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Food in Literature

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Food in Literature Final Script

The mountains of Appalachia are home to numerous recipes that have roots in Southern foodways. Asheville, North Carolina, one of the most prevalent Appalachian cities, has pioneered an industry in which Appalachian food can be enjoyed by a whole new audience. The combination of classic recipes and modern innovations in culinary technique has created a unique culture surrounding foods that were once meant only for those who could afford nothing else (Clampitt).

Cornbread, one of the most well-known dishes in Southern foodways got its start generations ago with the cultivation of corn by the Native American people. Since its introduction, corn has become an integral part of American industry. For people in Appalachia, corn was readily available and provided nourishment for all members of the family through various forms.

Cornbread itself goes by different names depending on the people and method in which it was cooked and consumed. Originally, cornbread was referred to as appone and suppone by Native Americans. This early rendition of cornbread contained only four simple ingredients and was a staple for many inhabiting the Appalachian region. The lack of ingredients like flour and sugar ensured the relevance of this cornmeal bread, referred to as corn pone, johnnycake,

hoecake, ashcake, and corn dodgers based on the variety of cooking methods that were available at the time (Edge).

As time passed, ingredients that had previously been unattainable were available for Appalachian people. Because of this, cornbread was diversified to include ingredients like flour, eggs, baking soda, and buttermilk. This “second generation” cornmeal bread is what most people know now as cornbread (Edge).

Cornbread variety has grown as more people immigrate to the southern United States. Variations include recipes like sweet cornbread, Mexican Cornbread, and Cornbread Salad. These differing recipes show how diverse the region of the Southern United States has become, as people have merged their traditional fare with that of their new homeland (Edge).

The modern cultural significance of cornbread is far different than it was 100 years ago. Cracker Barrel, a national chain restaurant, have “preserved the ingredients of country life to share with travelers on the road and families nearby” (Cracker Barrel). With every meal, you are given an option between biscuits and cornbread as an extra side.

The cornbread that Cracker Barrel serves are called corn muffins and contains sugar. While this food claims to be authentic to “country life”, I find it extremely interesting that sugar is included in the ingredients when so many people in the south are used to the simplicity of cornmeal, buttermilk, and eggs as ingredients in cornbread (Cracker Barrel).

Culturally, cornbread is typically associated with southern foodways. Most glance over the cultural importance of cornmeal bread to both the Native American people and the African American people. Because of this, there is very little research and information available on the relevance of southern foodways in relation to these two groups of people.

While we know that Native Americans were the first people to cultivate corn into the crop we know now, their perspective is seriously underrepresented. Of the few works from Native American authors I could find, one about the Lumbee people stuck out as an interesting perspective on the modern cultural significance of cornbread to Native Americans (Awiakta).

Cornbread, which is referenced several times throughout the piece, is especially important to a man named Eric Locklear, who owns and operates Fuller's Old Fashioned BBQ in Lumberton, North Carolina. Locklear describes cornbread as one of the most important parts of the meal and that his father, who started the business, always made sure that the cornbread was made "real thin and crunchy" (Lumbee).

Locklear also describes how many people that eat at Fuller's Old Fashioned BBQ are from out of town, and he and the other Lumbee people that work for him try to explain the relevance of the food they are serving. According to Locklear, they "go down the line and tell them, each item, what it is. They don't know what it is, and they go through there and get them a little sample of each thing, and figure out what they want to eat, and then they enjoy it. Because we still cook like my grandma and them cooked." (Lumbee).

If you're looking for a recipe for cornbread, Appalachian cookbooks are the place. According to Southern Foodways Scholar Ronni Lundy, "If God would have wanted sugar in cornbread, he would have called it cake" (Lundy). This distinction between sweet and savory renditions of cornbread has raged for centuries, with no definite conclusion reached. For those in Appalachia, cornbread is best served without sugar.

Often, there are entire sections dedicated to cooking with corn and multiple recipes that focus on different types of cornbread. The variety in this dish is one of the most intriguing factors, as one would normally assume that cornbread is a simple dish. In one cookbook, I found

10 recipes for cornbread that varied from regular cornbread to Mexican cornbread (Cooking on Hazel Creek).

Growing up in Whitfield County, which one of the few parts of Georgia to be considered “Appalachian” by the Appalachian Regional Commission, cornbread was a regular part of my diet (ARC). While I was more of a biscuit person, cornbread always wiggled its way on to my plate during the meal.

The cornbread I grew up with lacked sugar, as most variations of Appalachian cornbread does, but I wanted to do a little experiment. In preparation for this video, I decided to speak with several individuals to find out how many people preferred cornbread with sugar and how many liked it without sugar. Here are the results:

Subjects:

Jacob Adams

Amber Moser

Chelsea Hofmann

Jordan Washington

While these subjects describe the difference in preference, works in literature provide context in relation to how important cornbread and its different variations are to consumers of this cornmeal bread.

In Sheri Castle’s short story “Cornbread Communion”, people in the Appalachian region meet at a mill and ground corn into cornmeal to make cornbread for everyone. The description of stones grounding the corn into meal to prepare fresh cornbread gives the reader more context about cooking than most cookbooks. The tradition-like atmosphere in this piece cements the integral nature of cornbread in the Appalachian region (Castle).

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