

The History of Texas Cuisine

Barbeque brisket, chicken fried steak, chili, enchiladas, biscuits with red-eye gravy, pinto beans, fried chicken, kolaches and pecan pie – all bring the phrase “Texas cuisine” to mind. To truly understand Texas food, one must know something of the land and the people. Varied as the topography from coast to plains to mountainous desert, Texas is a fusion of 27 ethnic or cultural groups, each stirring their own ingredients into timeless Texas recipes.

African Americans deserve at least half of the credit for the Texas legacy of Southern cooking. Often African Americans were cooks as slaves or domestic servants. Even after emancipation, most could not afford choice cuts of meat so they used inexpensive cuts, often supplemented by game and fish. They mastered the art of turning greens and beans into culinary masterpieces adding hog jowl, salt pork, peppers and spices. We can also thank the African Americans for fried chicken and catfish.

A substantial influence on Texas cuisine comes from Mexico where food was improvised by people with simple cooking facilities using what was available. Venison, beef, pork, goat, chicken, eggs, cheese, milk and beans combined with corn masa, chocolate, peppers, onions, garlic and spices became the hearty, flavorful and filling food known today as Tex Mex. Chili con carne is the most famous dish and the official state dish of Texas.

Sopapillas and strudel are the official state pastries of Texas. Sopapilla is among the earliest pastries made in Texas as far back to 1682 in Ysleta, near El Paso. Tigua Pueblo Indians planted, harvested and ground wheat for use in meals prepared for Franciscan friars. Known by the Tigua as “Indian fry bread,” the pastry, made of wheat dough and fried in lard, evolved into what we know as Sopapilla.

Strudel came to Texas via European immigrants: English, French, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, German, Polish, Scandinavian and Austro-Hungarian. Many came to Texas by way of the Deep South and brought with them culinary influences of those regions: biscuits and red-eye gravy, black-eyed peas, peach cobbler and pecan pie. French influence brought Cajun and Creole cuisine to Texas through Louisiana. Europeans also arrived via ocean liner in Corpus Christi and settled in Central Texas. German skills at smoking meat and concocting sausage developed into today’s Texas barbecue. Chicken-fried steak is an adaptation of German immigrants’ Wiener schnitzel. Czech contributions include sausages, kolaches, and potato pancakes.

When enjoying a meal in Texas, you reap the benefits of a culture rich in diversity and history that is unmatched in the United States.

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