

Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association
Project: Culinary Tourism
Fieldworker: Liza Blair

Introduction

Settled by white Europeans in the early to mid 1800's, Overhill is an area whose food traditions are similar to that of most of southeast Tennessee. Although the foodways of the Overhill have experienced tremendous growth over the last 100 years, they've also persisted in retaining many of the early settler's domestic food practices. Meat, dairy and corn, the trinity of most southern cuisine, was introduced by these early settlers who borrowed from local Cherokee inhabitants, remain regional staples for much of the region. The introduction of corn products from the Cherokee had a lasting impact for residents, resulting in a number of corn-infused dishes still made today. Dishes like corn pone, corn cakes or corn flat bread are offered in many local restaurants, especially those serving BBQ or cooked meats.

The foodways of Overhill are dynamic in nature and continue to evolve to reflect the changing social landscape. As more people relocate to the region they also bring with them their culinary traditions and practices causing the foodways of Overhill to change in order to reflect these new influences. Today, Overhill is home to a wide variety of restaurants and food purveyors offering regional favorites such as whole hog BBQ, muscadine wine, country ham, chicken salad, sourwood honey, meat and three, creamy fudge, and homemade meringue pies. Specialty dishes like little square burgers, foot long hot dogs topped with chili and cole-slaw, smoked turkey legs, homemade pork skins, bourbon infused cakes, oven-baked pizzas, herbed cheese, apple stacked cakes and pecan fruitcakes are just a few of reasons why the foods of the Overhill are creating such great appeal to locals and non-locals. Arrival of immigrant groups also contribute to Overhill's culinary tapestry, introducing Latin, Korean, Japanese, French, and Lebanese foods to southeast Tennessee palettes.

This is a land where farming practices dominated the culture for over 100 years and community mom-and-pop groceries dotted the country-side. Today, things are very different. No longer dependent on farming as the primary means for economic survival, the landscape that once exhibited dairy, cattle and hog farms is continuously transforming, accommodating space for commercial use and residential development. Also disappearing are the community groceries. No longer utilized by local residents, these vestiges of the past are slowly disappearing with only a few remaining. Yet despite all this, the desire to preserve rustic and traditional food practices of the past are supported throughout the region as vernacular cooks, agriculture extension officers, farmers and local restaurants continue to retain the cooking traditions and practices that make southeast Tennessee a gastronomic wonderland.

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Beginning in November of 2008 and ending June 2009, Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association contracted me to conduct fieldwork for a new Culinary Tourism project. The project consists of identifying and documenting foodways of the Overhill (Polk, McMinn and Monroe counties). Communities acknowledged include Benton, Delano, Ducktown, Copperhill, Etowah, Englewood, Niota, Athens, Tellico Plains, Reliance, Madisonville, Sweetwater and Vonore.

What follows is a report detailing the expressive culture of Overhill's foodways.

Seasonal Foods

In addition to restaurants, bakeries and other indoor eateries, the area is also home to a number of seasonal community farmer's stands, produce markets and independent gardens. Gardening remains active, as seen by the many small patches of cultivated earth visible along back roads and county highways. Southeast Tennessee provides a suitable climate for farmers to yield productive and diverse food crops, which has resulted in an increase number of commercially and privately owned and operated farm stands and produce markets. These stands vary in size and shape and are extremely visible from June through October. Those of the greatest significance to the area include the Delano Farm Stand and Mayfield's Farm and Nursery.

Located in the small Mennonite community, the Delano Farm Stand provides a wide assortment of organically grown produce and fruits, as well as homemade pastries, breads, jams, jellies, honey and sorghum. Animal sales also occur on-site. Mayfield's Farm and Nursery covers a large tract of land and is the largest indoor market to sell privately produced food.

Other community markets identified include the Chilhowee Farmer's Market, the Farmer's Market and Animal Auction off Highway 30 between Athens and Etowah, and the Sweetwater Fruit Stand. Independent gardeners are also visible and some sell their produce to the public either at their home or from their cars parked alongside major roads and intersections.

Strawberries are another seasonal crop. Mayfield Farm and Nursery cultivates a large crop of strawberries to sell locally and at both the Chattanooga and Knoxville markets. Strawberry Knob Farms, a small independent farm located between Madisonville and Sweetwater, allows visitors to pick strawberries from their fields, providing both an experience and product.

Canning, although still active, is not as widely practiced as in the past but certain groups are working to change this. The extension offices of Polk, Monroe and McMinn counties offer canning courses for anyone interested in learning the art of food preservation.

Also worth mentioning are local establishments that are either open during select months of the year or provide seasonal foods. The Dairy Barn in Athens is only open during late spring and early fall but generates a steady flow of business. Another popular seasonal treat are snow cones, a Louisiana inspired flavored ice concoction available at C&W Drive In in Etowah. These frozen treats are only available in summer. Additionally, Majestic Mansion Bed and Breakfast offers seasonal teas throughout the year.

Local Agriculture and Farming

During the turn of the twentieth century, agriculture was the primary economic source for majority of Overhill families, followed later by industrial jobs. By early to mid 1900's, mill work and large-scale mineral extraction began to dominate the workforce. As the century came to a close, the landscape once dotted by family farms was transformed as more and more industries moved into the region, making independent farming an economic uncertainty. Since

1976, the estimated number of independently owned dairy farms in McMinn County, according to one dairy expert, has dropped from 50 to less than 20 working farms. Those who remain are finding new ways to diversify their income by transforming the farm into educational learning grounds for school groups and tourists.

Corn fields, a popular crop for dairy and cattle farmers, remains a visible reminder of the region's strong ties to agriculture and farming practices. Over the years, farming became a less profitable business and many family farms folded under strong economic pressure. Dairy farming remains the primary farming with many local farmers selling their milk to Mayfield Dairy, now owned by Dean Foods Corporation. As a way to stay alive, some farms diversified their crops as well as their image and became destination sites for locals and tourists interested in experiencing the real life of farming. Those identified in this survey that successfully made this transition include the Mason Dairy Farm in Niota, Lee's Dairy Farms in Englewood and Sweetwater Valley Farms in Sweetwater.

With 300 dairy cows, the Mason Dairy Farm produces over 1200 gallons of milk per day. All of it sold to Mayfield Dairy. School groups and visitors are invited to visit. The farm used to host an annual corn maze but has since retired that event.

Lee's Dairy Farms has been a family business since the early 1900's. Steve Lee specializes in selling all natural beef and hog meat to local and regional distributors. The dairy farm consists of 500 Jersey and Holstein cows with all milk sold to Mayfield Dairy. Lee also supplements his income by selling farm equipment. In May, Lee's Dairy Farms hosts a Farm Day for local school children. Hay rides, cooking demonstrations and farm tours are offered as a way to give back to the community while also educating youth.

John Harrison of Sweetwater Valley Farms is another example of restructuring the farm model to incorporate stronger economic gains. Harrison's family farm is strictly a dairy farm, selling milk to Mayfield Dairy in Athens. The farm also produces a wide variety of cheeses and has become known locally and regionally for their cheese production. Over the last few years, Harrison started offering farm tours in response to visitor demands. Currently, Harrison is in the process of building a 1917 replicated wood-frame barn for use as an education center, exhibit hall and entertainment center that will accommodate bus traffic and help his business be more attractive as a tourist destination.

Food Celebrations and Tourism

As heritage tourism continues to rise, specific tourism trails are becoming more common. Culinary tourism is growing in interest as more and more people are exposed to different cooking techniques, thanks in large part to cooking programs, the Food Network, food magazines and specialty books written by chefs and food critics. Food events have become increasingly more popular and many small towns are instituting festivals as means to promote and celebrate seasonal crops of significance to the area.

Two primary food celebrations were identified during the time-frame of this survey: the Ramp Tramp Festival in Polk County and MooFest in McMinn County. Both events garner large

support from the community and boost tourism. The Ramp Tramp Festival is a multi-day event. Produced by the Polk County Agriculture Extension Agency, participants are led by an extension officer on a hike to dig for wild ramps. Once harvested, the ramps are cleaned and prepared for the culminating event, a public dinner featuring live music and craft vendors. Prepared foods served at the dinner include ramp and eggs, potatoes, beans and corn bread with assorted pies and cookies for dessert. The event remains popular for locals and non-locals.

A relatively new festival, MooFest, started in 2008, was created to promote and celebrate the dairy industry presence in Athens. This all-day event takes place on the downtown square in Athens and includes dozens of craft vendors and home economic demonstrations, as well as dairy-inspired contests, such as a milking, ice-cream cone stacking, and a lively sundae making challenge.

Regional Culinary Specialties

Every region is known for a food tradition. No matter how obscure or mundane, from growing the counties best strawberries to the region's top pigs, culinary specialties are a pride of the community and Overhill food traditions are no exception. The Overhill is home to a wide selection of regional culinary specialties ranging from country ham, local honey, wineries and specialty fruit cakes.

Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams holds a special place in Overhill. Started in 1947 by Albert Hicks, Allan Benton took over the business in 1973. Each ham is slow cured using salt, brown sugar and sodium nitrate and aged for 9-10 months, although hams one year and older are available. Benton's Hams also specializes in smoked slab bacon and prosciutto. Owner Allan Benton has transformed the local store into a regional and nationally known business.

Smelter's Grist Mill in Copperhill is the only operational mill in Overhill. When in use, the mill grinds over 2000 pounds of corn a day. The mill sells stone ground meal and grits as well as fresh baked breads.

Seven Sisters is a specialty store where owner Philip Harrold sells his local honey and honey-based products. Located in Coker Creek, Harrold has several hives spread around the region to guarantee a nice variety of flavor. Honey varieties, when available, include spring, wildflower, blackberry, autumn harvest, orange blossom and sourwood.

Savannah Oaks Winery in Delano is a family owned and operated winery, selling a wide selection of wines from the family's vineyard. Grapes are harvested and bottled in the fall. Some wine varieties include Muscadine, Catawba, Niagra, Concord, Baconoir. The winery is open year-round and offers free tasting to visitors.

Schultz Orchards is another fall business, offering fifteen varieties of apples from over 1,000 apple trees. Hayrides and fieldtrips are offered during the fall season. The orchard also sells dry apples, apple jams and apple stack cakes.

Sweetwater Valley Cheese is the only regional cheese business. Both the cheese factory and store are located on owner John Harrison's farm and are open to the public seven days a week.

Sunshine Hollow is a 160 acre agri-business bakery and gardens located on-site. The bakery specializes in seasonal pecan fruitcakes and bourbon infused Woozy Cake.

Local bakers making a name for themselves are Stuart Shull of Tellico Grains Bakery in Tellico Plains and Allyson Kirkland of Allycakes in Etowah. Tellico Grains Bakery offers an assortment of savory and sweets, from fruit pastries, cinnamon rolls, cookies, brownies, cakes to sandwiches, pizza and salads. Tellico Grains also offers fresh made breads and flat breads. Allycakes is a local catering and baking business known for fun and whimsical specialty cakes. Another bakery worth mentioning is Jean's Bakery in Etowah. Jean's Bakery makes meringue pies, buttermilk pies, cookies (including the Cow Pattie, a chocolate, coconut cookie), brownies, and cupcakes. Jean's Bakery is also known for their wedding cake designs.

Landmarks

Every town, no matter the size, has a culinary landmark serving as a gathering hub for the local community. There are several Overhill culinary landmarks in the region deserving special mention. They include: Brownies Restaurant on Highway 11, The Country Patch in Athens, Scotties in Etowah and New York Restaurant in Copperhill. All provide locals with a place to relax, meet as a group, and enjoy good food in a welcoming environment that also serves as a second home. Some locals have been visiting these restaurants for over 10 years. Daily groups are formed, such as the coffee-crew at New York Restaurant. Titled by the restaurant owner, the coffee crew meets every morning and consists of several local residents. These gathering hubs are not strictly regulated to restaurants; convenient store markets and fly and tackle shops also have their share of regular traffic. The Reliance Fly and Tackle in Reliance has a weekly group meeting every Sunday. Referring to themselves as *The Church*, the group consists of retired residents interested in exchanging stories. One of particular interest is the Hardee's in Tellico Plains which serves as a site for early morning gatherings by several local men. Although not unique to southern food traditions, Hardee's and other fast food restaurants do speak to the foodways of the region and the need to socialize in spaces where food is a primary connector.

T. W Trew Manufacturing was a general store operating between the towns of Calhoun and Delano. Opened in the late 1800's, the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was open for over 100 years before closing in 1996. Community groceries, once prevalent throughout Overhill, are fast becoming memories as few and few remain open. Some that remain have shortened their hours and are only open during the busy tourist season.

The community store changed mid to late 1960's as fast food restaurants and TV dinners gave people more options about where and what to eat. Around this same time store inventories changed completely, thanks in large part to the arrival of the commercial grocery, which provided a greater selection of choice. Instead of buying a 10 pound bag of sugar from one brand or 25 pounds of flour, residents shopping at commercial groceries had greater selection of items and were able to buy foods pre-packaged in smaller, easier to handle amounts. Faced with competing prices, community markets began closing due to lack of community support. Today, only a few of these markets remain, Webb Brothers in Reliance and Hall's Grocery in Greasy Creek are two that still provide essential groceries to visitors and local residents.

Fundraising

Several organizations in Overhill utilize food as a fundraising tool to raise money for their causes. These annual events range in scope from bake sales and chili cook-offs to pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners. Vernacular cooks specializing in specific food preparation coordinate these events and in some cases prepare all meals. Over the course of this survey, seven fundraisers were documented. They included the Springtown Community Fire Station, Copperhill Kiwanis Club, the North Etowah Baptist Church, Calhoun United Methodist Church, the Mt. Vernon Volunteer Fire Department, Camp Agape Candlelighters group and Benton Masonic Lodge. These events represent a small sampling of the number of on-going culinary fundraisers taking place year-round.

Ethnic Foods

Like much of the South, Overhill is experiencing a changing culinary landscape as more and more ethnic communities re-locate to the area, bringing with them cultural tastes and food traditions. The steady flow of immigrant arrivals is having a slow but dramatic effect on the culinary landscape, introducing new foods and flavor combinations to traditional southern palettes.

Contributions made by immigrant communities have a direct influence on the changing face of the Overhill's food culture. Hispanic and Latino communities remain the most visible. Mexican restaurants are found throughout the three county region, with Mexican and South American groceries mostly prominent in the city of Athens. Several Mexican restaurants are located in Athens, including Las Margaritas, Mexi-Wings, Angela's Café (specializing in Cuban and Italian foods), La Chiquita and Los Posianas, the areas only identified South American market and restaurant. Mexican restaurants are also located in Copperhill and Madisonville.

Athens is also home to many Japanese restaurants, although the majority seems representative of Pan-Asian cooking styles and not traditional Japanese cooking. (Note: Small groups of Japanese worker from Denso Manufacturing in Athens were identified as actively cooking traditional meals at home, however, due to schedule conflicts, no direct contact was made. This is a group that needs more exploration. Athens is also home to a small Korean community. The owner of the Open Door Cafe in downtown Athens is from Korea and prepared traditional beef rolls at the 2009 MooFest.)

C&W Drive In and Small's Drive In (both located in McMinn County) are newly owned and operated by Louisiana transplants. Menus at both restaurants changed to reflect the owner's Cajun culture. Small's Drive In offers specialty Cajun dishes on Fridays; C&W Drive In provides fresh seafood options on the menu and also offers special Cajun plates on Fridays. C&W Drive In also celebrates Mardi Gras with a homemade King Cake distributed to interested customers.

Another ethnic community worth mentioning is the Lebanese community at the St. Catherine of Laboure Catholic Church in Copperhill. During the 1940's, several Lebanese families moved to

Copperhill to work as merchants. Today some of those families still remain in the area and are active in retaining their traditional food heritage. Several women from the community cook Lebanese meat pies for an annual church fundraiser. This event is open to the public and is heavily supported by local residents.

Conclusion

The foodways of Overhill are dynamic in nature and continue to evolve to reflect the changing social landscape. The increase of ethnic immigrants moving to Overhill is reflected in the rise in ethnic groceries and restaurants. And culinary tourism, a relatively new form of tourism, is having direct influence on the independent dairy and produce farmer, as seen in the transformation of the private farm to public space and the increase of community produce markets. Other traditions that continue to evolve are those featuring regional culinary specialties, like wild ramps, which are becoming canonized through annual food celebrations and public events. Like the ramp, dairy products and the dairy industry, which have significant ties to the community, are also being celebrated through multi-sensory festivals. As the years progress, it will be interesting to see how persistent old traditions remain or become influenced by influx of tourists and those relocating to the area.