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Food In Literature

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Peach Cobbler: Community and Condolences

If you have ever visited the South, owned a Southern cookbook, known someone who grew up in Appalachia, or watched a movie set in the area, you have heard about cobblers.

Sometimes, this famous dessert is referred to as Dutch babies, Galettes, Grunts, Slumps, Pandowdy, Sonker, tart, torte, buckles, or chuckwagon, but all of these vibrant names refer to one well known cobbler. The first use of the word “cobbler” was in reference to someone who makes or mends shoes, and later transitioned to mean clumsily thrown together. The word cobbler may also have been given to the dish for its golden brown crust, resembling the cobblestone streets of colonial America.

At the earliest colonizing in America, and especially after the expansion of the 13 colonies, families gathered their belongings in wagons and set out across the country to claim new lands and settle down.

With the early ideas of pies dating back to 9500 BC in Europe, these families wanted to continue the traditional foods they grew up on and bring the idea of pie to their new homes. On the road, with very little supplies, families threw accessible fruit, flour, and other simple supplies in one pan above the fire. Thus, the cobbler was born.

These traveling settlers impoverished familiar dishes, serving cobblers as a main dish until the late 19th century, when it became primarily a dessert due to less of a need for on the go meals. One of the appeals of cobblers is that they require very little preparation. Settlers could use cast iron pans to make savory and sweet cobblers, no matter where they parked their hungry families on the road.

After America continued to industrialize, cobblers remained present throughout Appalachia. Whatever was mass produced at the moment was seen in cobbler throughout time—Fannie Farmer, Nabisco, then Bisquick. Whatever was most accessible and most affordable became the topping and pastry for cobblers.

It is because of the available resources that we see a wide variety of cobblers: blackberry, blueberry, rhubarb, peach, or any fruit you can find in Appalachia.

Barbara Shortridge's American cuisine survey "Apple Stack Cake for Dessert: Appalachian Regional Foods" suggests peach cobbler has remained a favorite in Appalachia. Through asking Appalachian families to prepare menus for imaginary guests, data was collected that concluded peach cobbler to be a top dessert in the region especially in North Carolina and Georgia (Shortridge, Barbara G.).

So why peaches?

Southern Appalachia is filled with the sweet smell of juicy peaches. From roadside markets, grocery stores, and local farms, peaches line the streets of North and South Carolina, Georgia, and continue down south.

In Lancaster, South Carolina, you'll find peach cobbler served at Kilburnie Inn at Craig Farm, consisting of pecans, oats, sugar, butter, and flaky cereals. In Columbia South Carolina at

Mac's on Main, you will find Chef Fatback's World Famous Peach Cobbler served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. At Mcleod farm, peach cobbler is served in the form of "peach enchiladas," and at "The Peach Tree" it is served topped with peach ice cream (Stradley, Linda.).

Peach cobbler was quickly adapted into a nostalgic dish that tastes like home for a lot of Southerners. Often seen at family meals, church celebrations, and decoration day ceremonies, peach cobbler holds meaning in both community and condolences. As one of the most accessible, simple, and affordable dishes from the beginning of American civilization, peach cobbler has become a symbol of home for many southerners. In the family preparation, communion around the warm dish, deliveries to people in mourning as a means of comfort, peach cobbler has grown to carry much more meaning than those original chuckwagon settlers could have imagined.

Ellyn Satter's "Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family" includes peach cobbler in a section called "Involving Your Children" writing "an older child can make the peach dessert" and "the younger child may pinch off" pieces of the dough. The idea of family and community around peach cobbler is a theme that carries through time in literature, blogs, television, and other media (Satter, Ellyn.).

The well-known Paula Deen has a few variations of peach cobbler recipes, ranging in technique and ingredients, but her most popular, as seen on her blog, is called "The Lady and Sons Easy Peach Cobbler.". With over an hour of preparation time, and then served with cold vanilla ice cream, Paula Deen focuses on time with her family while cooking this warm, gooey dessert (Deen, Paula.).

Bell's Best 2, a community cookbook published by telephone companies in Mississippi, has over 4 pages of peach cobbler recipes. One of the appeals in peach cobbler is its ability to be modified: time, tools, ingredients, spices, amounts, all vary within these four pages.

Some recipes use vanilla cake mix, some make homemade biscuits and crust for the cobbler's toppings. Peaches vary from canned, to frozen, to fresh from the market or farm. Through all of these recipes, you can be sure of the constants: lots of sugar, even more butter, and of course, the delicious peaches. *Bell's best* also features a section called "Men's Microwave", showcasing a peach cobbler recipe made simple, so that men did not have to spend time cooking if faced with the task. The traditional idea of the domesticated woman showcases itself in this cookbook, as well as many other community cookbooks in Appalachia (*Bell's Best 2*).

On the other end of the spectrum is Ronni Lundy's book "Sorghum Savors", including the recipe for Emily's Howdy Pandowdy with Cornmeal Biscuit Top. This recipe is broken into sections: one for the filling and one for the dough. The biscuit topping is made of common ingredients like flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, salt, butter and cream. The filling is a bit more luxurious, containing peaches, lemon juice, flour, sorghum, fresh ginger, and salt. Even though peach cobbler is a traditionally southern and accessible meal, there is a small amount of evidence that the traditional food has been turned into a high end treat, feeding into the nostalgia and desire to taste the sweetness of the Appalachian lifestyle (Lundy, Ronni). This can be seen in Tupelo Honey's Peach Cobbler dish, prepared with lemon juice and novelty spices .

Barbara Shortridge's "A Food Geography of the Great Plains" surveys people across the

United States to collect ideal meals they would serve to guests if given the opportunity. Peach cobbler remained almost exclusive to the region of Appalachia, not just in the most southern states, but across the entire area. In Shortridge “Apple Stack Cake for Dessert: Appalachian Regional Food”, surveyors recognized peach cobbler as the number 1 dessert in both North Carolina and Georgia (Shortridge, Barbara G.).

Hannah Swensen's book “A Peach Cobbler Murder”, published in 2005, made its way to the big screen in 2016 with its premiere in the American TV Drama “Murder, She Baked” and into its own film later that year. This book is centered around a small town bakery owner, using peach cobbler as a way to set the scene in southern living and close quartered community (Fluke, Joanne).

So how do you make the warm and gooey, grunts, slumps, sonkers, chuckwagons, or, to keep it easy as a rendition of pie, cobbler?

First, grease a baking pan with butter, lard, oleo, or any other fat. Use whatever is at hand- glass, ceramic, or cast iron.

Line the bottom of your dish with peaches. If they are in season, find fresh peaches at the farmer’s market, or use canned ones from last years harvest, or Walmart.

In a separate dish, stir together the ingredients for the cobbler mix.

Sugar, butter, eggs, and flour! That’s it.

Add the cobbler mix to the top of your fruit. Dumping it on top is just fine, remember, cobbler means “clumsily thrown together”(Edison, Roger).

Bake at 375 for approximately 15 minutes, or until the top is golden brown.

Serve with homemade vanilla ice cream for an extra sweet dessert.

From the original chuckwagon settlers, to grandma's kitchen, peach cobbler has remained a constant dish served in the south as time progressed. No matter how far you travel or how long you're gone, the sweet smell of peach cobbler will always be waiting in Appalachia to welcome you back home.

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