

## **Heart and Soul**

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North Carolina has a rich tradition in "down-home" southern cuisine based on widely varied influences brought by an influx of people from many parts of the world. Traditions in food preparation of different cultural groups have become intertwined with the types of foods chosen for preparation. Southern cooking originated with few written recipes -- a pinch of this, a dash of that, and tasting as we go along. Traditional southern cooking was truly that of the senses.

Our southern ancestors had a much different lifestyle than we do today. Our ancestors had to produce their own food and process it by drying, smoking, salting, and later on, by canning foods in hot water so they could get by in seasons of scarcity. They worked hard outdoors to make a living, and their bodies were leaner, shorter, and needed more energy. Often their crops failed and their food spoiled. At times they were hungry, and their diets were monotonous. They added extra salt and fat to dishes to cover spoiled flavors. Desserts rich in fat and sugar gave our ancestors the extra calories they needed for their hard work.

These cooking practices have persisted for a number of reasons -- economics, climate, and tradition. Perhaps of equal importance is the sharing and partaking of meals as a social event. In predominantly rural areas, community events such as hog killings not only helped to make hard work easier and faster, they also provided great fellowship and strengthened friendships and loyalties. This practice has evolved into the pig pickings, barbecues, and covered dish suppers that are so popular today.

In 1996, Cooperative Extension Service centers in several eastern North Carolina counties began offering "heart healthy" southern food programs. A number of factors motivated this educational effort. The primary motivation was the fact that heart disease is the number one killer, and high

fat diets and lack of exercise are major contributors. Southern cuisine, high in fat and sodium, increases the risk of heart disease.

People who have lived in the region their entire lives, as well as transplanted Northerners, eat southern foods high in fat and sodium because they don't know how to make healthy and tasty modifications. They are afraid that if they tamper with the key flavor base of southern cooking (fat), the food will be tasteless and thus dim its unique charm. Through the "heart healthy" programs, participants were taught to adjust ingredients and cooking techniques to end up with healthier southern foods without sacrificing the taste.

Two-hour special interest classes in these programs provided educational information on the history of southern foods and risk factors for heart disease, including personal risk factors, lifestyle, and heredity. Tips for reducing the fat, calories, and sodium in traditional southern foods were presented along with cooking demonstrations. For example, those in attendance learned how to substitute fruit purees for fat, evaporated skimmed milk for heavy cream, butter sprinkles or flavoring for butter, as well as methods for seasoning vegetables with "ham-flavored" broth or smoked turkey. Also covered were utensils and cooking methods for heart healthy cooking such as preparing broths in advance and placing them in the refrigerator so the hardened fat can be lifted off. Participants had an opportunity to sample "heart healthy" southern foods such as seasonal greens, black-eyed peas, chicken salad, and lemon cake squares.

Of the 490 participants who attended classes, 90 percent have responded to surveys indicating they have necessary skills to prepare healthier meals for their families. Fifteen percent have gone on to enroll in "[Give Your Heart A Healthy Beat!](#)", a 12-week educational program aimed at people who are at risk for heart disease and other chronic illness.

Many requests for additional southern recipes prompted five family and consumer educators from Beaufort, Craven, Greene, Lenoir, and Wayne [counties](#) to compile some of the favorite recipes from the classes along with other southern specialties. The "Heart & Soul" cookbook includes: Healthy Cookin' Tips, Spicin' it Up, Feedin' a Crowd, Substitutin' Ingredients, Keepin' Food Safely, Cuttin' the Sugar, and more. It is a comprehensive resource for healthy food preparation and the hardcover cookbook has the nutritional content for each recipe along with a healthy cooking tip. Copies are available for \$19.95 (includes shipping) from Ann Darkow, P.O. Box 1967, Washington, NC 27889. Checks should be made payable to Beaufort County Extension Homemakers.

Extension Family and Consumer Education Agents contributing to "Heart and Soul" included Geissler Baker, Ann Darkow, Melissa Hight, Shenile Rothwell, and Christine Smith.

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