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The Surprising Origins of Fried Green Tomatoes



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The first time I, like a lot of Americans, heard of fried green tomatoes was when a movie by that name came out in 1991. Based on a novel by Fannie Flagg called *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, it starred Mary Louise Parker, Mary Stuart Masterson, Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy in a feel-good story of female friendship and empowerment set in Alabama. I was not a fan of the movie (two of the main characters are named Idgie and Ninny—need I say more?), and I didn't give much thought to the ostensibly Southern dish (more about that later) that one of the characters craves until a friend and I visited my aunt and uncle in New Orleans in the late 1990s.

They took us to a neighborhood hole-in-the-wall that served simple Southern fare. The whole meal was delicious, as I recall, though the only dish I can remember clearly was the fried green tomatoes. Now, I know that most things that taste good taste even better when battered and deep-fried. But something about this dish was extraordinary—the combination of firm-fleshed tomato with crunchy cornmeal coating, the slight tartness of the unripe fruit balancing the oiliness of the exterior. I was smitten.

The New Orleans visit was our first stop on a road trip to Chicago. (Now, why didn't I remember this story for Inviting Writing, instead of my [sad tale of food-borne illness](#)?) I kept looking for fried green tomatoes everywhere we went. Although I ate lots of other good things on that trip, I found my new favorite food only once more, at an upscale restaurant in Memphis. They were a disappointment—over-seasoned and overcooked.

The next time I encountered fried green tomatoes was almost a decade later at a rural county fair in, of all places, upstate New York. Served at a corn farmer's food stand, they were not what I had come to believe was traditional Southern-style—they were more like a corn fritter with a slice of green tomato nestled inside—but I was enraptured once again.

The reason I say “ostensibly Southern” is that, it turns out, fried green tomatoes may have been as unusual in the South before 1991 as they were everywhere else. In fact, according to Robert F. Moss, a food historian and writer in South Carolina, “they entered the American culinary scene in the Northeast and Midwest, perhaps with a link to Jewish immigrants, and from there moved onto the menu of the home-economics school of cooking teachers who flourished in the United States in the early-to-mid 20th century.”

Jewish?! And here I thought the crowning culinary achievements of my ethnic heritage were [matzo ball soup](#) and [bagels](#). Moss found recipes in several Jewish and Midwestern cookbooks of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, but none in Southern cookbooks and hardly any in Southern newspapers. You can read the whole entertaining and informative [account](#) of how a movie changed (or distorted) culinary history at his blog.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense that fried green tomatoes should be a Northern dish. Moss confesses to not liking green tomatoes, arguing that the ripe ones are “one of nature’s true delights” and that it’s a shame to eat them any other way. I am also a huge fan of really good ripe tomatoes, and if forced to choose only one or the other for the rest of my life I would have to go with ripe ones. But where I live in the Northeast, the growing season is so short that gardeners have to find something to do with all their unripe tomatoes before the first frost. Frying ’em up in batter seems like a good solution.

Although we’re at the peak of tomato season now, last week at the farmers’ market I spotted some green tomatoes next to the ripe ones. I bought some of each, and fried up the green ones according to a [recipe from *Southern Living*](#) magazine. That was before I read Moss’s blog, though; maybe next time I’ll try to track down one of the Jewish recipes he mentions.

About Lisa Bramen



Lisa Bramen was a frequent contributor to Smithsonian.com’s Food and Think blog. She is based in northern New York and is also an associate editor at *Adirondack Life* magazine.

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