

## Title:

Regional Cuisine - Down Home Southern Cooking

## Word Count:

566

## Summary:

I grew up in New England, the home of 'plain cooking', where corn on the cob is served as is with a slab of butter and a sprinkle of salt and pepper. We boil salted meats with vegetables and call it - well, a boiled dinner. Our clam chowder is white, our baked beans have bacon and molasses in them, and no one in the world has ever invented a food that was improved by the addition of curry. By the time I was eighteen, I could boil a lobster, steam clams and grill a pork chop t...

## Keywords:

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## Article Body:

I grew up in New England, the home of 'plain cooking', where corn on the cob is served as is with a slab of butter and a sprinkle of salt and pepper. We boil salted meats with vegetables and call it - well, a boiled dinner. Our clam chowder is white, our baked beans have bacon and molasses in them, and no one in the world has ever invented a food that was improved by the addition of curry. By the time I was eighteen, I could boil a lobster, steam clams and grill a pork chop to perfection. Then I moved to Virginia, picked up a roommate from North Carolina - and discovered a whole new world of down home country cooking goodness.

To an All-American Italian girl from Boston, the menus in restaurants were in a foreign language. Chicken-fried steak, grits, corn pone pudding, strawberry rhubarb pie - sweet potato pie?? In my mind, chicken and steak were two different meats, grits is what's on sandpaper, corn is a vegetable - and what in the world is sweet potato doing in a crust? But I became a fervent convert to Southern cooking the first time my roommate made up a pan of the sweetest, tastiest, most perfectly melt-in-your-mouth delicious Southern baking powder biscuits and topped them with sausage gravy. From that day on, I was Sue's disciple, standing at her elbow as she diced scallions to make up a mess of pinto beans, stirred the milk into a pan of drippings for milk gravy and rolled thin steak strips in chicken batter to make chicken-fried steak.

Down home southern cooking is no different than New England plain cooking - at

least at its most basic level. Like any other regional style of cooking, it makes use of the ingredients that are plentiful and cheap. In New England we gussy up our dried beans with brown sugar and molasses, and serve them with thick, sweet heavy brown bread dotted with raisins - perfect fare for cold winter nights. In North Carolina, they simmer for hours with salt pork and onions and served with scallions for scooping and a side of flaky biscuits cut out of dough with a juice glass. Salty, spicy and flaky-good all at once, it's a down home meal that makes my mouth water just to remember.

Some dishes just don't translate, though. There is no New England substitute for a Southern barbecue sandwich - shredded pork simmered with spices for hours and ladled over buns in a 'sandwich' that really requires a fork. The ubiquitous 'sloppy joe' just doesn't cut it. It lacks the spicy-sweet tang and buttery texture of real slow-simmered pork barbecue. Nor is there anything that compares with chicken fried steak - a dish that can't be described in words without selling it short. If you've had it, you KNOW how good it is. If you haven't, the idea of dredging and dipping strips of beef and frying it like chicken just doesn't do it justice.

My New England Italian roots show wherever I go. Lasagna will always be a favorite meal, and New England boiled dinners still make my mouth water. But I know, deep in my soul, that when I go to Heaven, the diners will serve flaky Southern biscuits with sausage gravy and chicken fried steak. Some temptations even the angels can't resist.