

## A TASTE OF APPALACHIA

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MARK F. SOHN

Stack cakes, shuck beans, chicken 'n' dumplings, soup beans, and fried apple pies—significant regional foods of Appalachia. Add biscuits and gravy, fried apples, chow chow, and gritted corn bread, and this food reveals its diverse roots in the cultures of Europe, America, and Africa.

American and Appalachian food has passed through significant periods of history, including Native American, European adaptation, steak and potatoes, new Continental, American regional, and healthy low-fat eras. Long before peanut butter and mayonnaise found a place in Appalachian kitchens, Native Americans hunted black bear, buffalo, elk, and whitetail deer. They gathered hickory nuts, black walnuts, American chestnuts, persimmons, and fox grapes, and they domesticated corn, pumpkin, squash, and beans.

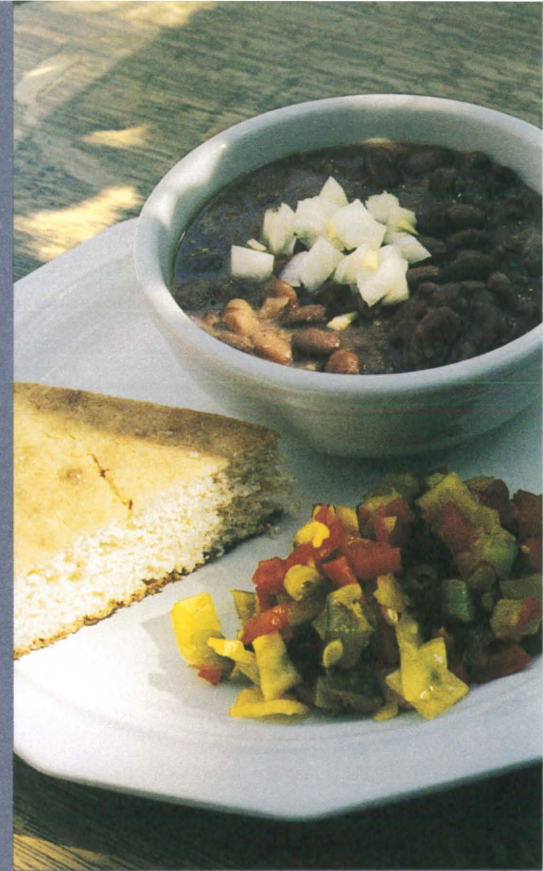
When Americans became fascinated with regional foods in the 1970s, the ingenuity and integrity of Appalachian foodways were well established and deserving of recognition. *The Foxfire Book*, edited in 1972 by Eliot Wigginton of the Appalachian part of Georgia, was among the first to give wide national attention to Appalachian food including dried green beans or "leather britches," dried pumpkin, sauerkraut, pickled beets, souse or hog's head cheese, stew, watermelon pickles, and methods of preserving such as burying, bleaching, drying, distilling, and churning. He also discussed hog killing, smoking, and curing. In addition to the work

Mark F. Sohn, Ph.D., is a Pikeville (Kentucky) College psychology professor, cookbook author, and photographer. His specialty is Appalachian cooking.

of cultural historians such as Wigginton, whole communities began organizing street festivals to celebrate regional foods. For example, in 1976 in Pikeville, Kentucky, a group of Shriners came together for Hillbilly Days, a celebration of mountain food and culture. Other communities established days or whole weeks to celebrate sorghum, apples, honey, ramps (a kind of wild garlic), maple syrup, dandelions, bean soup, fried chicken, bourbon, buckwheat, and even squirrels.

One of the popular events at these festivals is making apple butter. With leaves flying in the air and apples falling on the ground, people gather to preserve the fruit and anticipate the smooth tangy spread, sweet spicy sauce, and biscuit topping that is apple butter. Civic groups peel, simmer, and bottle their favorite apples. From the back of a pickup truck, group members stack bushels of fresh apples in their vendor tents. Over small fires and in giant cauldrons, using wood stirrers with handles that may be eight feet long, they simmer the apples, evaporating the water and making a concentrate. The boiling takes days, and stirring must be continuous. Then, the apple butter is packed in pint jars and sold from tents or tables. At other festivals the same community pride is seen as sweet sorghum stems are pressed and evaporated, dry corn is ground and bagged, and ramps are fried and served with dinner rolls and hot beans.

Between these annual community events, mountaineers gather frequently for dinners of home cooking served at homecomings, graveyard reunions, award banquets, club meetings, and church gatherings. A variation of the potluck supper, "dinner on the grounds" follows a morning worship service and gets its name from the fact that food is



Appalachian foods such as soup beans, cornbread, and chow chow use ingredients that are common to the region. Photo © Mark Sohn

eaten on the church property on temporary tables, retaining walls, church steps, or any spot that is comfortable enough. Glass- and foil-covered casseroles, Tupperware boxes of raw vegetables or deviled eggs, baskets of bread and dinner rolls, and cake pans and pie plates are arranged on long tables. Guests form a line, wait for a blessing, visit with friends, and then pass along both sides of the tables selecting their favorite foods. Pasta, potato, vegetable, apple, and molded salads are followed by hot vegetables, starches, meats, breads, and pickles. At the end are the desserts—cookies, bars, pies, cakes, and candies—and finally beverages. The specific foods at these events represent the varied ethnic backgrounds of those in the community, whether they are African American, Eastern European, English, German, Hispanic, Italian, Native American, Scots-Irish, or Swiss, all of whom have contributed to the region's food traditions. ■