

# North Carolina: A Culinary Crossroads

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Have you ever wondered where your food comes from? Yes, chicken comes from the many poultry farms around the state. Grits are made from the corn that North Carolina farmers grow in their fields. Okra and tomatoes are abundant almost everywhere, from the coast to the Piedmont to the Mountains. However, many of the foods we eat every day started out somewhere else.

Although we think of these foods as key parts of traditional Carolina cooking, there is much more to know about our surprisingly complex cuisine. Look at the following list. See if you can identify which of these foods are native to North Carolina and which were brought here from another country or continent:

chicken  
rice  
peaches  
sweet iced tea  
okra  
black-eyed peas

Did you guess that all six are native to our region? Did you guess three or four? One? *None* of these foods are native to North Carolina—or even to the United States! Most people are quite surprised to learn that even these common foods have a complicated history. There is a modern term used to describe the way that culinary traditions and customs evolve: *foodways*. When we talk about North Carolina foodways, we are discussing not only foods themselves, but also the ways that people choose foods according to individual and collective cultures, religions, habits, and preferences. For example, consider chicken. Historians believe that modern chickens descended from wild fowl native to Asia. Early European traders and colonists brought the first chickens to the Americas.

Rice may seem ordinary, but it played a crucial role in the development of the South's economy during colonial and antebellum times. Traders had brought rice from Asia to the colonies, but the rice crops did not grow well at first. That changed when enslaved people, captured from rice-growing countries in western Africa, arrived in the southern colonies. These men and women knew how to plant, harvest, and store rice efficiently. Despite the circumstances that brought them here, they were crucial in helping the South's economy thrive.

We can trace back to Spain the peaches that we see growing in orchards along rural roads. Tea came here from Asia. Sugar was traded around the globe for hundreds of years before making its way to the Caribbean islands. Enslaved Africans brought okra to the United States, as well as

black-eyed peas, which are native to Asia. Like rice, these crops flourished under the care of expert African growers.

By now you may be wondering if there are *any* foods Americans can claim as our own. The answer is yes. When we think of tomatoes, Italian food often comes to mind, but tomatoes are native to America, specifically South America. Spanish explorers took tomatoes home to Europe, but most people refused to eat them because they thought tomatoes were poisonous. The potatoes we usually associate with Ireland began in the Americas, too. Many Europeans also rejected the starchy tubers, believing they were toxic.

Corn is also native to the Americas and an important part of our regional cuisine. With its many varieties and uses, corn is endlessly versatile. Cornmeal, corn syrup, corn oil, popcorn, and grits are just some of the ways we utilize this crop. This humble grain appears in popular Italian cuisine in a dish called polenta. Polenta is made from cooked cornmeal that is chilled, sliced, and fried. Carolina peach farmer and author Dori Sanders likes to talk about the differences and similarities between now-popular foods and those she remembers from her youth. “Nowadays, you can find polenta in fine Italian restaurants,” she says, “but I remember eating our version of polenta when I was growing up on the family farm. Back then, we just called it ‘fried cornmeal mush’!”

North Carolina’s population continues to grow as thousands of people move here every year. These new Tar Heels—whether from neighboring states or faraway countries—bring with them the rich and diverse cultures of their homelands. The study of foodways will become more important as we interact more frequently with people from other backgrounds and beliefs.

With the ease and speed of modern transportation and communication, our foodways are affected directly more than ever before. That’s why we can buy tomatoes and strawberries in wintertime; we don’t have to wait until summer because fresh produce from a warm climate is a truck trip away. With a few computer commands, we can search and find recipes for anything from achiote seeds to zucchini. Even small towns now boast restaurants that offer us a world tour of tastes from Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, and beyond. When you bite into an apple dumpling, you taste the shared heritage of an Italian ravioli, Indian samosa, Polish pierogi, and Chinese wonton.

History, geography, economics, and politics—and even weather patterns—are the forces behind what we find on our plates. Each of us contributes to changing foodways with the culinary choices we make. Despite its complicated origins, North Carolina cuisine always will remain a source of pride for the growers, chefs, and home cooks who keep alive the best of our regional traditions. Understanding food helps us understand each another—and the changing world around us.

*\*At the time of this article’s publication, Amy Rogers was working as a founder and publisher of Novello Festival Press in Charlotte and was a frequent food commentator for National Public Radio station WFAE. Her publications include Hungry for Home: Stories of Food from Across the Carolinas and Red Pepper Fudge and Blue Ribbon Biscuits: Favorite Recipes and Stories from North Carolina State Fair Winner*