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Beaufort Stew/Frogmore Stew

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Beaufort Stew/Frogmore Stew

The South Carolina Lowcountry, embracing the Sea Islands and the coastal plain, is home to a broad range of culinary traditions. Greatly influenced by French, English, African American, and Native American foodways, the variety is impressive and includes several seafood stews, of which Beaufort stew, also known as Lowcountry boil or Frogmore stew, is the most well known.

Taking its name from two of the oldest Sea Island communities, Beaufort and Frogmore, the stew typically calls for a rather simple recipe: combine several large boiling potatoes, a couple pounds of smoked sausage, half a dozen ears of corn, and two pounds of shrimp. Most recipes call for these ingredients to be boiled with certain seasonings, like crab boil, and the stew is normally served with hot sauce.

This stew is equally at home on Lowcountry townhouse tables and at the family reunions of people who have traditionally farmed and fished the Sea Islands. This is a clear indication of the sharing of traditions, or creolization, that took place during the era when rice plantations dominated the South Carolina coastal plain. Enslaved African Americans brought from Africa the skills and knowledge needed to grow rice, as well as culinary traditions that became intertwined with traditions of other ethnic groups.

Planters, slaves, and small family farmers all depended on one-pot meals prepared in large black iron kettles. Whether the dish contained potatoes or rice depended largely on availability and time of year. Quoting from the ante-

bellum records of Hagley Plantation, Charles Joyner notes that between April and October each worker was allowed a pint of "small [rice] twice a week" and that "seafood ran a close second in popularity to pork among the Waccamaw slaves," who added "to their allowances of food by using their off times for fishing, crabbing, oystering, and clamming."

Even traditional dishes are subject to change and variation, and Beaufort stew is no exception. Although the longstanding prevalence of one-pot meals in American cooking points to antebellum origins, many argue that the nomenclature has been in use only since the middle years of the 20th century. Stories attempting to account for the stew's origins are numerous. They include tales of a fraternity cookout on a South Carolina beach and the last desperate attempt of an Army National Guard cook to feed the soldiers in his unit. Many scholars attribute the addition of link sausage to the influence of European butchery.

Numerous narratives clearly point to antebellum origins. Sabe Rutledge, who was born on a rice plantation just before the Civil War, told a researcher in the 1930s about two cooking pots maintained by her mother: "Boil all day and all night . . . cedar paddle stir with." Regardless of differences in nomenclature or recipe variations, one-pot meals have been a significant part of the American cooking heritage for hundreds of years.

The ingredients in Beaufort stew are boiled and then strained. The vegetables, shrimp, and sausage are removed from the pot and eaten only after this straining process is completed. This,

when compared to other southern stews, presents a distinct difference in the method of consumption. It is commonly agreed that a Beaufort stew cooked long enough to thicken significantly becomes what folks generally refer to as a muddle.

SADDLER TAYLOR

*McKissick Museum, Columbia,
South Carolina*

Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984), *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (1999); Stan Woodward, *Southern Stews: A Taste of the South* (documentary film, 2002).