Lolis Eric Elie
 "This film profiles down-home devotees of the barbecue world..."

Whole Hog by Joe York
 "An examination of barbecue culture in west-central Tennessee. At the core of the story is whole hog stalwart Ricky Parker, pitmaster at B.E. Scott's Bar B Que in Lexington, TN."

Southern Foodways Alliance

The Southern Foodways Alliance is an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture with headquarters at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. The mission of the SFA is to document and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the American South. www.southernfoodways.com