

# Key Ingredients: Tennessee by Food

In 2004 and 2005, eight rural Tennessee communities hosted the Smithsonian Institution's *Key Ingredients*, a traveling exhibit about food in America. Obion, Henry, and Lauderdale Counties in the west; Robertson and Williamson counties in Middle Tennessee; and Hawkins, Knox, and Blount Counties in the east: together, the culinary traditions and innovations of these communities paint a picture of food in Tennessee.

## **Hogs and Hominy: A Blending of Cultures**

Like Southern food in general, traditional Tennessee food developed from a fusion of European, Native American, and African traditions. The pork and wheat of Europe, the corn and beans of America, and the cooking style of African-Americans combined to make the barbeque, biscuits, beans and cornbread found throughout the state.

To learn more about the history and culture of the Cherokee in East Tennessee, visit the [Sequoyah Birth Place Museum](#) in Vonore.

When Europeans first arrived in 1540, native peoples in Tennessee had an abundant and varied food supply. The Cherokee, in eastern Tennessee, grew corn, squash, beans, and melons. From the wild they gathered berries, nuts, and acorns. They hunted or trapped fish, deer, elk, bison, black bear, rabbit, squirrel, frogs, turtles, and birds. The Chickasaw living in the west had a similar diet, and Shawnee peoples from the north and Choctaws from the south traveled into Tennessee to hunt the plentiful game. While the new arrivals from Europe and Africa adopted many New World foods, corn was the most significant Native American contribution to their diet. Native dishes such as roasted corn on the cob, suppone, appone, samp, and rockahominy became known as roastin' ears, pone, hoecake, and hominy as they entered the new settlers' culinary vocabulary.

In turn, Europeans contributed pork to the New World diet, and hogs soon became the major meat supply for all Tennesseans. As the nation's top producer of corn and pork in

the years before the Civil War, Tennessee earned the nickname the "Hog and Hominy" State.

Enslaved Africans brought knowledge of African crops such as sorghum, okra, black-eyed peas, collard greens, yams, and watermelons, as well as seasonings and preparation techniques from the West Indies, an area through which many slaves passed on the way to America. Cooking both for themselves and for wealthy European-Americans, African-American cooks profoundly shaped Tennessee cuisine.

### **From the Fried Pie to the Fish Fry: Tennessee's Local and Regional Flavors**

Tennessee is home to many famous Southern food traditions and innovations. Moon Pies and Little Debbie Snack Cakes both originally came from Chattanooga. Goo Goo Clusters, decadent chocolate-covered mounds of caramel, marshmallow, and roasted peanuts, were first produced in Nashville. Memphis not only claims the hotly contested title of Barbeque Capital of the World, but is also the original home of Piggly Wiggly, the grocery store which popularized the idea of self service, thereby revolutionizing the grocery shopping industry. Similar to these big cities, Tennessee's rural communities have their own culinary specialties.

The story of the Flippen family of Obion County, in West Tennessee, illustrates how one family can have a big impact on the "local flavor" of a community. In the 1930s, farmer Marty Flippen and his wife Viola set out some apple trees in addition to the row crops they had always grown. They didn't pay much heed to little orchard until they realized they could make a living selling the fruit. Several of their children and grandchildren also started orchards in Obion County. Flippen's Fruit Farm, owned by their son, Jack Flippen, is now the largest orchard in Tennessee.

The Flippen family has made Obion County a center for the production of fried pies, a Tennessee treat that used to be quite common a generation ago. In 1984, a severe hailstorm ruined the peach crop at Flippen Fruit Farm. Not to be defeated, the Flippens processed the pitted fruit and froze it. That winter, "Mama Dan" Flippen began experimenting with fried pies. "Everybody knew how to make the peach pie filling," she explains, "but we didn't know how to make a good pastry dough." Most women simply

flattened leftover biscuit dough into a circle and folded it in half over a peach or apple filling. The moon-shaped pie was then deep fat fried. After Mama Dan perfected her pastry, the fried pie business took off. Flippen Fruit Farm now has a small factory producing as many as 3,000 of their "World's Best Fried Pies" per day. In the process, the Flippens are preserving one of Tennessee's traditional foods, no longer commonly prepared in homes.

For many people, the mention of Tennessee brings to mind Jack Daniel's whiskey. While Jack Daniel's touts itself as the oldest registered distillery in America, the once world-recognized and now-forgotten distilleries of Robertson County predated the 1866 Lynchburg company by over seventy years. Like much of Tennessee, Robertson County attracted Scots-Irish settlers, who carried both a taste for whiskey and a knowledge of the distilling process. In Robertson County they found excellent raw materials for whiskey production: rich land for growing corn, oak trees for making barrels, and the perfect, limestone-rich water.

While Robertson County's distilleries are long gone, you may experience the Tennessee Whiskey distilling process at the **Jack Daniel's Distillery** in Lynchburg and at the **George A. Dickel Distillery** in Cascade Hollow, near Tullahoma.

Small-scale family stills were common throughout early Tennessee, but the distilleries of Robertson County soon grew into major businesses. During the heyday of whiskey production from 1865-1885, the county produced 45,000 barrels — over 2 million gallons — of whiskey per year. In 1909, statewide Prohibition went into effect. The distilleries closed down, and the art of making fine Robertson County whiskey was lost.

Say the words "moonshine" or "white lightning," and colorful images of revenue officers and blockade runners come to mind. The illegal distilling of corn into whiskey has a long history in Tennessee. Not wishing to lose their profits to taxes, moonshiners made their liquor secretly, often working by moonlight. Production increased with Prohibition, as legal distilleries closed their doors. Although moonshining has decreased in the last forty years or so, it can still be found in Appalachian communities such as Blount County.

Some foods, such as barbeque, cannot be claimed by any one county or region in Tennessee. Throughout the state, pork is the favored meat, although chicken, and occasionally beef, are also found. Traditionally, barbeque cooks slowly in a "pit" over hot coals produced by burning hardwoods, such as hickory or locust. After cooking gently for hours, the tender meat is chopped or pulled by hand into smaller pieces. Local sauces and side dishes provide the regional variations within the state. Middle Tennessee's sauce, for example, tends to be vinegar based, whereas a sweet tomato-based sauce characterizes West Tennessee's Memphis-style barbeque.

African-American cooks are often credited with laying the foundation for Southern barbeque. Historically, African-American men presided over the barbeque pit, both within their own community and at events put on for white audiences. For example, African American cooks in Williamson County, in Middle Tennessee, have prepared barbeque for a variety of venues. Some used to make barbeque at home and sell it from their porches and back doors, while others vended their barbeque from carts. Some had restaurants, while still others specialized in working special events, such as church or community picnics. Over time, the preparation of barbeque has become the province of both blacks and whites across the state, and women have also made inroads into the pit.

### **Food and Identity**

Food is an important part of how we express and affirm our identities. Food helps us remind ourselves and explain to others who we are, both as individuals and communities.

The "World's Largest Fish Fry" in Paris, Tennessee, shows how the Chamber of Commerce of one rural town sought to change its community's image with the changing times. Every April, this exuberant festival attracts over 80,000 people, who eagerly consume five tons of fried catfish, along with thousands of pounds of hushpuppies, French fries, coleslaw and white beans. And it all started with mules.

Paris got the inspiration for its 1938 festival from the highly successful **Mule Day** held in the town of Columbia, Tennessee. Mule Day traces its roots to a yearly livestock

market held since 1840. It has grown to a festival which includes mule pulls and shows, as well as food, music, and much more.

That's right. Mules. In 1938, Paris began an April mule festival, including a parade, mule judging, and other entertainments. By the 1950s, as tractors replaced the animals in the fields, mules became scarce. The Chamber of Commerce decided that Paris needed to update its image. Located near the recently created Kentucky Lake, Paris was gaining popularity as a center for sport fishing. To build on this reputation, the Chamber held a Fish Fry in the spring to kick off the crappie and bass fishing season.

As it happens, the first Fish Fry flopped, because the Chamber served Atlantic Ocean whiting prepared by a Memphis caterer. The imported fish and big-city caterer stretched the bounds of tradition to the breaking point. In the second year, with locally appropriate catfish prepared by members of the community, the festival took off and has continued strong for over 50 years.

At about the same time that the Paris Fish Fry got started, two Choctaw Indian families left their reservation in Mississippi for Lauderdale County, in West Tennessee, to work for a cotton farmer. Every year, more families joined them, until by the late 1950s there were about 200 Choctaw clustered around the small rural community known as Golddust. Although the need for agricultural laborers lessened in the 1960s and 70s due to mechanization, many of the Choctaw remained in Lauderdale County, moving to larger towns and industrial jobs. Today there are over 200 Choctaw in the county, including a community of about twenty-five families living on land purchased by the tribe in the town of Henning.

Living so far away from the reservation, the West Tennessee Choctaw grew concerned about maintaining their children's cultural identity and pride. The foods prepared at special events help to remind them of their heritage. These foods include hominy, frybread, and banaha, a kind of cornmeal dumpling wrapped in corn shucks. Although hominy is popular with many Southerners, traditional Choctaw hominy is a far cry from the canned product found at grocery stores. The Choctaw begin with white corn grown on the Mississippi reservation. After shelling the dried corn kernels from the cob, they

pound the kernels until they are broken into smaller pieces and the skin is loosened. Then the hominy simmers for hours in a big black iron pot over an open fire. Meat, such as chicken or pork, is added for flavor. It swells up as it cooks, so half a gallon of dried hominy can feed a gathering of fifty to seventy-five people.

The Choctaw also make frybread, a fried dough made from wheat flour, at community celebrations. A popular food with Native Americans all over the country, frybread's ingredients vary slightly from cook to cook and region to region. All of these special foods, and the events at which they are enjoyed, help to strengthen the sense of community and cultural identity of West Tennessee's Choctaw people.

African Americans grew up side by side with the Choctaw in West Tennessee and ate the same foods on a day-to-day basis. When asked what foods are favorites in the African American community in the town of Henning, Mayor Mary Ann Jarrett replies: "Greens, and beans, and corn bread." Beans with cornbread are traditional all over Tennessee, but the type of bean varies. In Henning, they favor pinto beans. Charlotte Harris, who works in the mayor's office, is an excellent cook. No one wants to miss the days when she brings her beans and cornbread into the office. Harris cooks her beans with a smoked ham hock for seasoning, and serves them with cornbread and chopped raw onions. "That's a meal in itself," says Mayor Jarrett. "It's delicious." Harris operates within a tradition of African American cooks, who, working in the past with limited resources, were able to produce flavorful and satisfying foods out of inexpensive and readily available ingredients. Today, this "soul food" continues to provide pleasure, nourishment, and a feeling of home and community to Henning's African American residents.

African-Americans have worked similar magic on chitlins, or chitterlings, the small and/or large intestines of a hog. African-American cooks from Williamson County, in Middle Tennessee, explain that chitlins used to be available at meat packing houses for a very affordable price. After carefully scrubbing the chitlins inside and out, cooks boiled them, often with hot red pepper and vinegar, and served them up with hot sauce. Chitlins, rather than ham or turkey, used to be served on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In recognition of this tradition, many African-American families in Williamson County once again include chitlins as part of their holiday meals.

### **The More Things Change ...**

Changes and innovations in agriculture, food technologies, and distribution have had far reaching effects on Tennessean's lives and diets. With these changes come considerable gains: compared to life sixty or seventy years ago, the average person today devotes much less time to obtaining and preparing food and has access to a more consistent and more varied food supply. On the other hand, some Tennesseans observe that these advances sometimes diminish the quality of food, and can lead to the loss of knowledge, skills, and heritage.

Tennessee's Extension program for homemakers, created in 1914 as part of the Cooperative Extension Service, offers an interesting view of changes that have occurred within Tennessee's home kitchens. The Extension Service assigned each county a Home Agent, a female employee who taught rural women about new technologies and safer, more efficient methods for domestic tasks. Home Agents organized Home Demonstration Clubs and held all-day meetings on a regular basis. The creation of this government-sponsored program reflected a nationwide movement to introduce a scientific approach to domestic chores, rather than relying on traditional techniques passed down from mother to daughter.

The topics presented in club meetings in Obion County, Tennessee, from 1917 to 1978 paint a picture of the changing nature of domestic food technologies and concerns. Arriving in 1917, Obion County's first Home Agent stressed food preservation techniques, such as canning. By 1948, rural electrification signaled a major shift in women's domestic lives. Programs from the 1950s indicated the growing prevalence of electric appliances, with topics such as "Use of a Home Freezer" and "Use of a Broiler."

Starting in the 1950s, programs revealed a new concern with time and convenience, with titles such as "Time Saving with Foods," "Cooking Out of a Box: Ways to Use Convenience Foods to Save Time and Energy," "Busy Day Meals," and even "A Blender Meal: Preparing an Entire Meal with the Blender." Programs from the 1960s and 70s

also indicated a new focus on fitness and weight control. These changing topics follow rural Tennessee women's lives from a time when they relied heavily on the food they grew or raised on their farms, to the modern day, when far fewer Tennesseans produce much, if any, of their own food.

The story of Clifty Farm Country Meats, located in Paris, Tennessee, illustrates the continuity that can occur despite changing food technologies. The business got its start with Truman Murphey, who owned a community meat locker in the 1950s. At that time, most people in rural Tennessee did not yet own home freezers. To have a supply of fresh meat available in summer, they brought their livestock to the locker, where Murphey slaughtered and stored it until needed. The meat locker itself was a fairly recent innovation. Earlier, rural people preserved meat for the summer months by salting and smoking it in the form of country ham or bacon. Murphey liked to give such country hams to his good customers as a thank you.

As home freezers came in, business at the community meat locker began to fall off. Murphey decided to try selling his country hams. People laughed at him, explains his grandson Michael Murphey. They said "Who would want to go out and buy one when we could do them ourselves?" Truman Murphey had foresight, however. Fewer and fewer people made their own country hams, and Murphey's business flourished. Now in its third generation, Clifty Farm Country Meats sells 900,000 hams per year.

Curing country ham began as a necessity, a way to prevent pork from spoiling during the hot summer months. Despite advances in technology which make salting meat an obsolete food preservation technique, Tennesseans have kept their taste for country ham. The Murpheys have learned that this taste has changed over the years, however. "Years ago," Michael Murphy notes, "People wouldn't even consider eating a ham until it starting molding. And now people don't want to see the mold — they think something's wrong with it." To please people's changing tastes, Clifty Farm also makes their hams much less salty than in the past.

The Murpheys use computers to monitor and control the temperature and humidity of the hams' environment during the curing process. This technology allows them to

control the mold, salt, and moisture levels of the hams, resulting in a consistent product that consumers can count on. The Murpheys take pride in their hams and the evolving food tradition which they keep alive.

There was a time when grist mills dotted the countryside in Tennessee. These local mills ground neighborhood farmers' corn and wheat into meal and flour. As farming and food processing move to a larger scale, these small mills have mostly disappeared. Hawkins County in eastern Tennessee boasts an unusual number of surviving mill buildings, although none remain in operation. The last of them, the Livesay family mill, which provided the flour for the nation's bicentennial birthday cake, closed its doors in the mid 1990s.

In Robertson County, the Orlinda Milling Company has operated a four-story roller-type flour mill for over 100 years. Local farmers Ricky Stark and his two brothers purchased the mill from a neighbor in 1992. The mill grinds locally grown soft red winter wheat, much of which comes from the Stark brothers' farm. Grinding two days a week, the mill produces 7500 pounds of Jewel Mills brand flour per week. Stark is proud of his flour, which he sells to area grocery stores and restaurants. He believes that the Orlinda area produces the best wheat, and that the old mill produces a superior quality of flour.

As America moves to larger corporate farms, the many different varieties of fruits, vegetables, grains, and livestock that were once raised on small farms are rapidly disappearing. If you visit the 1797 Ramsey House Plantation just outside of Knoxville in eastern Tennessee, you can view some of Tennessee's old-time vegetables, however. For the past several years, volunteer John Coykendall has run a heritage gardening and seed saving program at this museum.

Coykendall has collected heirloom vegetable seeds for many years. He has obtained over 100 varieties of beans, many from families in eastern Tennessee and southern Appalachia. Coykendall believes it is important to save these old-time varieties. He describes the tradeoff that can occur when modern varieties replace the older ones: "Your early tomatoes ... had an excellent flavor, but now they weren't good shippers ... These modern tomatoes you can pick it in Florida, ship it all the way to New York. You

can use it for batting practice in Yankee Stadium and you won't put a bruise on it. They have a lot of great big beautiful, tasteless tomatoes; they taste like Styrofoam that's been sprayed pink or red."

Good flavor is only one motivation for saving these vegetables, however. Coykendall explains: "All these seeds represent a time going back to a person's family. It's part of their ancestry, it's part of their heritage. And so it's not only something that they enjoy eating, it's also something that's been handed down over the generations. It's an unbroken link with the past." Seed saving is a dynamic and ongoing form of historic preservation. If the seeds are not grown and multiplied, these vegetable varieties will eventually die out. Coykendall and other seed savers keep this connection to Tennessee heritage alive.

All over America, we are losing farm land to urban development, but Tennessee is losing such land at a higher rate than many other states. A few years ago, a group of residents and concerned citizens formed the French Broad Preservation Association to help protect the rural landscape along the French Broad River in Knox County, not far from the Ramsey House. This area boasts a high concentration of historic buildings, little modern development, and the last remaining prime agricultural soils in Knox County.

The Cruze Dairy sells unhomogenized whole milk, the old-fashioned kind where the cream rises to the top. Their signature product is churned buttermilk, which can be found in Mom and Pop fruit markets and grocery stores in the surrounding counties.

Earl Cruze, a fourth generation dairy farmer in the French Broad area, has witnessed this loss of farm land first hand. When his parents retired and sold their land, his home farm was converted into an industrial park, rock quarry, and garbage dump. The loss of Cruze's homeplace showed him the value of preserving his current farm land for future generations. In the fall of 2004, in partnership with the French Broad Preservation Association, the Cruzes became the first Tennessee farmers to participate in the federally funded Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. They agreed to put a conservation easement on their 450-acre dairy farm, which protects the land from future non-agricultural uses.

Bill Alexander, who lives in a suburb on the other side of Knoxville, is also concerned with conservation. Rather than focusing on land, his efforts concern the skills and knowledge necessary for making traditional Appalachian mountain berry baskets. In the past, residents of Cades Cove and other Great Smoky Mountain communities made these baskets. If they were out in the woods and came across a patch of huckleberries, a type of wild blueberry, they wouldn't bother to go home to fetch a bucket. Instead, they would make a basket out of a solid piece of tree bark, scored on the bottom in a cats-eye shape, and then folded upwards. Alexander notes that the resulting shape is rather like a McDonald's French fry box. They would sew up the sides with strips of bark, and add a handle made out of bark, vines, or a split piece of wood. Then they would carry the berries home to make pie or jelly. As for the basket, "[We] throwed 'em away. Never kept 'em after the berries were gone," explained one man interviewed by Alexander.

People considered these baskets disposable, so very few examples of them survive in museums or private homes. Alexander seeks out the few remaining mountain basket makers to learn their techniques and stories, and has become proficient at crafting baskets himself. Most Tennesseans no longer go wild berry picking or have the knowledge to make a berry basket, but Alexander's enthusiasm and dedication will help to keep this practical and resourceful mountain tradition from being forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that Tennessee's foodways are changing. Many residents see their food becoming more similar to that of other American regions, as chain restaurants become more common and Mom and Pop businesses less so. Traditional Tennessee cooking takes time, a necessary ingredient which many home cooks find in short supply. Tennessee food is also evolving as new immigrant populations join the historical European, Native American, and African cultural blend. The Oktoberfest in Paris, Tennessee recently featured Mexican tamales for the first time along with the usual German and Polish cuisine, and they quickly sold out. As significant as these changes may be, Tennessee's signature foods show no signs of disappearing. Barbeque, fried fish, chitlins, beans and cornbread remain central to the state's identity. They evoke a history

of hard work and resourcefulness, and memories of community celebration and fellowship. And on top of all that, they are delicious.

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