

# Ethnic Foodways in Oklahoma

by Sue Manos

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With a population of just over 3 million, Oklahoma is nevertheless rich in its variety of ethnic groups. While Afro, Anglo, Mexican, and Native Americans now have the largest representations, Czechs, Germans, Italians, and southeast Asians have also immigrated over the past several decades. Foodways, which are the traditions of cooking, eating, and celebrating with food, tend to be one of the strongest retentions of these many cultures. Sharing unique food traditions strengthens family and community ties.

As the early Czech settlers came to Oklahoma at the turn of the century, they brought with them a tradition of hearty home cooking. Many of the residents still speak the language and get together on occasion to polka and waltz to local Czech bands and eat home-ground sausage *kolbasy* and sweet rolls *kolaches*.

## Sweet Roll *Kolaches*

Nearly every Czech family in Oklahoma makes *kolaches* for dessert on special occasions. To make these yeast-raised rolls

### Mix:

2 cups lukewarm milk  
½ cup sugar  
2 tsp. salt  
1 or 2 cakes crumbled yeast

### Stir in:

2 eggs or ½ cup milk  
½ cup shortening  
7 to 7½ cups flour  
(Makes about 6 dozen)

When dough is ready to form into buns, roll one-half into a square, ¼ inch thick, and cut into small squares, 3 to 4 inches each. Place filling in center of each square, then bring the four corners of the square in the center to cover the filling, pinching the edges together firmly. Place one inch apart in shallow buttered pan. Brush tops with butter and let rise until doubled (approximately half an hour). Bake 20 minutes at 375°.

If desired, frost with simple white icing.

### Fillings:

Prune Filling: Cook 1 pound of prunes until very tender, remove seeds and sweeten to taste. Add ¼ tsp. cloves and grated rind of ½ lemon. Cook until very thick and add vanilla to taste.

Apricot Filling: Cook dried apricots until very tender. Add sugar and cook until very thick.

Cottage Cheese Filling: 4 cups of well-drained cottage cheese, ¾ cups sugar, 2 eggs, ½ tsp. vanilla and ½ tsp. salt. Mix well. Add enough thick cream until the consistency is like thick jam. Fill *kolaches* and let rise and bake. Ice after baking and sprinkle with coconut.

Poppy Seed Filling: 1 cup ground poppy seed, ¼ cup butter, ¼ cup milk, 1½ tsp. lemon juice or ½ tsp. vanilla, ¼ tsp. cinnamon and ½ cup sugar. Blend all ingredients and simmer for 5 minutes. Let cool before filling *kolaches*. Will fill one dozen.

Coconut Filling: Mix together ½ cup brown sugar (packed in cup), ½ cup coconut and 3 tablespoons butter.

Fruit Filling: 2 cups chopped apples, 1 cup raisins, 1 cup brown sugar (packed in cup), ½ cup water, ½ tsp. salt and ½ tsp. cinnamon. Boil about 15 minutes until thick as mincemeat. Cool before using.

Apple Filling: Cook sweetened apples until thick. Flavor with cinnamon or grated lemon rind. Add a pinch of salt and a tablespoon of butter for each cupful of apples. Place spoonful in hollow of *kolache* and sprinkle with coconut or chopped pecans. (Recipe compliments of the women of Prague, Oklahoma)

The Germans who immigrated to Oklahoma followed the first major land rush in 1889 and constituted the largest population of Europeans entering the state. As agriculturalists, they were influential in bringing Turkey Red wheat into the region. Within their group they carry on strong religious, farming, and family traditions.

#### Plum Soup *Pluma Moos*

Customarily *moos* was made every Saturday to be eaten hot or cold for that day's supper or for Sunday dinner. Various types of fruit may be used.

##### Mix

- 1½ cups raisins
- 1 cup prunes
- 2-inch stick cinnamon
- 5 cups water

Combine in saucepan, bring to boil. Simmer, covered, 20 minutes until prunes are tender.

##### Mix:

- ½ cup flour
- 1¼ cup sugar
- 1 cup light cream

Mix the flour and sugar, then add cream and blend. Stir into the hot liquid and cook until done. (Recipe compliments of the family of David Peters, Stillwater, Oklahoma)

During the early 1900's at the end of the Mexican Revolution, a great number of Mexicans migrated to Oklahoma seeking increased income. The Mexican-American community in Oklahoma today is prospering and growing rapidly.

#### Beef Tamales

Tamales may be served at any meal but are traditionally served for holiday meals.

##### Meat Filling:

- 3 lbs. ground beef
- ½ cup paprika
- ¼ cup chili powder
- 2 tbsp. garlic powder
- ½ cup shortening or lard
- salt

Cook beef in the shortening in a heavy pan, breaking up the beef, until it changes color. Mix in spices and cook until meat is done. Do not let spices scorch. Set aside.

##### Masa:

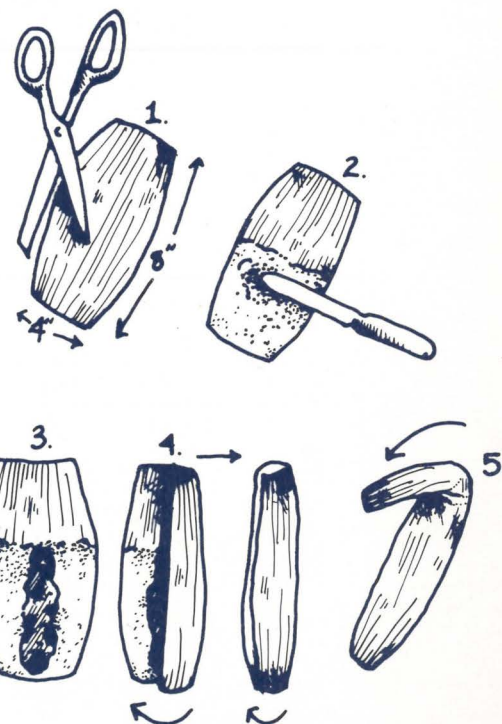
- 2½ lbs. yellow corn meal
- 2 Tbsp. salt
- ½ lb. shortening or lard
- boiling water

Put corn meal in a large mixing bowl. Make a hole and pour in boiling water, a little at a time, until you have a stiff dough. (Meal will be cooked and will expand.) Add salt and shortening and mix well. Dough must be very stiff in order to spread well on corn shucks.

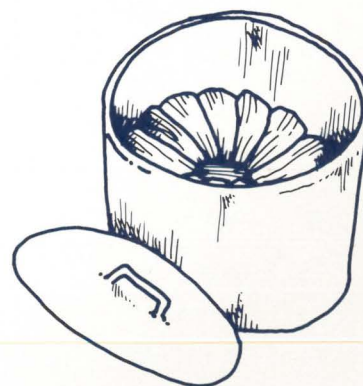
##### Corn Shucks (Husks):

Prepare dried shucks by cleaning out silks and trimming to about 8 inches by 4 inches (see diagram 1). Place shucks in a pan and cover with hot water to soften and make them pliable. Holding shuck in one hand with the rough side out (to hold *masa*) spread *masa* on in a ½ inch layer (see diagram 2). A large table knife may be used for this. When all shucks are spread with *masa*, place about 1 tbsp. meat on center of *masa*, lengthwise (see diagram 3). Gently roll shuck, enclosing *masa* and meat (see diagram 4). Fold down end. You should leave one end of shuck without *masa* approximately 3 inches (see diagram 5).

Cook in a steamer – do NOT place tamales on bottom of kettle. Cook about 2½ hours, adding water to steamer as necessary. Let stand untouched to rest about 20-30 minutes. Tamales will become firm as they cool. Unwrap husk and serve. (Recipe compliments of David Zamudio, Ada, Oklahoma)



*cook in a steamer*





The Italian-American community began in the early 1900's as people moved west seeking land and work. Religious holidays and celebrations have always been an important part of their culture in the United States.

#### Easter Bread *Casadele*

This bread can be served at Easter time.

##### Ingredients

4 eggs  
1 pkg. yeast  
½ cup melted pork fat  
½ cup grated parmesan cheese  
4½ cups flour  
a "guess" of pepper

Mix all ingredients, knead the dough and set in a warm place to rise, about 30 minutes. Punch down, shape in a braid, and let rise again. Bake at 400° for 20 minutes.

This can be used alone or for a variation, as a two-shell pie crust. The following is a recipe for the filling for a two-crust pie.

#### Easter pie

2 eggs  
1 lb. ricotta cheese  
½ cup grated parmesan cheese  
½ lb. mozzarella cheese  
1 roll pepperoni, diced  
a "guess" of pepper

Follow the same steps to make the crust as in *casadele*. After dough has risen, cut batch in half to make two pie shells. When first shell is placed in pie pan, mix all the above ingredients in a bowl and spoon into shell. Cover with second shell and bake at 400° for 20 minutes or until browned.

The Southeast Asian-Americans are some of the most recent immigrants to Oklahoma, with Vietnamese having the largest representation. The move from Southeast Asia to the United States uprooted them from all that was familiar in their Far Eastern culture, and to provide mutual support and preserve some of their cultural identity, they have settled into tightly knit communities.

#### Meat Rolls *Cha Gio*

These meat rolls, which differ from traditional Chinese Egg Rolls in spicing and texture, are a very popular special occasion food. Though they were once served for everyday meals, few women now have the time to make them often because they are so time-consuming: 2 lbs. ground fresh pork butt or pork and crabmeat or pork and fresh shrimp, Chinese mushrooms, softened in water, cleaned, drained, and sliced.

##### Ingredients

Bean sprouts  
2 eggs  
Oysters (optional)  
Watercress  
Rice paper *Ban trang*  
1 large onion, chopped fine  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Thin rice noodles  
Lettuce  
Fish sauce *Nuoc Mam*

Mix the meat and shellfish together with the seasonings and eggs. Cover and let stand while chopping mushrooms and onions. Cut bean sprouts into small pieces. Mix seasoned meat with vegetables. Take rice paper (soft yellow rice paper works the best) and cut each piece into 4 sections. Wet the rice paper by dipping it into water, then quickly remove and drain flat on a towel. Moisten only one piece at a time. Handle carefully so it will not break or tear.

Put a small amount of the mixture on the rice paper which is sitting on a heavy towel. Spread filling out to form cigar shape. Fold over one edge using fingers to hold down. Then fold in side edges as much as possible. Roll up gently, pulling to make it taut (see diagrams). Put separately on rack in refrigerator to let rice paper dry.

Preheat 2 cups oil in heavy pan. When oil is about 375°, put in rolls and cook about 4-5 minutes, until crispy and brown. Remove and drain and serve hot over rice noodles with watercress, lettuce, and fish sauce. (Recipe compliments of Vietnamese-American Association, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Fish sauce and rice paper are commonly available in Vietnamese grocery stores.)

The American Indian population in Oklahoma includes over 30 tribes, many descended from tribes which travelled over the Central and Southern Plains for several centuries. The Cherokees, a Woodlands tribe who came to Oklahoma on "The Trail of Tears" from five southern states, are the largest in number.

### Fry Bread

Fry bread is mainly a Plains Indian food. Because of their nomadic lifestyle, Plains Indians did not have ovens, so they learned how to utilize flour as best they could. One of the easiest ways was to fry it. Now it is served along with lunch and dinner as part of the regular diet.

### Ingredients

2 cups flour  
3 tsp. baking powder  
1 tsp. salt  
¾ cups milk

Mix dry ingredients. Stir in milk, adding more if necessary to make a smooth dough when formed into a ball. Divide dough into small balls, about 1 cup sections, and roll out to ½" – ¾" thick in a round shape. Cut each circle into 4 pieces. Drop a few at a time into about 2" of hot fat in a cast iron skillet (fat should be at the temperature for frying doughnuts). Fry until golden brown in color, turning once. They will puff up immediately if the fat is the right temperature. Drain on paper towels and serve with the meal.

### Grape Dumplings (Blue Dumplings)

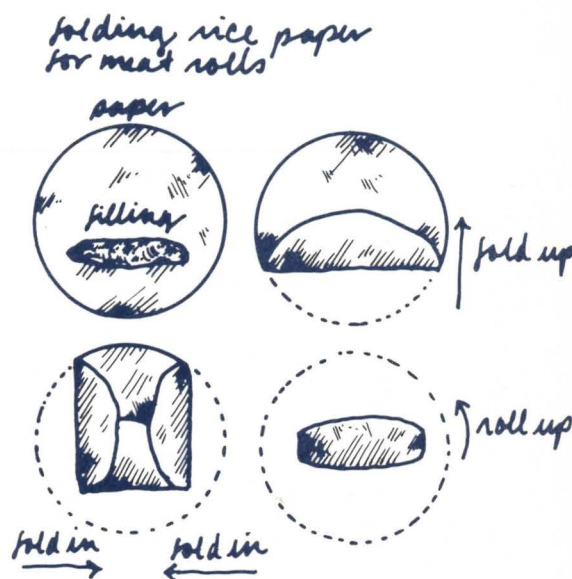
These sweet dumplings are made by the Cherokees at home to be served as a dessert or at Stomp Dances or for other ceremonials.

### Ingredients

1 quart unsweetened grape juice  
2 cups sugar  
¼ tsp. baking powder  
½ tsp. salt  
⅛ cup cooking oil  
½ cup water  
1½ – 2 cups flour

Mix baking powder, salt, oil and water together. Add flour, a little at a time, until you have a thick ball of dough, rather rubbery in consistency. Roll out onto floured board just as you would a piecrust. It should roll out to be very elastic and ⅛" thick.

In the meantime, boil the juice and sugar together until it begins to get sticky, almost jelly-like. This will take about 4 minutes over a high heat, stirring occasionally. When it begins to be jelly-like, slice the dough into narrow strips about ½" wide and 4" – 6" long. Drop into the boiling juice. Arrange it so they can all be dropped in rapidly at once. Keep the dumplings apart. Bring back to a boil and boil for 2-3 minutes. Cover and set off fire for about ½ hour to cool in order for it to thicken for serving. Can be served hot or cold with ice cream or whipped cream. (Option: can be made with blackberry, blueberry, or other juices if available.) (Recipes compliments of Clydia Nahwooksy, Norman, Oklahoma)





The Afro-American community in Oklahoma began before the rush of 1889. Around the turn of the century, there was even an immigration effort to settle Oklahoma as an all-Black state and at one time, there were over 25 all-Black towns. The early frontier life lent itself to outdoor cooking and smoking. Despite the rough terrain, okra, corn and pigs thrived as food sources.

#### Fried Okra and Ham

Okra, which originally was brought from Africa, is extremely popular and served in many variations. Many of the culinary skills which were indigenous to Africa were easily adaptable to the environment of Oklahoma.

1 lb. fresh okra  
½ cup cooking oil  
1 lb. smoked ham, cubed  
1 cup chopped onion  
salt and pepper to taste  
1 #2 can whole tomatoes or 1 lb. fresh tomatoes (optional)

Wash okra and remove tops. Cut in pieces about 1 inch thick. Heat oil and sautee ham until light brown. Add onions, okra and tomatoes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Cook over low heat until okra is tender, about 15 minutes. Serves 6. (Recipe courtesy of Hannah Atkins, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma)

Oklahoma's Anglo population has been strongly influenced by the many other cultures around it. Large numbers came as settlers during the land rush and remained to work in the various industries in the state.

#### Chicken-fried Steak and Cream Gravy

Chicken-fried steak with cream gravy and biscuits has been a popular food tradition that has spread to nearly all groups in Oklahoma.

##### Ingredients

Round steak, pounded thin  
Flour, seasoned with salt and pepper  
Eggs  
Milk

Mix eggs with a little milk and season with salt and pepper. Roll meat in the flour, then in the egg and back in the flour. It should be fried in hot oil in a heavy skillet – not too quickly. The secret to success is a consistent heat and not too much batter.

##### Cream Gravy

Pan drippings or sausage drippings  
Flour seasoned with salt and pepper  
Cream or milk  
Water

Brown drippings and some flour in skillet until brown. Add equal parts of milk and water until it reaches the desired consistency. Stir to keep smooth. (Caution: add milk and water slowly to avoid lumping).

#### Hot Biscuits For a Crowd

##### Ingredients

8 cups flour  
¾ cup baking powder  
1 teaspoon salt  
2 heaping tbsp. shortening  
½ gallon buttermilk

Preheat oven to 450°. Mix dry ingredients and cut in shortening by hand. Add buttermilk, mix, roll out dough ¼" thick and cut out biscuits. Cook approximately 15 minutes in preheated oven, watching carefully so they don't burn. (Recipes compliments of Robert L. Wharton and Bill Bigbee)