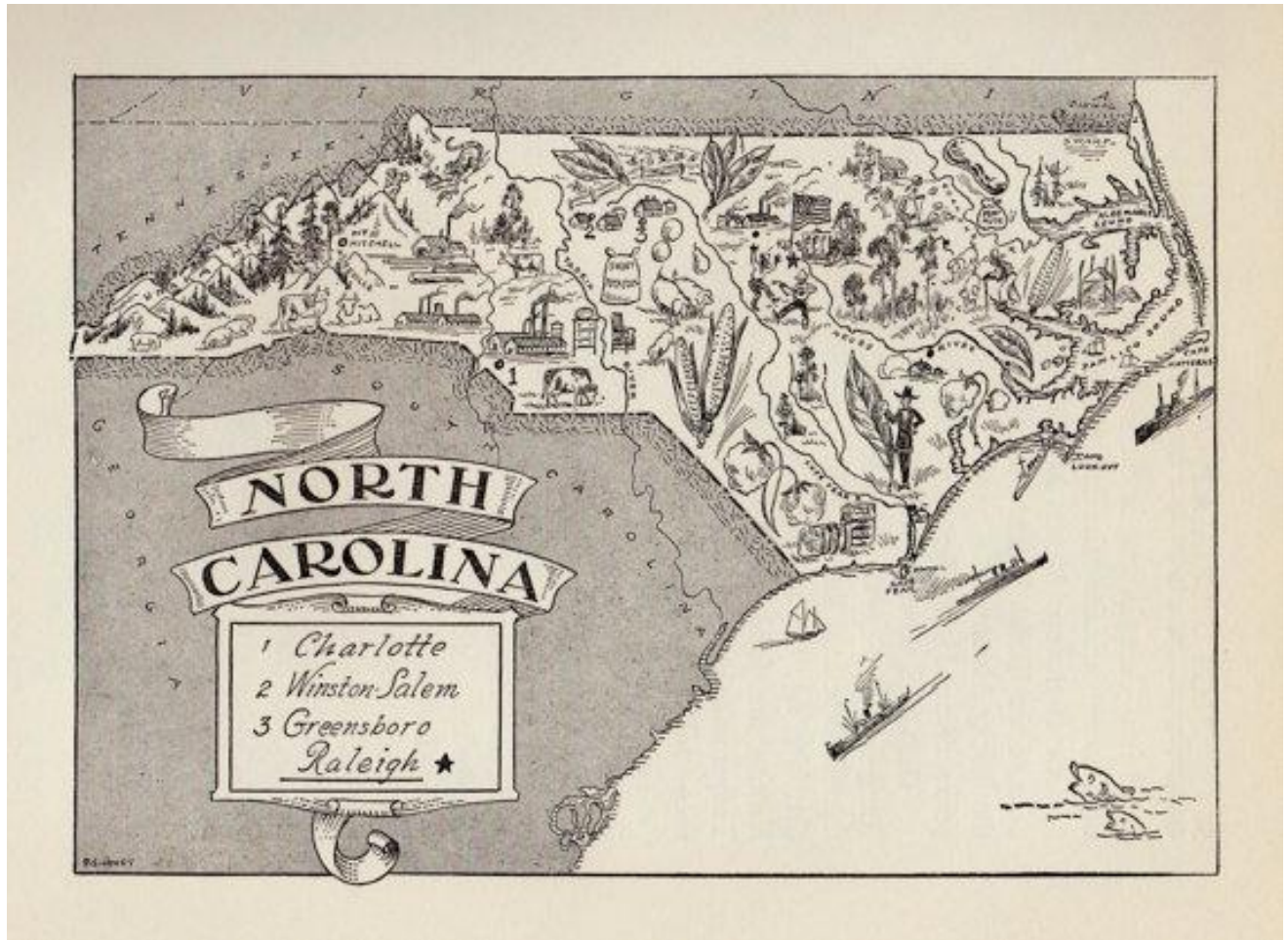


Three Generations of Southern Food & Culture

An Oral History of North Carolina



By
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Cast of Mothers & Daughters: Spanning Three Generations

Elizabeth Hill (Mother of Teresa): Born 1926. Youngest of eleven siblings across a twenty-year span. Food brought the family together then, and it's how she taught her children to come together ever since.

Teresa Hill Lee (Daughter of Elizabeth): Born 1946. Senior Mary-Kay Consultant. Opened a Southern Catering business through her Wilmington Women's Group to raise money for charity.

Robin Wenskus (Step-daughter of Elizabeth): Born 1950. Interior Designer. Grew up in a large Southern family in coastal North Carolina.

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Nan Smith (Mother of Noelle): Born 1948. Retired elementary school teacher. Renowned Southern cook and hospitality expert in her area.

Noelle Smith Parker (Daughter of Nan): Millennial, born 1988. University professor in her late twenties. Part of a younger generation when it comes to southern heritage.

Introduction:

Southern culture and food, for many, is an intermixed and tightly connected concept. There are hundreds of years of history—economic, political, and social— wrapped up in what it means to be Southern. It is each layer of this history that forged Southern tradition, food, and culture.

Of course, every part of the South claims its own idiosyncrasies, so I chose to focus on my home state of North Carolina. North Carolina is a unique place for many reasons: It is one of the only states to have mountains, piedmont, and a coastal region. Much of the Civil War was fought on North Carolinian soil, and so there are many historical and momentous events that took place there. Pirates used North Carolina as a home base for their United States operations because of the numerous wide rivers flowing right into the sea. And lastly, North Carolina is a huge agriculture state, and you will read about how this impacted the lives of many I interviewed.

Listening to three generations of women (all mother-daughter pairs) recall memories and instances of growing up Southern, shines a light on heritage and traditions surrounding food and

culture in North Carolina. Their stories discuss food, God, family, and being home for the Holidays in a way that is not only nostalgic and insightful, but heart-warming.

The Food Culture of Yesteryear

Robin Wenskus:

I remember so many things that were wonderful about my grandmother's cooking, like Cornbread Lace Cakes. She would make this cornbread for dinner where she'd put a little oil in the frying pan, mix the batter, and then she would pour the batter into the frying pan. As it dropped in, the hot oil flattened it out and would start cooking real fast because it was so thin. Then as it cooked and the oil bubbled it made these lacy, crispy edges around the cornbread and she'd serve them up hot like that. We called them her Cornbread Lace Cakes. Oh man those were wonderful. And if she wasn't serving cornbread, there were biscuits. There were biscuits with every meal anyway half the time—that's very much a Southern thing. **We had biscuits growing up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.**

I learned to cook from this grandmother. She was always in the kitchen or in her garden and she loved it. When I was growing up she was in the kitchen almost all the time. She did everything you can imagine: She canned from fruit trees out back, she'd get chicken for dinner from the coop in the backyard, she'd garden and had vegetables, fruits, you name it.

I hated it when she killed the chickens though. She made me watch once so I'd know how to do it, but I was so scared that I think she soon figured I wasn't going to learn how to kill a chicken anytime soon. Of course, I was probably around ten, so the whole idea held very little appeal for me. But she was never timid. She used to take that chicken and literally twist its neck. I also saw her chop the head off a chicken once and I had nightmares for days because the chicken danced around a little, you know, it may be dead but its nerves fight for a minute. Anyway, after all that, my grandmother would take that chicken onto the porch and pluck it. I can remember sitting with her while she plucked out all the feathers, and they would get caught in the wind. **Suddenly we'd be sitting in the middle of all these floating feathers, and it was beautiful in a strange way.**

Nan Smith:

Both of my grandmas were good cooks. My father's mother, Granny Wren, she was from the hills of North Carolina and she had a high school education. She grew up farming and everything that was edible to her was fresh out of the garden, and so all her cooking was seasonal. She would cook collards or cabbage or a pot of beans just about every day though—she'd add some vinegar and just put them on the stove all day long and they'd cook down until they were practically mush, but that was just her way of cooking. I mean she really wasn't that educated a person, she could read and write, but she didn't have any real formal education after high school.

But then my Mother's mother, Granny Thomas, she was from Stanton, Virginia, and she went to college, she went to University of Richmond and she became a nurse by profession. That's how she met my grandfather who was a World War II doctor. She really did a lot of gourmet cooking for her day. She took a lot of cooking classes. She kept hundreds of recipes. The first cookbook I ever got—I still have it—is the one my Great Grandmother had and she gave me. It's called *The Rumford Cookbook*.

Rumford is also baking powder, and it was such a reliable brand back then, very wholesome. Everybody used Rumford. They published their first cookbook in the early 1900's. That was kind of like everybody's go-to around here, way before the Betty Crockers and the Martha Stewarts. *The Rumford Cookbook* was one of my training books, and I still refer to it. I still have it. It's a little red book, a red hardback book. Of course, now it's covered in flour and oil and gracious knows what else, but I would be completely lost if I had to go without it. There are just some recipes that it's easier to go look up than remember forever, especially ones around the Holidays that you only cook once a year. **But it's the tradition of it all too, it's the tradition that matters so much.**

Passing on the Tradition

Robin Wenskus:

My grandmother, Beedie, she's the one who taught me how to can preserves. I can remember so many days watching her and being with her in the kitchen while she was boiling the fruit before she canned. She made apple butter, apple jelly, and plum preserves because we had a plum tree

in her yard and, just watching her do all that and go through all that process—I knew it had to be a labor of love.

She cooked all the time in my growing up years, all my growing up years. She had this cast iron skillet, and she'd put her oil in there and she'd bread chicken pieces and add all the seasoning, and cook it all up, oh man, I can still see her standing over the stove with it. She'd make fried steak and chicken-fried steak. And, oh honey, she fried some fried chicken. The woman fried some chicken.

She'd go up in the backyard you know to that big pecan tree. And, of course, when they would drop she'd be there, ready to pick them up off the ground. She'd bring me with her and we'd wear these long aprons so we could collect the pecans in our aprons and bring them back inside to crack open. And then we'd get in the kitchen—and I hated it—but I'd have to help her crack them open, and pick out the pecans and we'd sit there for hours shelling and picking out pecans.

Surely you can't talk about the South without talking about grits. You'd never know there are so many different ways to make grits, certainly no one outside the South knows about it. I grew up on regular cheese grits, shrimp n' grits, dinner grits (which is a polite way of saying the cook put a splash of white wine in them, so you're having them for dinner), and eggs cooked in the grits. Now my grandmother wasn't a fan of dinner grits because of the alcohol, but when she was making eggs with grits for dinner she'd cook the grits and then she'd break an egg into them and stir it real fast. The heat from the stove and the heat from the grits cooked the egg up real fast, so you had to keep stirring, and then you wouldn't be able to tell what was egg and what was grits. It would turn a yellow color and then we'd eat them with country ham or bacon and called them "egg-grits." **I miss her every time I'm eating good Southern food, every single time.**

Elizabeth Hill:

As a kid, they never let us in the kitchen because we'd make a mess cooking. Now we had a black cook growing up because Mother was very ill. And she kept us out of her way. But sometimes she'd bring her children over while she was cooking. Two little black children for me and Joelynn, my sister, to play with. Marvelous, marvelous people.

I had black maids all the way through and they loved my children to death and my children loved them. I had never cooked anything until I got married. But I found Melissa, Melissa Buttman. And I'd drive to go get her on Sunday night and drop her off Friday night.

Oh my stars, she did our grocery shopping and everything that we wanted. She always seemed to know exactly what we needed. But she loved cooking vegetables. Didn't know too much about meat—she was young. But she could cook some Southern vegetables! She was my lifeline then and I don't know if she even knew it. She would take the kids to the park. And she cleaned house and she was doggone good, good. I was a single working mother back then you know, and Lordy, I don't know how any of us would have got through without her.

She stayed with us until she got married and she would have stayed on, she wanted to stay on, but her husband said no, he wanted her home. I had her up with us since my two kids were six and eight, until the oldest was in the 11th grade. When Gary would fall out of bed at night he wouldn't call for Momma, he'd call "Lissy! I've fallen out. Come get me Lissy!" **I loved her, and she loved them.**

Nan Smith:

I would say my Grandmother Thomas and my Mom were probably my biggest teachers. Our houses weren't air conditioned back then, so we would peel tomatoes and shuck corn in the basement. The basement would open up and it was so cool down there. To work in the basement was like being in real air conditioning.

When it wasn't scorching out, we had a side porch with this long glider, just like a sofa, but it was a glider. We had about three or four rocking chairs and we'd sit there and talk about everything—the weather, the neighbors, what everyone in the family was up to, you know, and we all had bowls between our legs because we'd be snapping peas!

My mother always wore a dress even out in the garden, she had a dress on. And she would put that bowl between her legs and she'd shuck corn or snap peas, or shell pecans. We had pecan

trees all around their house. I learned at a very early age how to shell pecans, and **I would come inside afterwards and my nails would be just black or green underneath them from shelling all day long.**

Robin Wenskus:

I was born in 1950 and I cooked and worked with food mostly with my grandma growing up. While my grandmother and I were shelling pecans, a huge North Carolinian pastime because everybody had pecan trees, the boys were out running around, playing in the backyard or something. For some odd reason they didn't usually get corralled into much of the pecan shelling or corn husking. I think it was because they were too fidgety to sit still that long. You know how boys are sometimes when they're little? They just can't sit still that long.

It's interesting being in the modern world now, and looking back to then. Especially thinking about women's roles these days. Having the woman be a stay at home Mother (which was the norm back then for those who could afford it) has given way to many women having full-time jobs.

But when I think back to my grandmother I never picked up any resentment from her at all, about being responsible for all the meals and laundry, the cooking and cleaning, that sort of thing. I mean, she loved it. **Her kitchen was her kingdom, and her garden was her chapel.**

She would get up at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning in summertime when the garden was growing. She loved getting out there early before anybody else was awake, and she'd be out there pulling weeds and doing this and doing that watering and puttering around. I can remember her telling me that that was her time with God. She loved getting out there in the garden in the early morning hours when nobody else was up and it was just her and the Lord; She would talk to him and talk with him. That was her quiet time. That was why she loved it.

And then she'd bring in the fresh vegetables and berries and put the fruit in bowls in the kitchen so we could all just walk by and grab something to snack on. But mostly she just loved providing for and cooking for her family. She just loved it.

The Holidays: Southern Style

Nan Smith:

And oh, Christmas time! Now this was a family thing: We would make twenty pounds of fruit cake the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It was always my grandma and my aunt (they lived at the other end of the block from us; they had the French Dutch colonial house and we lived in the Colonial house) and my Mom and me. And I mean we'd start days ahead. You know chopping up the citron and orange peel and then we would soak the raisins in the Mogen David wine and chop up the pecans and then we'd pick out the half pecans to decorate the top of the cakes. We did all that and so it was a weekend event, but we had to start early because there was so much to do. My mom and my grandma would soak cheesecloth in rum and wrap every cake with rum so they were saturated with the flavor.

Then around Christmastime everybody in the neighborhood would always get a big plate of all these things that we'd been making for the past two months: the rum cakes, cookies, candied pecans, you name it. We had tins all over the dining room loaded down with these cookies and cheese straws for weeks, and it was like, no wonder we had weight issues, we were in the kitchen cooking and tasting everything we made!

While we did that the men had their own job: making the Brunswick Stew! Now this is very particular to Coastal North Carolina, no one else makes real Brunswick Stew. Of course it's named for our county, Brunswick County, but a few copycats across the Carolinas try and get it right. Anyway, the Brunswick Stew was also my Dad's job. Every year he'd pull out this huge stew pot. And this is no joke—it looked like a cauldron, a witch's cauldron. My Dad would go out with my brother and my uncle and they would shoot rabbits or squirrels for the stew, and we always had lots of chicken and beef and pork too. They would start really early in the morning as the meat was the first to go in the pot and cook, and then they'd add all the vegetables to it. It was really the men's job this stew: it kept them outside and busy and out of the way of all us women flying around the kitchen. It worked for everybody! After the big meal, we would put the stew leftovers in containers and freeze it for the wintertime, of course we would eat off of it for days too.

Teresa Hill Lee:

I even have my grandma's original North Carolina Spoon Bread recipe. Not too many people know how to make a proper Spoon Bread anymore, but it's like a soufflé. And it would always collapse, and that would always distress Momma, but always, there it came—out just like with a pancake. The part that would fall was always my favorite though because it was the part that was the most dense and gooey.

Of course, I didn't have as much trouble back in the day fixing plates for large groups of company because **when I was growing up there was no such thing as a vegetarian or a vegan. I mean there might have been people who didn't eat certain foods, but we never knew those words.**

Southern Law & Culture Rules

Robin Wenskus:

Part of the idea behind having everybody over on Sundays after church is that the Blue Laws¹ were in effect, and so nothing was open on Sunday. You couldn't go shopping and you couldn't go run errands and you couldn't be busy here, or busy there. It facilitated people just relaxing and being together.

The Blue Laws came from a time when on Sundays people rested and didn't work in the fields. The Blue Laws were just the evolution of that mindset, of honoring the Sabbath day to keep it holy. That's where it evolved from, out of Judeo-Christian values. It encouraged people to just be with each other, for families to be together. There was no commerce. Because Biblically Sunday was a day of rest. The stores were closed, the shops were closed, the theaters were closed. There might be a couple of gas stations. And then maybe one or two drugstores opened just for emergencies. But other than that everything came to a standstill on Sunday. It was all over the

¹ The "Blue Laws" or "Sunday Laws" in the United States are laws banning certain stores from being open on Sunday due to religious reasons. Most of these laws have now been repealed, though some States still have bans on the sale of alcohol on Sunday.

South. I don't know if it was up North or not, but that's how it was in the South. People respected that day.

Eventually those began to be taken away, now Sunday is no different from any other day and people just run themselves ragged. And it's hard to get kids and parents and everybody to sit down and even have a meal together. And that has to have had a negative effect on families, and on the closeness that there used to be. And not just with your immediate family, but with the extended family as well. People used to really consider the aunts, uncles, and cousins to be close family. Now, it's like we as a culture barely have time to keep track of our immediate, nuclear families, not to mention the whole tribe.

The Blue Laws were in place all my childhood. I don't know why they call them blue, but they were laws that had been on the books for probably hundreds of years where everything on Sunday was closed. Most people went to church, and then they came home and they wanted to be with their families and relax or go fishing or visit friends. And there wasn't really technology to distract people back then. The only thing you had was the television and the radio, and if you wanted to watch TV, you could, but we didn't watch TV very much.

Southern Culture Today: At an End, or a Resurgence?

Noelle Smith Parker:

My generation is in a different place with the tradition and heritage of cooking, especially Southern cooking. I'm in my late twenties, and I've grown up hearing how active my mom was in the kitchen with her mom growing up. I know I was never as involved with my mom in the kitchen. I think also not just technology but I think the fact that girls are now playing sports more and having hobbies more—it's not about traditional domestic life apprenticeship anymore.

I can cook basic stuff. But there's no sort of archive or record of recipes I love or cook often because I only use online recipes. My mom's generation has that kind of record though. When Alex and I went over there for dinner last night, she showed us her *Rumford's* cookbook and there was a page that was opened and it was like “oh, like I can see this recipe was used a lot.” It had grease splatter stains on it and everything. She clearly opened to that page a lot, and that

recipe was cooked all the time over, just, decades.

The women in my family have passed down the art or love or responsibility of cooking for generations. And I feel like that ended with my childhood a bit, because my Mom and I didn't cook together unless it was the Holidays. **In many ways, I feel like Millennials are the lost generation for many Southern traditions.**

But this is something I want to bring back with my children. I feel like, maybe that can be the start of something new.

But for now, you know what we do have? My husband and I have a vegetable and herb garden and chickens. It's like that part of food-making—the raw and fresh foods part—skipped my Mom's generation and went straight from my Grandma to me. My Mom loves flowers, but she's never bothered much with planting a garden of things you can eat, and she would *never* have chickens. But having fresh foods to serve my family is really important to me. I don't want to just rely on the pesticide-riddled foods from the grocery store or worry about buying “cage free, organic, hormone-free” eggs, plus they're so expensive! Now we have enough eggs that my sister and my Mom will drive over and visit and I'm sending them home with fresh eggs. **But that's family isn't it? Being there to fill in the gaps for each other.**