

Hogmeat, Corn and Catfish: Tennessee Foodways

by Phyllis M. May

Food traditions are often taken for granted, but like music, housing styles, and language, they often characterize regions, representing the confluence of history and environment into a distinctive culture. The state of Tennessee, part of a region often called the Upland South, has been influenced by the Midwest, Deep South, Appalachian mountain, and vigorous river and lake cultures. While few food traditions are exclusive to the state, its daily foods blend these influences and the resources of the local southern environment with the foodways of West European, African and Native American peoples in ways characteristic of this region.

The foodways of Tennessee are rich and diverse. In typically Southern fashion, many families in rural regions of the state maintain small gardens next to their homes. In them are leaf lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, onions, cucumbers, corn, and a variety of peas, beans, and greens—ready for consumption at family dinners. Throughout the summer, seasonal fruits and vegetables are canned and frozen for later use, so that jellies, jams, fruit butters and sauces, preserves, pickles, relishes, and stewed fruits grace the table year round. In many households, a salad consists simply of a plate of fresh tomatoes, onions, peppers, and cucumbers marinated in a vinegar dressing. Beans, peas, or greens are simmered with a piece of salted pork for seasoning. Fresh pies and cakes accompany every dinner. Some Tennesseans supplement their diets with wild plants, such as poke “sallet,” creasie and dandelion greens, fresh herbs, “dryland fish” (morel mushrooms), and various nuts and berries. They may also eat wild game, hunted or trapped for subsistence rather than sport. Rabbit, possum, raccoon, squirrel, frog, turtle, deer, various birds, and even groundhog are regularly mentioned meats in the diets of a number of Tennesseans. People in the river and lake regions of the state capitalize on the water-based foods not only as a source of income but also as an integral part of their daily diet, preparing them in a variety of stewed and fried meat dishes. Canned carp, which tastes like salmon, is a special river delicacy. Although southern-fried chicken is extremely popular throughout Tennessee, the delicate tastes of fried catfish or whiting rival its standing in some parts of the state.

Two of the most significant foodstuffs for Tennessee are corn and hogs. Corn is a staple food of this region and is used in a variety of ways: as a food for human and animal consumption, as a fuel, as a primary ingredient for making whiskey and medicines, as a material from which tools and toys are made, and as a source of barter. As a food, it is served on the cob—parched and boiled—or off the cob—



Sam Page cleaning groundhog, Free Hill, Clay County. Photo by Tom Rankin, Southern Arts Federation

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Dora Bowlin with her pantry of preserves, Hancock County. Photo by Chris Hale

fried, steamed, boiled, or baked. It is the basic ingredient in hominy and grits; dried, it is milled into cornmeal. For many Tennesseans, bread means cornbread, a food that can be eaten at every meal.

Pork is as versatile a foodstuff as corn. One of the most popular methods for cooking it is as barbecue. Memphis claims to be "The Pork Barbecue Capital of the World" since it supports an enormous number of barbecue businesses and hosts the "Memphis in May" barbecue contest. However, barbecue flourishes throughout the state in backyards, home-built pits, small commercial establishments, and community contests and festivals as a major means of meat preparation. Anyone who is truly acquainted with barbecue knows that discussions of it evoke strong sentiments. Everyone knows the best barbecue place or someone who makes the most spectacular sauce. Any great sauce contains one or more time-tested secret ingredients that distinguish it from "ordinary" sauces and make the real difference. Within the state of Tennessee, barbecue may be accented by sweet sauces, vinegar-based sauces, tomato-based sauces, beer or alcohol-based sauces, doctored-up, store-bought sauces, hot, peppery sauces, or a dry mixture of spices to be rubbed directly on the meat or mixed in with the meat juices and used for basting. Flavors (and opinions) also vary concerning whether the meat is cooked as whole-hog barbecue or as pork shoulder or ribs. Furthermore, the style of the pit and the material out of which it is made, the type of charcoal or wood used to make the fire, whether the meat is cooked prior to being placed in the pit, and the appropriate length of time for cooking it to the desired point of doneness all enliven personal testimonies about barbecue.

Another product for which Tennessee has gained a well-deserved reputation is country ham. By salting down a freshly butchered hog and dry-aging it or smoking fresh or salted meat with hickory wood or dried corncobs, Tennesseans have preserved hog meat flavorfully throughout the winter without the necessity of refrigeration. Across the state, this process occurs as both a home-based and commercial activity.

Food is part of most family and community celebrations. In northwestern Tennessee, several communities have organized annual festivals around those particular foods which provide an economic base for the area, such as "The World's Biggest Fish Fry" in Paris (featuring local catfish), "The Strawberry Festival" in Humboldt and "The Okra Festival" sponsored by the town of Bells. In Black communities across the state, barbecues are standard fare for homecomings, family reunions, and Fourth of July and Emancipation Day celebrations. These events furnish economical and socially intensive ways to prepare food for large numbers of people.

Food facilitates social interaction and the expression of cohesiveness, both to the group itself and to outsiders who may be permitted to share in such festivities as community festivals. Among the Choctaw of Tennessee, for instance, *banaba*, a bread of dried peas and cornmeal wrapped in cornhusks, is not only a source of nutrition but also a reaffirmation of their traditional lifestyle and culture in the face of change. All humans process, prepare and eat foods in culturally specific and prescribed ways as part of their daily activities. It is precisely because of this that food traditions serve as an



effective avenue for the expression of identity, tastes and values, symbolism, etiquette, artistry, sensory stimulation, and creativity. Tennessee's food traditions serve as an important way to express and maintain identity at the state and community level. Anyone who has missed a chance to explore the infinite varieties of dishes based on corn or to delve into a plate of Tennessee country ham, barbecue, or fried catfish, has truly overlooked one of the state's most essential, pleasurable experiences.

Country barbecue of domestic and wild meats, including groundhog, squirrel, frog, and chicken, Free Hill, Clay County. Photo by Tom Rankin, Southern Arts Federation

Suggested Readings

Bowlin, Dora B. *"Hog and Hominy": Corn in Early East Tennessee*. (Privately published.)

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Trillin, Calvin. "Thoughts of an Eater with Smoke in His Eyes." *The New Yorker*, August 12, 1985, pp. 56-63.

Walter, Eugene. *American Cooking: Southern Style*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1971.