



SOUTHERN Perfection

The ways of cooking, like the ways of women, are mysteries to most men. Some of us do manage to master the kitchen, although I do not consider myself among that number. I feel comfortable there, possessing middling skills that allow me to cook what I like. My desires, however, are few, running to traditional Southern foods and wild game, with a few Italian dishes tossed in. If called upon I can cook other things, but without enthusiasm.

As for the ways of women, I suspect all men tend to be shell-shocked wanderers, staggering through a foggy no-man's-land searching for signposts, unsure of what they did wrong or what they did right and wondering why what was right once is now wrong. I used to think I understood women a little but gradually realized I was mistaken. [Actually, I was told I was hopelessly ignorant.] And after a particularly harrowing episode in a big-box home improvement store, I have come to believe that women's ways are as alien and recondite as those of monks who bathe every seventh Tuesday and spend their lives guarding a most holy relic, the significance of which has been lost for a millennium.

Simple yet time-consuming, Brunswick stew provides a hearty meal and summons up good memories.

Written by Jim Wilson
Photographed by Melissa McGaw



“Vegetables are not in the original Brunswick stew. Those who prefer vegetables add them after the stew is done, in their plates.”

Time has a way of scrubbing away those notions we held with much certainty, sometimes leaving a man surer of what he does not know than what he does. I do know—and will not be shaken from the belief—that Brunswick stew, that Southern favorite, is one of the finest concoctions ever to grace a table. I suppose no brother has ever turned against brother, no marriage been rent asunder, no friendship fractured in disputes over the proper recipe for Brunswick stew. I don’t understand why not, but having never heard of such, I’m guessing that’s the case.

Brunswick stew is a dish that appeals to men who like to cook, what with the preparing of huge portions of meat, perhaps some of it killed by the cook himself, and the fact that the dish is best cooked outdoors, preferably with a few cronies hanging around for moral support. Stew making also consumes significant quantities of time, much of which is spent just standing and looking while the stew simmers, interrupted by the occasional stirring of a large pot with a long wooden paddle. Most guys are good at working 10 minutes out of 60. “No, Honey, I can’t go to the store and get you some eggs; I got to keep an eye on this stew. But when you go would you bring me another beer?... Hey, have I told you today I love you?”

Brunswick stew has long been a staple of the South, its flavors and traditions having been guarded and nourished at volunteer fire department and church fundraisers for generations. If the Methodists needed new choir robes, it was time to make a stew. I guess it was a simpler time than most of us realize, one in which a stew had the power to draw people together. As our state becomes increasingly urban, many of us get our stew these days in barbecue restaurants. That’s a fine setting, but it pales in comparison to the delights of the outdoor eating of stew.

In my childhood in Granville County, I assumed that Brunswick stew, like sliced white bread and Baptist Training Union, was universal. That’s not true, even in North Carolina, where Brunswick stew all but disappears from the menus of barbecue restaurants in the western sections of the state, becoming scarcer than a liberal Democrat at a gun show. (Barbecue itself vanishes in parts of the country—and that’s most parts—where heavy tomato sauce instead of a vinegar-and-pepper sauce accompanies any barbecued meat. Is it really necessary to say that barbecue can be only pork? You can barbecue beef, but it ain’t barbecue.)

Although Brunswick stew and barbecue are a delectable combination, over the decades stew

has been relegated to the role of barbecue’s sidekick, sort of an Ed McMahon to barbecue’s Johnny Carson. It deserves better.

Virginia and Georgia stew enthusiasts have carried on a good-natured, long-running feud as to which state could claim to be the home of this noble meat stew. (There is a lukewarm claim that the stew originated in North Carolina’s Brunswick County, but few take that one seriously.) I don’t have a dog in this fight, but the Virginia recipe, simpler than the Georgia version and much older, is more to my liking. Beyond that, I only know that I like my stew cooked in the manner of that I ate as a child. Growing up hard by the Virginia border, that was the Virginia-type stew.

The original Virginia stew—according to legend cooked by Uncle Jimmy Matthews for an early-19th-century hunting party of Dr. Creed Haskins or, depending on the telling, a political rally—contained only squirrels, stale bread, onions, butter and seasonings.

At first, the hunters were skeptical of Uncle Jimmy’s gray stew, looking as it must have like lumpy, day-old dishwater. But hungry hunters—or politicians—tend not to be picky, and they loved the flavor of the stew and took the recipe home. Almost immediately, it seems, cooks began tinkering with the ingredients, primarily by adding vegetables, then by eliminating the main ingredient, squirrel, in favor of meat that required less effort to obtain.

The alterations to the original Brunswick stew were noted by Meade Haskins, a descendant of Creed Haskins, when in 1907 he stated: “Vegetables are not in the original Brunswick stew. Those who prefer vegetables add them after the stew is done, in their plates.” Thus, today’s Brunswick stew bears little resemblance to the original.

According to the strictures of the Virginia Brunswick Stewmasters Association, the only acceptable ingredients for a Brunswick stew are chicken, fatback, tomatoes, butterbeans, onions, potatoes, corn, butter, salt, black pepper, red pepper, sugar and one additional thickening ingredient. A “special” stew has beef and chicken, while a “deluxe” stew contains chicken and squirrel.

Any of those three options will result in very good stew. Although chicken has become the standard, no Brunswick stew is better than one that contains expired tree rodents. However, most people don’t have 70-odd squirrels in the freezer to throw in a big pot out in the yard, which remains the best place to cook a stew and the only way to cook enough stew to place in quart containers and half fill the freezer.

Most of us cook our stews indoors these days, either because we don’t have large stewpots or don’t want the effort and expense of making a 10- or 20-gallon stew. Even with a stovetop stew, plan on a considerable investment of time. Making Brunswick stew is simple but not quick.

For a 12-quart stovetop stew, I use chicken thighs, several large packs of them, about 12 to 15 pounds or so total. You can’t have too much meat. The butterbeans and white corn are frozen, several bags of each. I usually peel and cut potatoes into small chunks until the pile looks right. It usually works out to about 8 or 10 pounds. I prefer round white potatoes over yellow potatoes, but I’m not sure I have a valid reason for that preference. Onions? Three or four large ones or until I get tired of chopping. I like the onions in small pieces because I want them to disappear in the stew. I don’t want a slippery piece of cooked onion the size of Delaware in my mouth when I shovel in a spoonful of stew. The tomatoes, three or four large cans, are a combination of diced and crushed; this saves having to chop whole tomatoes.

Boil the chicken the night before until it is almost off the bone. Put the whole pot in the refrigerator overnight, and then pick the meat from the bones the next morning. It should just about fall off. Discard the skins and bones and use the water that you boiled the chicken in as the base of the stew. This broth will have some fat from the skin and meat, so the Stewmasters’ fatback is perhaps unnecessary, although in a nod to tradition and taste I like to include it too.

The chicken, potatoes, onions, fatback and butter, two or three sticks, go into the pot first, along with the seasonings, which you will need to tinker with during most of the cooking. It’s best to remove the fatback when it begins to come apart. I’m not sure sugar is really necessary, but folks say it cuts down on the acidity. I don’t like sweet Brunswick stew (or, God help us, cornbread with sugar), so I use a tablespoon for 12 quarts, which is like not using any.

I like my stew just slightly orange, so I back off on the tomatoes. I would like to cook a stew once without them, just a gray stew as a tip of the stew paddle to Uncle Jimmy, but I’m not sure it would receive a warm reception.

The key to Brunswick stew is controlling heat. In the beginning, bring the



chicken, broth, onions and potatoes to a low boil and let them bump along for a short while. The more stew I cook, the more I believe it's best to allow it to cook for a couple of hours or more before adding first the butterbeans and finally the corn. When you do add the vegetables, it will take a bit for the stew to come to a simmer again, but resist the urge to help the process by cranking the heat to the highest setting. You want the concoction to bubble just a bit.

Brunswick Stew Ingredients

- 12-15 lbs. chicken thighs
- 8-10 lbs. white potatoes
- 4 large onions (white or yellow)
- 2 (24 ounce) bags frozen butterbeans (small)
- 2 (24 ounce) bags frozen white corn
- 1-2 (28 ounce) cans diced tomatoes
- 1-2 (28 ounce) cans crushed tomatoes
- Kosher salt
- Red pepper (crushed or dried pods)
- Black pepper
- 2-3 sticks salted butter



High heat will scorch a stew quicker than you'd think possible. You'll be stirring a perfectly good stew one minute and the next turn up what looks like a long, dark skid mark from a Jeff Gordon victory burnout from the bottom of the pot. This also applies to reheating stew: avoid high heat. It is not your friend. To eliminate this problem, I've taken to adding the tomatoes, which can burn quickly, very late in the process.

Stirring goes hand in glove with controlling heat. It's more fun outside where you can use a long wooden paddle, but a wooden spoon works well in the house. The consistency of the stew should be such that the paddle or spoon will stand upright in the middle of the pot. Traditionally, that's the indication of when the stew is done.

A word on ingredients: Making a Brunswick stew can be a great way of cleaning out the freezer. Venison, quail and rabbits might not be on the Stewmasters' list but still make a very good stew. Do not, however, make the mistake of using meat you suspect might be too old or freezer-burned. The stew will not disguise the taste of meat past its prime. Instead, the meat will ruin the stew. Bad ingredients always will yield bad stew. You will be unhappy, very unhappy, at having fallen under the spell of false economy.

And Brunswick stew is a food that should make you happy, evoking as it does for some of us pleasant memories of a North Carolina childhood, of picnic tables covered in white paper, sweating steel urns of sweet tea and murmuring conversations punctuated by eruptions of laughter from plainly dressed men and women who not long before were sitting on tractors or ironing clothes. The lure of Brunswick stew and conversation brought them together, the men in khaki shirts and pants, the women mostly in worn cotton dresses.

I still remember the feel of the men's rough, tanned hands as they rubbed my buzz-cut head briskly and laughed, and the talcum powder and coconut pie smell of the ladies as they patrolled the tables, asking, "Do you need something else, Honey?" I was fortunate to have grown up in that little place, lucky to have benefited from the kindnesses of those people. They gave more than I returned. And though many of the adults I knew then are now dead, their faces and voices remain more vivid than those of most people I've met in more recent times. All that returns, borne by the taste and the smell of Uncle Jimmy Matthews' Brunswick stew. ♦

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