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Brunswick Stew

Despite humble beginnings, Brunswick stew has been the subject of more public debate than any other southern stew. The stew is such a matter of pride that both Virginia and Georgia claim to be its birthplace. For years, stewmasters and their assistants from both states have competed in cook-offs at public festivals in an effort to settle the so-called stew war, and neither side has shown any willingness to relinquish its claim.

Historical markers found on U.S. Highway 1 in rural, south central Virginia proclaim Virginia's view and describe Brunswick stew in its most basic form: "According to local tradition, while Dr. Creed Haskins and several friends were on a hunting trip in Brunswick County in 1828, his camp cook, Jimmy Matthews, hunted squirrels for a stew. Matthews simmered the squirrels

with butter, onions, stale bread and seasonings, thus creating the dish known as Brunswick Stew. Other states have made similar claims but Virginia's is the first." Likewise, strategically located near Interstate 95, just outside of Brunswick, Ga., a concrete-filled, cast-iron stew pot is the backdrop for a plaque proclaiming coastal Georgia as the birthplace of Brunswick stew. Without a doubt, the signs give clear evidence of the ongoing stew war between Virginia and Georgia—although the war has spilled over to parts of Alabama, South Carolina, and Tennessee, and a great deal of North Carolina.

Matthews's recipe generally follows the pattern for other early stew dishes, such as those described in antebellum cookbooks that involve meat, sometimes marinated in vinegar, gently boiled in an iron pot with onion, seasonings, and butter. Gradually, the widespread domestication of animals such as sheep, hogs, chickens, and beef cattle eliminated the need to rely on the wild game common in early camp stews. Most contemporary recipes for Brunswick stew substitute pork, beef, or chicken for squirrel or other wild game, include several vegetables, and add seasonings that were missing in 19th-century versions.

While Virginia boasts ownership, the Georgia connections are also very strong. A book of antebellum recipes gathered by a Georgia homemaker, Annabella P. Hill, lists Camp Stew—Mr. B's Receipt. The recipe is virtually identical to contemporary Brunswick stew, including such vegetables as butter beans, corn, and tomatoes, while it calls

for roughly equal quantities of squirrel and chicken meat.

It is important to note that Jimmy Matthews was African American. That fact, combined with the understanding that Native American cooking traditions also influenced these early camp stews, reminds us that Brunswick stew resulted from synthesis of shared food traditions.

Clearly, the stewmasters and crew members from the Brunswicks of Virginia, Georgia, and even North Carolina not only love the stew, but also cherish the ritual of stew making. The inconvenience of rising before dawn, the hard work of peeling potatoes and onions, and the hours spent pulling and pushing a five-foot paddle through an ever-thickening pottage become a labor of love. This sense of pride in the stew is effused with a strong sense of community service and camaraderie that strengthen the foundation of a tradition that remains an integral part of the community landscape.

SADDLER TAYLOR

*McKissick Museum, Columbia,
South Carolina*

Annabella P. Hill, *Mrs. Hill's Southern Practical Cookery and Receipt Book* (1995); Elwood Street, *Brunswick County: The Home of the Stew* (1942); Stan Woodward, *Southern Stews: A Taste of the South* (documentary film, 2002).