Introduction

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Introduction

Lisa J. Lefler

We all are consumers of the planet. One of the cultural universals that provides anthropologists with ample opportunity for trepidation, joy, and curiosity is eating. This volume represents the work of anthropologists who share interest in the importance of food and in the use of plants and animals. During the forty-sixth annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society, held in Oxford, Mississippi, we had the pleasure of meeting at the Mecca of Southern food enthusiasts, chefs, and food documentarians—the University of Mississippi. Our discussions and papers about plants and food represent common activities at Ole Miss, as this is the home of the Southern Foodways Alliance. This organization, housed at the University’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture, provides the perfect backdrop for foodways themes. By their own definition, the Southern Foodways Alliance “documents, studies, and celebrates the diverse food cultures of the changing American South” (http://www.southernfoodways.org/). Southern food and Southern cooking have long been popular genres for cookbooks, cooking shows, and magazines. For many years, for example, Southern Living magazine has provided interested hosts and hostesses, living both north and south of the Mason Dixon line, with recipes and dining suggestions. Garden & Gun, a relatively new magazine in this genre, combines two mainstays of Southern culture, providing readers with tips
about food, as well as covering stories for enthusiasts of producing and hunting it for themselves.

Anthropologists are also interested in what people eat, where people eat, why people eat the things they do, and what food may represent to them. We want to know about the meaning and context of food—how it is gathered, how it is processed, what it means to the gatherers and tenders of the soil—and to understand multiple uses of plants as food and medicine and how food contributes uniquely to identity.

Cultural considerations of food and foodways include the way people perceive the place and role of certain foods. For example, among the Eastern Cherokee, a spring green called sochan not only is a nutritious plant that provides important vitamins to the diet, but it is also a meaningful thing that provides a unique connection for the Cherokee people. Not many people who live outside the homeland of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians have ever heard of sochan. For those in the know, however, this plant is highly celebrated. It can be commonly found at large family gatherings and homecomings. Even the physical activities that surround the gathering of the plants in the Great Smoky Mountains Region of Western North Carolina are valued memories among the Cherokees. Other people often do not understand. Recently, several members of a Cherokee family appeared in federal court for gathering sochan in the nearby national park. At the hearing, traditionalists from the tribe who testified before the federal judge pointed out that this plant is of extreme importance to their people and that the annual gathering in that place had been done for thousands of years.

Sochan is an important spring staple that provides nutrition, but the Cherokee also believe in the plant’s medicinal properties, for instance, in its value for “cleaning the blood.” Like ramps, another regional delicacy addressed in this volume, gathering sochan
is perceived as a family tradition and spring ritual that provides an opportunity for physical activity and for creating memories of time spent together with children, parents, and grandparents. Sochan can also represent a place of harvest that has been identified by one’s ancestors and kept a family secret for generations. Furthermore, these generationally kept, secret locations can be sources of great sadness, as many of them are now inaccessible. Economic development of the land, which actually results in destruction of the land and its flora and fauna, or new ownership of the land, which often includes “no trespassing” signs and fences, both restrict access to patches of edible and medicinal plants and prohibit the socializing that is synonymous with the annual seasonal family outings to gather traditional foods.

Southern foods help identify various regions, ethnicities, histories, and ecosystems. They are the substance of memories of fishing, hunting, planting, gathering, harvesting, “putting up,” and of family gatherings where foods were prepared and consumed. Even the vessels in which foods were cooked are artifacts of culture and place. Cast iron cookware is pretty much a Southern universal. “Gritters” (punched tins attached to wooden boards to coarsely rip dried kernels of corn for meal), butter churns, crock jars, cabbage cutters, and yes, “stills” were all representative of region, class, and ethnicity. Blacksmiths, potters, woodworkers, and other regional artisans all contributed to the preparation of Southern food.

A great understanding of regional ecosystems often was associated with the harvesting and preparation of food. Mountain subsistence farmers often planted by the “signs” and took a great deal of caution when deciding to break ground, when to plant tubers, and when to sow those vegetables that would bear fruit topside of the soil. As part of preserving the rapidly changing lifeways of mountain living, high school students in Rabun County, Georgia, collected local stories of planting by the signs, Appalachian cookery, and
Appalachian winemaking, which are included in various books for the now famous *Foxfire* collection.

Other local color publications come in the form of regional cookbooks. From the Delta to the Atlantic coast, one can find church and civic groups who have gathered family-favorite recipes and printed them for fundraisers. In many of these cookbooks, stories about why certain foods or dishes were popular to the region are explained in short paragraphs and provide “outsiders” with a glimpse into the food world of that community. For some people, these cookbooks are like sacred texts in that they have included handwritten recipes from relatives and experiences of years past. They hold not only recipes that satisfy physical hunger but also provide keepsakes of emotional attachments. When these family cookbooks are lost or damaged, lasting sadness is associated with those handwritten notes and quirky ingredients that old friends and relatives shared.

Not only do foods such as barbecue, grits, and cracklins hold a place in the hearts of Southerners, so do their drinks. While living and doing research in Oklahoma, I heard conflicting discussion on the placement of the state: Is Oklahoma a Southern state or a Midwestern state? It wasn’t hard for me to weigh in, as I quickly found that 90 percent of the restaurants in which I ordered tea did not put sugar in the boil as they prepared it. Sweetened iced tea, “sweet tea,” is a staple of Southern living, and a state that doesn’t offer this drink as a regular menu item could never be considered a Southern state. Other drinks (besides corn “likker,” of course), that are of Southern heritage include mint juleps, buttermilk, and a host of sodas or soft drinks. Coca Cola and Pepsi originated in the South, and several regions claim fame to other brands such as Cheerwine (North Carolina), “Blenheim Ginger Ale (South Carolina), Buffalo Rock Ale (Alabama), Pop Rouge (Louisiana), Dr. Enuf (Tennessee), and Ale 81 (Kentucky)” (Egerton 1987).
Southerners are also known for their “sweet tooth,” and a meal is never complete without dessert. Seasonal fruit cobblers, made primarily from berries that can be gathered in rural fields, included gooseberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, huckleberries, wild strawberries, and mulberries. These berries would be picked as they came abundant during various seasons of the year. Shoo Fly pie, divinity, stack cakes, fried apple pies, congealed fruit salads, and chess pies are all desserts that provide guests an opportunity to make primal noises denoting approval to their Southern host.

People of the South speak of food as often and casually as others talk about the weather. We speak of special dishes, local diners, and annual food-centered events. We talk about what we ate when we were growing up, how food was prepared, and how it tasted. Inevitably, memories emerge of grandmothers in the kitchen: at a wood-stove making biscuits and gravy, next to a large iron cauldron making hominy, putting up jars of “bleached fruit,” or preparing enough food for dozens of family members and guests for a holiday meal. Each memory is so vivid you can smell it.

As we think of Southern foodways and celebrate how food represents diversity in the South and characterizes the South, this volume offers perspectives that perhaps would not be addressed in a general volume on Southern food. To be sure, their ethnographic focus is primarily centered on the South. The chapter, by volume editor Lisa Lefler, discusses ramps—a leek-like wild bulb—and its place in her Appalachian family and culture; the chapter by C. Laine Gates, Justin M. Nolan, and Mary Jo Schneider discusses political issues relating to obesity in the Arkansas Delta; and the chapter by ethnobotanist David Cozzo explains what Cherokees of the region believe about medicinal plants native to the region and how they use them—specifically with reference to snakebites. But our considerations, if they ever really could be, are not exclusively confined to some “pure”

Southern realm. Rather, consideration of the local also raises questions about links elsewhere. The study of food also provides a venue for the analysis of other things, including relationships of power. In addition to the political issues raised by Gates, Nolan, and Schneider, Avi Brisman's work also turns our attention to issues of political control in relationship to food, focusing on how food service operates in prisons. This erudite article, presented initially for SAS, subsequently modified for publication in the journal *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy*, considers food in prisons from a wide range of cross-cultural settings. Similarly, David Johnson considers food more generally, and he discusses how issues relating to food can be used in anthropology courses to teach students about culture. David Cozzo's analysis of ethnobotany has similarly wide potential for application.

Clearly, food satisfies hunger, but it can help us understand other things as well. It is prepared as part of a daily routine, but it also may be sacred. It is wound up with history, culture, and place, and also who makes, monitors, and controls it. Southerners know that food—particularly as it is paired with music—is as unifying as spiritual enlightenment and as euphoric as sex. It is a topic of limitless possibilities; and for many anthropologists, a topic not just to be studied but to be sampled and enjoyed.

Note
1. In volume 15, issue 49.

Work Cited