Cornbread Nation 3: Foods of the Mountain South
Edited by Ronni Lundy
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Introduction
By: Ronni Lundy

Come and listen to my story 'bout a man named Jed,
A poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed.
—"The Ballad of Jed Clampett"

In the year 2003, members and friends of the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) turned analytical attention and copious appetites to the foods and traditions of the mountain South. Zealously we consumed vats of gold and glistening shuck beans mopped up with sops of brown-crusted, bacon-seasoned cornbread. We sampled apples (many of vintage origin, still grown in the hills and hollers) sliced fresh, or dried, cooked, and slathered between sorghum-sweetened layers of stack cake. We celebrated the holy transformation of humble pig into paradise-worthy slices of slow-cured, smoke- and salt-tinged country ham. We weighed the merits of rich and dusky fried apple pies versus sun-kissed peach ones. And we partook of the sacred corn of the region, not just in bread and kernels, but in the purest, potentest distillations known to man and angels.

And when at last we were, as my mother would have observed, "like to founder," we leaned back from the table and began to discuss, debate, and imagine exactly what all this food might mean.

What does it say about the work ethic of a culture, for instance, when you discover that to make eight small servings of cooked shuck beans, someone has to plant, cultivate, weed, pick, string, and sew onto thread five pounds of green beans for drying?

How can you assert a purely Anglo-Saxon and profoundly isolated culture when you discover that those same shuck beans are a German creation and that the traditions of the region also include Italian, Swiss, African American, and Native
American foodways? Not to mention oysters.

How do you hold to assumptions of ignorance when you see a list with dozens of native greens, berries, barks, and seeds that were turned into food and/or medicine? Or believe in traits of clannishness and hostility when you hear the catechism of a Loaves and Fishes ethic that made friends and strangers alike welcome to mountain tables, that caused pork chops-enough-for-the-family to be reconfigured in the kitchen into a pork casserole that would provide as well for any and all drop-ins?

In other words, looking through the lens of real Southern mountain food—the methods of its growing, processing, and eating—we began to see a vivid picture of the region and its people that had little in common with their most prevalent and demeaning stereotypes. And we began to wonder where those stereotypes came from and why they were so tenacious. As is so often the case with the SFA, we discovered lurking under the dinner table an unexpected subject inextricably connected to the food above. In the past, meditations on the provenance of fried chicken and barbecue led us to impassioned explorations of the issues of food and race. At this conference we discovered that the visitor under the table looked suspiciously like class and the prejudices that accompany it.

Now it happened that in this same year we were honoring Bill Best as the Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame. You will read about him here in a piece by Sarah Fritschner that describes the work that earned Bill this most cherished SFA award: his heirloom seed bank of green bean varieties grown in the Southern mountains. Born in western North Carolina and having spent most of his life in Berea, Kentucky, Bill is a true man of the Appalachians, geographically and spiritually. He is a scholar and philosopher, as well as a husband of the land. In addition to farming, he was a professor at Berea College until his retirement a few years ago. He has made it his life's work to understand on many levels the impact of the dissonance between the truth of Southern mountain life and culture and the dismissive way it is perceived and portrayed by the dominant world "outside." In his writing on this subject, he draws often on the work of Carl Jung, and Bill's perceptions on the power of myth in the shaping of personal identity have been likened to those of Joseph Campbell. That Bill can explain some of these concepts in a story about the taste of his mother's tomatoes makes him our sort of people.

It was in a book of Bill's, From Existence to Essence, that I discovered a key to understanding why mountain ways have persistently been translated in such pejorative terms in larger American culture. Bill's explanation is complex and
nuanced. My paraphrase is, perhaps unfairly, simple: For the last century and then some, the culture of America at large has been a culture of things. From its onset, the culture of the Southern mountains has been one of connection. Being intangible, the treasures of the latter are virtually invisible to the citizens of the former. Consequently, a life focused on fostering connection, as opposed to acquisition, might seem to the dominant culture, at best, quaint and anachronistic, at worst, ridiculous and perverse.

In other words, if you value a person most in terms of the number of things he or she has—cars, Cuisinarts, face lifts, cell phones—you will not value a person who has few things but is, instead, rich only in connection. If you see time as well spent only when it is spent in pursuit of things, you will see time as wasted when it is spent instead nurturing connection.

Consider the green bean: In contemporary American culture, the bean has little status (unless it is, of course, haricot vert, appearing in cameo star turn in a major production by a celebrity chef). In the contemporary kitchen, this bean is sometimes a matter of nourishment, but more likely just a color on the plate. Consequently, the beans we buy at the grocery store have been bred to minimize the amount of time we spend with them—commensurate to their insignificant value as "things." They no longer have strings. Heck, they barely have beans, so they can be cooked in a flash. In fact, we buy most of them in cans already cooked, or frozen and simply in need of heating.

In the mountain South, however, the green bean is the center of a network of amazingly complex connections. Beans are grown for nourishment, so the favored varieties have plump pods that are allowed to fill out with protein-rich seeds. The time it takes to simmer these, slow and low on a back burner, can be spent outside by cooks who are as connected to the earth and their garden as they are to the stove. These beans are bred for flavors and textures so idiosyncratic that Bill Best has acquired some 200 seeds of distinctly different characteristics. Mountain people name their homegrown varieties of green beans; some are linked to specific families, some belong to communities, some have names that suggest poetry or stories: Lazy Wife, Roan Mountain, Tobacco Worm.

Bush beans are grown commercially because they are easy to cultivate and pick. Pole beans are grown in the mountains because they taste better, and that alone is reason to justify the extra care. Corn stalks provide the poles traditionally, and the beans are connected to the health of the corn crop, providing nitrogen to the soil that corn depletes.
Mountain beans have strings. Ask anybody from the hills and they'll tell you that a bean with strings beats a bean without on flavor anytime. But those strings also provide connection. Women sit on the porch to string beans, a task that offers a cooling respite in a physically exhausting day of gardening, cooking, and housework. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and children are apt to join in, and the stringing becomes an occasion for conversation and community.

At canning time that community moves into the kitchen. More hands make the task go faster. And why buy lots of equipment? One canning kettle will do for an extended family of several households if everyone takes turns.

 threading shuck beans for drying was often a community project for the porch as well. Or it could be a special time between mother and child, as Billy C. Clark describes in his story "Leatherbritches." Originally dried for sustenance in the long, cold winters of the mountains, these labor-intensive beans are still prepared by mountain people today for their flavor, and also for their connection—to the past, or to the home that many mountain people have had to leave, looking for work.

When I left my home in Kentucky for the first time, moved out west, and spent my first Christmas alone, my homesickness was tended by my mountain aunts who sent a care package with a bag of shuck beans inside. I cooked those beans for the people who had befriended me in New Mexico, and a boy from Baltimore could not leave the pot, so delighted was he by their flavor, so fascinated by their history. He became my husband, the father of our child. Connection. Slender yet sturdy as the strings on beans.

All of this is the long way around to telling you that this, the third volume of *Cornbread Nation*, a compendium of splendid writing on the foodways of the South, has two themes. Up front and plainly, we devote the bulk of this volume to the foodways of the mountain South. Geographically, that region is defined as the Appalachian range beginning in Maryland and West Virginia and extending to the northernmost hills of Alabama, plus the Ozarks of Arkansas and Missouri. Culinarily, those borders extend farther to include eastern Texas, where many of the Anglo settlers came from the mountain South and the foodways still show it, and also the fingers of the hillbilly diaspora that stretched north into the factories of Ohio, Michigan, Chicago, Indiana, and south and east into the mills of the Carolina lowlands.

In these selections we hope to share with you visions of a culture that is not only
rich in terms of its past but still strong in the present. You will travel from an eastern Kentucky sorghum stir-off attended by folksinger Jean Ritchie in the early part of the twentieth century to a couple of present-day restaurants in West Virginia, where a young writer ponders the meaning of the different cultures each attracts. Those of you new to the region will learn about pawpaws and papaws who hunt for possum. Those of you familiar with your own neck of the woods may be surprised, as I was, to travel to Helvetia, West Virginia, with Sally Schneider and discover the rich, Swiss-rooted traditions that form the foodways there. You will hear Adriana Trigiani describe growing up as an Italian hillbilly and Frank X Walker limn the truth of being born Affrilachian. You will consider food and its connections remembered, sometimes mourned, and more often recreated by the mountaineers of the hillbilly diaspora. At every stop along the way you will be welcomed to a table where the real food described is distinct and delicious, the food for thought sustaining. Don't be afraid to dig in. There is always enough to nourish us all.

Not all of the pieces in this anthology have to do with the mountain South, however. As West Virginia-born singer/songwriter Tim O'Brien notes in the lyrics to our organization's new national anthem, "No matter where you're headin' when the train leaves the station / You still take your supper in the Cornbread Nation." It was our intention from the outset that each edition of Cornbread Nation would showcase the best writing we could find to illuminate the foodways of the South at large. So here you will also journey to Cajun Louisiana with Rick Bragg, where he finds a cure for a broken heart at the communal tables of the boudin circuit. You will attend a syrup making and family reunion in north Florida with self-styled cracker ecologist Janisse Ray; and ponder the secrets of geophagy, not to mention the political ramifications of methods of chilling iced tea, with Guy Davenport. If you read closely you will realize that these diverse geographic stories are linked by more than blue highways. Like our stories of mountain food, they are also, at heart, tales of connections that reach beyond the table and garden into the hearts of the individuals and communities they sustain. It is the power of such connections that have made food and foodways the most potent signifiers of what it means to be Southern and, as you will soon discover, what it means to be from the mountains.

It's because of these connections that I am sure that Jed and all his kin would, in fact, have been loathe to pack up and leave home when he came into all the money in the world. I also think the potency of connection is why, when CBS television put out a casting call in 2003, looking for a poor family from the Southern mountains to move to a mansion in California for a reality-based version of The Beverly Hillbillies, the company was barraged not with hordes of eager candidates
but a flood of outrage and a well-organized media campaign from the natives, most particularly the folks at the Center for Rural Strategies.

Or, to put this concept in terms that a thing-centered world might better understand:

Jethro and Elly May's new cement pond: $37,000
Granny's green felt dining room table: $4,500
The chance to hunt possum with your papaw or break cornbread with the cousins: Priceless.

So join us now as we take an armchair journey through the larders of the mountain South and points beyond. Sit a spell. Take your shoes off.