

Tomato Figs and Light Biscuits: An Exploratory Sampling of Arkansas's Nineteenth Century Culinary History

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Arkansas in the 19th century had a unique and important culinary history. Arkansas cookbooks, "receipts" (recipes), and cooking utensils highlight the state's culinary history and culture from the early 1880s to the turn of the century. This essay, and [provided website](#), employs a combination of food history and culinary history, both distinct subjects, yet each one provides different examinations of the time period. Ken Albala defines the differences between the two subjects, in an *Historically Speaking* article entitled, "History on the Plate: The Current State of Food History."¹ Culinary history, according to Albala, focuses on the ingredients, recipes, cooking methods, reconstruction of historic cooking in situ, and the history of cookbooks, while food history highlights the social, intellectual, economic, and "cultural parameters of consumption."² Where food history lacks, often neglecting the kitchen, culinary history picks up this task. Similarly, culinary history often forgets the "rigorous methods of textual analysis used by food historians."³ This essay will predominately be an examination of the culinary history of Arkansas, occasionally employing food history to examine certain obvious social phenomena that appear in the objects examined. An analysis of the historic cookbooks, receipts, and cooking utensils used in this essay will act as a snapshot into the culinary world of Arkansas during the 19th century. This analysis is meant to serve as a sampling of Arkansas's culinary history, since such a limited project cannot possibly detail the entire history of Arkansas cuisine for the 19th century. However, this study does contribute a unique aperture into a piece of Arkansas, and southern, food culture.

In an article by Andrew P. Haley in *The Public Historian* entitled "The Nation before Taste: the Challenges of American Culinary History", Haley rightly states that there are major differences between how we as a society think of food today and how people of the past viewed their food. In order to genuinely and accurately understand the role food played in the past, we must abandon our views of food today. Haley identifies three notions that need to be considered by historians and museum curators: "recognizing that taste is constructed and temporal; engaging with material and social contexts, especially physiology, class, and gender; and admitting to our audiences that not all culinary mysteries have immediate or simple answers."⁴ While Haley is more focused on food history, though he uses the term

¹ Ken Albala, "History on the Plate: The Current State of Food History," *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10 No.5 (November 2009): 6.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Andrew P. Haley, "The Nation before Taste: The Challenges of American Culinary History," *The Public Historians*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May 2012): 53.

culinary history, all of these ideas he brings are indeed key for any culinary, or food, history undertaking by historians or museum curators.

Today we are more concerned with taste than our ancestors who were more concerned with getting food on the table. As public historians, we must show the public that “our concerns with historical context, economic status, and issues of race and gender are not trickery...but rather a genuine reflection of what those in the past thought about their larder.”⁵ We must be aware of how we present food to the public, emphasizing that the past cannot be recreated via a replicated recipe, and that food is never just food, it has real and significant meaning attached to it that may or may not be understandable today.

Though food is central to every society, it was looked over by historians and scholars in the past. In the last half of the 20th century, the study of food became more important to scholars from all disciplines. Food is never just food. It holds a plethora of cultural markers that form and shape society. Food can be a marker of race, class, gender, and ethnicity.⁶ The cookbooks, “receipts,” and utensils created and used in the production of food also hold these markers and can be interpreted as communal and regional histories.⁷ In order to better understand the lives of our 19th century ancestors and culinary history, we must look at the food they ate and why they ate it.⁸

Food has always been a central part of life in the region that is now Arkansas. Through the various groups that have lived in the Arkansas region, food has been prepared, produced, and presented in a multitude of ways. From the first productions of food in the area by the local Native American tribes 10,000 years ago to the, essentially, globalization of food, mainly via restaurants, in the 1960s and onward, Arkansas culinary history has been shaped through the different groups and outside influences. Although most associated with the South, Arkansas’s foodways and cuisine can also be identified with the Southwest and Midwest of America, largely following “traditional ‘American’ lines, with little impact being felt from the small immigrant population.”⁹ As Arkansas cuisine and food production has evolved over the years through natural and outside influences, it has simultaneously been influence by and been the influencer in economic, social, religious, and political events and changes.

⁵ Haley, 64.

⁶ John T. Edge, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Vol. 7: Foodways* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007): xix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁹ Michael B. Dougan, “Food and Foodways,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4032>, accessed November 18, 2013.

When trying to study the history of Arkansas and its people, looking at the food that people produced and ate can offer more insight to their daily lives and events. Indeed, knowing what people ate can help “humanize the absent figures of the past and make tangible the history they lived.”¹⁰ The presentation of the history of food raises further questions about the resourcefulness, labor, and exchange that “historical actors brought to the everyday challenge of addressing their own hunger.”¹¹ As food is, usually, part of the everyday experience for humans, it is a relatable topic that spans time. The history of the food people consume today can be more relatable because of the crossovers. By studying food, historians can address larger issues “about how cultures change over time and how people define their own cultures.”¹² The history of food can lend itself to unearthing new meanings in the human experience.¹³

Arkansas’s culinary history is a small segment of the larger and broader culinary history of the South. Studying Arkansas’s culinary history is part of the diverse history of the South. For decades historians have attempted to define what exactly Southern means. What does it mean to be southern and what is it that makes up the southern culture? Food undeniably plays a role in these definitions. Historians and Museum Curators have attempted to define these broad ideas, but this cannot be done without first defining all of the different regions of the south. A good example of this study, especially relevant for this thesis, is the Southern Food and Beverage Museum’s treatment of studying southern food. Though the museum’s mission is focused on “the discovery, understanding and celebration of the food, drink and related culture of the South,” this institution “celebrates all of the cultures that have come together through the centuries to create the South’s unique culinary heritage.”¹⁴ An example of this mission is their “Gallery of the South: States of Taste,” a vast “collection of exhibits on the food and foodways of each Southern state.”¹⁵ This gallery focuses on individual states, but the purpose of this gallery is to show how each state contributes to and shapes Southern food culture.

No study of a state, plantation, farm, or restaurant can reveal *the* history of southern food, but it can provide an insight into part of southern food culture.¹⁶ By studying cookbooks, “receipts,” and cooking utensils, we can begin to understand the society in which

¹⁰ Megan Elias, “Summoning the Food Ghosts: Food History as Public History,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 34, No.2 (Spring 2012): 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ John C. Super, “Food and History,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 36, No.1 (Autumn 2002): 165.

¹⁴ “Introduction to SoFaB,” Southern Food & Beverage Museum, <http://southernfood.org/about/introduction-to-sofab/>, accessed April 11, 2014.

¹⁵ “Gallery of the South: States of Taste,” Southern Food & Beverage Museum, <http://southernfood.org/gallery-of-the-south-states-of-taste/>, accessed April 11, 2014.

¹⁶ Drew A. Swanson, “Wormsloe’s Belly: The History of a Southern Plantation through Food,” *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 15 No.4 (Winter 2009): 52.

these objects were produced. And by studying the individual states of the South, we can see “how people maintain cultural heritage or ethnic identity by preparing, sharing, and consuming foods historically associated with specific populations.”¹⁷ It is important to understand Arkansas’s culinary history as just part of the whole culinary history of the South. While Arkansas’s culinary history shares the same characteristics of southern food culture, it offers different practices, cuisines, and ingredients that separate it from and contribute to southern food culture.

Overall, Arkansas cuisine did not drastically change until well into the 20th century. Foodways largely remained the same and people continued to eat and produce similar foods as previous generations. The 19th century is crucial to understanding Arkansas’s culinary history because of its centrality in Arkansas’s history. This century saw Arkansas’s evolution from colony to territory to slave state to free state and into the rapidly changing world that the 20th century brought. Arkansas’s own culinary identity was formed during this century, and its formation has lasted, though with some modern twists, into the present day. By exploring Arkansas’s culinary history of the 19th century, one can better understand the overall history of Arkansas during this period.

There are many Arkansas cookbooks, “receipts,” letters, journals, and utensils available for analysis, but not many culinary specific that date to the 19th century. The last three decades of the nineteenth century brought about a slew of new, Southern cookbooks. These cookbooks were produced mainly for community fundraisers. Southern, regional cookbooks were also produced as a means to define southern culinary and food history through a published source. Although not all of the cookbooks used for the website were mass-produced, looking at other widely used cookbooks can be beneficial for comparison and contrast to other themes at large.

The majority of the cookbook and “receipt” sources used for the website are objects that belonged to the Woodruff family. As one of the more influential and well off families in Arkansas, William Woodruff was the founder of the *Arkansas Gazette*, these items do not represent 19th century Arkansans as a whole. The other cookbooks were written during the 19th century, though the authors are not from Arkansas. Other “receipts” and dishes that Arkansans prepared during the 19th century were inspired by sources outside of Arkansas. It seemed fitting to have a plethora of different books.

All of the cooking utensils, minus the cake mold, that were selected for the website are from the same donation. Though the original owner of these utensils is unknown, it seemed appropriate to have as many cooking utensils from one owner versus multiple owners. This

¹⁷ David A. Davis, “A Recipe for Food Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 62 No.2 (June 2010): 366.

action seemed valid as it would give a more fitting representation of what cooking utensils an Arkansan might have in their kitchen during the 19th century.

I choose the following objects initially based on their age. The objects had to originate from the 19th century. There were many different options for the objects, and some objects were rejected because they were not similar enough to the rest of the collection. The cooking utensils were selected because they all originated from one collection. The Woodruff cookbooks were also used for this reason. The two published cookbooks were chosen because of their known wide circulation throughout America. There were other items that dated later in the 19th century that I chose not to use because I wanted to focus more on the early to late-mid 19th century.

No known Arkansas cookbook was produced until 1891, with the publication of *Chicora's Help to Housekeepers*.¹⁸ The University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Center for Arkansas History and Culture has a copy of this cookbook. This cookbook details recipes and home remedies intended for use by housekeepers. The last, roughly, 20 pages are advertisements for local shops and businesses in the Little Rock area. I chose not to use this object mainly because there is no explanation as to who "Chicora" is, and the book contains no personal notes besides the introductory page requesting readers to simply try the recipes before they place their judgment. The cookbooks and "receipts" chosen for the website all originate with either known, published authors whose books were widely circulated or from personal and familial mementos that were handed down and passed around over generations. Though I included two cookbooks that were widely circulated in America, I do not have enough information about the publication and production of this particular Arkansas made cookbook to warrant its place on the website. However, further study in Arkansas's culinary history would greatly benefit from a focused study on cookbooks around the turn of the century and into the mid-20th century with the introduction of communal cookbooks raised for charities.

The following objects were selected based on the quality of the object; the availability of the object; the relevance to Arkansas's 19th century culinary history; the cultural markers that each object presented; and the uniqueness or familiarity of each object. Though the object count seems limited, "receipts" and sections from each book will be highlighted individually. Some sections will just be "receipts" that all derive from one cookbook.

Cookbooks, "receipts", and cooking utensils are obviously invaluable for culinary and food studies. By examining these objects from various periods, one can see the availability and variety of food available; the changing attitudes towards the preparation, production, and consumption of foods; the developing technologies in the kitchen and available to cooks;

¹⁸ Dougan, accessed April 11, 2014.

and gender, class, and race relations through these objects. All of the objects selected for this essay's accompanying website are part of the permanent collection of the Historic Arkansas Museum in Little Rock. These objects were chosen because of the different people they represent and the uniqueness, or similarly their familiar characteristics, they share with the 19th century.