

The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods through the Year Eubanks, Georgann Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 262 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 978-1-4696-4082-2. [Book review]

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Abstract:

Food is always a good topic of conversation, and that informal approach is taken by Eubanks, author of three Literary Trails regional guides of North Carolina, who invites the reader to cross the state on a journey to meet individuals who raise heritage food products. She uncovers the challenges and rewards of the lifestyles they have chosen.

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Food is always a good topic of conversation, and that informal approach is taken by Eubanks, author of three Literary Trails regional guides of North Carolina, who invites the reader to cross the state on a journey to meet individuals who raise heritage food products. She uncovers the challenges and rewards of the lifestyles they have chosen.

Eubanks structures the book to follow the year month-by-month, highlighting foods available during that time of the year. Her selections range from the popular and ubiquitous apple to the delicate persimmon. The great pleasure in reading the book comes from Eubanks' storytelling. She shares food history, agriculture and aquaculture methods, and life experiences of farmers, foragers, and others.

The year starts with snow! It's a nostalgic look at snow days and whipping up snow cream, a novelty that children consider a treat. Reminiscences by those she interviews of which ingredients to include with the snow and sugar – cream versus milk versus evaporated milk, for instance – bring back the fun and excitement of families and friends preparing this dish. Food

memories are a theme throughout the book as people consider what the produce or other agricultural product has meant in their own lives and in their communities.

The reader has the sense of joining Eubanks on her trek to counties across the state. She incorporates the history of the foods and their importance to the local economies and to the families living in the towns and area countryside. The language is lyrical as in her description of persimmons as “orbs suspended high like tiny burnished lanterns, dusky red as if a cloud of smoke had come by and clung to them in patches.”

The chapter on goat’s milk provides an in-depth account of how poet Carl Sandburg’s wife and daughters established a goat herd at their farm, Connemara, in Flat Rock, and weaves in discussions of various goat breeds and products such as cheese, ice cream, and soap. Typically collected from locations that are not disclosed by foragers, ramps have a long history among the Cherokee, who have special harvesting techniques that Eubanks describes. She discusses a cantaloupe taste test and shares her experience on Ocracoke Island driving around neighborhoods in an electronic golf cart with a friend looking for fig trees. Foods from other months include shad, soft-shell crabs, serviceberries, and scuppernongs.

While the descriptions can be beautiful, they also reflect the very real economic hardships and struggles that farmers face. Eubanks is particularly skillful in describing the complexities of oyster farming along the coast, the difficulties in starting a business, and the competition faced from regional and global markets. The weather and natural disasters are factors in the success of crops, and Eubanks takes care in describing the effects of wildfires in the mountains as well as hurricanes in the eastern part of the state.

Food producers are the focus, but Eubanks also interviews scientists, anthropologists, researchers, and experts affiliated with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension and state agencies, such as the Division of Marine Fisheries. She visits food festivals, restaurants, country stores, farmers markets and fish markets, and she shares histories and cooking techniques described by the people she consults.

Readers interested in food, agriculture, fishing, history, and the people of North Carolina will enjoy this book.