

Teaching Appalachian Heritage Cooking to Children

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will increase understanding of Appalachian culture.
- Participants will increase understanding of Appalachian cooking and recipes.
- Participants will increase confidence in teaching Appalachian cooking to youth audiences.

Many Appalachian heritage foods continue today as a part of West Virginia communities, festivals and culture. Historically, preparing these foods was a matter of survival. Today, youths and adults can learn about our heritage through preparing these foods and understanding why they were used.

A Matter of Survival

The winter months in the Appalachian Mountains could

be severe and harsh, and survival was dependent upon many factors, including the successful growing and preserving of crops during the warmer months. Essential vegetables, fruits, herbs and nuts were grown in fields, large gardens and small kitchen gardens. Harvested crops were stored in cellars, buried, canned, dried and pickled – nothing was wasted.

Separated from civilization, Appalachians were self-reliant, independent and proud of the hard work that led to their survival. Ninety-five percent of items that were consumed in the Appalachian home were homegrown, and seeds from the garden were saved for next year's crop. They also foraged and hunted the mountain landscape. Foraged foods were a treat and included ramps, morels and Polk greens.

Families relied on each other for survival. Daily tasks included bean stringing, corn shelling, food processing and even cooking. Cooking was a cooperative effort. One example of this is the dried apple stack cake. Families and neighbors would contribute cake layers to create a stack



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of six to 12 cake layers, and then the cake would be enjoyed by all. Cookbooks were non-existent, so recipes were shared and handed down orally among family and friends. Often, there were stories to go with the recipes. Families enjoyed sharing recipes and meals together that kept the kitchen as the heart of the home.

Early Appalachian Diet

Dried beans and corn were essential storage ingredients in Appalachian homes. Beans were an inexpensive protein and a winter mealtime staple. On a cold winter day, a pot of soup beans with pork flavoring simmered all day; beans offered a healthy sustenance as well as comfort. Favorite beans to use were white, pinto and butter beans. Beans were normally served with a side of cornbread, fried potatoes and onions.

Corn was consumed fried, creamed and on the cob; it also was made into cornmeal, hominy and moonshine. Even the corn shucks were preserved and used to stuff cushions or mattresses. Many would grind their own cornmeal to make cornbread, a staple with soup beans and other Appalachian dishes.

Did you know that WVU Jackson's Mill still grinds its own cornmeal today? The locally ground cornmeal can be purchased. Demonstrations also occur periodically, and a planned trip to watch a demonstration could be a wonderful learning activity for multiple generations.

Cornbread

Ingredients:

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup cornmeal
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup milk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cooking oil or shortening, melted

Directions:

Preheat oven to 400 F. Grease a 9-inch-by-9-inch baking dish. Stir together flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder and salt. Combine eggs, milk and oil (or melted shortening). Make a well with the flour mixture. Pour in the liquids. Stir until ingredients are just blended; batter will still be a little lumpy. Do not over beat. Pour into the greased baking dish. Bake for 20 minutes.

Recipe adapted from *Better Homes and Garden: New Cook Book* (1982), 9th edition, 3rd printing. Meredith Corporation, Des Moines, Iowa.

Hogs proved to be an inexpensive protein to raise, since they could be free-range in the woods. They were a large portion of a family's meat supply, and they were used in their entirety. Pork fat was used to flavor foods, such as beans. Many families came together to make sausage, as well as butcher and hang hams to cure in smokehouses. Survival during the winter months was dependent upon these gathering and harvesting practices.



Soup Beans

Ingredients:

- 1 pound dry pinto beans (or white northern beans)
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ quarts water
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup onion, chopped
- 1 large piece bacon rind or similar cut (for seasoning)
- 1 teaspoon salt



Directions:

Wash beans well and soak overnight in cold water; drain. Place beans in a large Dutch oven or soup pot. Add water, onion, bacon rind and salt. Simmer 1 to 2 hours. Serve with chopped onions and cornbread.

Recipe adapted from Cast Iron Cookbook: Yesterday and Today.

Cast Iron Cooking

The fireplace served as the center of home life in many Appalachian homes, being used not only for warmth but also for cooking. Cooking later evolved from the fireplace to the wood stove. In many Appalachian homes, the cast iron skillet served as a treasured heirloom that was passed down from generation to generation, which continues today.

If cast iron is properly cared for and seasoned, it makes cooking with it a joy. However, neglect of cast iron causes poorly cooked foods and disappointment. Proper seasoning protects the cast iron from rust and gives the cast iron a non-stick surface.

Cast iron seasoning steps include:

- Wash using mild, soapy water, or just water, and a stiff brush. Never use an abrasive cleanser. Rinse and dry thoroughly with paper towels or a cloth.
- Warm the oven and spread a thin coating of oil over the entire surface of the cast iron. Do not use margarine or butter.
- Place the cast iron in your oven and heat to 300 F for 60 minutes. Allow the cast iron to remain in the oven until it cools to room temperature.
- Remove from the oven and wipe clean. It's now ready to use.

Popular cast iron pieces include skillets, griddles and Dutch ovens. Foundries of cast iron cookware include Griswold, Wapak, Wagner Ware, Favorite Ware and Lodge.

Common foods cooked in cast iron included stews, leather britches beans, fried potatoes, cabbage, October beans, hominy, fried pumpkin,

corn cakes, bran bread, crackling bread, molasses sweet bread, ash cakes, old fashioned gingerbread, syrup bread, pumpkin cake, carrot cake and cobblers.



Quick Made Cobbler for Cast Iron

Ingredients:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ stick butter or margarine
- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk
- pinch salt
- 1 can fruit of your choice (cherries, peaches, etc.)

Directions:

Melt the butter in a Number 8 cast iron skillet and set aside. Mix remaining ingredients (except fruit) together. Pour the batter into the skillet and top with fruit, do not stir. Bake at 375 F for 30 minutes.

Adapted from Trail Boss's Cowboy Cookbook (1985), 3rd printing. Society for Range Management, Denver, Colorado.



Leavening Bread

Making bread depended on the availability of the leavening agent and grain used. When added to batter, a leavening agent makes carbon dioxide bubbles, which create “lift” when released.

Lift is the air pockets that make cake, cookies or bread light. Yeast was difficult to obtain, so families made their own starter or used baking soda and buttermilk to create lift. The popular salt-rising bread and buckwheat pancakes used a homemade starter. Cornbread was a staple in many homes because both corn and baking soda were available and, when paired with beans, made a complete protein source. Popular heritage quick breads that used baking soda or powder included biscuits, Irish soda bread, cornbread and quick breads.

Heritage Food Festivals

There are many festivals across the Mountain State that celebrate our culture, harvests and food heritage. Historically, these gatherings served as agricultural exhibitions, spread knowledge of farming methods, provided an opportunity to select superior animals or crops, and fostered pride in agricultural achievement. Today’s fairs and festival serve many of the same purposes and planning a visit with children and grandchildren to these cultural celebrations can offer a wonderful learning opportunity and a chance to sample and enjoy heritage foods.

Some of these include:

- **Buckwheat Festival** – Preston County in September
- **Strawberry Festival** – Buckhannon in May
- **Ramp Festival** – Richwood in May

- **Maple Syrup Festival** – Pickens in March
- **Mountain State Apple Harvest Festival** – Martinsburg in October

Tips for Engaging Youths with Heritage Cooking

- Review older recipes together, possibly hand-written ones that have been passed down from generation to generation. Try making the recipes together.
- Enjoy reminiscing and telling stories about family members that have passed on when trying the recipes. For example, “grandma would always make this recipe for birthdays and special occasions.”
- Plan a heritage recipe meal and invite family members to share in the food and fun.

Club Activity

- Club members bring their favorite family heritage dish and share the story along with a meal together.

Resources:

Cast Iron Cookbook – Yesterday and Today

Dutch Oven Cooking – 4-H Project Manual, University of Idaho Extension

smliv.com/food/appalachian-foods-defining-generations/

whatscookingamerica.net/soup/appalachian-soupbeans.htm

www.southernfoodways.org/a-helping-of-gravy-soup-beans/

Better Homes and Garden: New Cook Book (1982), 9th edition, 3rd printing. Meredith Corporation, Des Moines, Iowa.

Trail Boss’s Cowboy Cookbook (1985), 3rd printing. Society for Range Management, Denver, Colorado.

Preparations for Caregiving: www.aarp.org/caregiving/financial-legal/info-2017/legal-preparations-ag.html?cmp=RDRCT-825ffe1a-20200402

Services, U. D. (2018, June 1). National Institute on Aging. Retrieved from Advance Care Planning: www.nia.nih.gov/health/getting-your-affairs-order

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