

Averett, Ben: Doing It Right ^[1]

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Ben Averett: Doing It Right

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 10/10/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I had been hearing about Ben Averett's annual Brunswick stew for years. Every October since 1967, Averett has scrubbed out a 25-gallon black iron wash pot, built a hardwood fire under it and prepared an old-fashioned stew for a crowd of friends and family in Oxford. After supper, he and his guests break out fiddles and guitars and play old-time music half the night. There is a rumor about some kind of autumnal tonic - nothing to that, I am sure.

Brunswick stew is a cherished dish in our tobacco belt, and Averett takes great pride in making stew just like his elders. For him the real thing means more than just good stew. His stew stands for the way he believes a life should be lived: no shortcuts, no compromises and finding a fulsome joy at the good things in life, not least among them, a bowl of homemade stew on a crisp fall night.

Here Averett discusses the history of Brunswick stew and shares his recipe - for those of you who want to do things right.

In Ben Averett's words:



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Uncle Ruben Jones was a tobacco farmer, and everybody up and down the road - everybody in this county - were tobacco farmers when I grew up. You were either a tobacco farmer or you sold something that a tobacco farmer needed, or you were a tobacco farmer. Late August, early September, they would do what they used to call neighborhood stews. Tobacco was out of the fields, and you're curing the leaf in the tobacco barns and keeping the fire going. No such thing as oil burners, gas burners. This was an excuse to get together. All summer they worked from way in the dark in the morning until after black-night dark raising a crop. Fall stew-time was the first time really since spring that anybody had time to do anything. And a stew is always an excuse to get together. They always had too much garden. By August they had already canned all they were going to put up for the year, and the gardens were still producing. One farmer would have, say, a whole lot of late corn, but he didn't have any butterbeans. Uncle Ruben's stewpot was always out by a great big old oak tree. Everybody ate outside, most of the time just standing up. You didn't have anything besides stew and slaw, white bread or crackers. And that was it. Usually they just drank iced tea. When I got up in years, I decided I wanted to fix my own stew. I said, well, I've got to get me a good recipe. There was a woman here in Oxford. Her name was Mrs. Sterling Carrington. She ran the stew at Hester Baptist Church. Every Septe

You might volunteer you and your pot, but you didn't cook it your way. She'd travel around to pots. "Now put this in," she'd say, and she'd taste it. "Now you put salt in this one," or "you put pepper in that one."

Now, when you got through, you might be eating out of one of five pots but it all tasted the same. She ruled that thing.

She gave me the recipe just like I have it today, for a 25-gallon pot.

About 6 o'clock in the morning I'll have the water boiling in the pot. I put in all the meat, which is 2 squirrels, 8 pounds of beef and 8 pounds of pork, and about 7 frying-size chickens - none of this stuff that you buy at the grocery store. Don't even buy that. You put all the meat and 2 pounds of onion and 2 pods of cayenne red pepper in it. That stays at a rolling boil till about 10 o'clock. Then you put in the butterbeans. The recipe calls for a gallon of baby butterbeans, little bitty things. You want to buy the good ones. Just add water along. The meat will settle and you can pick the bones out. Every time you put in a new ingredient, put in about 3 tablespoons salt and black pepper.

About 1 o'clock you put in 10 pounds of potatoes. Peel 'em and quarter 'em and chunk them in there. Then, getting down about 3 or 4 o'clock now, the potatoes are done. The butterbeans for all practical purposes have disappeared. You don't even buy that. I grow tomatoes purposefully for my stew. My wife, Amy, quarters the tomatoes and takes all the seed and pulp and squeezes them and what we put in is pure tomatoes. It calls for 8 quarts.

I usually let the tomatoes stay about an hour, then they've cooked all to pieces. You don't put the corn in till about 30 minutes before you eat. I raise my own corn and I cut that off the cobs. I usually use about 120 ears of corn that we cut off a stalk. Then, at the end, the recipe calls for a half pound of butter, a half cup of vinegar, a cup of sugar, and a small bottle of Heinz ketchup. Fifteen minutes later, you can eat, usually between 5:30 and 6.

You can't speed that recipe up. It's a lot of work, but I REALLY like good stew. And I get a lot of enjoyment out of folks eating it and appreciating it.

I understand it's changing times, and everybody is living at such a fast pace. But if you're going to do it, do it right. A man here in town told me last year, he said: "Ben, let me tell you how you can speed this up. Use instant onions and instant potatoes. I said, "I don't even want to hear this." That don't cut it. I'm not saying it's not good. But don't call it what it's not. There's only one way to make Brunswick stew right. And I do it RIGHT.

One of the guys that comes to my stew is the son of Ruben Jones, the one I was telling you about. He's 73, and he said last year, "Ben, I haven't eaten stew like this since daddy cooked it." I sort of felt good about it.

I want to thank Anna Fink and her father, Dr. Leon Fink, for their help with my interview last month. Dr. Fink generously shared with me an earlier interview he did with Mrs. Galvez, and Anna did a magnificent job as my translator.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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