The Immigrants & Diverse Flavors of Tennessee & Southern Appalachia

Tennessee Roots
Tennessee’s history is rooted in the Watauga Association, a semi-autonomous government created in 1772 by frontier settlers living along the Watauga River. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “These were the first men of American birth to establish a free and independent community on the continent.” The association was the first step toward establishing the state of Tennessee, nicknamed the “Volunteer State.”

Early Immigrants
Early immigrants to the Watauga area included the English, “Scotch-Irish,” Welsh, Scotch-Highlanders, French Huguenots, and Germans. They were hard-working, independent-minded farmers, hunters, back-country gentry, and statesmen. James Robertson, a North Carolina farmer of Scotch-Irish descent, arrived in 1770 and played an important role in the history of Watauga. He left the area in 1777 to become a colonizer of Nashville and became known as the “Father of Middle Tennessee.”

The Lost State of Franklin
The Wataugans purchased their land in the spring of 1775 from the Cherokee Indians. After the Revolutionary War was won, North Carolina claimed it, but the frontiersmen independently formed their own state within the union—the short-lived State of Franklin (1784 to 1788). It became part of upper East Tennessee when statehood occurred in 1796. Tennessee was the 16th state in the Union.

Three Grand Divisions
• Three stars in the state flag represent Tennessee’s three Grand Divisions: mountainous East Tennessee, the hilly farm country of Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee with its flat cotton lands along the Mississippi.
• Principal cities are Knoxville (East Tennessee) in the cradle of Appalachian cuisine, Nashville, the state capitol (Middle Tennessee) serves up a rich heritage of Southern cuisine with global influences. Memphis (West Tennessee) is a mecca of barbecue. There is also great representation from areas such as Latin America, the Middle East, and Japan.
• Memphis is famed for blues music on Beale Street and the soul food that goes with it. If you spend 48 hours there, here is everything you’ll need to eat and drink.
• Volunteer state vittles include hot chicken, fluffy biscuits, dry-rubbed ribs, and potent moonshine.

Welcoming New Immigrants
• Immigrants have made a big impact on Tennessee’s culture and cuisine. The first settlers also included those of Irish, Scotch (Scots)-Irish, and German heritage.
• Here is an in-depth look, with photos, at Nashville—a city of newcomers.
• Jennifer Justus explores Nashville’s diverse cuisine offered along Nolensville Pike.
• Refugees helped create Knoxville as we know it today. In 1848, a “Swiss Colony” was created four miles north of Knoxville on a 275-acre farm. The Colony of Gruetli-Laager started in 1869 when 100 Swiss families immigrated to Middle Tennessee.
• Population demographics are shifting to embrace new immigrants, a majority being Mexican; a second cohort coming from India. In Smyrna, near Nashville, Karen refugees from Burma (Myanmar) helped save an Episcopal church on the brink of shutting down.
• There are large Laotian communities around Murfreesboro and Nashville. In Memphis, food is connecting people at the Global Café, where authentic, affordable dishes are prepared by refugee food entrepreneurs from places such as Syria, Nepal, Venezuela, and Somalia. For twenty years in Knoxville, Hispanic heritage has been celebrated during the annual HoLa Festival.
• The Knox Asian Festival provides a glimpse into several Asian cultures and celebrates traditions and talents from the Asian continent.

Tennessee Rhythms
• Music is Appalachia’s most effective cultural ambassador. In 1927, in a makeshift Bristol,

• Nashville, known as “Music City,” is the home of the Grand Ole Opry—the longest-running radio broadcast in American history.

• Bluegrass music evolved from an earlier type of country music called old-time music, mostly played on acoustic instruments like the banjo, fiddle, and mandolin. Spirited and upbeat, it is designed for square dancing and clogging.

• African-American music had an important influence on Appalachian music.

Women’s Suffrage

• Tennessee’s ratification of the 19th Amendment granted American women the right to vote in 1920.

Appalachia Folkways

• The Encyclopedia of Appalachia, edited by Rudy Abramson and Dr. Jean Haskell, is the first encyclopedia dedicated to explaining the region, people, culture, history, and geography of Appalachia.

• The Museum of Appalachia, a Smithsonian Affiliate, is an authentic mountain village and farm that tells the story of the mountain folk that live in Southern Appalachia.

• Author Ronni Lundy says that her people [Southern Appalachians] were right all along, in pronunciation (“viddles”), practice, and sentiment.

• Sister Cities of Nashville connects the people of Nashville with the people of the world.

• Blackberry Farm, Tennessee is nestled in East Tennessee in the Great Smoky Mountains—an idyllic escape from urban life. By reading their cookbook you are transposed, for even a few moments, into their luxurious world.

• News coverage often reveals the hard life of some Appalachia residents. We applaud the nutrition education information at Food and Nutrition –TN.gov, which aims to make all citizens aware of healthier food choices.

Appalachian Foodways

• The food of humble Appalachia is rapidly becoming the next big thing in American regional cooking.

• Here are 11 iconic Tennessee foods to try.

• “Let’s Eat: Origins and Evolutions of Tennessee Food” is currently on exhibit at the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville.

• Chef Rufus Estes, born in Murray County, Tennessee, in 1857, was a former slave who helped teach America how to cook.

• In East Tennessee, the Cruz Farm Dairy and dairy queen Colleen Cruz Bhatti are churning up the most delicious ice cream, artisan buttermilk, and cream you could imagine.

• Sorghum is made from the pure, sweet juice of sweet sorghum cane. It was a primary Southern sweetener in the nineteenth century. Here’s a recipe for sorghum ice cream.

• Ramps, a spring delicacy, are wild onions (also called wild leeks or wild garlic) with an onion-garlic flavor and a pungent odor. Ramp festivals are held in mountain towns throughout Southern Appalachia.

• The cast iron skillet is one of the most important pans in the Appalachian kitchen. Here is a list of the best cast iron skillets you can buy, and tips for seasoning a skillet from renowned Chef Sean Brock.

• Rebecca Lang shares a recipe for Nashville’s signature chicken dish—Tennessee Hot Chicken.

• Here’s a recipe for Apple Stack Cake from Appalachia.

• The smokehouse of Bob Woods, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, produces the finest country ham in the South—and probably in the country. Award-winning Nashville and Charleston Chef Sean Brock agrees!

• East Tennesseans grew up eating tamales long before Mexican restaurants appeared. One cook makes them Delta style (“hot tamales”): cornmeal dough and spicy filling shaped into parchment-wrapped bundles and simmered. Texas tamales steamed in corn shucks are a family business for the owners of Nashville’s Sisterhood of the Tamale.

• Global Appetites: Ruby Banerjee is one of Western North Carolina’s most celebrated instructors of the cuisine of India.

• MoonPies were created in 1917 at the Chattanooga Bakery, Inc.

for Kentucky coal miners.

• Listen to a honky tonk song about RC Colas and MoonPies—a classic Southern combination! Click here for a recipe to make your own.

The Whiskey Trail

• Five of the best distilleries on the American Whiskey Trail are in Kentucky and Tennessee.

• Southeast of Nashville is legendary Lynchburg; the famed home of Jack Daniel’s—producer of sublime Tennessee whiskey. You may sniff, taste, and wonder at the golden-amber liquid, but you’ll have to go outside Moore County to taste.

• Sing the country song “Tennessee Whiskey” while sipping on Tennessee-Style Ice Tea or Lynchburg Lemonade.

• Spin the “Lazy Susan” at Miss Mary Bobo’s Boarding House Restaurant and enjoy a mid-day Southern dinner with fried chicken, ham, collards, cornbread, okra, stewed tomatoes, creamed corn, and more. Then wait for dessert!

• “Ya-hoo, Mountain Dew”—The carbonated, high-caffeine drink is rapidly becoming the next part of a man’s world; women were in the business too.

• The origin of NASCAR is linked to “whiskey trippers” who were skilled in outdriving revenue agents.

• Kentucky Dam sings Buffalo Trace Distillery, The Woodford Reserve Distillery, and Four Roses Distillery for handcrafted, artisanal bourbon whiskey.

Resources

• A city newspaper, printed or on-line, captures the essence of an area and its food culture—from restaurants to agriculture and food education. Check out The Knoxville News Sentinel; The Tennessean (Nashville); and The Chattanooga Times Free Press.

• Here’s a map of the Appalachian region and its counties.


GCI Committee: Co-Chairs Susan Fuller Slack, Editor (Charleston) and Roberta DuBay (St. Louis); GCI Founder Suzanne Brown (Atlanta), Teresa Farney (Colorado), Margaret Happel Perry (New York), Anita Lau and Cecilia Filetti (Los Angeles), Advisor Sandy Hu (San Francisco). Photos, Page one: musician (Tim Moshholder), neon sign (Paul Brennan), and apple skilet from Unsplash. Photos of Tennessee biscuits, fried pies, and nettles by Susan F. Slack, Page two: Election Day, Library of Congress.