



Spicy Pork Rinds

Skillet Fired
Cornbread

Pimento
Cheese and
House Pickles

Deviled Eggs

Grilled
Batard
Bread

Chicken Liver
Mousse with
Pickled Sweet Onion

TELLING THE STORY OF APPALACHIA ONE FOOD AT A TIME

BY SHARI DRAGOVICH

Appalachian food shares the story of the people, as well as their celebration of history and culture.

In studying the core of any culture - skills, talents, inventiveness and values - researchers would often look straightway at that culture's foods: study their gardens, peek into their kitchens and read through their recipes. In today's industrialized food society, this isn't necessarily the case.

Unless you're talking about Appalachia.

In Appalachia, it's the food that tells its people's story. Furthermore, it's the creativity and ingenuity of these foods and their cooks that make the story sing.

Generally, the term Appalachia is used to describe the central and southern portions of the Appalachian Mountain Range. More distinctly, it points to the particular people of this region; a culture best narrated through its foodways.

At the **Frontier Culture Museum** in Staunton, Appalachia's story unfolds through living history exhibits, beginning with the villages of the Native Americans and West Africans. Visitors learn that Woodland Indians taught colonists of the Three Sisters: corn, pole beans and squash, which would become foundational foods in every Appalachian garden and home for centuries to come.

"Appalachian ... culture is rooted in the idea of sustainability...of living as a whole," explains Chef Aaron Deal, executive chef and general manager of the Appalachian-inspired **River and Rail Restaurant** in Roanoke, Virginia. An Appalachian native, Deal grew up immersed in a culture of sustainability: picking and preserving and helping his grandmother put up foods for the winter months.



The River and Rail's Jar of Pickles



Along with sustainability, explains Deal, is utilizing all the parts of an animal, letting nothing go to waste and enabling families to eat well all year.

Other foods that tell Appalachia's story are those morphed recipes of European descent. From England, Scotland, Germany, Hungary and Italy, immigrants reinterpreted

generations-old recipes using ingredients on hand. They also brought apples - seeds, scions and saplings - and planted them along mountainsides, eventually making Appalachia the most diverse apple region in America.

Fred Sauceman, Appalachian foodways writer, calls it "making do with what you have and

celebrating it." It's a song found in vinegar pie, a dish created by inventive mothers longing to make meringue pie for their family but with no citrus fruit for making it. It's the springtime rhythm of food foraging: "messes" of ramps made into a "sallet," or morel mushrooms fried into "dryland catfish." It's the riff of thousands of heirloom beans, tomatoes, apples and more: varieties unique to the mountain south and born from the hybridization efforts of Appalachian farmers working to create disease-resistant, nutrient-dense, tastebud-friendly foods. It's the hum of dedicated time required to make many traditional Appalachian dishes - in some cases, several days. Out of this "hardscrabble" (as Sauceman calls it) part of America, where extractive industry has pervaded and subsistence living ruled, the incredible creativity, ingenuity and loyalty of a people rises like the foods they grow and the mountain songs they sing.

Over the years, Appalachia has received much press, reels of misinformed bylines about the mountain south and its folks. And yet, through the foodways work of mountain south natives like Deal, Sauceman and others, Appalachia's story is holding its high ground.

And what an edifying story it is! It's a story easily discovered



THE RIVER AND RAIL (ROANOKE); JOHN PARK / THE SHACK (STAUNTON); MATT MAIER



THE EVOLUTION OF APPALACHIAN FOOD

Chef Deal's Top Picks

WANT TO TASTE APPALACHIA'S story for yourself? Chef Aaron Deal offers a few of his favorites for helping people experience the best of Appalachian cuisine:

Country Ham. The Virginia Country Ham is a southern food tradition. Period. While there are many fine sources, **Calhoun's Country Hams** consistently makes epicurean "favorites" lists. Visit them in Culpeper, Virginia, or at the farmer's market in Old Towne Alexandria. Or, call them at 540-825-8319 to have one shipped to your door.

Cornbread and Buttermilk. Together or separate, these two foods are a Mountain South staple. River and Rail serves a hearty skillet-fired cornbread with whipped sorghum butter and sea salt. And while you're in Roanoke, head over to the **Texas Tavern** for some old-fashioned, full-fat buttermilk. Tavern owner Matt Bullington likes his sprinkled with salt and pepper.

Anything apples. Before it became coal country, southwest Virginia was a major apple producer. Fortunately, through the efforts of apple orchardists like Diane Flynt (owner of **Foggy Ridge Cider** in Dugspur, Virginia), "Apple-achia" is making a comeback. Visit Virginia.org/food for a complete listing of Virginia orchards and harvest celebrations.

Anything Tomatoes. Heirloom tomatoes are among the most cherished of Appalachian heirloom seeds. A visit to Thomas Jefferson's home, **Monticello**, is an excellent way to begin exploring the world of tomatoes and other heirloom plants. Visit Monticello.org for a complete listing of garden workshops and seminars, or to purchase your own heirloom seeds.



The Shack—Staunton

in towns like Abingdon at the **Muster Grounds**, where frontier life is taught through living history, or at **Harvest Table**, a restaurant dedicated to celebrating Appalachian food heritage and farm partnerships. Or in Staunton at **The Shack**, where diners experience epicurean versions of Appalachian classics in a setting where 'making room at the table for everyone' is their highest value. It's found at River and Rail where everything - from their pickled vegetables to their local compost program - hums with Appalachian sustainability, or through Tour Roanoke's Appalachian 'Shine & Spirits Tour. It's found at apple orchards like **Foggy Ridge Cider** where visitors participate in orchard and cider-centric events and in the plethora of new (legal) moonshine distilleries springing up in Franklin County. And it's found in abundance at Saturday farmers' markets throughout the Commonwealth.

"It's an interesting thing," says Deal of the popular rise in Appalachian cuisine. "There's no such thing as 'new' Appalachian cuisine. It's the way it should be done ... to support the land and community." ♥



Shari Dragovich is a freelance writer whose work appears in regional magazines throughout the Southeast. Her favorite pursuits include all things story, all things community and all things wine.