



TAR HEEL TASTES

Apple of My Eye

As the perfect complement to your dinner or for dessert, versatile fried apples are easy to make and perfect to eat anytime.

BY R. KELLY COFFEY

Fried apples are a simple yet distinctive dish widely served in the upland South. They can be found on tables at any meal and with a variety of other foods, making them a staple in traditional mountain cooking. Fried apples are rarely singled out for the praise they deserve because — like biscuits and potatoes — they serve as a side dish to more glamorous parts of the meal. They shouldn't be confused with stewed

apples, applesauce, fried apple pies, or other apple dishes. Genuine fried apples are a cuisine all their own with roots in agricultural history, pioneer subsistence, and plain home cooking.

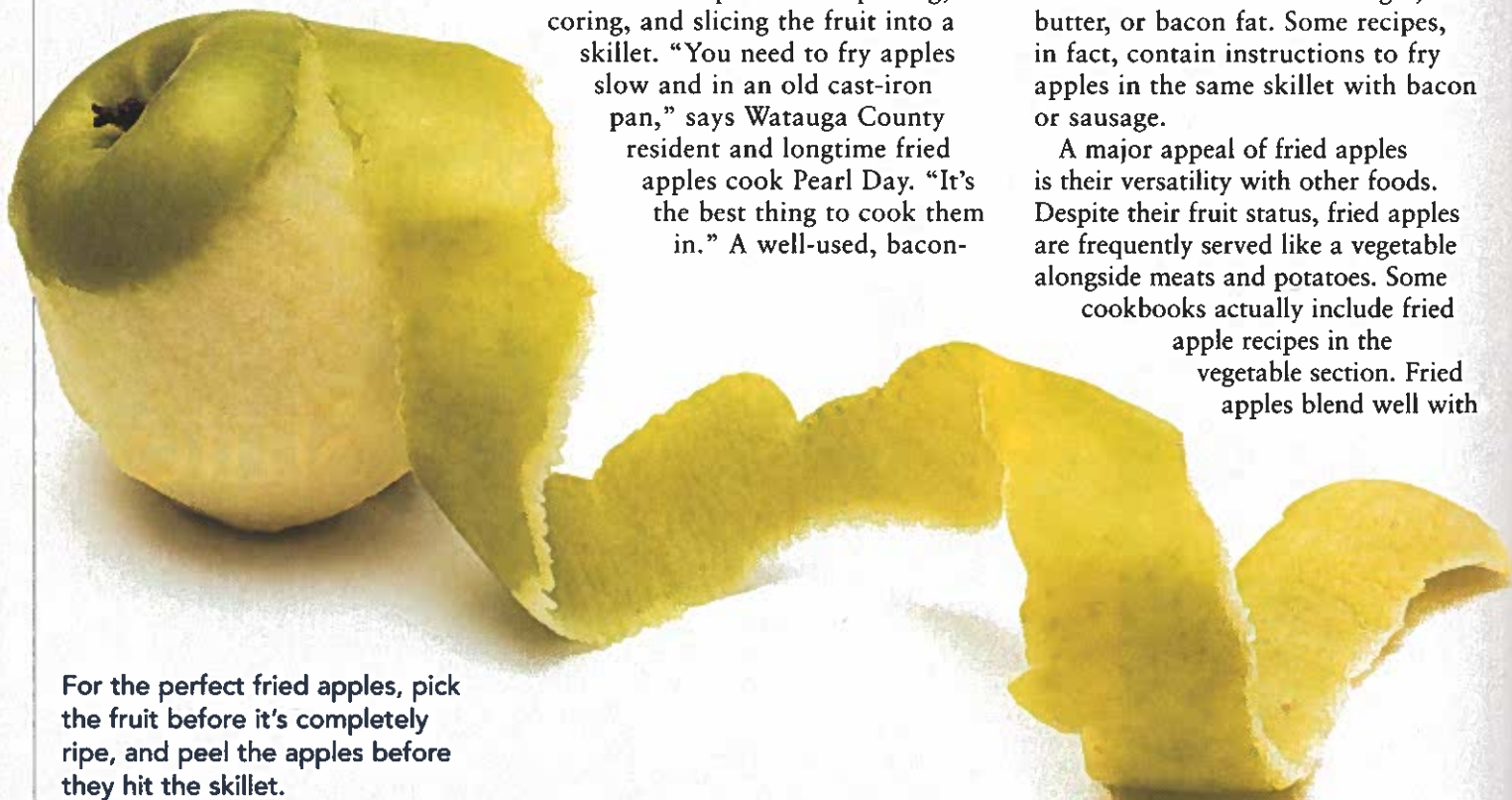
No fuss

Fried apples are popular in part because there's no fuss in fixing them. The dish requires few additional ingredients and is ready to serve with minimum preparation. The basic recipe involves peeling, coring, and slicing the fruit into a skillet. "You need to fry apples slow and in an old cast-iron pan," says Watauga County resident and longtime fried apples cook Pearl Day. "It's the best thing to cook them in." A well-used, bacon-

frying iron pan heats evenly and imparts a hint of pork flavor to the fruit, but almost any skillet will work. The apples are braised until the slices become translucent. Over-frying results in unacceptable mushiness. Perfectly fried apples lose their raw crispness yet hold their shape and remain firm enough to sink your teeth into them.

Apples in any form are beneficial and nutritious. Prepared with a minimum of other ingredients, fried apples can be a healthy, nonfat supplement to many meals. Alternatively, fried apples can be cooked wickedly sweet and greasy with the addition of more sugar, butter, or bacon fat. Some recipes, in fact, contain instructions to fry apples in the same skillet with bacon or sausage.

A major appeal of fried apples is their versatility with other foods. Despite their fruit status, fried apples are frequently served like a vegetable alongside meats and potatoes. Some cookbooks actually include fried apple recipes in the vegetable section. Fried apples blend well with



For the perfect fried apples, pick the fruit before it's completely ripe, and peel the apples before they hit the skillet.

various forms of pork and complement biscuits and gravy. "Pork tenderloin, fried apples, and biscuits — ain't no better eating," declares Day. Historically, pork has been the primary meat in the Southern diet. Because the two foods harmonize so well, the ubiquity of pork encouraged the preparation of fried apples to go with it. Fried apples have been served with breakfast bacon as much as they've been paired with supper chicken. And they're sweet enough to be easily altered from a "vegetable" to a dessert. A favorite mountain dessert ensemble includes biscuits, butter, and fried apples. Leftover fried apples are just as good the second or third time around. After Sunday dinner, for example, country cooks often leave remaining fried apples on the table for those with the urge to snack after supper.

Testing for tartness

Rice is a companion dish to fried apples that has an interesting Carolina history angle. The smooth texture of fried apples contrasts pleasingly with the coarseness of rice. Fried chicken, biscuits-and-chicken-gravy, rice, and fried apples make a delicious meal. Eighteenth-century Southern recipe books listed apples as an ingredient in rice puddings and in a concoction called Carolina Snow Balls, made primarily with rice and apples. How did a highland fruit become associated with a coastal grain? Rice plantations were common along the southeastern coast in the 1700s, including North Carolina's Cape Fear River area. Because rice transported easily, was not prone to spoilage, and grew relatively close by, the grain made its way into the Carolina backcountry as a trade item, where its tasty pairing with upland fried apples was discovered and perpetuated.

Early settlers brought established apple varieties from Europe, but the popularity of fried apples in mountain meals is largely a legacy of frontier American farming practices that were indifferent to Old World apple pedigrees. Rather than graft known varieties, pioneers

usually planted mixed-genetic apple seeds and used the resulting fruit for cider or livestock feed (apples from most seedling trees are tasteless, but they render acceptable cider when varieties are mixed). Occasionally, a new, exceptional tasting, cooking-quality variety emerged among the seedlings, which farmers preserved in their household orchards and propagated by producing clones. These customs generated an amazing variety of apples in appearance, taste, cooking characteristics, and ripening time.

"They were a good frying apple; there would be a yellow look to them when you fried them." Also known as "Carolina Greening," Green Skin likely originated in North Carolina in the 1800s. Another North Carolina native, Magnum Bonum (Latin for "great good"), can be traced to Davidson County in 1828. Fried Magnum Bonums have a very firm, meaty texture. Red Rebel has a flavor similar to a pear, while Hunge, an apple with Moravian origins,

Blue Ridge Fried Apples

Peel, slice, and core firm, slightly unripe apples (quantity can be varied as desired and according to the skillet size). Slices should be of medium thickness, about 1/2-inch wide.

Distribute the slices in a skillet; fill not more than half of the pan's depth.

Sprinkle the slices thoroughly with sugar, at least enough to coat well. No water or other frying medium is necessary. For enhanced flavor, add bacon fat.

Cover and cook on high until the apples begin to steam; then quickly

reduce heat to medium-high.

Never stir or turn the slices.

Fry with lid on for about 15 minutes, then remove lid, and turn heat to low.

Cook on low heat until the slices become translucent and excess moisture evaporates.

Variations of this basic recipe are numerous. Add cinnamon, for example, for a spicy flavor. Individual servings can be buttered at the table. If serving as a dessert, adding whipped cream on top enriches the apples.

With only a little effort and planning, a farmer could have apple trees bearing fruit sequentially from June to October. In addition, certain late-ripening varieties can be stored for months, resulting in the availability of fresh apples practically year-round. Under such conditions, rural cooks had an abundant supply of apples anytime to fry and serve with every meal.

Fried apples can be made from many varieties, each having its own unique characteristics. Gragg, a local favorite in the northwestern part of the state, originated in Caldwell County around the mid-19th century. Fried apples made from Graggs have a perfect texture and a bright green color. Winter Jon, an old mountain variety, fries to a vivid white. "Green Skin was the best apple around Christmas," says Day.

has a wine-like taste. Many modern varieties commonly found in grocery stores, like Golden Delicious and Granny Smith, produce excellent fried apples as well.

Apple varieties in traditional home orchards were grown and valued, not for fresh eating, but for their cooking qualities. Many older varieties, in fact, are bland when eaten raw. Cooking brings out their concealed flavor. The best apples for frying are typically tart when raw and somewhat unripe (unripe apples taste fine when fried). Sweet or fully ripe apples tend to "cook up" into applesauce.

Common as cornbread

Folks raised on fried apples find nothing extraordinary about the dish because it's as common as cornbread on rural tables. Chef Bret Jennings, however, brings the dish to urban

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diners in his Chapel Hill restaurant, Elaine's on Franklin. Elaine's is a casual yet upscale restaurant featuring locally grown meat and produce. "My granny made fried apples all the time — just as a side item. She didn't really dress them up," Jennings says. "We do fancy plates here where we make it look nice and combine all the textures and flavors and ingredients together."

One of Jennings' entrees includes a pork chop, macaroni and cheese, and unpeeled apples fried in clarified butter. Another focuses on pork tenderloin, sweet potato hash, and fried apples. "We'll brown them up in bacon fat, throw some smoked bacon in there with arugula [and] thyme, and make a little relish to set on top of that pork," he says. "It's hard to go wrong with fried apples and pork."

Fried apples add a satisfying element to a meal like no other fruit or vegetable. Their fruitiness helps lighten a heavy meat or starchy vegetable, yet they're more filling than a salad. The origin of the dish is unknown, but if the forbidden fruit in Eden was really the apple, there's no doubt the prospect of frying it tempted Adam and Eve. 🍏

R. Kelly Coffey writes from his home in Watauga County.

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