

# Dig in to North Carolina's Food History

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From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 46: 2 (spring 2007).

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Growing up in North Carolina a few years ago—okay, make that more than thirty years ago—I thought about food a lot. I loved to cook from the time I was big enough to help my grandmother make biscuits in her Orange County farmhouse kitchen. I learned early on that when life's big moments came along, food was almost always part of the picture.

I remember eating fried chicken, deviled eggs, creamed corn, and coconut cake at our family reunions, and hot dogs with chili, slaw, and onions at the Yum-Yum restaurant when we drove from our home in High Point to Greensboro for back-to-school shopping. Before I could spell the word *kitchen*, I knew that barbecue came with hush puppies and that tea was supposed to be iced and sweet. I knew that favorite sandwiches included peanut butter and jelly, tomato, baloney, and pimento cheese.

Autumn meant a camping trip to Doughton State Park or a drive along the Blue Ridge Parkway to enjoy the changing leaves. Riding home, we always stopped to buy a jug of cider and a bushel of crisp apples for snacks and pies. Summertime meant a vacation on the North Carolina coast. Back then, a beach trip from High Point took hours in the backseat of a hot car with the windows rolled down to catch the tiniest breeze. The heat didn't bother us a bit. We were looking forward to eating a picnic on the way and to feasting at the Sanitary Fish Market and Restaurant in Morehead City during our stay. Before heading home we would stop by the docks to fill our coolers with shrimp, oysters, flounder, and clams. We loved doing business with local fishermen who knew North Carolina's coastal waters well and worked them with skill and care. About halfway home, we would pull over at a roadside stand to buy cantaloupes and bushels of ripe, fragrant peaches. We ate a few peaches right away, but most of them made the trip home to be transformed into pies, cobblers, and luscious jam for wintertime biscuit breakfasts.

Nowadays our drive to the beach on Interstate 40 goes quickly, and we crank up the air-conditioning against the heat. But the food story is much the same. We still love going out for Calabash shrimp with tartar sauce, and we still buy glistening, fresh seafood from Tar Heel boatmen. My friend Fred Thompson—who writes cookbooks and a weekly column for the *News and Observer* in Raleigh—considers North Carolina's seafood industry to be one of its treasures and calls our state's fishermen the last in the long tradition of hunters and gatherers. Their equipment and methods combine old wisdom and tradition with modern technology and skills. Many follow a path learned from their parents and grandparents—knowledge gained from a lifetime of “reading” the waves and harvesting the bounty from coastal waters.

North Carolina's tables have gotten bigger and better since I was a fourth-grader eating fish sticks on Fridays in the Tomlinson Elementary School cafeteria. Today's Tar Heel kitchens serve

up a feast I could not have imagined as a child. Thankfully, I still find many of the traditional foods with deep roots in our first two centuries as a state. Mixed in is a delicious array of new foods, introduced by people who have come from other places to make North Carolina their home. Back in elementary school, I didn't know much about pizza, lasagna, submarine sandwiches, or smoothies. I loved spaghetti and macaroni but hadn't heard of their Italian cousins: fettucine, linguine, or the fresh basil sauce called pesto. I had to grow up and travel far from home to taste tortillas, croissants, injera, and pita bread for the first time. Now I can buy all these breads and more in the Piedmont, freshly made by people who moved to the Tar Heel State from Mexico, France, Ethiopia, and Lebanon.

The state's food story grows more interesting every year. I can still drive to Prospect Hill in autumn for tasty Brunswick stew, cooked slowly and patiently by members of the volunteer fire department. Their faithful cooking raises money to keep their big red engines ready to roll out and help their neighbors. On New Year's Day, I can go to Mama Dip's Kitchen in Chapel Hill to savor Mildred Council's traditional good luck meal of roast pork, black-eyed peas, and collard greens. She cooks this meal in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation that ended slavery on January 1, 1863. Born in Chatham County, Council has a restaurant, mail-order food business, and two best-selling cookbooks that have made her famous. At Chinese New Year in February, I can sample noodles, dumplings, and fried rice at a community celebration at the State Fairgrounds in Raleigh. Friends who are Jewish share honey cake at Rosh Hashanah, the celebration that calls for eating sweet foods to set the stage for a sweet year to come. In October I can eat bread baked in celebration of Dia de los Muertos at my local Mexican bakery. At the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and prayer, I can join my neighbors from Pakistan at a joyous feast of Eid al Fitr.

This issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* invites you to enjoy a taste of North Carolina's history by looking closely at an important part of your everyday life: food! Historians examine how people have lived, worked, played, celebrated, fought, and survived troubled times. Studying food and foodways can help them understand these stories and bring them to life.

When you think about food, you probably focus on things that you like to eat and how to get them, whether that means a family trip to your favorite pizza place or baking chocolate chip cookies at home. When historians think about what people ate in the past and how they got it, cooked it, and shared it, they are studying *foodways*. Examining North Carolina's foodways opens a window onto life in both the recent and distant past. Consider food history as a quilt, with different pieces of cloth sewn together to make one big, useful, and beautiful coverlet. Focus in on each piece to understand a part of the story. Agriculture is one big piece, showing us what people planted and harvested. Technology is another piece, focusing on the tools that our ancestors used in farming, cooking, and preserving food to last them through a long, cold winter. Another piece is economics—the business of food that people sell to make money or use their money to buy from someone else.

In this issue we will learn about the crisp, juicy apples that long have grown in orchards throughout the state. We'll taste the smoky, delicious world of North Carolina barbecue. These stories show us how a single food can matter to those who prepare it—and how it can provide pleasure for all of us who eat the “fruits” of this labor. We'll also look at food in times of conflict

or war, when the story of what people ate and how involves hardship and challenges. We'll revisit difficulties and frustrations created by the unjust system of racial segregation that used to be a way of life in our state. The hours that our ancestors spent cooking on their open hearths in the 1700s and 1800s will be something to remember the next time you or someone in your family turn a knob to heat up a stove. And an examination of how North Carolina's people kept food on the table year-round before nearby grocery stores sold food from around the world offers something to consider as you drop your favorite cereal into a shopping cart.

We invite you to be a detective, examining the history of our state to learn who ate what, where, when, and how. You could start by planting a summer garden this year of corn, beans, and squash. Native people planted corn first, knowing that the stalks would grow tall. They then planted beans around the cornstalks, to give the bean plants natural poles to climb. Finally, they planted squash around the corn and beans, so the big leaves would shade the base of the plants and discourage weeds. The American Indians were tending these "three sisters" for years before immigrants from Europe stepped off their ships onto the state's sandy coastland. While your garden grows, you could look up what different Native tribes hunted and grew, or how they survived harsh winters.

You also could focus on newer North Carolina food and cooking, exploring the kitchen traditions among immigrant communities just settling here. Look closely at what we grow, cook, and eat. Discover how food helps define who we are. Make a list of the many annual festivals held across the state that celebrate different foods, ranging from collards to strawberries to ramps.

Here's hoping you find lots of food for thought in this *Tar Heel Junior Historian* and something that whets your appetite to know more. Open your mind to the ways that food matters in your life. Start "cooking up" your own Tar Heel food history. Consider how the food stories in your world can help you understand who you are, where you're from, and what matters to you, your family, and your neighbors when you gather at the table.

*\*At the time of this article's publication, Nancie McDermott was a food writer and cooking teacher who had recently released the cookbook Southern Cakes. Born in Burlington, raised in High Point, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she is a former middle school language arts and social studies teacher. A member of the Southern Foodways Alliance and resident of Chapel Hill, she served as the conceptual editor for this issue of Tar Heel Junior Historian.*