

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

>> [Voiceover]: If there is one sweet treat typically thought of when Appalachian cooking is mentioned, it is the apple stack cake. Traditional apple stack cake incorporates multiple elements of Appalachian cuisine, such as sorghum molasses and apples. It also a flexible cake with many variations based on what was available in different regions of Appalachia.

Historically, apple stack cake has shown up throughout the Appalachian region, from Pennsylvania to Mississippi, but it is thought to have originated in Kentucky in 1774. There is some conjecture that claims that James Harrod, the colonist who founded Harrodsburg in that same year, brought the apple stack cake from his home in Pennsylvania. However, at this time wheat flour was not available, so the stack cake would not have become popular for another 100 years. There are other such claims, including some that cite similar cakes from different parts of Europe, such as the sacher torte, as key influences in the creation of the apple stack cake.

Socioeconomically, apple stack cake is an interesting dessert. In many more rural areas of Appalachia in the past it was difficult to get much wheat flour, but the other key ingredients, like sorghum molasses and apples were readily available. Oddly enough, there are next to no recipes that use cornmeal instead of wheat flour. The way the layers are made to soak up the liquid from the rehydrated apple filling, you would think a corn pancake would suffice. This lack of flexibility in flour leads to the conclusion that by the time apple stack cake had reached its peak, wheat flour was much more available in Appalachia. History claims apple stack cake surfaced in the late 18th century, but it is likely that it was not popular until the late 19th to early 20th century.

Apples, on the other hand, were very available in most of Appalachia. Apple trees were sturdy and grew well in even the most mountainous regions. Dried apples were a staple that was easy to make and easy to keep. Apple stack cakes could be made with other dried fruits, such as pears, which also grew in the region, but were not as easy to process. Apples were also one of the fruits that lasted well into the winter and spring when dried, so that apple stack cake could be made year round. This meant that it could appear at any occasion throughout the year.

This cake has traveled far and wide, playing different roles in different communities. The most common role was as a treat to take into Church on Sundays or something made for celebrations, such as family reunions. Because the cake took a few days to cure, it could be transported further to large family gatherings and festivities. Because wheat flour was a little harder to get, this cake was not made for every church Sunday, but instead for occasions, like Easter Sunday or Baptisms.

There is an old story about using apple stack cake as a poor woman's wedding cake. The story says that each guest would bring a layer of the cake to the wedding when they came. Then, the cake would be filled and stacked in time for the reception. Another similar story states that the number of cake layers received by the bride indicated how popular and involved she was in her community. The reality of this idea is that because of the nature of the apple stack cake, it needs to sit for at least 48 hours before serving so that the apple filling has time to soften

up the layers of cookie or cake and bind them together. Serving apple stack cake right after it is stacked would not be a treat at all.

Traditionally, the apple stack cake is made up of five or more layers of a dough that is more like cookie dough than cake. It is often cited in recipes, such as the recipe in *Our State Magazine*, that you can stack as many layers as you would like, but they must amount to an odd number in the end. There is no explanation as to why though. Many older recipes use a cast iron skillet to bake each layer separately over a hearth or stovetop. This way, the cake could be made without using an oven to bake the layers in. Once the cake is stacked and assembled, it must sit.

While there is variation in recipes, that resting period is crucial to having a moist, tender cake. As mentioned before, some of the most common ingredients in apple stack cake are dried apples, sorghum molasses, and cinnamon. Some variations use other spices, honey, or regular molasses, and different forms of apples. There are even some that use other types of fruits, such as peaches.

Sidney Saylor Farr, a well known Appalachian native and writer, has her own recipe for dried apple stack cake in an article she wrote that was published in *Appalachian Heritage* in 2004 entitled "Dried Apple Stack Cake." Her recipe uses lard instead of the more common butter of today's recipes. In Appalachian cooking lard was often used more than butter because it was more readily available as a cooking fat. Dairy cows need pasture, but pigs can live anywhere. Her recipe flavors the cookie-cake layers with ginger instead of cinnamon, which would have been easier to get because it can be grown here. Her recipe uses the typical dried apples that are rehydrated with spices and some sugar as a filling. The use of both sugar and molasses in this cake recipe is interesting because most just use molasses. It is probably because this recipe calls for regular molasses, which is much stronger than sorghum molasses. One interesting part of this cake recipe is that it suggests making a meringue frosting to coat the outside with, while most apple stack cakes just use the apple filling to coat the outside and seal it. A meringue would not last as long, so this cake would not have been made for taking anywhere.

In a more traditional recipe, such as the recipe for "Old Fashion Apple Stack Cake" in "Beech Cookin'," they use shortening or lard, molasses, ginger and a smaller amount of buttermilk to ensure that the layers are strong and closer to cookie than cake. The filling is still made with dried apples, but there is an alternate filling that is made with fresh apples as well. These apples are also cooked down with spices and sugar into fresh apple butter before being used as filling.

A more recent recipe replaces lard or shortening with butter and the typical molasses with specified sorghum molasses. One such recipe is the "Sorghum Apple Stack Cake" in "Generations Recipes and Memories." In this recipe, the author Maggie Brown uses cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg instead of ginger, as well as butter and sorghum. The layers are still baked in a cast iron skillet though, just like the older recipes. At the end of this recipe is a note that says that her family always made this cake for Christmas and they called it "fruit cake" instead of apple stack cake. In other recipes this can also be true because sometimes different dried or fresh fruits were used between the stacked cookie-cake layers.

Apple stack cake is also featured in many works of Appalachian literature, not just in recipes. In an article by Barbara Shortridge titled "Apple Stack Cake for Dessert" published in 2005, she discusses a

survey taken in Appalachia asking what the ideal meal would be prepared to represent Appalachian cooking to foreign guests. Apple stack cake was one of the desserts cited as representational of Appalachian cooking. This shows that this cake has a lot of cultural significance for Appalachia and is something served for special occasions. It also represents the way that the idea of apple stack cake is thought of as an ideal dessert for a guest, which implies that it was considered fancy, but also down to earth in this community.

Another place in literature where apple stack cake has shown up was in "The Land of the Saddle-Bags" by James Watt Raine. This book was originally published in 1924 and it's intentions are unclear. The vast majority of the novel speaks about how thrifty and quaint the isolated mountain life was. There is only one mention of apple stack cake among many mentions of other foods. This is important though, because a huge premise of this book was that these rural people had no access to stores and mass-produced products. In reality, they did have access, or the cake would not have become so popular. Mentioning apple stack cake shows just how wrong and condescending Raine was in his writing.

Whether it has been in recipes, culture or just in literature, apple stack cake is often considered representative of Appalachian culture. The use of common local ingredients, such as sorghum and apples, paired with ingredients that might have been a little more challenging to acquire, such as flour and cinnamon make this cake a mixture of both modern and rural. This shows just how diverse Appalachian culture can be. It is often thought that they were, and still are, isolated, but in reality there is a mixing of both lifestyles in this cake that is considered one of the most Appalachian desserts there is.