Taste of Place: Place-based foods in Iowa

Rachelle H. Saltzman

Iowa Arts Council

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Taste of Place: Place-based foods in Iowa

Abstract
During 2005, the Iowa Foodways Project: Taste of Place researched, via surveys, interviews and photography, Iowa-produced foods that have a connection to place and heritage.

Keywords
Agritourism and place-based food, Community-based food systems

Disciplines
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Abstract: During 2005, the Iowa Foodways Project: Taste of Place researched, via surveys, interviews and photography, Iowa-produced foods that have a connection to place and heritage.

Question & Answer

Q: How do we determine what foods are unique to Iowa and have potential for marketing as distinctive products?

A: This project conducted research to identify, document, and tell the stories of Iowa place-based foods.

Background

Given Iowa’s status as an agricultural state, there was no shortage of suggestions for foodstuffs that were prime candidates to be identified as Iowa place-based foods. For the most part, these are the kinds of foods that evoke a taste of home or place. These are foods we make and eat at home, in our communities and ethnic groups, and at local restaurants. Most of these foods are prepared by group members for group members, whether in families, in religious communities, in ethnic enclaves, or within geographical regions. The rise of the culinary tourism movement also has spurred interest in locally produced foods, nostalgia about foods remembered from childhood, and the ongoing production of regional and ethnic goods for local markets.

Objectives for this project were to:

1) Conduct field research including surveys and ethno-graphic documentation in Iowa to provide a list of five to 10 place-based Iowa foods that meet these cultural, geo-graphic, and ecological criteria:
   • Ingredients must be or have been grown and/or processed in Iowa.
   • There must be some heritage basis for the food/crop, whether historical, ethnic, ecological, or geographical.
   • Given the nature of the project, the food would have some kind of “story” related to it, which would make its Iowa connection clear and could be used to market the food.
   • The food likely would meet two or more of these criteria (e.g., Muscatine melons, Hawkeye apples, Albany onions, Amana rhubarb wine).

2) Provide a selection of “stories” from the state’s major ecological regions regarding place-based Iowa foods that have the potential to be used for marketing those foods and encourage their production.

Approach and methods

The project investigator surveyed the state for ideas on traditional, place-based foods using a variety of methods. She used press releases to the media, contact with previous researched communities and individuals, online surveys, and interviews with reporters around the state. Documentation consisted of field notes, audio-taped interviews, 35mm slides, digital photos, and tape and photo logs. The Leopold Center’s Regional Food Systems Working Group and others provided direction regarding specific research sites/foods. She also reexamined previous research with Iowa early culture groups (Meskwaki, Amana, Swedish, German, Dutch, French, Danish, and Norwegian) as well as Latino, Southeast Asian, and Bosnian communities.
Results and discussion

There were nearly 50 suggestions for Iowa place-based foods. It was easy to find foods that met at least two of the criteria for the designation, but few met all three qualifiers. After conducting interviews with producers, seven food products met the test for all three benchmarks:

- Maytag® Blue Cheese
- Maasdam’s Sorghum
- Rhubarb wine from the Amana Colonies
- Uncle Jack’s Popcorn
- K&K Tiny but Mighty Popcorn
- Western Iowa mettwurst
- Southeastern Iowa black walnuts and pawpaws

Most of the foods that Iowans and others identify with Iowa fall into four categories:

1. Those that are grown and processed here and have a heritage basis (pork tenderloins, Maasdam’s sorghum syrup, Amana rhubarb wine, mettwurst, black walnuts, Muscattine melons, and pawpaws);
2. Those that are processed here and have a heritage basis (Dutch letters, lefse, kolaches, Swedish pancakes, Norwegian kringle, Danish aebleskivver, Mexican flour and corn tortillas, and other ethnic dishes);
3. Those that are grown and processed here, but have no substantive heritage basis (several kinds of tasty salsa; cows’ milk and goats’ milk cheese from Cresco and the Goat Sisters; Java chickens and most other heritage poultry; emerging vineyards and wineries; a variety of delicious local organic and natural dairy products, some from re-emerging micro-dairies; and farmed fish from western Iowa); and
4. Those that are grown and processed here and that do have a heritage basis but are not necessarily produced organically or naturally, and as a result may prove problematic to market without having to contend with other political and economic issues (buffalo from northwest Iowa, Amana® meats, pork tenderloins, Maidrite® sandwiches, hybrid sweet corn, soy nuts).

The ecological basis of Iowa place-based foods stems from grasses the animals eat that affect the taste of the meat or the milk/cheese produced, the soils in which the crops grow (e.g., sorghum, Muscattine melons), the soil and climate for the grapes and fruits (e.g., Hawkeye apples, Amana rhubarb wine), and the effect of molds and humidity.

(Maytag® Blue Cheese). More research needs to be done on precisely how these factors influence the taste of the food products.

But if food comes from ingredients grown elsewhere, or is so common that it really doesn’t matter where it comes from (e.g., potato chips, doughnuts, hamburgers, sweet corn), it is difficult to make the claim that the food has a uniquely specific Iowa origin. Foods that are missing the heritage part that “tells the story” will not likely build the case for place-based foods.
Conclusions

Without identification and research to document place-based foods, appropriate marketing and application of economic development resources cannot take place. The tasty, locally and sustainably produced Iowa foods must be promoted in popular food publications, television and radio shows, and web sites (such as Gourmet, Food and Wine, Bon Appetit, Food Network, etc.) as well as in academic venues.

Despite the variety of cultural and regional ties of many Iowa foods, however, there are next to no state-level marketing dollars tied to promoting an area with regard to foods produced locally. The A Taste of Iowa ® marketing program of recent years was one attempt, but funding was removed, and it no longer exists at the state level in Iowa.

Iowa has some excellent, popular place-based food items. These foods have local fans as well as state, regional, and national adherents. It is important that these foods be framed as wholesome, from the heartland, and affordable, as opposed to focused on high-end specialty foods markets. Some of those foods meet all three criteria, and are raised, or could be raised, using sustainable or organic practices. But there also are foods, among the most well-known and most widely identified as having a taste of Iowa, that simply have nothing to do with sustainable farming practices. The challenge will be to encourage at least some of these food producers to use more sustainable practices.

Impact of results

This was a beginning step to document Iowa’s place-based foods, and has garnered considerable media attention at a time when this movement is taking off nationally and internationally. The second phase of the project (development of web-based fact sheets) will provide publicity and a model as well as outreach for Iowa place-based foods. (See www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/index.htm.) The opportunity to work on this project has created new connections with other members of the Center’s Regional Food Systems Working Group to promote these foods.

Education and outreach

Presentations on the project were given at the Society for Applied Anthropology, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, American Folklore Society, and the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. Articles on the project and Iowa foods have appeared in several state newspapers and publications.

A presentation on the project can be viewed at http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing_files/workshop06/index.htm

Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged by this project.

For more information contact Rachelle H. Saltzman, Iowa Arts Council, 600 E. Locust St., Des Moines, Iowa 50319; (515) 242-6195, e-mail riki.saltzman@iowa.gov