

2007

Burgoo

Saddler Taylor

University of South Carolina - Columbia, taylor7@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/mks_staffpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture - Foodways (Volume 7)*, ed. John T. Edge, 2007, pages 132-133.

This Article is brought to you by the McKissick Museum at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

sion of mutton is the major difference between burgoo and Brunswick stew. Otherwise, the two stews are quite similar, in both preparation and consumption.

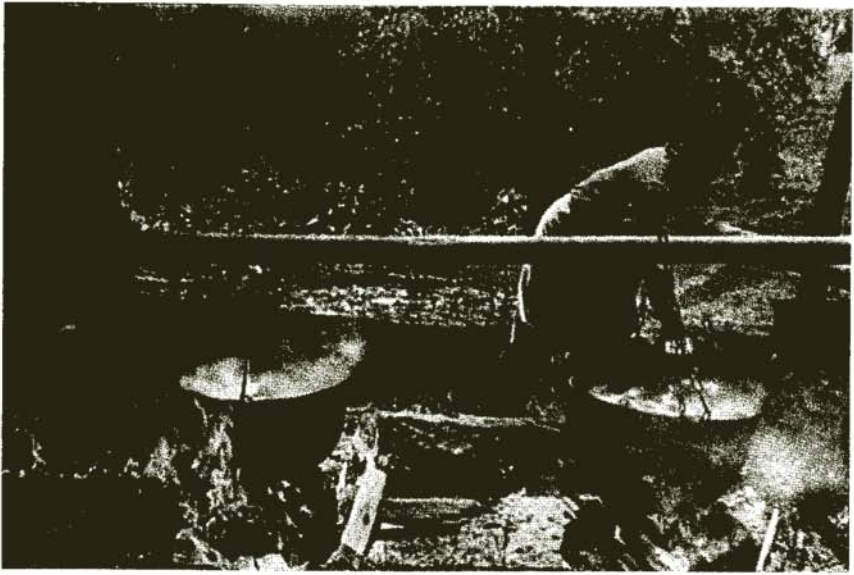
While western Kentucky burgoo recipes are distinguished by this critical difference, many of them actually include other meats as well. Some recipes call for squirrel, veal, oxtail, or pork, bringing to mind jokes told by stewmasters that refer to "possum or animals that got too close to the pot." The storytelling and banter during the long hours of stew preparation are keys to strong social bonds that develop over a period of time. Kentuckians tell stories about the legendary Gus Jaubert, a member of Morgan's Raiders during the Civil War, who supposedly prepared hundreds of gallons of the spicy hunter's stew for the general's men.

The origin of the term *burgoo* is ambiguous. The term could be a corruption of the word *bulghur*, referring to a cereal porridge commonly fed to 17th-century English sailors, or a derivative of the Arabic word *burghul*, which refers to boiled cracked wheat. Another possibility stems from the French term *ragoût* (pronounced ra-goo), which is a heavy soup or thick stew. Nomenclature aside, the most striking characteristic of burgoo remains the inclusion of sheep as the primary meat ingredient.

While sheep raising is not commonly associated with the South, both the Spanish and English brought sheep to the New World during the earliest years of colonization. Early breeds such as Native Florida and Hog Island survive today. Domestic sheep production

Burgoo

Virginia sheep stew and Kentucky burgoo are unique among southern stews in their use of mutton or lamb, hinting at the historical importance of sheep in southern culture and diet. The inclu-



Cooking burgoo for a benefit barbecue supper on the grounds of St. Thomas' Church, near Bardstown, Ky., 1940 (Marion Post Wolcott, photographer, Library of Congress [LC-USF33-030971-M3], Washington, D.C.)

increased dramatically in the Owensboro area after high tariffs on imported sheep were established in 1816. Both the topography and climate of western Kentucky were suited for the low-maintenance, grazing livestock. Able to survive on the most scant vegetation and capable of withstanding wide fluctuations in temperature, sheep were a natural fit.

Accomplished stew makers generally are men, sometimes dubbed "stew-masters" by their peers and stew consumers alike. The veneration of elders who carry closely guarded knowledge pertaining to "secret ingredients" and special techniques is an essential part of the burgoo tradition. The subsequent variety of burgoo recipes lends itself to a very localized sense of pride and distinctiveness from community to community. In no situation is this more evi-

dent than in the annual church parish picnic. During the summer, throughout western Kentucky, no less than 36 churches cook hundreds of gallons of burgoo. These picnics serve as fundraisers, homecomings, and community festivals. Most parishes have bumper stickers and signs proclaiming their barbecue and burgoo the region's "finest." Like other stews, burgoo is communal by nature, not only in preparation, but also in consumption. Through this sense of congregation, community stew makers come to identify with a particular tradition and proclaim a true sense of stew ownership.

SADDLER TAYLOR

*McKissick Museum, Columbia,
South Carolina*

W. E. R. Byrne, *Tale of the Elk* (1995);

Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food*

(1996); Reay Tannahill, *Food in History*
(1973); Stan Woodward, *Southern Stews:
A Taste of the South* (documentary film,
2002).