

Ballance, Maude: Ocracoke Cooking ^[1]

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Maude Ballance: Ocracoke cooking

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/11/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Maude Ballance on Ocracoke Island to talk about history and food. Born on Ocracoke in 1932, she is one of the island's finest cooks, and, in my experience, there is no better way to understand a place's past than by tasting its food. Ocracoke's history can be savored in a host of glorious local delicacies -- dishes such as boiled mullet with hot pepper vinegar, stewed crab with corn dumplings and blackberry dumplings with egg sauce.

Ocracoke's cookery evokes long-forgotten trade routes, a centuries-old reliance on fishing and a self-sufficiency born of being 25 miles off the mainland. In some island recipes, you can even taste the flavors of the English coast, especially Devonshire and Cornwall, where so many of the island's 18th-century colonists first went to sea. You won't find these local delicacies in any restaurant though. They live on only in the kitchens of island women like Maude Ballance.



Maude Ballance. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission ~~Maude Ballance~~ to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I remember Daddy used to boil fish for his breakfast mornings. He fished all his life, and they'd go out early mornings to go to the nets. They had to be there by daylight or the gulls used to eat the fish. They'd come home and when we'd get up My father, I don't think he ever worried about a thing. He was easygoing. My mother, she was the boss. She stayed at home, looked after the family, cleaned house, done the cooking. Now, toward the later years, when the tourists started coming If people had not been here, say, in 50 years, I don't think they would hardly recognize it. Everything was just dirt roads, dirt paths. If you went anywhere, you had to go on a boat. We had just a few stores on the island. We didn't have gift shops I guess I learned to cook by watching my mama and grandmother. I don't think I ever saw my grandmother without her apron on. Some things I can fix, and some things I can't, but I don't ever go by a recipe. I can take anything I got and mix it up. We got plenty of stuff out in the water to eat, and most everybody had gardens. They raised potatoes, cabbages, collards and everything you could think of to eat. And they would preserve what they raised. I've seen Mama put up three or four jars. And they always made their own breads. They'd hardly have a loaf of bread in those days. They'd make biscuits and they'd make yeast rolls -- hot rolls, we call them. On the weekend, you'd always make a cake or pie of some kind -- fig cake. We always had blackberry dumplings years ago and even today. We'd go blackberrying early mornings. You know where the fire hall is? Going up the street from the fire hall, that used to be a cow pen years ago, where all them houses are in. We'd go home and wash them, put them in a pan and dry them out. Mama would take flour and water and roll it out on a napkin, and then she'd take a hand of blackberries and put it in and roll it up. You could boil them for about five minutes. Even in hard times we had plenty of fish. We'd have baked drum fish, fried mullet, all kinds of fish. And we'd always make clam chowder and clam fritters. Mama would fry hard crabs, and I like to have fried soft-shell crabs on a sandwich. Crabs. Mama and them used to stew mullet too. You take potatoes and onions and maybe a piece of pork meat and cover them with water and pepper and salt and cook them. Just before the potatoes get done, you take your mullet and put on top of it. Gosh, they'd put you in jail now if you ate them, but when we were growing up, you could get all the turtles you wanted -- those old, big loggerhead turtles. It was something they would catch in their fishing nets. You had to cut it up and parboil it. In the fall of the year, Daddy would salt mullet roe and lay them upstairs. I can see Mama's upstairs now. We didn't use the upstairs then, and that's where he'd put them. They cut the roe out and wash them, salt the roe, and then, after they salted them. They would salt fish too. They didn't have deep freezers like they got now. Daddy would put them in barrels and send them off to Washington, or else keep a barrel for himself in the wintertime. All the men in them days used to salt fish for the winter. A lot of the things we used to have then, we don't even think about any more. And we have things we eat now that we didn't have, like spaghetti and meat loaf. And I can't hardly remember going any other place to eat besides home, not like t

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