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Author: Chris Baker


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Reinventing Mountain Food Traditions and Small Farm Survival in Southern Appalachia

Chris Baker
Professor of Sociology, PhD., Walters State Community College, Morristown, U.S.A
Chris.Baker@ws.edu

ABSTRACT

For over four decades, social scientists have addressed the relationship between development strategies and Appalachia’s highland cultural traditions. Historically, mountain foodways and diversified agricultural practices were defined as aspects of primitive folkways legitimating resource extractive industries and centralized development strategies. Today, the region contains many of the nation’s remaining family farms. The processes of globalization and growing demand for local foods are introducing highland farming traditions to new audiences. This case study looks at the emerging role family farms in the East Tennessee valley are playing in development and the social construction of the region’s foodways. Drawing on multidisciplinary perspectives, I focus first on the historical roots and continuity of the region’s culinary tradition. Highland foods represent the core of mountain culture grounded in the ecological and economic experiences of its rural communities. Next the paper discusses the emergence of markets for place-based foods focusing on community development, tourism and a local foods-based culinary renaissance.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable agriculture, tourism, farming communities, culinary renaissance.

Food Studies and Cultural Identity

Food studies provide important insights into cultural identity and social change (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Anthropologists point out rural foodways give people a sense of distinction within a community – knitting together material and nonmaterial cultural practices or what Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) call culinary capital. Food is an essential component of the transformation of the identity of regions undergoing the processes of globalization. Ethnographies exploring regional responses to globalization document how communities incorporate global foods into local foodways. Relocating migrants also draw on food symbolism in new environments by appropriating foods into their existing traditions (Crowder 2013).

Recent studies on Romanian mountain agricultural systems are highlighting the persistence of traditional knowledge and indigenous farming practices and their role in cultural preservation and maintaining biological diversity (Akeroyd 2016; Page and Popa 2013). Fieldwork on hay is increasing our understanding of traditional knowledge and its relationship to heritage preservation and land management (Iuga, Iancu and Stroe 2016). Iuga (2016) chronicles how haymaking is interwoven with preserving and perpetuating the collective memory of the community in the village of Șurdești in Romania. Social scientists looking at traditional Appalachian foodways are
taking similar approaches to documenting mountain food and agricultural practices as an alternative to the contemporary industrial food system (Baker 2016; Lundy 2016; Sohn 2005; Veteto, 2014). The work includes documenting mountain food varieties and heirloom seeds. Bill Best’s fieldwork exploring his ancestral foods provides an introduction to the region’s heirloom beans and tomatoes (2013). Veteto et al. (2011) found 1,412 place-based foods in the region. As we increase our knowledge of indigenous mountain food traditions, emerging markets for local and place-based foods raise questions around their future. Drawing on interviews and secondary sources, this paper chronicles Appalachia’s agricultural and foodway tradition and the emerging markets supporting family farms in East Tennessee.

Appalachian Foodways and Regional Development

Appalachia’s agricultural tradition represents small-scale diversified farming practices in one of the world’s most diverse ecosystems. Many of the region’s folk traditions directly reflect traditional farming practices. Representing rural lifestyles and distinctive forms of music, dance, crafts, and culinary practices—mountain folklife is part of a collective lived experience grounded in the southern mountain ecosystem. Historically, mountain folkways were portrayed as primitive cultural traits, part of a larger negative stereotype of the region. Between 1880 and the Second World War, journalist or color writers, social scientist, and social reformers often depicted the region as a backward culture made up of contemporary ancestors and “Yesterday’s People” (Frost 1899; Shapiro 1978; Whisnant 1983). Cultural studies scholars point out Appalachia’s experience was not distinctive. Definitions of primitive mountain culture were also part of the colonial strategies exploiting the region’s old world British highland ancestors (Cunningham 1987). In reality, diversified farming practices and folkways were essential to mountain life. Highland foodways are the product of subsistence strategies lasting through periods of rapid social and economic change. As they come into the spotlight as solutions to industrial food systems, re-examining their historical roles and contemporary options is becoming an important component of development strategies.

The view of Appalachian society as an example of premodern Anglo-Saxon heritage played an important role in the commercialization of its traditions and the organization of society around large-scale industrial development strategies (Becker 1998; Davis and Baker 2014; Eller 2008; Gaventa 1980; Lewis, Johnson and Adkins, 1978; Shapiro 1978). Throughout the 20th century highland farming communities adapted to what James Scott (1998) calls late modernist “large-scale interventions.” Mountain foods and folklife have been used to adapt to the changing conditions of life for Appalachian highlanders for two centuries. Appalachia’s everyday foodways helped
mountain cultures adapt to deforestation and other large-scale land use patterns. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), for instance, represents one of the largest development projects in modern history. The outcomes of TVA and other centralized planning shaped highland land use around resource extraction, hydroelectric dams, federal parks, and urban growth centers (Cole 1948; Eller 2008; Whisnant 1983). While focusing on improvements in farming, depression era federal programs promoted crops supporting industrial agriculture and market integration. Rural communities, on the other hand, continued to produce ancestral foods as they struggled with outmigration and the declining conditions of diversified farming (Walker 2000).

Highland Foodways and Mountain Life

Located in the valley of Southern Appalachia along the base of the Great Smoky Mountains, East Tennessee’s rural communities continue diversified farming on ancestral land into the modern era. Unlike many of the nation’s family farms lost to corporate agriculture, these operations survived with roots spanning generations. Located in tight-knit communities, full and part-time mountain farms continue to raise poultry, pasture-fed beef and heirloom varieties of among other things—greens, apples, beans, pumpkins, corn, potatoes, and tomatoes (Lundy 2016; Best 2013; Sohn 2005). Highland farming heritage includes subsistence strategies from forest farming and hunting and gathering to mixed agriculture and commercial truck operations. Appalachia’s agricultural family and community systems continue ancestral practices of food preservation – passing down skills for pickling, drying, preserving, and canning herbs, meat, and vegetables (Davis 2000; Eliot 1972; Lundy 2016; Sohn 2005). The origins of highland foodways are diverse. Sohn (2005:4) states: “Mountain food may not have a homogeneous style, but it is distinct. It is distinct because the region’s people were independent. Its mountains offered an abundance of natural resources, and because its settlers mixed with the Native Americans.”

Corn became the main food in the American South. Both fresh and dried, corn provided grain for bread, silage, whiskey, and was used as a form of currency. Livestock husbandry practices emerged from highland terrain. Frontier farms raised sheep, cattle, and hogs on hillside and mountain pastures. East Tennessee frontier farms raised hogs utilizing forging techniques. Frontiersmen spent most of their time cutting firewood, canning, slaughtering and curing hogs, tending crops, and distilling corn whiskey. A typical family raised bees, chickens, and almost every vegetable. Households needed cash for taxes, coffee, and sugar. They engaged in selling and trading butter, eggs, nuts (walnut and chestnut), animal hides, honey, and whiskey (Davis 2000; Dunaway 1996).

Illegal whiskey or moonshine became a distinctive southern mountain foodway beginning with settlement in the early 1800s. The Scots-Irish brought their pot still tradition to the new world making illegal whiskey from Native American corn using old world recipes. Originally part of mountain culinary folkways, the whiskey trade evolved into a defining feature of highland life during national prohibition in the 1920s (Dabney 1998; Pierce 2003).

Forest gathering practices includes
herbs, poke, ramps, mushrooms, and ginseng. Settlers introduced European grains – wheat, barley, rye, oats, and flax. Early Spanish traders introduced peaches, okra, sorghum (for molasses), sweet potatoes, watermelon, and livestock. Settlers flourished by using both native and European plants – corn, squash, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage, peas, turnips, and a host of other vegetables. Northern Europeans changed the ecosystem by introducing old world honeybees, onions, turnips, cabbages, livestock, and a broad range of beans (Davis 2000). The rudimentary diet that evolved in the region incorporated forest products, fish, and wild game. Often seen as peasant foods, early Appalachian culinary practices were a rich community and kinship experience of harvest and heritage festivals, church revivals and Sunday dinners. Providing a strong attachment to land and culinary heritage, many of these practices have lasted into the modern era (Dabney 1998; Dykeman 1955; Eliot 1972).

Landownership and the quality of soil dramatically affected farming in Appalachia. Large plantations thrived while others on eroded soil and near deforestation struggled to sustain families (Dunaway 1996). Modern East Tennessee’s commercial farms emerged as part of regional poultry, pork, and vegetable canning industries in the 1920s. Cash from tobacco farming maintained home steads for retirement (Eller 2008; Kingsolver 2011).

Corporate Food Systems

Modernization and the introduction of industrial food systems transformed rural America in the 1960s. The move from farm to factory work meant local seasonal food began to compete with national food distributors introducing processed, frozen, or pre-packaged foods (Pillsbury 1995). Declines in farming and home production have given way to convenience foods followed by contemporary fast food. While fresh food continued to be raised locally, the loss of tobacco and crop diversity led to fewer farmers and less support for small-scale farming (Nolt 2005). Many East Tennesseans began to farm part-time to supplement low factory wages. James Scott (1998) suggests that in many places in the world 20th century centralized planning strategies have simplified diversity and ignored local knowledge. Scott’s central argument is that grand development schemes are unable to address local realities where local knowledge and practical skills are adaptations to constantly changing human and natural environments (1998).

Like many modernist development schemes around the world, America’s post war industrial food system has had a similar negative impact in Appalachia. Ecologist John Nolt suggests the replacement of local food in rural Appalachia has been especially destructive in terms of the region’s health outcomes. Outside of rural communities many people no longer grow food or even prepare meals. And what has replaced local foods has become socially destructive. He writes: “This food is mostly junk: highly processed, fattening, low in quality, of little nutritional value, and expensive. Thus it helps reinforce the familiar cycles of poverty, disease, and dependence” (2005: 173).

Besides the corporatization of food production, another important trend effecting rural areas and agriculture is urban sprawl, pushing up land costs and taxes. Since the 1970s, the transformation of rural society in the South reflects a “bulldozer” revolution led by a growing middle class and urban sprawl (Cobb 1999; Nolt 2005). The resulting loss of farmland has reduced the number of farms in Appalachia. The negative impact on health is only one of the key challenges created by industrially produced foods. Declines in small farms are due not only to increase in land taxes and costs but also to a lack of policy support connecting small farm produce to markets and institutions.
Appalachian Foodways in a Global Economy

More than any other aspect of culture, food continues to define mountain communities identifying with the agricultural landscape and a sense of “food place.” An irony of these patterns of development is that as communities face pressure to sell farm land, the people buying the land are behind the growing number of farmers markets, equestrian farms, and consumer demand for rural foodways and ornamental plants centered on fresh, pick-your-own, seasonal, organic, and local foods. Local mountain foods are driving a culinary renaissance introducing Appalachia's farming and culinary traditions to a new audience. The state leads the nation in the growth of farmers markets (Chesky 2009; Green 2014; Lalone 2008). How the region and nation addresses these issues will have important impacts on the future of rural areas (Byrne 2001). In both rural and urban Appalachia growing support for regional food heritage is giving voice to small farms. Fred Sauceman has documented how foodies are behind a return of food trucks, small local food venues, diners, drive-ins, and ethnic restaurants to rural East Tennessee (2014).

Urban centers are incorporating farm heritage in farm markets, restaurants, brewpubs, and distilleries in redevelopment. Known as the “Scruffy City,” downtown Knoxville, north Knoxville, and the Old City are reinventing a vibrant arts and culinary community with upscale pubs, book and record stores, art galleries, theatre, and music venues. Fueling the growth is the redevelopment, historical preservation and investment in public space in neighborhoods like Fourth and Gill, the Tennessee and Bijou theatres, Southern Railroad Station, and South waterfront. Driving efforts are businesses dedicated to sustainable foodways with farmers markets, food festivals, diners, restaurants, food trucks, pubs, and wine bars. The city has an International Biscuit Festival and cafes like the Wild Love Bakery which incorporates ingredients from several local farms into a new southern cuisine.

Once a regional commercial and distribution center for surrounding wholesale and truck crops, Market Square in downtown Knoxville became as Jack Neely points out the “Most Democratic Place on Earth” (Neely 2009). Today downtown Knoxville advertises 100 restaurants within a one mile radius. The return of indigenous food includes Soul Food in east Knoxville serving chitlins, “hot chicken,” greens, and macaroni and cheese (Perkins 2017). The area advertises M.A.M.A. or Magnolia Avenue Marketing Area. New foodways here coexist with traditional barbeque and soul food representing cuisine from North Africa, Hispanic, Philippine, and Asian. Food has emerged as central to the identity of Latin American migrant communities in East Tennessee. With many of its new arrivals originating as agricultural workers, the region's Hispanic population is introducing new uses for local foods. Part of the region’s growing international community, Central Americans are redefining the use of local produce. In town centers like Morristown and Johnson City they support poultry processing and have established Mesoamerican foodways with small-scale tortilla factories, restaurants, and tiendas. Here migrants from Michoacán, Chiapas, Jalisco, and Oaxaca follow family recipes using East Tennessee foods (Sauceman 2012; Baker 2012).

Regional tourism draws on the 11 million yearly visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP). Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, the park is an important refuge for many of the nation's plant and wildlife species. Sevier County hosts many of the parks' visitors at general stores, retail shopping, waterparks, resorts, mega hotels and dinner shows. In migration to the area represents almost every continent – including retirees and
a large Hispanic and Eastern European workforce. With most of the attractions selling rural farm lifestyles and food products, the county supports over 18,000 jobs with $1.7 million in revenues (Grainger 2014).

Another important example of mountain symbolism is the growing legal whiskey industry. More than 40 new distilleries statewide now sell corn whiskey or “moonshine” (Gibson 2013; Pierce 2013). In downtown Knoxville, Knox Whiskey Works partners with Riverplains Farm in New Market and Valentine Mills in Dandridge. Drawing on corn whiskey has its origins in East Tennessee’s agricultural heritage. Knox Whiskey Works uses non-GMO heirloom Hickory Cane and Tennessee Red Cob corn strains from Riverplains Farm. Not mass produced, Valentine Mill’s corn is ground on a traditional water powered stone arriving on demand is small batches. Other distilleries like The Old Mill in Pigeon Forge grind their own grain on century-old 4,600 pound mill stones. The growing use of local foods for tourism and urban redevelopment is connecting family farming with new development and cultural diversity.

Mountain Farming in a Global Economy

Appalachian foods are still fostered by family labor, hand preparation, and heirloom varieties of plants and livestock. Rural counties still have agricultural fairs and farmers cooperatives, unchanged since the 1920s. Appalachia continues to operate many of the nation’s part-time farms with operators often retired from industry. A key challenge for local food producers is accessing new markets (Grigsby and Hellwinckel 2016). Farming households lease land to other fulltime farmers, sell hay for cattle and equestrian markets, or raise their own cattle to survive. Others engage in wholesaling commercial or truck crops. Truck farming consists mainly of the small-scale marketing of vine-ripened tomatoes. Grainger County’s farms are one the largest producers of tomatoes in the nation. In 2010, the state was tenth for the number of farms (10,900) and 44th for farm size at 139 average acres. The county has a yearly tomato festival. Farmers send produce to urban areas and several states. Grainger County has 400 farms of which 70 percent produced less than $10,000 in value (Department of Agriculture 2011; Kennedy 2008). Local vine ripened tomatoes taste like historical farm fresh produce providing the opportunity for urbanites to relive part of their heritage. For many who have left for jobs in urban areas, fresh foods are a potent symbol of rural childhood for the area’s baby boom generation (Dyer 1999; Kennedy 2008; Ritter 2013).
Rural communities provide the labor force for urban growth centers as migrant workers and family members support the truck farming of seasonal crops. Interviews with farm families reveal a strong connection between farming and family cohesion: “I can see my entire family from the hill where we live. Our church has 200 people with 60 attending regularly. There are 30 children. I am kin to everyone one of them.”

Other interviews suggest local knowledge contributes to sustainable landuse practices. Gary Strange has revived the two century old wildflower honey tradition in Del Rio, a rural community on the North Carolina and Tennessee border just outside of the Cherokee National Forest. His 1,200 hive operation thrives on the area’s pastoral mountain ecosystem: “They ate me alive. We made a living on the land. This was my first fulltime job. Local farms use very little pesticide. We have lost a lot fewer colonies. West the pesticide used by big farms are a major killer of bees. We don’t have big farms” (Baker and Sanyal 2017: 5).

Along with beekeeping, mountain apple orchards have survived and are thriving in the area due to tourism. Carver Orchards in Cosby sells 126 varieties of apples with 40,000 trees. The family makes fried pies, cider, and apple fritters at their family style farmhouse restaurant. The southern food renaissance is taking hold at premiere resorts and hotels. Blackberry Farms in Walland sells frontier life turning mountain farming practices into luxury cuisine and outdoors recreational activities. Blackberry Farms incorporates an inn, restaurant, farm, and wellness center into a high end remake of past mountain life. Along with traditional farm practices such as grubbing are yoga and horseback riding. On over 9,000 acres, the farm makes its own apple butter, beer cheese and honey on land once used to hide moonshine stills. Where mountain families once lived, today you find thousand dollar whiskey, wine and cheese tastings with hillbilly Nouveau food parings (Severson, 2016).

Traditional mountain livestock practices are part of the culinary revival. Pork remains an important food for Southerners (Lundy 2016; Sohn 2005). Working class populations continue to embrace foods such as scrapple or corn meal and pork offal at local IGAs. On the other end of the class spectrum, however, pork curing has become an elite culinary art. Known internationally, Allen Benton, of Benton’s Smoky Mountain Country Hams smokes and sells tradition country salt cured ham and home style pork products (Edge 2017). Other small venues like Swaggerty Farm processes pork exported to several states. While grassfed beef and ham are exploding in popularity, small dairies have declined. Limited examples of success include Cruze Farms which operates a dairy and sells their own pasteurized Jersey cow products in south Knoxville. Cruze sells traditional farm products – whole milk, chocolate, butter milk, and herb seasonal flavored ice creams to urban markets. Their operation spans farm stores, coffee houses, restaurants, and high end specialty stores in Knoxville, Nashville, and Chattanooga.

Rural Food Challenges

Appalachian communities face a number of challenges related to food security and food deserts. As tourism and urban redevelopment generate farm markets, food insecurity remains a challenge for a large number of people in poor communities (Billings and Blee 2000; Nolt 2005; Saslow 2013; Smith and Willhite 2017). In urban areas, minorities more often suffer from limited access to healthy food in the contemporary food system. Knoxville contains 20 food deserts (communities with less access to healthy foods) mainly in low-income minority neighborhoods (Alapo 2017). Historically Black neighborhoods in east Knoxville lost their last grocery store, Walgreens in 2014. Poverty and job loss in former coal mining counties are key
challenging shaping access to healthy food. In rural areas, social problems are being accompanied by the loss of traditional foods and knowledge of traditional customs (Nolt 2005). Re-establishing local foods is becoming central to community activism addressing food insecurity. With 32 chapters, Berea College’s Grow Appalachia program addresses the loss of farming practices in former coal counties. Established in 2010 with an emphasis on community-level education, Grow Appalachia works with partners in the region in 32 chapters to address local knowledge and grow summertime and fresh foods (Smith and Willhite 2017).

Theoretical Reprise

Food defines mountain communities more than any other aspect of culture. In contrast to urban America, Appalachians continue to identify with the agricultural landscape and a sense of “food place.” This research helps us begin to address an alternative food narrative based on indigenous and traditional knowledge of mountain foods. Anthropologist in the region point to a need to increase the role of local voices in conservation and heritage preservation (Howell 1994; 2002). Today even in the face of health epidemics linked to mass produced and fast food, narratives of the importance of foodways offer a blueprint to supporting rural areas. New markets for local food must be accompanied by policies supporting investment in small-scale farming and its potential for place-based change addressing healthy communities and land conservation.

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