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By the Light of the Moon

The Hash Pot Runneth Over

SADDLER TAYLOR



Somewhere in the wistful nostalgia of years past, I can imagine writing an article on hash for newly transplanted South Carolinians. Residents from Iowa or Nebraska—one of the states that always looked really big and square on the wall map. Folks that needed an introduction to the enigmatic South Carolina dish called hash. Reality bemoans the fact that things have changed in South Carolina. I am painfully aware of this because my “Got Hash?” bumper sticker causes less Pavlovian lip licking than eyebrow raising. Even some in local law enforcement, known for their attraction to culinary lures, eye me with keen suspicion.

Dismaying as it is, many suffer from an unfamiliarity with hash that now runs several generations deep. Hash carries with it a significant amount of baggage and a sense of unsettling intrigue. Unlike Brunswick stew, the darling of two neighboring states, hash has the distinction of containing unrecognizable ingredients. Not being able to identify individual ingredients tends to be a cause for alarm. In the words of at least one North Carolinian, “It’s pre-chewed, made for people with no teeth.” While hash has come a long way, it is still synonymous with random hog parts—you know, all *that* stuff. Traveling through the state, I am frequently left with the impression that many look upon hash with the same sense of pity and puzzlement as they do the lone shoe spending its final hours on the shoulder of a highway. Where exactly is the other shoe? Are there really snouts in your pot of hash? Fortunately, this stew ignorance has led to a renewed sense of importance for many Carolina hash makers.

The South has no shortage of fine local barbecue houses. Not a soul with any amount of unforgiving girth in the waistline would argue. Most of these community-based gems operate without obese marketing budgets or brightly coiffured mascots. Despite the reality presented by restaurants poised like

perky teenage flirts off exit ramps from Hardeeville to Dillon, the Palmetto State can still boast a dynamic hash tradition.

The stories surrounding these establishments are as colorful as they are varied. In spite of the wanton consumption of the collective petri dish of mass-produced food, most local barbecue joints have a firm grip on their agricultural roots. While many have phased out such traditional delicacies as souse, liver pudding, and hogshead hash, they maintain a clear vision of whence they came. Symbolism runs high—PawPaw’s cast-iron kettle, Dad’s heralded sauce recipe, Auntie’s special coleslaw.

One commonality among regional food traditions—whether crawfish boils in Louisiana, clambakes in Massachusetts, or burgoo in western Kentucky—is an emphasis on individual variation. This surge of individualistic pride among hash makers is an anathema to the incessant standardization of corporate food. Variation in preparation (and consumption) involves relationships between numerous factors, one being the dynamic and powerful influence of folk belief. One of the most widely circulated folk beliefs associated with hash involves the most beneficial time to prepare the stew. Cooking by the light of the full moon is acknowledged by many to be the best scenario, though very few restrict their cooking to this particular time.

Mister Hawg’s Bar-B-Q is one of the exceptions. Owners Marion and Davis Robinson produce hash and barbecue on a schedule dictated by traditional moon lore. Nestled deep in the heart of Fairfield County, the barbecue pit my wife now considers my second home proudly proclaims to have “Fairfield’s finest butts and ribs.” The area is dominated by pine forest that thrives in shallow, rolling pastureland. One hundred years ago it looked much the same.

Due largely to South Carolina’s agrarian roots, many widely circulated folk beliefs, customs, and superstitions are directly related to early thoughts on farming practices and crop growth cycles, specifically those regarding the moon and its subsequent effects on harvesting. While most modern farmers rely on the nightly television weather report more than a well-worn copy of the *Farmer’s Almanac*, these same agricultural folk beliefs have been adapted to apply to other aspects of South Carolina life, particularly the preparation of hash.

Mister Hawg’s Bar-B-Q, like most South Carolina barbecue restaurants, grew out of a localized family tradition—the “shade tree” cooking of so many other recognized barbecue masters. With humble beginnings in the backyard of the family home place, brothers Marion and Davis helped their father and grandfather cook barbecue and hash for neighbors. From the backyard to

the full service restaurant, the brothers experienced both the joys and the struggles. Early on in the restaurant business they decided to alter their cooking schedule. The decision was made to sell barbecue and hash one day a month—the last Saturday.

During one of my visits to the feed trough, I asked Marion why they picked this particular day. Bigger crowds? Work schedules? Financial considerations? Marion stared at me through piercing eyes, “You ever hear about digging post holes on the dark of the moon?” With a look so earnest and penetrating it left no doubt as to the seriousness of the question, he continued. “Why, if you dig a post hole on the dark of the moon, you aren’t going to have enough dirt to fill that hole back in.” Other men in the room grunted in agreement, and the stories began to flow. Cutting down trees for firewood, filling up baskets and buckets with harvested crops—all of these personal experiences dealt with the ability to maximize one’s resources when the moon is full or “on the light side.” Marion explained, “You see, the last Saturday of the month is always going to be on the light of the moon, and our hash pots will overflow if we aren’t careful.”

The common-sense solution was to cook only when the same amount of ingredients would produce more hash. This is not a strange blip on the traditional hash radar screen. Barbecue chefs, stew makers, and hash masters alike continue to speak quite earnestly about the powerful influence the moon has on food preparation. “By the light of the moon,” “right side of the moon,” and “waxing moon” are all phrases of deep importance, verbalized from back roads to the strip mall.

By its very nature, folk belief is extremely versatile and has the ability to adapt with a remarkable degree of fluidity. The commonly regarded belief that the moon has very real, measurable effects on agricultural activity might no longer dominate the talk around the checkerboard at the local co-op, but it is mentioned with regularity around the hash pot.

There was something of a cathartic moment when Marion divulged the reason for the Saturday hash preparation. On some level, he seemed a bit concerned about disclosing these stories and how it might affect my impression of him. In very short order, I learned three things about Marion. One, he cared very little about my impression of him and his reasons for when he cooked his hash. Their system works; they are proud of their hash and have no need to justify anything to me. Two, he had only a cursory interest in my reaction to all the “moon talk.” Finally, and most important, the brothers make a darn good mustard-based hash.

Normally, after any lengthy interview or day in the field, I would pack up

my gear, offer deep thanks for a day well spent, and be on my way. Not so with the Robinson brothers. I have yet to leave without being offered a glass of sweet tea, a comfortable chair, and a large plate of white rice smothered in the yellow, steamy concoction—straight from the iron kettle and always under the watch of a full moon. This is why the lure of the sultry teenager on the off-ramp will never draw me in to her culinary web. As for the rest of the societal caravan, the proverb rings true—more die of food than famine.