

# Foodways in a Festival Setting

by Charles Camp

*Charles Camp is employed by the Maryland State Arts Council, where he holds the position of State Folklorist. He has worked in various capacities on eight Festivals of American Folklife.*

In 1971, when I first became involved in the Festival of American Folklife as a fieldworker assigned to identify craftspeople for the presentation of traditions from my native Ohio, I recommended that a man from East Canton named Virgil Miller be invited to demonstrate the process of apple cider-making on the Mall. I can admit now that I recommended Mr. Miller as a potential Festival participant almost as an afterthought; having failed to identify as many craftspeople as I had planned, I hoped that cider-making might by some stretch of the term “craft” be considered along with my other recommendations. When Mr. Miller was invited to participate I was happy for him but privately concerned that, among practitioners of more widely recognized and respected Ohio traditions (rug weavers, basket makers, gunsmiths, and the like), Mr. Miller’s demonstration of cider-making would appear so unremarkable that few Festival visitors would pause to observe him at work.

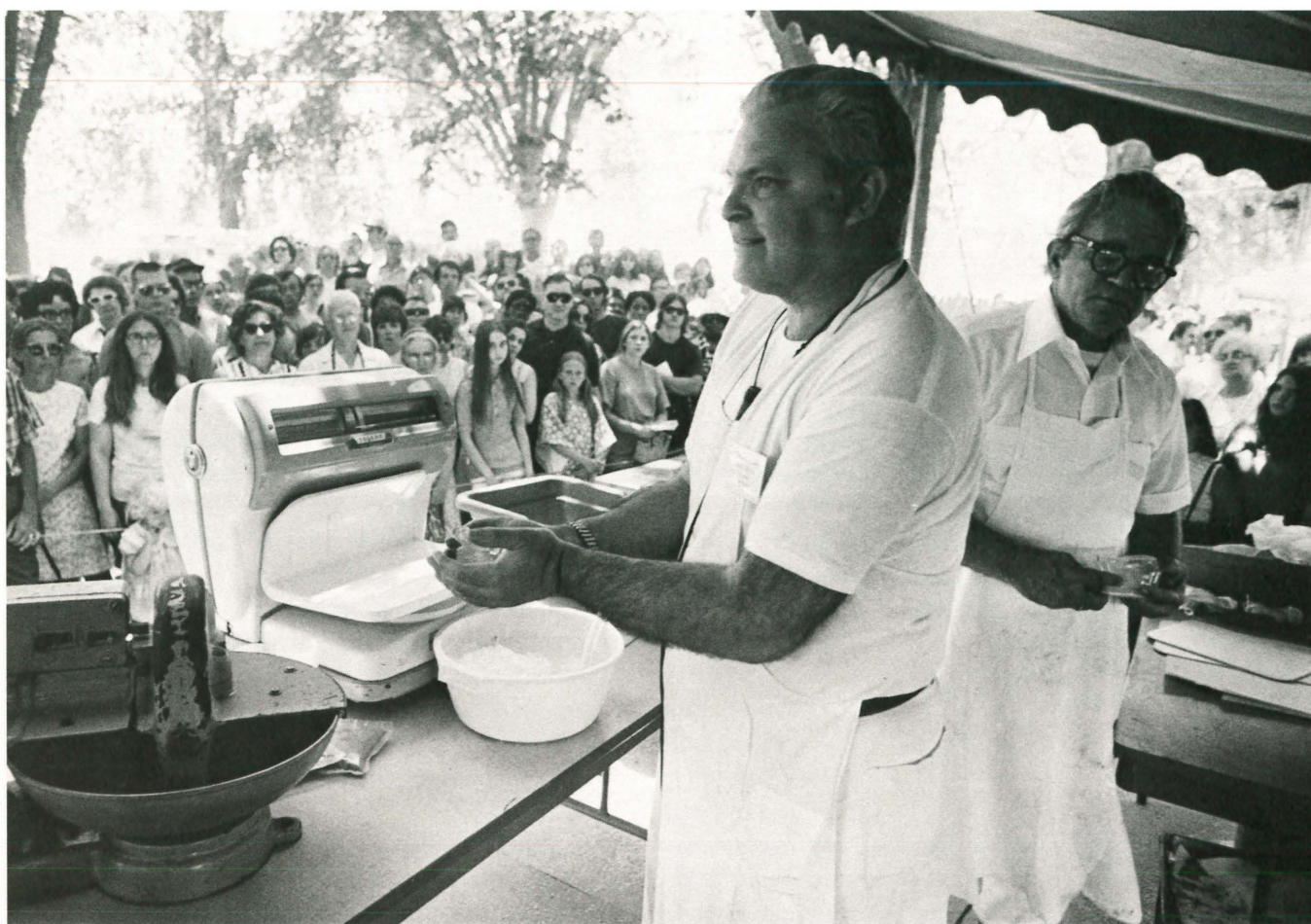
As it turned out, my fears were unfounded. Not only did large crowds gather around the cider press Mr. Miller had trucked from Ohio, but the very thing I had considered to be the demonstration’s weakest point—the utter familiarity of the foodstuff (apples) and the processed product (cider)—proved to be its greatest strength. Knowing at a glance what it was that Mr. Miller was doing gave his audience an opportunity to focus upon the cultural characteristics of his work—the occupational skills which had been passed down to him within his family, the differences between cider-making (and cider itself) in Ohio and other parts of the country, and the mixed blessings of operating a small family business whose fortunes were dependent upon such undependable things as sun, rain, and frost.

Much of what was valid for the presentation of Virgil Miller at the 1971 Festival is also true for the study and presentation of American foodways in general. Few aspects of our cultural life are more broadly expressive of ethnic, regional, occupational, or age-group identities than foodways, yet food is seldom the symbol of first choice in characterizing a particular culture group. If, as Festival founder Ralph Rinzler observed in 1971, the preparation of food is frequently the most persistent of cultural traits among the descendants of immigrants, lasting long after language, song, dance, and ritual have been eradicated or diluted, then foodways is predictably the folklife subject of last resort, attracting scholarly attention only after the loss of other traditions have left food as an isolate of identity, the cultural core most resistant to change.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that folklife represents both the most artistic and the most highly endangered traditions within a community lends justification to the continued documentation of forms of expression which may no longer be commonly practiced, such as ballad singing, observance of secular rituals like mumming or may day, or the making of stained-glass windows. Still, this view tends to overshadow the truly traditional charac-

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph Rinzler, “Bagel-Making in Ohio,” *Festival of American Folklife 1971* (program book), p. 8.



ter of most aspects of foodways and the degree to which food serves American communities as an abidingly useful social instrument and symbol. Virtually every step in the path which links field to market to kitchen to dinner table is marked by tradition, from the observance of lunar signs in the planting of a corn crop to the hollers of street vendors; from the composition of a Cajun gumbo to the carving of a Thanksgiving turkey or the apportionment of a wedding cake. And, unlike many other forms of cultural expression which are profoundly changed by the intervention of institutions bent on the “improvement” of community life, foodways are most often sheltered from rapid change by the intimacy of their acquisition and transmission: the food preferences we acquire as children eating at the family table are sustained and extended through the informal apprenticeships of daughters to mothers and sons to fathers. Few cooks can recall when it was that they learned how to make gravy or when to pick a vine-ripened melon because the process of learning such things is so closely bound to the process of growing up. The lessons are communicated within a setting of reassuring familiarity—the small tasks and practiced measurements—which consistently produce predictably delicious results.

But while cookery is the culinary focus of foodways, it is the range of occasions when people sit down to eat together which provides the sharpest view of food’s cultural utility. From a family’s Sunday dinner to a community oyster-and-ham supper, food events provide the basis for the comparison of ethnic and other variety in community life because such

Meat cutters and butchers demonstrate their occupational skills to visitors at the 1971 Festival of American Folklife.

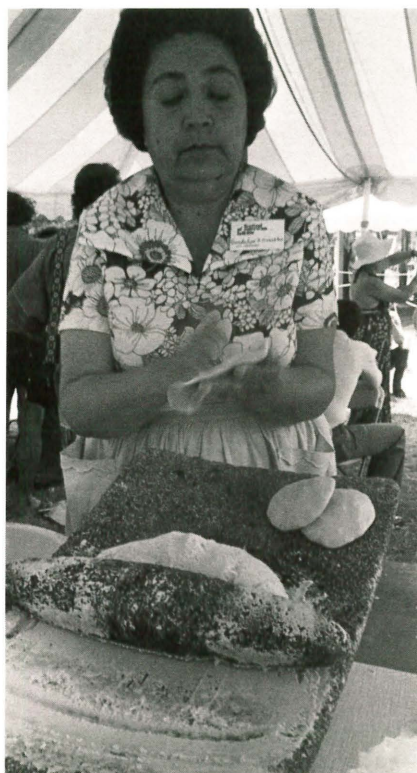


*Suggested reading*

Jones, Michael Owens, Bruce Giuliano, and Roberta Krell, eds. *Foodways and Eating Habits: Directions for Research*. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society, 1983.

Schweid, Richard. *Hot Peppers: Cajuns and Capsicum in New Iberia*. Seattle: Madrona Publishers, 1980.

Sokolov, Raymond. *Fading Feast: A Compendium of Disappearing American Regional Foods*. New York: Ferrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981.



Ethnic and regional culinary traits are transmitted through the preparation of tortillas during a food demonstration at the 1975 Festival of American Folklife.

events embody and express roles and relationships among the people involved as well as specific individual tastes and preferences. The division of labor for a family reunion picnic, for example, is a delicate task which draws upon varied sorts of familial information: who may be depended upon to make arrangements for the rental of a park shelter, how best to accord due respect to older family members without overburdening them with the day's labors, honoring the specialties of a dozen cooks without producing a table offering two kinds of macaroni salad and ten fancy desserts.

If the consumption of special meals may define an important social occasion, then individual foods may serve as symbols with meanings beyond their culinary merits. Eastern European *pysanki* (elaborately decorated Easter eggs) refer back to the imagery of nature and of food for their spiritual message, yet in their decoration the eggs become objects which can no longer be considered edible. Virtually every culture group in America produces (and consumes) some sort of bread, and the differences between Greek *pita* and Jewish *challah* cannot be accurately measured in a comparison of their ingredients. The uses of these and other foods provide the keys to our understanding of them as part of a cultural as well as a culinary tradition. The act of breaking bread has an almost universal meaning as a sign of sharing, but in foodways the proximity of the ordinary and the symbolic is uncommonly evident: at the same time that a shared meal may **symbolize** togetherness, the act of eating from the same pot **enacts** togetherness.

As a generally intimate, if ordinary enterprise, the preparation and consumption of food is not easily presented at an event like the Festival of American Folklife. For cooks who come to the Mall to demonstrate the cookery traditions characteristic of the place or ethnic community from which they come there is much concern that what has been learned during a lifetime of familiarity may not be so easily communicated in a few words to Festival audiences. The task of planning two weeks worth of Festival presentation — the estimate of ingredients, description of necessary equipment, and selection of the foods or processes which best communicate the traditions the participant personifies — is both foreign and considerable. But from its beginnings more than fifteen years ago, the Festival has used the familiar as well as the rare in American folk culture to inform its audiences about the subtle, human sources of that culture's abiding strength. The presentation of foodways at the Festival serves not only to broaden the definition of folklife that visitors bring to the event, but also to identify the fundamentally traditional character of the varied ways in which Americans prepare and use foods to serve their cultural as well as nutritional purposes.