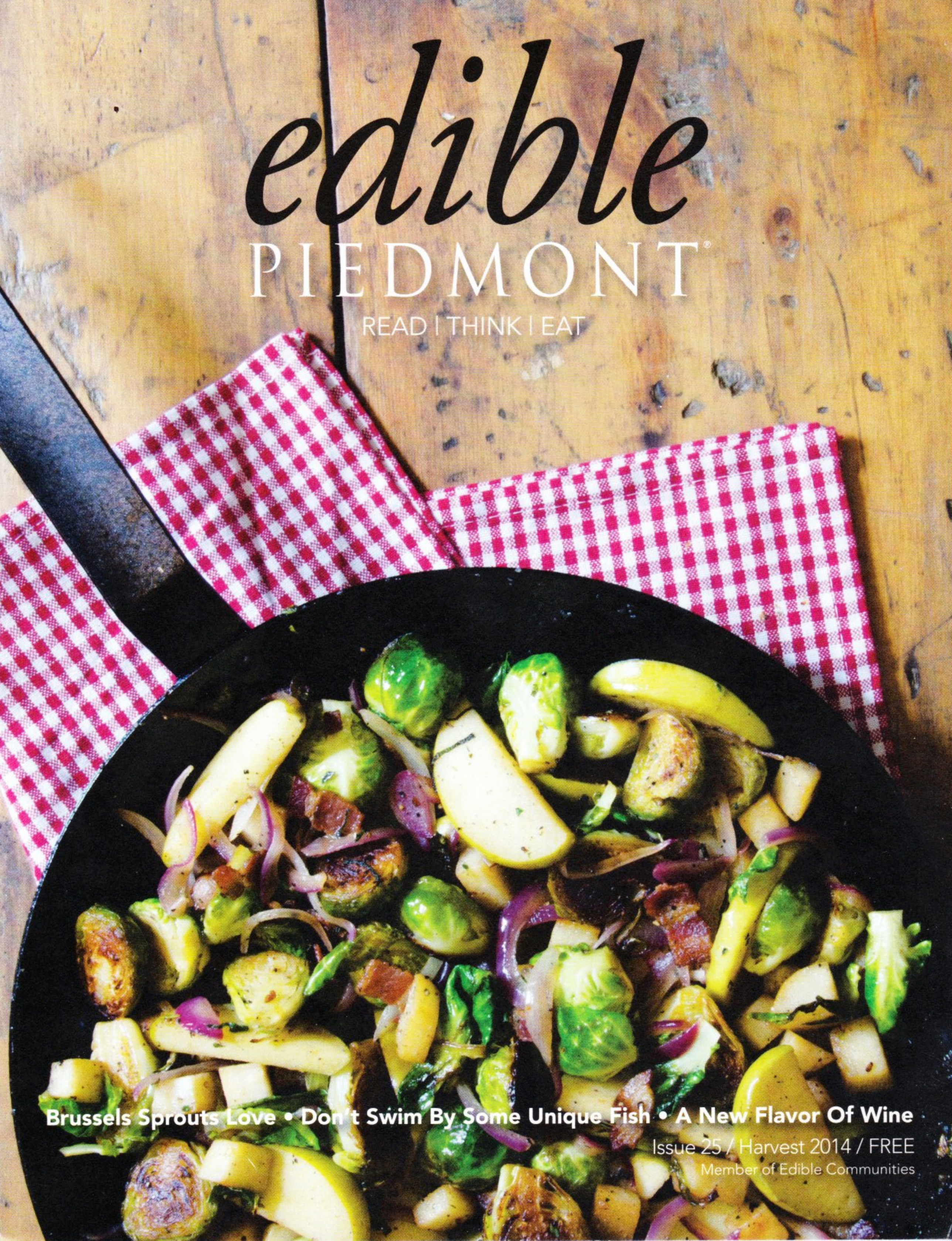
edible PIEDMONT®

READ | THINK | EAT



Brussels Sprouts Love • Don't Swim By Some Unique Fish • A New Flavor Of Wine

Issue 25 / Harvest 2014 / FREE
Member of Edible Communities

Authentic Brunswick Stew

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY NANCIE MCDERMOTT

Philip Whitfield stirs the cast iron washpot of stew, cooking over hickory wood using a maplewood paddle made by his uncle for the Glosson family stews.

If I had to pick a quintessential deeply-rooted Piedmont North Carolina dish, my choice would be the hearty, gently-seasoned, autumnally-colored meal-in-a-bowl known as Brunswick stew. Stirred up and long-simmered since sometime in the latter years of the nineteenth century, this seasonal heirloom dish has devotees aplenty and variations galore, but the essentials remain the same.

It's cooked in large quantities, traditionally outdoors over a carefully tended, low and slow wood fire, and classically in a gigantic iron pot, often one that doubled as a washpot the rest of the year. It goes along with autumn activities including hunting and harvest-season festivals. Folks who spent their springtime planting and summertime tending an array of crops to eat and put up, use as animal feed, or sell for income, have finally gotten room to step away from the tractor or pickup truck and spend a cold night outdoors with some friends and neighbors. They take turns stirring the pot of multiple meats, hearty broth, and a parade of vegetables, added over time and in order, according to the stewmaster.

There is usually a stewmaster, he (and it has tended to be 'he') who orchestrates the occasion, making the calls on what happens when, which ingredients are added in what increments and at what speed and in which directions the thickening pottage is stirred. The whole process takes a day or a night, depending on the habits and preferences of those creating the stew, which is the name for the entire endeavor as well as the name of the beloved and tasty end product.

Most people like it, many people love it, and there are a fair number of folks who can get all steamed up about its origins, particularly in the Brunswick Counties of Georgia and Virginia, respectively, herein listed alphabetically so as to remain neutral on the subject. Virginia points to accounts published in 1907, recounting a particular stew prepared for hunters in 1828. Said stew included squirrels, bacon fat, saltpork, and water, with bread added to thicken it at the end. That would have been mighty satisfying for a hunting party on a cold fall day back then, but it was not Brunswick stew until such time as tomatoes, corn, onions and butterbeans entered the picture. Georgia's claim involves a particular cast iron washpot and a turn-of-the-20th century date on which the First Stew would have been cooked, but there is not much to go on beyond civic pride. People enjoy the rivalry, as it provides a welcome respite from arguing about barbecue and sports, and what matters is neither the location nor the date of some First Stew, but the fact that the Brunswick stew-making tradition is alive and well, has been simmering across numerous county lines and state borders for more than a century, and that many a volunteer firetruck, baseball diamond, and community center moved from dream to reality with the dedicated stirring of slow-simmering pots of stew.

Advance preparation is built in to the recipe for quantity cooking, and gathering equipment and ingredients takes considerable time and space. Many essential stew components would have traditionally been 'put up' or 'canned' during the summertime, including corn, tomatoes, and butterbeans, each of which came in mid to late summer, and needed preserving for fall and winter pantry shelves. Stew organizers order meat in quantity (or arrange to have it hunted and dressed). Also on the to-do list for the stew crew are provisions for serving stew on site by the bowlful, and for packing it into pint or quart containers for sale and distribution to many lucky folks.

The Glosson Family Stew in Chatham County, NC

While plenty of North Carolina stews serve as fund-raising community events, family stews are thriving as well. The Glosson family gathers in Chatham County each autumn for a family-powered stew, one that beautifully marries old time ways with smart adaptations to make things workable in their 21st century lives.

"I don't remember when or how we first started doing this," Linda Glosson Allred notes, "but our mother, Lizzie Glosson, had an old Army pot that holds about 15 gallons that she used to cook stews in the kitchen. As the family grew with the addition of in-laws and children/grandchildren, we needed more space to spread out, so cooking outside was the best solution." They use two gas turkey cookers modified for optimal stew cooking, while also tending one cast iron wash pot of stew over hickory wood, so that the traditional way and flavor can be part of the event. Whether heated by wood or gas, stirring is key. Linda's husband Buddy Allred, made boat-sized paddles out of maple wood for tending the family's pots of stew.

"We don't use a 'recipe'; each stew is a little different," Linda explains. "We watch for sales on chicken, beef and pork, so we can buy the meat, cook it, chop it, and freeze it in gallon-size Ziploc bags. We also freeze the broth in plastic containers. How much meat we have depends on how many bargains we've found." Vegetables are the usual lima beans, corn, potatoes, onion and tomatoes, but they like to include green beans, mixed vegetables, and some okra.

By cooking the meat in advance and chopping up the vegetables in a food processor prior to cooking, their stew cooks down quickly. Pots are bubbling around 9 a.m., and their stew is ready by around 1 p.m. Somebody makes hush puppies, and tables hold saltine crackers and hot sauce. People bring lawn chairs, and pitch in to help with every aspect of the family stew.

Margaret Glosson Faill, the one who comes the furthest with her family from Tennessee, brings in soup mugs and real eating utensils. "We found out that plastic bowls get too hot to handle when filled with hot stew. So a few years ago I had soup mugs printed and brought several dozen to the stew. Plastic spoons just don't hold enough for a good bite. Yes, we have to wash them and store them for next time but real utensils and bowls make the stew much more enjoyable."

Linda Glosson Allred says, "Several of the younger generation now pitch in to help with the stews. I'm hoping that it is a tradition that my children and all my nieces and nephews will continue when we are too old to keep it up."

Grocery lists typically include an abundance of hens, some beef, peeled tomatoes, onions, potatoes, small white corn, butterbeans, butter, salt, pepper, and in my favorite detail, one red pepper pod. One! Dispersed into a washpot full of meaty, vegetably goodness, and included by a culinary community known for wonderful but mildly-seasoned cooking, it's curious to me. But there it is, listed more often than not.

Secondary ingredients, as in often listed but not essential, begin with squirrels, 2 or 3; sometimes rabbit gets a mention. Once a key ingredient accompanying chicken and beef rather than replacing them, these small game now seem to be a supplement rather than the star component. I made a small batch of stew last winter with squirrel included, and was surprised to find the flavor of squirrel to be quite mild; undetectable, in fact, among the multiple goodnesses of the finished stew. The idea seems to have been this: "If you've got them, add them; but go on ahead with the stew regardless because they are welcome but not required." Pork and veal have a place in a sizable number of written accounts, and to a lesser extent, ground beef. Each is a variation on the theme, however, which is chicken and beef with presence on the bill for squirrel.

A third tier of ingredients includes Worcestershire sauce, green beans, and okra, and some recipes call for stale bread added toward the end as an assist in thickening up the stew in the home stretch. Also present are mashed potatoes, a shortcut chosen over the standard whole peeled potatoes. These will break up and cook down into creamy stew oblivion thanks to the routine of day-long or night-long stirring, but mashed potatoes is another way to go. Some call for creamed corn along with the shoepeg or small white corn included in classic stew.

My friend Susan Reda, a Piedmont NC resident and lifelong fan of Brunswick stew, notes that cooking down the multitude of ingredients into one hearty and satisfying essence is key. "Every single spoonful contains every single ingredient!" she observes, though anyone new to stew wouldn't necessarily see it. Given the long, active cooking method, the only identifiable ingredients in a traditional stew would be butterbeans and corn. But in a dish like this, calling for many hands investing energy and time, it's not about what you see on the spoon. Linda Glosson Allred of Chatham County, NC, enjoys a family stew tradition from her childhood, one she and her sisters and brothers carry on today. Already preparing for the Glosson family's Fall 2014 stew, she credits her parents for starting a precious tradition, now in its third generation, and for teaching their six children the secret to a fine Brunswick stew: "Love is the first, last, and best ingredient in the whole pot." *eP*

Nancie McDermott is a food writer and cooking teacher, born and raised in Piedmont North Carolina and now living in Chapel Hill. She is a contributing editor for *Saveur*, the author of ten cookbooks, and a featured instructor on Craftsy.com.