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Biscuits Script

History and Culture Section

The word biscuit derives from the Latin word “biscoctus” which means twice-cooked. The origins are ambiguous, as the biscuit just seems to be a staple that has been around forever. Many articles talk of biscuits as if Southerners are born with the biscuit recipe in hand. The truth of the matter is that those both “inside and outside the community in Appalachia came to believe Southerners were getting diseases because of their diets. Cornbread became a target” (*You Are What You Eat / UT News / The University of Texas at Austin*). The alternative of biscuits came to be due to the perishable and expensive nature of yeast, and the fact that the only ingredients required for biscuits, specifically beaten biscuits, are a fat, a liquid, and flour. (Stauffer). However, the wheat flour traditionally used for biscuits was not easily accessible to the people of Appalachia, and thus class divisions based on biscuits and cornbread began (*You Are What You Eat / UT News / The University of Texas at Austin*).

Additionally, we know that there is a stark contrast between biscuits of Europe and biscuits of America, specifically biscuits of Appalachia, but where the divide originates from is unclear. Some sources claim that there are roots that tie the biscuits of Europe [what we consider cookies] to the biscuits of America, while others still insist that biscuits spawned out of the

scarcity of ingredients and creativity of southern bakers. There is a consensus, however, in the discussion of beaten biscuit as the premier biscuit of Appalachia. But how did biscuits go from a literal labor of love that needed to be beaten “300 times for family and 500 times for guests” to something that chefs have decided “should be handled as little as possible” (Engelhardt) (Moskin)?

We begin our journey pre-Civil War Era, where beaten biscuits are king. Beaten biscuits use no leavening agent, and instead rely on being beaten and folded multiple times in order to incorporate air into the dough, as leavening agents were not yet readily available and yeast was expensive and perishable. The air pockets cause the dough to expand while in the oven, and thus rise. A key question here in discussing the intersectional backgrounds of food becomes who was responsible for this labor; who shoulders the responsibility of spending hours beating air into the dough?

With the *rise*, if you will, of baking soda and baking powder, in the mid-late 1800s, a new type of biscuit emerged: ones made with these leavening agents (Stauffer). These leavening agents changed not only the process and chemistry of biscuits, but the taste as well. The beaten biscuits of the past were often flatter and harder, while these new biscuits were fluffier and lighter due to the inclusion of the baking soda or baking powder. Traditionally, baking powder was single-acting, meaning it needed an acid to react with in order to create carbon dioxide, and thus air bubbles, within the dough as it bakes. This single-action could either occur at room-temperature on the counter [fast-action], or at a high temperature in the oven [slow-action] (Stauffer). There is an added element of danger when dealing with double-action baking powder, however; too much of it and your biscuits will develop a metallic aftertaste due to the inclusion of sodium aluminum sulfate as a component that allows a double-action rather than single action.

This change to the chemistry of baking powder started around 1885 and ensured that the release of carbon dioxide would not happen until later in the baking process (Stauffer).

Biscuits evolved out of necessity and lack of time to commit to such a task with drop biscuits. These drop biscuits are more closely related to scones in the both the texture of the dough and the process of formation. Their name stems from the process of just being able to drop the dough onto a sheet pan to bake rather than the labor intensive method associated with beaten biscuits. These drop biscuits have since evolved into ‘cathead’ biscuits, which are simply just drop biscuits that are the size of a cat’s head as seen at the ever popular Biscuit Head. This evolution calls issues of class into discussion, as we must always consider who gets to participate in these trendy food areas, and who these foods are accessible to. Often times, this kind of biscuit is the one we think of contemporarily when we think of a biscuit, even though historically it took a long time to get to this version.

In class we’ve discussed a lot surrounding Elizabeth Engelhardt’s piece “Beating the Biscuit,” in which Engelhardt highlights the difference in class structure when dealing with the type of biscuit one might make. Engelhardt highlights how women of upper class status would often cook a form of beaten biscuit, because they had the financial and social wellbeing to do so. Upper class women not only had the means to get the ingredients to make a beaten biscuit, but they also had the time at their disposal to do the labor intensive process to make these biscuits. Additionally, many upper class women had hired help, specifically African American women, in their kitchens, so often times these women were not even the ones who were making the biscuits. In contrast, the lower class women of the Appalachian region often did not make any sort of beaten biscuit, and rather cooked cornbreads or a variation thereof. The women of Appalachia did not have the money to buy imported wheat flour, and so instead they used what were at their

disposal, which was most often corn. The women of Appalachia also did not have the same amount of time that upper class women had since Appalachian women were often working outside of the home in addition to feeding and caring for their own families. This contrast in what biscuits are being made in different households is directly tied to the social class that these women found themselves in.

Literature Section

Despite social class determining what a “true” biscuit might be, biscuits have long been the iconic symbol of the South. Some of the most popular pieces of Southern literature feature biscuits as a prominent item served for a meal. When looking at literature from the Civil War era, one sees a distinction of a biscuit as a Southern food. Margaret Mitchell’s classic novel *Gone With the Wind* features multiple scenes with main character Scarlett O’Hara eating biscuits. Mitchell writes, “[Scarlett] dropped her eyes to her plate and nibbled daintily on a beaten biscuit with an elegance and an utter lack of appetite that would have won Mammy’s approval” (Mitchell 93). We can glean here that Scarlett is not only used to having biscuits as part of her diet and that Mammy makes biscuits on a regular basis, but also that Scarlett’s preferred biscuit is a beaten biscuit. Biscuits are a part of Scarlett’s Southern identity in addition to being part of her identity as a lady. We can see the traces of Engelhardt’s argument here. Privileged Southern women with the means and money to have beaten biscuits were clearly eating them. However, Mitchell’s depictions of biscuits also presses up against Engelhardt’s argument a little bit. Later in the story in the midst of the war, Mitchell details the Yankee blockade’s impact on the Confederate’s day to day life stating, “white flour was scarce and so expensive that corn bread

was universal instead of biscuits, rolls and waffles” (Mitchell 199). Here Mitchell presents the idea that cornbread might not have been exclusively an Appalachian woman’s choice for bread, but rather that when white flour was scarce for even the upper class Southern woman, cornbread was made as an alternative. This complicates Engelhardt’s divide between the upper class Southern woman’s biscuit and the lower class Appalachian woman’s cornbread. But it does reaffirm Engelhardt’s idea that Appalachian women in the Progressive era did not initially make beaten biscuits do to the lack of accessibility to the resource of white flour.

Similar presentations of biscuits in popular literature can be seen in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The main character, Sethe, is a former slave now freed and living in a post Civil War Ohio. In the opening chapter of the book, she recounts her experience as a slave as she bakes biscuits. Morrison writes, “the fat white circles of dough lined the pan in rows. Once more Sethe touched a wet forefinger to the stove. She opened the oven door and slid the pan of biscuits in” (Morrison 16). Morrison presents an interesting dynamic here. Sethe, as a former slave, bakes biscuits because no doubt she knows how to make them from her time cooking for her master. However given Sethe’s status as a former slave, it is interesting that she chooses to bake biscuits instead of cornbread. Since flour was more expensive, especially following the war, it would seem more appropriate for Sethe to bake cornbread both culturally and socioeconomically. However, this isn’t the case. Morrison utilizes a symbol of the white upper class South and Appalachia to subvert the very class and race issues that Engelhardt highlights in her article.

The recipes for biscuits in cookbooks vary from relatively simple recipes to more complex recipes featuring labor intensive processes to achieve the perfect biscuit. In Nathalie Dupree’s collection of recipes, *Southern Biscuits*, Dupree features some of the “easiest” biscuit recipes. One of these easy recipes, “Allison’s Easy Sour Cream Biscuits,” calls for just self-

rising flour and sour cream (Dupree 34). The sour cream is simply folded into the flour. Biscuits are cut from dough and placed on a tray to be baked. The sour cream supposedly makes these biscuits lighter and fluffier. In a contemporary biscuit cookbook, Biscuit Head's very own cookbook in fact, calls for the addition of cake flour. Traditionally, recipes for biscuits call for all-purpose flour, or later self-rising flour. Cake flour has a lower protein content [8-9%], whereas AP flour has a much higher protein content [10-13%]. The lower protein content makes cake flour the weakest flour and creates a lighter and fluffier batter or dough ("All-Purpose Flour vs. Cake Flour — What's the Difference?"). This showcases the trend of biscuits becoming bigger, lighter, and fluffier in comparison to the hard beaten biscuits of the past.

Despite the quite dramatic transformation of biscuits, they remain a symbol of the South, and more specifically Appalachia. With each new recipe and form biscuits take on, their influence only grows. So roll up your sleeves, roll out your dough (or don't, up to you) and enjoy a biscuit, whatever your favorite may be.

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“1967 theatrical re-release poster for *Gone with the Wind*” by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [CC BY

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gone_with_the_Wind_\(film\)#/media/File:Gone_With_The_Wind_1967_re-release.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gone_with_the_Wind_(film)#/media/File:Gone_With_The_Wind_1967_re-release.jpg)

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