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# Muddle

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ents like white wine, leeks, celery, and fresh tarragon. In *Tar Heels: A Portrait of North Carolina*, Jonathan Daniels made a keen observation regarding the typical fish muddle recipe when he said of it, "the ingredients of which vary with what you have got."

Historically, muddles are cooked when the fish are "running." After they are caught, the fish—rockfish were common—are cleaned and cooked right on the riverbank, in large cast-iron pots. Unlike Brunswick stew or burgoo, these stews are cooked down to a thick mush or porridge. Similarly to bogs and perloo (from the French *pilau*), rice or potatoes provide the thickening agent in a muddle. In direct contrast, most fish chowders, like the catfish chowder of Sea Island Gullah tradition, do not include rice and have a much thinner consistency.

Muddles have more similarities with other regional stews, however, than differences. A muddle is a communal dish, a food of congregation. Easily prepared for large groups of people, muddles are typically a fixture at political rallies, church homecomings, festivals, and community gatherings. The social connections are so strong that, like the term *barbecue*, *muddle* is used to refer to the gathering as well as the dish itself.

Recently, because of a severe drop in the rockfish population, chicken has come to be a popular replacement for the traditional fish. The practice of cooking the muddle on riverbanks in large cast-iron pots has largely faded as well. This mirrors the decline in backyard "shade tree" hash preparation in South Carolina. While no longer as

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## Muddle

While central and eastern North Carolina have claimed Brunswick stew as a native favorite, the fish or chicken muddle has an equally strong historical precedent in the state. According to oral tradition, the fish muddle has ties to Native American culture. Prominent along the Roanoke River in the northeastern part of the state, the muddle is a close cousin to the fish chowders, perloos, and chicken bogs of neighboring South Carolina. The traditional muddle recipe was far from complex: fish, onions, potatoes, and basic seasonings. Despite these humble origins, some contemporary recipes include ingredi-

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common on the small family farms and riverbanks of South and North Carolina, both chicken bog and fish muddle remain staple culinary delights at festivals, stump meetings, family reunions, and church homecomings throughout the region.

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*McKissick Museum, Columbia,  
South Carolina*

Jonathan Daniels, *Tar Heels: A Portrait of North Carolina* (1941); Lettie Gay, ed., *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking* (1930); Annabella P. Hill, *Mrs. Hill's Southern Practical Cookery and Receipt Book* (1995).