Cooking the Kentucky Way

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My interest in writing developed because I wanted to bring life to the family stories that were passed down through generations of my family. I'm from a farm family that arrived in western Kentucky in 1820. I was told that my ancestors, Henry and Lizzie Smith, moved their family from Germany to the piedmont region of North Carolina, and in mid-life made the decision to go further west, through the Cumberland Gap and eventually settled in far western Kentucky.

Henry and Lizzie were the earliest ancestors of those I grew up with. I was blessed in childhood to have parents, grandparents and great grandparents. These elders were the people that taught me their ways, told me stories about their parents and grandparents, and encouraged me to learn more about my past.

As these grandparents began to pass away and my parents grew older, I grew more interested in my heritage. I was curious about those early ancestors. Why did they come to Kentucky? What did they look like? Where did they live? What did they eat? How did they make a living way back then?

As I've researched my family over the past thirty years, I've discovered that the foods we eat, the customs we have, the traditions we celebrate, all came from these ancestors. For years, my mother and I had discussed the need to pull all the family recipes together and make a cook book. One sweltering summer day, we came across something that caused us to get busy and finally do it.

It was in July 2000, a few weeks after my Granny, my dad's mother, passed away. Mom was helping clean out Granny's kitchen and came across the handwritten recipes she made when she was a schoolgirl, in 1925. Having the recipes she'd recorded from her mother and grandmother as she learned to cook motivated us to put our family's recipes and stories together into book format.

Because of my research into our family, I couldn't leave it as just a cookbook. This cookbook, *Passions of the Black Patch: Cooking and Quilting in Western Kentucky*, is all about family traditions, living off the land and making do with what nature provides. Even as a cookbook, it tells our collective story of being Kentuckians.[1]

From our earliest settlement, Kentucky has been a crossroads of travel and trade routes, linking east and west, north and south, because of our geographic position. When the Commonwealth of Kentucky was established in 1792, our forefathers created our capital in Frankfort. It was where all roads led to the center of the state, from every direction.

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[1] Bobbie Smith Bryant, *Passions of the Black Patch: Cooking and Quilting in Western Kentucky* (Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2013) cover.

It is because of those crossroads that so many regional recipes abound in Kentucky. This cross-pollinating of regional fare has given us a menu that includes everything from barbequed mutton, burgoo, dill pickles, slaw, baked beans, potato salad, corn bread, corn on the cob, fried catfish, watermelon, fried fruit pies, and hoe cakes.[2]

We are a state settled by a melting pot of other cultures. The early Indians had their own ways of preparing foods, and the new settlers brought their methods with them as well as those of their slaves. Each group brought its own ideas of which plants and animals were edible, how they should be procured, prepared, and preserved.

The Indian tribes of Shawnee, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek, were the first people to use foods such as bear, deer, elk, turkey, buffalo, nuts, fruits and greens. They also used wild plants that were domesticated over thousands of years such as pumpkin, corn, beans and squashes. The Chickasaw were the native Indian tribe of our western Kentucky region.[3]

The Indians taught early Appalachian explorers and the Long Hunters that went further west about hunting and cooking. Many of our current preservation techniques are borrowed from the Indian culture, such as drying corn, apples, and pumpkins. Other foods such as burgoo, sassafras tea and poke sallet are from our American Indian natives.[4]

Many of the early pioneers were excellent marksmen and fishermen. Those men also knew how to kill, clean and prepare their food. As Kentucky became more settled and the fear of Indian raids subsided, farms dotted the land as families began to make a living from the land.

The plains of Kentucky were perfect for rye, clover and timothy hay as well as the infamous bluegrass. Some of the nation's finest livestock comes from the Bluegrass region in central Kentucky, including horses, sheep, and cattle. For western Kentucky, hogs, chickens and goats are predominant.

To the south, the Cumberland Plateau favors apples, peaches, cherries and other fruits. In the far west, the Jackson Purchase offers fertile plains, cypress swamps and creeks, making it a paradise for wild game and freshwater fish.[5]

With all the magnificent provisions of meat, fish, poultry, plants, vegetables, fruits and nuts that nature provided, it should be no surprise that it didn't take long after the pioneers got settled in Kentucky that a woman would publish a cookbook. The first Kentucky cookbook was

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[2] Dorothea C. Cooper, ed., *Kentucky Hospitality: A 200- Year Tradition* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, Inc., 1976), 2.

[3] John E. Kleber, Thomas D. Clark, Lowell H. Harrison, and James C. Klotter, eds., *Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 338.

[4] Cooper, ed., *Kentucky Hospitality*, 20-28.

[5] Cooper, ed., *Kentucky Hospitality*, 5. Also Kleber, Clark, Harrison, and Klotter, eds., *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 338.

published in 1839. It was titled *Kentucky Housewife*, and was written by Boyle County native Lettice Bryan. [6]

Early on in our history, Kentucky saw people migrating into the state from many places. This map shows the primary nationalities of the early immigrants. The Germans, English, Irish and Scotch-Irish, came in droves, and some of them brought their slaves who had their own native customs and traditions.[7]

Among the treasured items my German ancestors brought with them when they left North Carolina and moved to Kentucky, was their tobacco seeds and farm practices. Other things they brought were the foods they loved like sausage, cabbage, and potatoes. And then there were the traditions they cherished such as the Easter Bunny and St. Nicolas.

Another sect of immigrants that contributed greatly to the Kentucky foodways are the Scotch-Irish. More than 250,000 of these Scotsmen immigrated to America from Presbyterian Colonies in Ulster in the 18th century. Ireland was war torn and in abject poverty, causing these hordes of families to make their way to America. Many landed in Pennsylvania, then trekked southwestward down the valley trails of Virginia in to the hollows of the Cumberland's where they settled in Kentucky.[8] They felt this was the best land for poor men. These clannish and independent Scots meshed their traditions with those of the Indian tradition and created their own foodways.

It was this group of Scotch Irish heritage that really mastered corn and learned to prepare it in a variety of ways such as porridge, pancakes and hot breads. Corn was their staple of life, both for humans and for animal feed. These hardy people also liked milk products and knew how to turn it into other staples. By 1800 their butter was being shipped downriver to New Orleans and the West Indies.

The Scots were also known for their corn whiskey. In Scotland and Ireland, farmers perfected home distillation processes with grain, making it into whiskey. It was easy to transport and very marketable. Prior to coming to Kentucky, the Scots experimented with rye and later corn to create different tasting beverages from their Old-World Malt whiskey.

Demand for their fire-water became even greater after the American Revolution when Pennsylvania farmers couldn't meet the growing demand and the newly settled areas of the Kentucky frontier became a major whiskey producer.

Back then, a Kentucky farmer could produce 80 gallons of sour mash whisky from an acre of corn. Sometime in the early nineteenth century the tradition of aging whiskey in

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[6] Deirdre A. Scaggs and Andrew W. McGraw, *The Historic Kentucky Kitchen: Traditional Recipes for Today's Cook* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), ix.

[7] Gyula Pauer, Richard Ulack, Karl Raitz, eds., *Atlas of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1998), 77.

[8] Parke Rouse, Jr., *The Great Wagon Road: How Scotch-Irish and Germanics Settled the Uplands* (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, 2004), 21-36.

charred oak barrels developed, following European traditions, and bourbon was born. It soon became the standard by which all other American whiskeys were to be judged.[9]

While the direct origin of the name bourbon is not known, Louisville historian Michael Veach, proposes that the whiskey was named after Bourbon Street in New Orleans, a major port where shipments of Kentucky whiskey sold well as a cheaper alternative to French cognac.[10]

Though saloons were outlawed in 1880, there were known locations in our region where distillers produced quality shine for sale and medicinal purposes. [11]

Another culture that impacted the foodways of Kentucky were the English. The English had a thousand-year tradition of successful family farming around small market towns. They were familiar with farming grains, meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables, and knew how to preserve foods, taking them from plenty during summer and fall, through the time of need, winter to spring.[12]

Even though their immigration numbers were smaller, the French, Italian, Greek and Chinese and the multitude of slaves that were brought to America also contributed greatly to the variety of foods we have today: okra, shrimp creole, crème brulee, and rice, to name a few.

Early farm families had a tough time preserving foods. Many would store fresh milk or meat either near a cool spring, or down in a well. Some families dug cellars underground. Families living near a town may have had manufactured ice to purchase and put into an ice house and later on, an ice box. That method and the icebox itself were thrown out once electricity brought in refrigeration.[13]

Water was another commodity that required a good bit of manual labor until modern technology made it more convenient. It's hard to imagine having to take buckets to the creek or the well, every time you wanted to make a pot of coffee or boil a pot of beans.

Cisterns were used to collect rain water and while measurers were taken to purify water with charcoal and sulfur, typhoid was a real health problem created from contaminated well and spring water sources.[14]

Gardens were and continue to be a staple of farm families. The crop must be planted when the sun shines, and the ground is warm and dry. The rural existence of farm families is

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[9] Cooper, ed., *Kentucky Hospitality,* 3.

[10] Laura Kiniry, *"Where Bourbon Really Got Its Name and More Tips on America's Native Spirit". Smithsonianmag.com.* 13 June 2013.

[11] Dorothy and Kirby Jennings, *The Story of Calloway County 1822-1976* (Murray, KY: Murray Democrat Publishing Co., 1980), 45.

[12] Cooper, ed., *Kentucky Hospitality*, 4.

[13] Ibid, 289.

[14] Dorothy and Kirby Jennings, *The Story of Calloway County 1822-1976*, 60.

governed by the changing of the seasons as we consider positions of the moon and stars, animal behavior, and the changing phases of the weather.

Beef is readily available in Kentucky and farmers frequently share with neighbors when processing cattle. The neighbors return the favor when a fresh supply is needed. Wild game is also part of the farm family table. Venison, squirrel, rabbit and turkey each provide tasty additions to standard livestock fare.[15]

Tomato plants and other vegetables come later, usually in May and June. Aside from corn, beans and potatoes are considered staples of the farm family diet. I remember we'd pick beans during the day, then late in the day or early evening, I'd sit with Granny on the back porch as she removed the strings and broke the beans into bite sized pieces for canning or cooking. Those beans were always cooked with a good chunk of bacon or ham for seasoning.

Many farms have fruit trees of apple, peach, and pear that generate abundant fruit each year. Apples provide tasty cider and the dried fruit has filled many a fried pie through the years. Fruits such as apples, cherries, peaches, pears, plums, and blackberries and strawberries were canned, preserved, or dried for winter use. Food preservation was accomplished differently in the era before refrigeration, when salt was used as a preservative.[16]

Women in Kentucky often contributed to the family's income by raising chickens in order to sell eggs. Country stores and city businesses would take eggs or chickens in exchange for payment for items or services, even newspaper subscriptions.[17] Ordered through the postal system and delivered by the mailman, the baby chickens arrived just a few days old. My great-grandmother always placed them in a brown cardboard box next to the refrigerator to catch the warm air from underneath. In time, the chirping baby chicks could create quite a noisy commotion as they grew large enough to be put out in the hen house.

Chickens were a staple of the family farm and preparing a chicken for food is a whole other story. A farmer's cooking skills include the ability to catch, kill, clean, and prepare the hens in a variety of ways.

For many farm families, hog killings were a form of entertainment. When cold weather began, it was time for getting neighbors together to process pork.[18] Other uses besides the meat for food included the fat which was used for frying, baking and soap making.

For our family, pork and chicken were served more frequently than beef on a day-to-day basis. We had barbequed mutton upon occasion, but I did not eat lamb until I moved away from home as a young adult. We had sliced ham for holidays, along with turkey for Thanksgiving and again for Christmas.

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[15] Cooper, *Kentucky Hospitality*, 21, 26-27, 286-287.

[16] Kleber, Clark, Harrison, and Klotter, eds., *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 338b. Also Cooper, *Kentucky Hospitality*, 25-26.

[17] Dorothy and Kirby Jennings, *The Story of Calloway County 1822-1976*, 79.

[18] Lynwood Montell, *Hog Killing Time in the Kentucky Hill Country* (Kentucky Folklore Record 18 (1972), 61-67.

I was surprised to learn that canning food began as an effort to feed the army during the Civil War. After the war, the Cooperative Extension Service of the federal Department of Agriculture helped to accelerate and improve home canning practices. After World War I and again during the Great Depression, there was tremendous interest in growing and preserving food. [19]

Canning became a bit old fashioned once freezing was made possible in the 1940s. Once supermarkets came on the scene and fresh produce could be purchased year-round, farm families had less incentive to grow large gardens and preserve the food. This trend is changing again in these modern times as many of the younger generation are interested in the source of the foods they eat.

Pickling was another way to preserve certain foods like cucumbers, green tomatoes, green and hot peppers as well as chow chow relish, mixed vegetables. Corn, green beans and cabbage are also typical foods to be pickled and served as a side dish.[20]

Food curing dates back to ancient times, both in the form of smoked meat and as salt-cured meat. It was discovered in the 1800s that salt mixed with nitrates (saltpeter) would color meats red, rather than grey, and consumers at that time then strongly preferred red colored meat. In our family, ham was most often cured in salt, then smoked with hickory wood to season it. Some farm families now sugar cure their meat. [21]

Up until the past twenty to thirty years, our selection of spices or herbs on the farm were limited to things like salt and pepper, cinnamon, red pepper, sage and dill. Early on, herbs were used for medicine rather than food preparation.[22] When we talked about seasoning food, we were generally referring to the use of cured pork or lard was used rather than a spice for flavoring.

At our house, the noon day meal was called dinner and it was also a large meal consisting of meat, vegetables, bread and fruit. Sunday dinner was always a big deal and still is in our family today. We invite everyone to one house and the generations all eat together.

Supper, the evening meal, was usually a little lighter fare, though it too included some type of meat, vegetables, bread and fruit. The produce at each meal varies according to the season. During the spring, early crops such as greens are served, in the summer, fried chicken, green beans, fresh corn, peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes. The fall brings in fresh pork, squash and pumpkins. During the winter, dried or canned beans and fried apple pies are a staple.

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[19] Cooper, *Kentucky Hospitality,* 291-2.

[20] John Van Willigen and Anne Van Willigen, *Food and Everyday Life on Kentucky Family Farms 1920-1950* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 218-220.

[21] Ibid, 228.

[22] Kleber, Clark, Harrison, and Klotter, eds., *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 338.

While recipes are important to cooking, exact measurement is not. The cooks in our family did not learn to cook by measuring ingredients, I call it cooking by sight, but another Kentucky author, Marion W. Flexner, called it cooking by ear. This happened in the early days because there weren't accurate ways to measure ingredients.

Recipes often used generic terms for measurement such as a wine glass for liquid or a handful for flour. In time, measuring ingredients became the norm and today's recipes reflect the change. However, for many farm women, cooking came by way of watching mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts as they concocted favorite dishes. [23]

When it comes to bread, everyone has their favorites. Beaten biscuits seem to be popular in the central part of Kentucky, while here in western Kentucky, sour or sweet milk biscuits were the norm. Everyone seems to have some type of cornbread they prefer; some requiring an egg, others not, some needing white meal versus yellow, from Johnny cakes, and hot pepper to sweet corn, baked in a cast iron skillet. Biscuits are often served with something else, from freshly churned butter to homemade fruit jams, jellies or preserves.[24]

We can't talk about food without mentioning holidays and family traditions; these are the memory makers for most folks. In my parents' generation, they felt privileged to get an orange in their Christmas sock, along with pecans and Brazil nuts, a rare treat for farm children.

In addition to having a birthday cake, my favorite birthday always required a meal of fried chicken, and I know many families that find chicken and dumplings to be the meal they remember most fondly.

Some favorite desserts that I commonly hear about include fried pies, jam and coconut cakes, cream pies in all varieties, brown sugar cookies, and brownies. One of the most unusual recipes I found in my Granny's handwriting was for vinegar pie. I had to try it, of course, and must say, it's scrumptious.

Other traditions of the past tied to food were ice cream socials and pie or box suppers which became quite popular. Often sponsored by religious groups or schools, these events were held for the purpose of raising much needed money for school supplies, equipment and books. Local musicians such as fiddlers and juice harp players joined singing groups that provided harmony for these festive occasions like a moonlight party or barn dance.[25]

Celebrating holidays, such as the 4th of July, Memorial or Labor Day, provided a short break for farmers. Families prepared outdoor fare such as fried fish or barbeque mutton for these summer picnic opportunities.

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[23] Deirdre A. Scaggs and Andrew W. McGraw, *The Historic Kentucky Kitchen*, x.

[24] Cooper, *Kentucky Hospitality*, 21, 110-111. Also John Van Willigen and Anne Van Willigen, *Food and Everyday Life on Kentucky Family Farms 1920-1950* (Lexington, KY: University Press, 2006), 17.

[25] Dorothy and Kirby Jennings, *The Story of Calloway County 1822-1976*, 68.

My great-grandmother used the old iron dinner bell to call Papa in from the field at dinner time, the midday meal. When he worked fields that were too far from the house for her voice to carry, she clanged the bell.

Another practice of farm families was to feed the hands in the field. If there were more than a couple of men working in the field, the farmers' wife would take food to all of them at dinner time. This could be as elaborate as a full spread on a flat-bed wagon or a sandwich in a picnic basket.

From fishing or frog gigging in a nearby pond to picking blackberries or making snow cream, many of our fun outdoor activities revolve around food made by nature. We even celebrate our food culture in events like the Banana, Tater Day, and Ham Festivals.

In researching my family's history, I discovered some simple truths. Food is what nurtures us physically; and, there is an emotional bond that somehow grabs us and stays with us throughout our lives. By capturing our collective heritage of food, I have found a way to honor my ancestors and their enduring legacy.

Bobbie Smith Bryant is a community development advisor for the Kentucky League of Cities. She is the author of three books, Forty Acres and a Red Belly Ford: The Smith Family of Calloway County, Passions of the Black Patch: Cooking and Quilting in Western Kentucky and Farming in the Black Patch. For more information visit www.bobbiesmithbryant.com.