

**Preparing our Food Heritage:  
Promoting Cooking that Engages with  
our Heritage and Sense of Place**

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Virginia Food Heritage

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## **Introduction:**

Virginia is a destination for both food and history. History buffs travel from all 50 states to visit Colonial Williamsburg, Civil War battlefields, and other historical sites and communities.<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth also boasts fertile and scenic lands from the coast to the mountains, certainly a contributing factor to the range of history that has taken place here. In Central Virginia, small farms engage with their longstanding heritage by sustaining surrounding communities. These two regional assets do, in fact, have common ground. The intersection of the Virginia's rich history and its deep agricultural and culinary traditions serves as a basis for the heritage of food preparation. Food is important not just as a means of sustenance, but also as an indicator of the culture, climate, and inclinations of a place and its people. In the Thomas Jefferson five-county region, the cooking and preparations of foods further defines the area as a distinct historical and cultural area.

The region currently benefits from the economic and cultural stimulus of a connection with both history and food, but there it is also room to grow the area's unique food heritage for the benefit of community, the environment, health, and the economy. Though the scope of food heritage is expansive and inclusive – covering production, processing, retail, preparation and consumption, as well as celebration – there is particular opportunity to make the most of the region's heritage cooking. Seeking out and collecting food stories, interviews, recipes, remembrances, and an inventory of historic edible plant varieties supports the continuation of the region's food heritage. Additionally, promoting cooking classes in schools and in the community that focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Rypkema, Donovan D., *Virginia's Economy and Historic Preservation: The Impact of Preservation on Jobs, Business, and Community* (Staunton, Virginia: Preservation Alliance of Virginia, 1995).

heritage foods allow children and community members alike to engage with the history of food and preserve it for future generations through continued use. By encouraging the documentation, preservation, and continuation of heritage foods and preparations in the Thomas Jefferson five-county region, the area can become more engaged with its history, food system, and culture, which will foster an enhanced sense of place, optimal economic activity, and a more sustainable future.

### **Why Food Heritage?**

Food Heritage in Virginia encompasses more than just old recipes and heirloom varieties; food heritage is personal, powerful, and evolving. At the regional scale, foods grown or raised historically as well as traditional ways of preparing them represent a general food heritage, but at the familial and individual level, food heritage becomes more emotional and deeply connected to personal experience and habit. Though this more personal heritage may not fit exactly within the regional context (for instance, a family tradition of having lobsters at Christmas in a landlocked state!), the continuation and honoring of significant histories and foods is important to the culture of a place. America is a melting pot that has imported (and exported) a myriad of food traditions that have stewed within a new geography and culture to become new and distinctive. Food heritage, like culture itself, changes and adapts to new environments and new situations. This evolution is representative of historical and local trends and changes as well. The oft forgotten role of food in the chain of history is important to complete a full image of a place and its culture.

In addition to the historical significance of food within the context of regional culture, food heritage, like historic preservation, can be utilized as a powerful means of environmental and economic resiliency. In an age where food has become insecure and in even dangerous, reflection on a historical, locally-based food system can allow a region to envision a future in which the region is able to fully sustain itself and its communities.<sup>2</sup> A locally-based cycle of production and consumption allows economic capital to flow within a region; therefore, benefiting the region economically.<sup>3</sup> This reliance on a local region promotes trust and accountability among growers and consumers. The economic leakage that results from a failure to support and engage a local food system (that also promotes heritage food) deprives the region of both profit and independence.<sup>4</sup> A region that produces, processes, distributes, sells, prepares, and consumes its own food is agriculturally and economically resilient. This system upholds and fosters a historically based, yet evolving food heritage.

### **Heritage Food Preparation:**

An important part of heritage and local foods is the cooking and preparation of traditional fruits, vegetables, meats, and other food products that establish a connection with the past and further the resilience and distinctiveness of the region. With new ways of cooking and newer more efficient appliances and utensils, historic methods, and often tastes, are being lost and forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Recipes and preparations either wane or adapt as heritage breeds and varieties disappear. As food heritage can accommodate

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<sup>2</sup> Cobb, Tanya Denckla, *Reclaiming Our Food* (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2011), 171.

<sup>3</sup> Bendfeldt, Eric, et al, [A Community-Based Food System: Building Health, Wealth, Connection, and Capacity as the Foundation of Our Economic Future](#) (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2011), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Ferguson

a degree of adaptability and evolution over time as foods (and kitchens) change, continuing and honoring old preparations in the modern world provides a link to the distinctive regional food culture. Today, food has become merely an anonymous product one buys at a store or restaurant; however, before the industrialization of food, there were strong communal and personal connections between the farmer, the market, and the consumer that grounded food and preparations to a sense of place.<sup>6</sup> Regional distinctiveness was not a choice or a goal for which to strive, but merely the way of life. The content and origin of foods were transparent and accountable. This openness and trust allowed the region to develop unique and personal food preparations. By continuing or returning to a food environment with transparency, regional significance, and historical precedent, a powerful sense of place can be reestablished and enhanced for the Thomas Jefferson five-county region.

Cooking traditional foods and recipes in the modern world can be difficult and time consuming. Historically, things were cooked a certain way because of the limited tools, resources, and technology available. Today, fitting heritage food preparations into modern schedules and eating habits may seem difficult and inconvenient. However, historic recipes can and must adapt to cultural changes in order to survive. There certainly is something to be said for continuing or recreating historic methods of preparation, like churning butter, but to truly and realistically accommodate heritage foods into our everyday lives, some changes must be made. For instance, compare preserving heritage food preparations to preserving a historic building: both need to be used to survive, but both also need some sort of updating for the way we live now. In

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<sup>6</sup> Sokolov, Raymond, *Fading Feast: A Compendium of Disappearing American Regional Foods* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 1998), 3.

order to preserve heritage cooking for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, we must collect and document heritage preparations, recipes, and stories to be used as a benchmark for teaching heritage cooking skills in the context of modernity. Some foods will no longer be available, while others will taste differently. However, the more awareness of heritage there is in the regional food system, the more ingredients and food products will reflect the regional food heritage. Starting with fresh, local, and seasonal food (whether strictly considered heritage or not) to prepare regional or personal heritage recipes both supports the growing of a new, regional food heritage and represents the evolution of food and the region.

### **Heritage Food Preparation Preservation: Appalachian Food Storybank**

In order to preserve heritage preparations, a community or region must collect and document traditional recipes and food practices that have been an important part of the identity of the area. This is the idea that spurred the formation of the Appalachian Food Storybank in Asheville, North Carolina. The Appalachian Food Storybank is a newly founded organization that collects recipes, stories, and interviews that document heritage foods within a 100-mile radius of Asheville, NC.<sup>7</sup> It started as a program of Show Food Asheville and seeks to preserve the personal connections people have with their food and heritage as both a service to the families and individuals who remember historic foods and preparations and an effort to maintain a sense of place and history for the region's diverse and unique foods.<sup>8</sup> The project gathers recipes and other material for their website, which provides the region with an accessible and engaging database

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<sup>7</sup> Patty, Susannah. Phone Interview by author. Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC. April 19, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of food heritage. They continue to collect heritage food information through both personal connections or networks and attendance to regional food events and festivals, like 2011's Mountain State Fair, where they set up a "Storybooth" in which to conduct interviews about people's food heritage.

The central goal of the Appalachian Food Storybank is to "acknowledge, honor, and archive" the personal stories, memories, and histories of the Asheville region to provide a link to food heritage in the future.<sup>9</sup> This will preserve local food stories and practices for future generations. By promoting the documentation of "local knowledge, natural resources, and food biodiversity," the Appalachian Food Storybank forges connections between the past and the future as a service to those with local food acumen as well as for educational purposes. By compiling stories, histories, growing techniques, recipes, and other foodways, the program provides the public with a shared accessible resource. They also hope as they acquire more and more food heritage documentation, the local university (UNC Asheville) can become a partner as a repository to hold, protect, and promote their archive.<sup>10</sup> By gaining more information on heritage food preparations, the food traditions that have been lost or are at risk are identified and can be targeted for continuation or revival. The Appalachian Food Storybank can become a powerful resource of local heritage food knowledge that can be mined to promote the continuation of heritage food preparations through cookbooks, cooking classes, partnership with the local university, heritage gardens, restaurants, and, of course, traditional home cooking.

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<sup>9</sup> Appalachian Food Storybank, About, <http://appalachianfoodstorybank.org/>, Accessed April 19, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Patty, Susannah, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.

One of the main foci of the Appalachian Food Storybank is the training and execution of oral history interviews. Interviews with knowledgeable, often elderly individuals can offer a wellspring of information and insight into heritage foods and the evolution of food today. They train volunteers to conduct both long and short interviews with people in the know.<sup>11</sup> At the Mountain State Fair in Fletcher, NC, which “celebrates the people, agriculture, art and tradition” of Western North Carolina, the Appalachian Food Storybank set up their “Storybooth,” a portable recording studio for conducting short interviews.<sup>12</sup> This was their first use of the Storybooth, but the concept can be applied at other fairs, festivals, farmers markets, and food venues. As a way to focus specifically on heritage food within the Asheville region, they require interview topics pertain to local or wild plant varieties and animal breeds, traditional preparations, and/or life in the woods, on a farm, or in a garden.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, they define local as a 100-mile radius of Asheville, also the bounds for a partner organization Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project.<sup>14</sup> Interviewees can be nominated by friends or family members. Through the training and execution of targeted oral history interviews on heritage foods and preparations, the Appalachian Food Storybank is well on its way to becoming a beacon of regional knowledge and an important stimulant of cultural and agricultural resilience for the Asheville region.

The Appalachian Food Storybank serves as a comparable example and benchmark to measure the success of Central Virginia efforts at food heritage preservation through the Virginia Food Heritage Project. The Asheville region, a small

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<sup>11</sup> Patty, Susannah, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Mountain State Fair, <http://www.mountainfair.org/mountain-state-fair.html>, Accessed May 3, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Appalachian Food Storybank, Arranging an Interview, <http://appalachianfoodstorybank.org/>, Accessed April 19, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Patty, Susannah, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.



city with a state university and surrounded by rich agricultural traditions, provides an appropriate comparison due for the Charlottesville region. As a collector of food heritage knowledge and, therefore, an incredible resource for promoting and reviving food preparations of days gone by, the Appalachian Food Storybank shows the potential for the Virginia Food Heritage Project to dispense the stories and recipes it gathers for education and training. With an expanded understanding of heritage preparations and place-based culture, the Thomas Jefferson five-county region can then develop educational programs to promote the preservation of food heritage

### **Heritage Food Preparation Education: FEAST**

One way to proactively engage and educate a community about food heritage preparations is by providing cooking classes. The free community-centered educational cooking classes and demonstrations that FEAST provide in Asheville, North Carolina offer a precedent for seeking engagement with food heritage through community development. Kate Justen, the co-founder and program director noticed a need in her community for teaching young people and adult community members alike about cooking in a fresh, easy, affordable way.<sup>15</sup> In fact, FEAST stands for “fresh, easy, affordable, sustainable, tasty.”<sup>16</sup> FEAST, also a program of the Slow Food Asheville, stresses choice in cooking with a mind to childhood and family nutrition. Their motto is, “we are much more likely to chose healthy food if we can prepare it.”<sup>17</sup> By knowing more about food – where is comes from, how to cook it, and what it tastes like – participants engage more fully with their food system and, therefore, make better

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<sup>15</sup> Justen, Kate, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> FEAST, About FEAST, <http://feast.slowfoodasheville.org/>, Accessed April 19, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

cooking and eating decisions in the future. FEAST also emphasizes hands on, group cooking and problem solving in the kitchen with the caveat that ingredients used are fresh, local, and seasonal, and, therefore, not necessarily the ingredients stipulated in a standard recipe.<sup>18</sup> Other goals for FEAST include teaching about portion control; fat, sugar, and sodium reduction; fiber and calcium rich diets; changes to food once cooked, creating and adapting recipes (i.e. cooking with what you have); nutritional value; team work; and math and science skills. Teaching students and adults about types of foods, characteristics and properties of foods, and ways to adjust and adapt recipes when substitutions are needed provides a newfound and significant engagement with food preparation that benefits their health and engenders an awareness of their food system for those who have become extricated from their food due to the anonymous nature of the modern industrial food system. This newfound awareness and knowledge of food provides the potential for the integration of heritage foods.

FEAST coordinates cooking classes by partnering with existing programs and schools. They conduct programs in elementary and middle school kitchens, which provides flexible and accommodating facilities as well as reliable attendance.<sup>19</sup> Because students are already at school, it is easier to attract attendance to an afterschool program, whereas programs in a community center kitchen are harder to bring in participants, even though class are free and open to the public.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, issues of transportation and timing to and from classes complicate attendance. FEAST has found that when they partner with an existing program or gathering, they have

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<sup>18</sup> Justen, Kate, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

better attendance and, therefore, can have a greater potential impact.<sup>21</sup> One existing organization FEAST works with is I Have a Dream, which provides after-school educational programs to children in public housing.<sup>22</sup> By finding interested partners and programs with which to work, FEAST has been able to create meaningful relationships with communities and schools to implement their vision of spreading awareness about food preparation.

Classes comprise between four to twenty-two students for between 30 minutes and two hours at a time. They are held during the day, in the afternoon, and in the evening to accommodate various schedules.<sup>23</sup> They find that when classes are held in schools, there is more room for growth with the students, whereas classes in community centers usually attract sporadic attendance by a wider range of people.<sup>24</sup> Engagement with students in multiple classes establishes relationships that can help build a connection and a lasting impression on the importance of food preparation. To help with the school programs with young children, FEAST recruits volunteers for cooking sessions to talk students through the food preparation process and ensure overall safety.<sup>25</sup> Many volunteers come from the local university, which integrates multiple age groups and generations in the preparation of food. Additionally, volunteers themselves learn and engage as they assist in classes.

FEAST, in addition to the free cooking classes in schools and the community, holds paid fundraising classes in local restaurants or food sites led by area chefs to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> FEAST, I Have A Dream and Project MARCH, <http://feast.slowfoodasheville.org/>, Accessed April 19, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Justen, Kate, Phone Interview by author, Charlottesville, VA to Asheville, NC, April 19, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

attract attention, enthusiasm and money toward the program.<sup>26</sup> They receive most of the food for cooking classes from the local food bank called Manna Food Bank. Manna donates fresh, local produce and bread and sells other food products at a reduced price.<sup>27</sup> By being visible in the city and attracting interest in their work, FEAST forges new relationships and new partnerships to serve as a source of food to conduct the program. The model of serving schools and communities by offering free, hands on cooking classes could have an immense impact in Central Virginia by adding a focus of food heritage and local distinctiveness. Engaging communities with both the history of food and place-based aspects of preparation will lead to a greater understanding of the effect of our food system and the need for a resurgence of heritage food preparations to connect us with the past, the region, and each other.

### **Policy Recommendations: Overview**

In order to encourage to preservation of heritage food preparations in the Thomas Jefferson five-county region, there must be working farms, access to local food, knowledge of heritage recipes, as well as education and training for preparing food. Therefore, ease of access to sources of fresh, local, and seasonal food is vitally important to the able to prepare heritage foods. Firstly, local farmers must be supported to become economically viable within the region. Secondly, farmers markets need to be accessible and properly promoted in order to provide people with food for which to prepare heritage recipes. Additionally, local food in grocery stores and corner markets would further promote the accessibility of fresh, seasonal, local foods to different

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

populations. Thirdly, the collection and preservation of regional food preparation knowledge is necessary. Lastly, the collective regional knowledge should be reasserted through coordinating cooking classes and an online resource for the community. This structured, supportive approach has the potential to bring heritage food preparations back to the fore, making the region a distinct food heritage destination.

**Policy Recommendation #1:** Form Partnerships for Documentation and Preservation

The Virginia Food Heritage Project is an important resource and partner with which to promote the collection of heritage food preparation information for educational and training purposes. Like the Appalachian Food Storybank, the Virginia Food Heritage Project seeks out stories, recipes, recommendations, and engagement from Central Virginia to document the food heritage of the area. The Virginia Food Heritage Project is collaborative and community-based.<sup>28</sup> It seeks to expanded local knowledge and understanding of heritage foods through documentation. Through greater understanding of and an enhanced connection to local food heritage, the region can become a destination for food heritage.

In order to a acquire detailed and diverse accounts of the regional food heritage, the Virginia Food Heritage Project must train and prepare interested volunteers to conduct interviews. The TJPDC can assist the Virginia Food Heritage Project in promoting and providing resources for training sessions. Additionally, the TJPDC can partner with the Virginia Food Heritage Project to provide the equipment needed to set up interview booths like the Appalachian Food Storybank’s “Storybooth” at the many food festivals and events throughout the region. As the collection of stories, recipes,

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Food Heritage Project. <http://vafoodheritage.com/>. Accessed May 3, 2012.

and remembrances grows, the TJPDC can facilitate coordination between the Virginia Food Heritage Project and University of Virginia to serve as a permanent archive of the body of heritage knowledge to ensure its preservation and access for perpetuity. As the Virginia Food Heritage Project grows, the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission can act as a partner and facilitator to help fulfill the needs of the organization as they change and expand.

**Policy Recommendation #2:** Encourage Cooking Classes that Engage with Food Heritage

By supporting the efforts of the Virginia Food Heritage Project to understand and document the food heritage preparations of Central Virginia, the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission can also promote the education and training of the community to prepare heritage foods. Once the knowledge of heritage foods is documented and archived, community organizations can teach it in the form of a free, inclusive cooking class program. Following the FEAST model, free community-oriented classes in schools and community centers can provide hands on, group heritage cooking training to those in the region interested in engaging with and promoting food heritage. Furthermore, to meet people halfway in their busy modern lives, a website that features how-to's, a question and answer section, as well as instructional YouTube videos would effectively dispense heritage cooking information to a wider audience and support the cooking classes as well. This provides the community with a specialized, localized go-to resource for heritage cooking. The TJPDC can facilitate and coordinate between the Virginia Food Heritage Project and partner organization that operate and/or house the cooking classes.

Central Virginia has no dearth of interest or enthusiasm for local food or cooking. As such, there are many existing organizations and programs that could be potential partners for offering cooking classes. The Jefferson School African American Heritage Center provides an ideal setting for community cooking classes. The center's location, historical associations, and the interest and enthusiasm of its supporters make it ideal alone, but with the completion of the current renovation and its opening as a community center and home for local non-profits, the Jefferson School will have the facilities and built in support for conducting community-centered heritage cooking classes. One of the Jefferson School's new tenets, the Jefferson Area Board of Aging also presents a valuable partner in the effort to preserve and continue heritage food preparation. With their interest in and emphasis on intergenerational sharing, JABA would also be an excellent resource for collecting heritage food knowledge. By seeking out and offering assistance to parties that already have a vested interest in food heritage, the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission can encourage and provide support for existing area organizations and programs to provide heritage cooking classes to the community.

Local city and county area schools pose even more potential for expanding heritage knowledge and engage generations with both past and place. Following FEAST's example and assessment of the sustained relationships and investment cooking classes with schoolchildren have, the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission can coordinate a program that rotates between schools in the region to provide area students with an early background in heritage food, cooking skills, and food system engagement.

Because the class should be a free service to the regional community, the TJPDC can seek out grants and founding for offering the courses. Paid fundraising events like the ones FEAST puts on could also help raise the money needed to provide cooking classes. The TJPDC could seek out community partners in the form of local restaurants, food retail stores, and farms interested in hosting and/or helping with fundraising events. Volunteer are another important aspect of the program. TJPDC can seek out and recruit interested and engaged community members to help with the classes and the website. The University of Virginia is also a great resource for enlisting volunteers. The Thomas Jefferson five-county region could adopt FEAST's motto, but adjust it to read, "we are much more like to choose *heritage* food if we can prepare it." By providing the community services to teach citizens about heritage cooking through classes and a comprehensive website, the regional can choose to prepare heritage foods and, therefore, work toward the preservation of a local, historically-based food system that engages the region with history, place, and people.

**Conclusion:**

Food heritage is an inclusive concept that creates connections to place, history, and culture. Preserving the quickly dwindling knowledge of Central Virginia's food heritage allows interested parties to utilize said knowledge for the education and training of individuals and communities to continue the traditions that tie them to their region and to each other. By concentration on the past, and working in the present, we can grow a brighter, more sustainable future for generations to come.



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