Fall 2001

South Carolina Hash: By the Light of the Moon

Saddler Taylor

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

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Publication Info
Published in North Carolina Folklore Journal, Volume 48, Issue 1/2, Fall 2001, pages 80-87.
http://paws.wcu.edu/ncfj/
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"Saddler Taylor"

Courtesy of Saddler Taylor
John Shelton Reed has written, “Southern barbecue is the closest thing we have in the U.S. to Europe’s wines or cheeses; drive a hundred miles and the barbecue changes” (qtd. in Binswager and Charlton 11). With this statement, sociologist Reed presents an insightful comparison between two geographically separated and culturally distinct areas of the world. However insightful it may be, Reed’s assertion is overly simplistic in its implications. Generally speaking, Southern barbecue traditions, and subsequently the South Carolina dish, barbecue hash, certainly do have regional variants and are a part of a complex historic, economic, and social dynamic, but I would argue the regional nature of barbecue is much more highly localized than Reed acknowledges. The diversity and vast variation attendant upon barbecue, as well as other foods of congregation, is evident when the traveler moves from one neighborhood to another, much less from region to region. Replace one hundred miles with a short walk around the block and a more accurate vision of the southern barbecue—and the South Carolina barbecue hash—landscape is represented.

While barbecue in its various manifestations is a familiar Southern staple, hash is less well known outside of South Carolina. Though recipe differences are limited only by the number of preparers, hash is basically a stew containing a combination of at least one meat, usually pork or beef, and a variety of vegetables that can include potatoes, onions and corn. It is generally prepared in conjunction with beef or pork barbecue and arguably the most varied and recipe-specific aspect of hash is the sauce base, or stock. These sauce variations are endless, but usually involve ingredients like mustard, vinegar, ketchup, hot sauce, or Worcestershire sauce. Although many hashmakers use some combination of these ingredients, there are many hash recipes that call for no such sauce additions. Instead, the stock consists of nothing more than a variety of seasonings and broth. From a consumption standpoint, hash is widely regarded as a side-item, eaten on rice or grits, and occasionally as a sandwich filler.

One common denominator in regional food traditions—including not only hash but also crawfish boils in Louisiana, clambakes in Massachusetts, “yellow jacket” stews of the Eastern Cherokee, and many others—is the concept of individual variation. Both in preparation and
consumption, variation is the product of a symbiotic relationship between multiple factors, one being the dynamic and powerful influence of folk belief. Quite often, the presence of common folk belief(s) is the only similarity among the hash dishes from different regions of South Carolina. While recipes vary widely, there are ritualized aspects of hash preparation and consumption that transcend regionalism. A cursory survey would include such staples as the powerful symbolism of the cast iron stew kettle, the all-night preparation time that invariably includes group social interaction, and the general consensus that hash is to be eaten as a side item.

Additionally, one of the most significant folk beliefs associated with the preparation of hash involves the proper time to prepare the stew. Hashmakers overwhelmingly agree on the best time—by the light of the full moon. Due largely to South Carolina’s agrarian roots, many widely circulated folk beliefs, customs, and superstitions are directly related to early thoughts regarding farming practices and crop growth cycles, specifically the moon and its subsequent effects on crops and harvesting. While most farmers now rely on the nightly television weather report more than they do the seminal Farmers’ Almanac or the location of certain constellations in the night sky, these same agricultural folk beliefs have been adapted to apply to other aspects of South Carolina life, particularly the preparation of barbecue hash.

In one particular barbecue establishment, the proprietors have settled on a cooking schedule that has taken years to develop, one based on traditional moon lore. Mister Hawg’s, like most South Carolina barbecue establishments, grew out of a localized family tradition—the “shade tree” cooking of so many other backyard barbecue masters. With humble beginnings in the backyard of the family homeplace, brothers Marion and Davis Robinson would help their father and grandfather cook barbecue and hash for neighbors on July 4th and other special celebratory occasions. The community response grew to such a degree that the brothers finally decided a restaurant was the next step. Soon they had an established operation on a major highway in the upper midlands region of South Carolina. Within a few years, however, they were simply overwhelmed by the demand for their barbecue and made the decision to close the restaurant. However, they experienced a powerful example of the influence of a community aesthetic. Their neighbors refused to
accept that they were no longer preparing barbecue. Mister Hawg's
customer base had become so loyal, large, and geographically diverse
that many people heard of the shut-down after traveling long
distances to acquire the local delicacy, only to find a "closed" sign
hanging on the door.²

However, due to the local community's overwhelming reaction to
the closing, the brothers finally decided to make barbecue again, but on
their terms—a compromise would have to be reached. Clearly the
community's interest lay only in the opportunity to buy the brothers' hash again, with much less interest in the reopening of the restaurant itself.³ For the brothers, the operation had to be more manageable since the restaurant "staff" consisted of the two brothers and any close friends they could talk into showing up to help. The decision was made to sell barbecue one day a month—not one weekend a month, but only one Saturday a month. And not just any Saturday, but the last Saturday of every month.

During one of our conversations I asked Marion what made them decide on this particular day. Big crowds? Work schedules? Financial considerations? Those are some of the answers I expected to hear. "You ever hear about digging post holes on the dark of the moon?" Marion asked, with a look so earnest and penetrating that there was no doubt as to the seriousness of the question. "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 repeated the adage and applied it to other aspects of rural activity. Cutting down trees for firewood, filling up baskets and buckets with harvested crops—all of these personal experience narratives dealt with the ability to maximize one's resources when the moon is full or "on the light side."

As 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." Stories began to flow about cooking hash on the "dark side" and not getting as much as you would on the night of a full moon, despite putting the same type and quantity of ingredients into the large cast iron pots. The common sense solution was to cook only when the same amount of material would produce more hash to sell to the consumer.

These types of personal experience narratives, or what C. W. von
Sydow classified as “memorates” (Brunvand 161), are the foundational framework of the larger folk belief. The constant repetition of these narratives, coupled with situational context, strengthens and adds credence to the folk belief. It is imperative to note that the reason the Robinson brothers operate when they do is not anomalous, not a strange blip on the traditional barbecue hash radar screen. Barbecue chefs, stew- and hashmasters 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 suburbia.

Folk belief, much like the larger machine of tradition, is extremely versatile and has the ability to adapt with a remarkable degree of fluidity. This is not to imply that the folk belief itself undergoes a particular change in connotative value, but instead that situational contexts for the same belief can be very different and differently influential. In this case, the one constant element, the moon, is freely interchanged with a variety of applications. The commonly regarded belief that the moon and other heavenly bodies have very real, measurable effects on agricultural activity no longer overtly dominates traditional farming circles as it did during the first half of the twentieth century. However, it would be a gross oversight to say such folk beliefs, customs, or superstitions have not been carried over into other areas of life. Again, the main construct stays the same, but the application changes. Although lunar phases are no longer used to plan crop planting cycles or harvesting times, hashmakers are quick to note that cooking by “the light of the moon” will without fail produce more stew.

The contemporary influence of traditional folk belief is quite prevalent in hashmaking circles, albeit not immediately communicated to the casual observer. One has to be allowed inside the outer layer of social pretense and clearly this invitation is not always readily proffered. Normally this reluctance to divulge such “superstitious” reasoning stems from very different motives than, say, the standard refusal to identify the secrets behind long-held family hash recipes. The latter tends to deal with a sense of pride that lends to the element of distinctiveness among peers. The former, however, deals with the realization that the particular belief might be considered foolish or ridiculous outside of a certain circle of influence.
There was something of a cathartic moment when Marion divulged the reason for the Saturday hash preparation. To some degree, he seemed a bit concerned about how disclosing these narratives would affect my impression of him. This “outsider” might possibly consider something that he held dear to be unrealistic instead.

In very short order, however, I was the one who learned three things about Marion: he cared very little about “my impression of him” and his reasons for doing barbecue when he did; he had only a cursory interest in my reaction to all the “moon talk”; and the brothers make a darn good mustard-based hash. Their system works, they are proud of their product, and have no need to justify anything to me. 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 piled high with the yellow, steaming concoction straight from the iron kettle—and, of course, always under the watch of a full moon. When I finally do leave, I can’t help but sing a few verses of the song “Place in the Fire” (parody of Bill Staines’ “A Place in the Choir”):

All God’s critters got a place in the fire
Some are roasters, some are fryers
We cook ’em all as they require
And serve them up with jams or sauces,
or anything we’ve got now...

Cows and pigs make many a meal
Steak and hamburger, liver and veal,
Ribs and bacon, chops and peel,
All the pig except the squeal.

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1In this case, it is important to note that I use the word community in much more than a geographically localized context. I refer not only to people who still live in the local area, but also to patrons who have long since moved away but still return to Mister Hawg’s for barbecue hash. While these patrons are no longer physically a part of the community, their emotional attachment is still very strong. The hash is something of a “cultural marker” that people continue to identify with, even if they no longer live within the context of the specific tradition.
2 For the community, Mister Hawg’s had taken on such a powerful ritualistic role that the barbecue had become what folklorist Kathy Neustadt describes as a “traditionalizing element” (148-49). For some patrons, this ritualized treatment of hash simply revolves around significant family or communal events. Occasions like the ubiquitous birthday celebration or the Fourth of July would certainly fall in this category. However, the majority of Mister Hawg’s customers do not have such a formal, calendar-specific relationship with the hash. More than just a need to have the hash a few special times throughout the year, these patrons have an intrinsic habit. This dependence is not perceived as a vice, but instead Mister Hawg’s is an institution in which each customer has a certain ownership, providing not only a source of culinary and social pleasure, but immense pride. Similar to what Neustadt discovered in a Massachusetts clambake tradition, the need to consume Mister Hawg’s hash had developed “formalistic traits…repetition, stylization, and a collective dimension” (148-49).

3 Traditions tend to have strong associative qualities that take on nothing less than ritual importance. Because of the highly sensory nature of food preparation and consumption, certain smells and/or tastes are often important triggers for individuals. For years, scholars have recognized that these feelings of “nostalgia” are directly “connected to sensory impressions and memories of the sound of language and song or the scent of foods” (Bendix 34-35). Food can be a key factor in this act of remembering or more specifically what philosopher Edward Casey has called “place memory.” Casey holds that physical locations are “containers of experience” that provide powerful triggers for any number of memories (qtd. in Hayden 46). Even if experienced outside of original context, these sensory encounters can evoke deep and powerful memories of a personal, familial, or communal setting. However, while Casey states that this social memory (consumption of hash) is a product of place association, I would argue the opposite can also be the case. Place association (physical or emotional “place”) can instead be the product of the cultural marker, the barbecue hash. Evidence of this can be seen throughout South Carolina where cooking locations have changed, sometimes several times—and Mister Hawg’s is no exception. There seems to be little if no issue with adjusting to a new location to purchase and consume Mister Hawg’s hash. Patron loyalty is not guided by
geographic location *per se*. Instead, the tenacious loyalty here rests in a twofold relationship between “who” and “what.” First, who made the hash and second, what hash is being consumed. In other words, it must be Mister Hawg’s hash, made by Davis and Marion. Clearly, the acts of preparation and consumption are the memory triggers, not the location of this particular act of preparation or consumption.

Information gathered through a combination of several different telephone and field interviews beginning in March of 2001.

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**Works Cited**


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