

"The Local Farey Tale of Burgoo" Transcript

STEVE ROSS

I've been aware of burgoo for forever it seems like. I think when I was in junior high or what they call middle school now, I remember them setting up a burgoo pot behind the junior high school and Davy Warford and his family stirring that pot for hours. The first time I actually tried it, I didn't try it then, I'm not sure, maybe at that age I wasn't quite ready yet but... The first time I tried it was at one of the festivals in Lawrenceburg and I just remember being really impressed with how delicious it was.

Local Farey Tales music begins

NORA VETTER

Welcome to Local Farey Tales. I'm your narrator, Nora Vetter. What IS a local farey tale? It's the story of a fare, f-a-r-e, that can only be found in certain regions, states, cities and so on... Each tale will be told with the help of the voices that know it well; historians, creators, servers, festival organizers, super fans, etc. Today's featured fare? Burgoo! You heard Steve Ross from the Central Kentucky-based band, Puncheon Creek, speak about his first experience with burgoo. Now let's meet the rest of our Burgoo Tale-Tellers.

Tale-Tellers Intro

I'm Patrick Bosley with the Moonlite Bar-B-Q Inn, I'm Amanda Carter with the LaSalle County Historical Society, I'm Kendall Clinton with the Lawrenceburg - Anderson County Tourism Commission, I'm Pastor Bennie Cowger of the Bergoo Baptist Church, Tim Frederick, Greg Marsee, Steve Ross and Brandon Warren from Puncheon Creek, I'm Bob Gates I was Director of the Kentucky Folklife Program for 30 years, My name is Russ Kennedy my title, Burgoo Guy, I'm Jessica Stavros from the Kentucky Historical Society, My name is Sue Talbott I am a volunteer that organizes the Burgoo Cook-Off here in Webster Springs, My name is Marc Therrien the Executive Chef and Managing Director of Keeneland Hospitality, I'm William Davis Warford Jr known as Davy, I'm Jay Williams and you're listening...

JESSICA STAVROS

...and you are listening to the local...

MARC THERRIEN

...local farey tale of...

AMANDA CARTER

...local farey tale of burgoo...

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PATRICK BOSLEY

...farey tale of burgoo soup...

RUSS KENNEDY

...of Kentucky-style burgoo...

BENNIE COWGER

...of burgoo...

2:34 - Music transition

MARC THERRIEN

I'm Chef Marc Therrien from Keeneland Hospitality and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo.

I flew over from San Diego to interview for this position. Burgoo I saw on the menus and I actually brought that up in the interview I said, "What is burgoo and when can I change it?" Cause the name burgoo, I just, I don't know, it doesn't sound like something I want to rush and go eat. So, I just didn't know what it was because I was very ignorant and I can tell ya, I got a lot of white faces and long jaw drops on that question.

RUSS KENNEDY

Would you put something in your mouth called burgoo? It sounded a lot like bird doo to me. But, I got around to lovin' it.

BOB GATES

You know, I was not that impressed with it. It kinda felt a little gamey or spicy to me or something. But you know, I tasted it more and liked it.

AMANDA CARTER

I didn't try it, just because around the area there was always rumors about what was in it. And even when I came on and did the ordering I was still a little hesitant because that was always in the back of mind. But it's actually really, really good. I feel bad that I waited so long to try it.

JESSICA STAVROS

There is a smell and I wish I was more adept at identifying spices, but there is a smell about burgoo that is not like chili. You can smell when there's a pot of chili on or if chili is cooking. It's not like that. There's something just a little tangy about it. It is a distinct smell, for sure. It makes me feel like...Spring time. Oh, I long for it.

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PATRICK BOSLEY

It has that muddling of flavors that come about to create a unique flavor of what burgoo is. So when you have it, it's not beef stew, it's not vegetable soup...and it has a little bit of bite from the pepper in it but it's not hot. And so, when you reach that golden color, you look at the consistency of it and you see the potatoes in it and you see the meat in it and you go, "That's burgoo".

AMANDA CARTER

You really get the smoky taste from it being cooked on the fire for 12 hours or 13 hours or whatever it takes.

JESSICA STAVROS

I would say it must be cooked over a fire, I would say it must have vegetables, I almost said it must have meat but there are a lot of vegetarian burgoos out there, so it doesn't have to have meat. And it must have spices. So those are your must haves. And I like to think of burgoo as diverse as Kentucky itself. Sometimes it can be a tomato base with chicken and pork. Other times it could just be vegetable based with beans, lots of beans, lima beans, corn... Some could have potatoes but that's a little less popular, potatoes not a big one... Spices, run the gamut, the meat really varies, it's been called roadkill stew but it could be fully intentional, right? So we're talking possums, squirrel, pigeon, any type of bird or game...

PATRICK BOSLEY

Back in the day, it definitely had wild game in it, if you go back to the 1800s... In the modern version it's mutton, beef and chicken.

DAVY WARFORD

My Grand, they used all different types of meat; rabbit, squirrel, groundhog, whatever, put in there. Then I guess over the years, people would rather have the modern meat like beef, pork, chicken, whatever...

SUE TALBOTT

Some people do use wild game such as deer or bear. We have had people that use rattlesnake in the stew...they have to have 3 kinds of meat in the stew.

JAY WILLIAMS

In a lot of burgoo you have that mixture of meats, mixture of flavors like beef, lamb and chicken. Which mixed together I think is supposed to kinda emulate the taste of wild game, in a way. By mixing meats together... And then it has potatoes, corn, onions, butter beans, carrots and so on... all the common things you'd find in most burgoo.

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AMANDA CARTER

It's not really a secret ingredient because we let people know that we put it in there but August Hill Winery is located in Utica, their storefront is in Utica, and we do use their red wine to marinate the meat and cook with.

JAY WILLIAMS

Every local tradition is a little bit different. We talked to some people that say, "Oh no, you can't put butter beans in that! It's only supposed to have cabbage." "Oh no, not cabbage! You can't put that in burgoo!"

PATRICK BOSLEY

It gets to be fun if you come down to Moonlite sometime and you come in the morning, there's some old timers that drink coffee and every now and then I poke the bear and talk about, "Is that really burgoo if you put this in it?" Especially if I know they put that in there. If I know someone puts lima beans in their burgoo, I'm like, "Is it really burgoo if you put lima beans in it?" And then I walk away and get 'em all stirred up and they get a big debate going on whose is best or what you put in it.

RUSS KENNEDY

My sister, when she makes burgoo, good lord, she puts green beans and peas in hers. I don't put green beans and peas in mine. Because my understanding is that traditional burgoo didn't have green beans and peas. But she likes that. And that's how she makes it.

8:54 - Music transition

KENDALL CLINTON

Hi, I'm Kendall Clinton from the Lawrenceburg - Anderson County Tourism Commission and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo.

Well, I am not from Lawrenceburg originally, I was born in Southern Indiana. And burgoo is also a dish found there. I grew up until I was about 5 years old next to my Grandfather's house. And he cooked burgoo before I was born. So I remember, even at age 4 and 5, each Fall seeing my Grandfather drag out his cast iron burgoo kettle. Light a fire in the driveway and he would cook burgoo there in the driveway. He did that for years. When he finally passed away, in his mid-80s, the burgoo pot was inherited by his children and other family members. So my Mom and her sisters and other relatives would still get together in the Fall and they would all contribute one of their items that was used for their burgoo recipe.

PATRICK BOSLEY

For this area in Kentucky, it's just a heritage soup. And it's something that's been in so many families for so many generations that everyone knows what it is.

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Even if they don't agree what goes in it. So you see a soup and you go, "That's burgoo". But the recipes will all be a little different. But everyone knows what it is.

RUSS KENNEDY

So when Mom and Dad would pack us up and haul us off to the local Veterans Post for a big to-do or goings on, whatever it happened to be... Back in the back parking lot there would be a burgoo going on and when I say that I refer to a big, black cast iron kettle filled with the recipe, the recipe as it were... James Conway, the Burgoo King, doing the honors... And I recall, being asked to help with the stirring, with the stirring of the big burgoo pot. It was done with a large wooden paddle...

JESSICA STAVROS

And now think of a large black kettle over a fire with a person tending to it constantly. Some would use canoe paddles, and they would say when the canoe paddle sticks straight up in the middle, you're done. That's when it's done. Which takes a long time, right? So, these are units of measurement we have here so... The tending of the stew and the stirring of it is another important aspect of how you create it. This is not a throw it together on a pot on a stove kinda thing.

AMANDA CARTER

Cause you have to have something that's big enough to get down to the bottom. Like I said, if you let that sit and the fire is cooking that a lot of times that will burn so you need something long enough to get to the bottom of the kettle and be able to move the food around so it doesn't burn. So we do use boat oars. I mean, they're probably, 3 1/2 - 4 feet long. Just enough to where you can get in there and stir it really well.

KENDALL CLINTON

My Grandfather actually used a boat oar to stir his. I mean, the pot is so big. And when he got older, he got tired of stirring it and he was kind of an inventor of sorts and he hooked the boat oar up to an electric motor so it would manually stir the burgoo. He didn't have to stand there and stir it all the time.

PATRICK BOSLEY

I remember, maybe it was the 80s, some of the churches started making some hybrid paddles because it got to be real hot being over the soup. And then they get like an L-shape paddle so you could stir it from farther away. You'll see some pictures at a barbeque festival and you'll see them with an L-shape paddle and it allows you to stir it without being in the middle of the heat. And maybe even later there's one church in the community that created automatic stirrers for their kettles. So technology places a part in how much you stir it.

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But originally, it was something that had to be constantly stirred to keep it from burning so a lot of times it was the younger people that did all the stirring. The older men will drinking the beer and watching the younger boys get hot stirring the burgoo. I definitely had my time of stirring the pot.

RUSS KENNEDY

And Mr. Conway had been around long enough to know that he didn't want to spend the entire day, and it's a day long cook, it's a day long operation... He didn't want to stir the pot all day long. He was smarter than that. But there were kids like me and my brothers and sisters and other kids who would line up for our opportunity to take a turn on the burgoo paddle. And I thought that was just wonderful. At the time, I didn't know what burgoo was, but I did realize that while that process was underway there were people stacked up there in the back parking lot of the Veterans post. There was a party going on!

PATRICK BOSLEY

Barbeque is a word that can be used as both a noun and a verb. The noun is what you're eating but the verb is what you're doing. The men were barbequing at the church picnics and the women were cooking the vegetables. And everyone worked together and that's one of the things that makes barbeque so unique is that it's not just Mom's job, it's not just Dad's job, it's a family job and I think that's the legacy of barbeque and burgoo. It's a communal event. And so, to me, it's always more about the verb than the noun. It's always about doing it and making it as much as enjoying it.

BOB GATES

I did a church once...documented...I had a pretty big video camera on my shoulder kinda thing and I got there at 6 o'clock in the morning. And it was between Lawrenceburg and Harrisburg. They invited me out there to document it and I got there and basically they had everything figured out. They had 8 women in the basement of this church, cutting onions. Just cutting onions like crazy. I was in there trying to videotape it and I was crying. I couldn't wait for that part to be done so I could go outside. I got outside about 8 and they had the pots going. They had about 8 big pots there. And they were big ones. And they started bringing the tomato juice and other stuff and the meats and they started cooking it and they started stirring it... The neat thing about that was, it's not just the cooking it's a place where you can tell stories. So these men, and boys who are watching them and want to take a turn stirring it so they can feel like they're gonna be a man, too... are all telling stories and you have like a hierarchy there of the guy that's allowed to sweep around an area and clean it up and the guys that got to be the stirrers... You can see who's in charge and who's not and it was a great dynamic. And I stayed with them all day. I did a lot of video with them. And 6 or 7 o'clock (pm) is when they were done. And cars from all over the county were driving up there. And you couldn't even park next to the church. You had to park like a mile down.

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And people walking with their little containers. Because you brought your container and they would fill it up for you. And buy it by the gallon or quart or whatever. You could tell people really looked forward to it and it was not just going there to buy it. It was there to see everybody. See all the people. Like a celebration.

JESSICA STAVROS

There's a historian here in Frankfort, his name is Russ Kennedy and he says, "Burgoo is not a dish. It's an event." Not only creating the food itself but it's generally reserved for large gatherings. So church suppers, family reunions, political rallies... any time when large groups of people gather. And it has to be over an open fire because a lot of people will say the smoke has to impart its flavor on the dish as well. So, it's really a social gathering meal.

RUSS KENNEDY

Burgoo is associated with harvest. People would come on a weekend, they would come from their farms and their little homes throughout the county and they would come to town for a harvest celebration. And they would bring whatever it was they had to contribute to the big burgoo pot. Now if you can imagine a ginormous, cast iron pot tied off on trees so it wouldn't tip over. And if you can imagine people standing on step stools around the circumference of the pot with giant stir paddles and they would cook for days. They would cook for days. And they would serve the community to celebrate the harvest. AND now picture this, you've got all these people gathered for this harvest celebration, what better place in the universe for the politicians to show up for the opportunity to do a little stump speaking. That's where the association between burgoo and Fall political events came into being. And to this day, I mean, to this day, here in the new millennium, we do a lot of burgoo events for politicians that are running for election.

DAVY WARFORD

At one time we used to cook burgoo for different ones that were running for governor on the Democrat ticket. And I've met several governors and I'm friends with one governor, ex-governor now...

BRANDON WARREN

My first experience with burgoo happened not long after I moved up here. I actually moved to Lawrenceburg around 2000. So being new to the area, we just went with the insurance agency that my wife's family used, Farm Bureau. I'm not plugging for them by any means. The reason I'm telling you that is because every year Farm Bureau would have a customer appreciation at the Alton Ruritan Club. The night before, as Steve had mentioned to you, Davy Warford and a bunch of other folks who were in the Ruritan Club there in Alton would stay out all night with the big cast iron pots cooking burgoo. So my first experience was at one of these Farm Bureau customer appreciations.

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It was the craziest thing to me because my wife said, "Hey, we're going to the Farm Bureau burgoo tonight. You need to grab a pot." So I would grab a pot that I would make chicken noodle soup in, a quart pot or whatever. And she would grab a pan or pot or whatever. And we'd bring a fork or spoon... our own spoon, a fork and a pot. And you would go up there and get your burgoo. And they'd have drawings and stuff... So the burgoo that I had was actually the Davy Warford (burgoo) and Steve had mentioned Holly Warford I think, which is Davy's granddaddy I think...

DAVY WARFORD

The Farm Bureau, there's usually about 40 or 50 helping. Cause the Farm Bureau gets the FFA to come in and help stir, help pack the water and usually there's a humongous crowd.

RUSS KENNEDY

In my heart, burgoo is an event. It's great food, but it's an event. It's more than food. It's an event. People together. People slapping each other on the back. People telling stories, "You remember so and so?" "Yeah." "You remember the time that this...?" "Yeah." Just a time to let your hair down and have a good time, get yourself a cup of burgoo and all is right in the world.

JESSICA STAVROS

We could talk about it in an ingredients way or in the purpose of the foods way. Who is it going to serve? So a true burgoo, I don't feel like it would be true if it wasn't serving a large group of people. Otherwise I'd just call it stew.

22:12 - Music Transition

JAY WILLIAMS

Hello, I'm Jay Williams and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo. Stan Woodward, the filmmaker that made the documentary film about burgoo and I consulted with a lot of different experts and we found that burgoo, the word burgoo, meant basically a thick porridge and it was used even on English sailing ships going back to the 16-1700s. They would say, "Cook up a burgoo." And that just meant, cook up a thick porridge. Now, as time went on, that name began to mean a hunter's stew.

PATRICK BOSLEY

Where did the word come from? A lot of people think the word came from ragout, like a stew, mutton...

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JESSICA STAVROS

Of course it's hard to pin down, right? Because words come from generations and generations of how things are called...changed regional dialects... There is a word called burgle which was a Turkish wheat pilaf. Bulgur wheat was used by British sailors and so they think the word could have come from that. They also think it could have come from a mismatch between barbeque and ragout, which is a French stew. So how the word came to be is unclear.

RUSS KENNEDY

Burgoo is an old dish that comes from the days of settlement of these United States. Many stories say it came over in the belly of the ships. It was made from what they had on board. People think that burgoo came from bulgur wheat. That's where they got the name. And there are a million different fascinating stories about where the name comes from and who are we to say which one is right.

JAY WILLIAMS

We also traveled to a little town called, Bergoo, West Virginia. It turns out that going back to the early 19th-century there was a group of hunters camped on the Elk River in what is now West Virginia, would have been Virginia at that time, and they made up a stew of various meats including venison and groundhog and whatever else they'd killed on this hunting trip. And they seasoned it with apple jack and pronounced it, "a delicious burgoo". And they named the nearby river, Bergoo Creek, where this camp had happened. And so these early cooks, whose names have been lost to history, at least left behind the name bergoo/burgoo attached to the stew they had cooked.

SUE TALBOTT

The theory that we have, I don't know who established that but...it was at the end of a day of hunting by people hunting various game... whatever they had managed to get that day, they put it all in the pot for the evening meal and added their vegetables and any spices or whatever. And they, for whatever reason, called it burgoo.

BENNIE COWGER

I really think that the town of Bergoo is tied to the dish burgoo. And if you go way back, Indians used to come to this area and hunt for their food. And when they were hunting for their food, they'd put a pot on the floor and if you come in with a squirrel you threw it in the pot, if you had a rabbit you'd throw it in the pot and that's really where burgoo stew came from. And I'm not sure but I really think, Bergoo was probably named from that.

MARC THERRIEN

Oh, I've heard so many different variations. It's one of those, it's like Big Foot, ya know? We don't really know. I've heard that the Native Americans came up with it. I heard back in slavery days that's where it came from. I heard that it's just more of a pioneer type of thing.

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So we really don't know where it came from. All we know is that in 1930...well, it was made in the 1800s but it really didn't become popular in the racing circuit until about the 30s. But I think it's been there for a long time so I've looked. We have a historical library on property. I've actually gone to research it. I've gotten as far as the early 30s and that is as far as I've gotten on it. Everything else is speculation.

KENDALL CLINTON

I guess invented, they think back in the 1800s. And they aren't sure who invented it. One theory is that it was a Frenchman who was looking for something to feed Civil War troops and they were just taking whatever they had on hand. And then there was another theory that there was a group of freed slaves that were basically doing the same thing, trying to cook with what was available. So...

JAY WILLIAMS

Of course, the origins going way back are cloaked in mystery but people do know a lot about figures like James T. Looney, Jim Looney who was known as the Burgoo King and Gus Jaubert who was his mentor. The one who was reputed to have served thousands of gallons of burgoo back in the late 19th century. And so, that certainly wasn't a new tradition if they were serving thousands of gallons of burgoo in the 1880s and 1890s... It certainly wasn't a new thing. It has to have gone back much, much farther.

RUSS KENNEDY

And the Courier Journal based in Louisville, once reported on Jaubert cooking for 6000 Civil War veterans down in Louisville. He cooked burgoo for 6000 people. And the Courier Journal asked him, they said, "How many can you cook for? What's your limitation?" He said, "My limitation is only how much supply you can provide."

JAY WILLIAMS

John Egerton in his book, "Southern Food", had repeated a recipe that I think had originally been published in probably the Louisville Courier Journal by Tandy Ellis. Which was taking Gus Jaubert's recipe as it had been handed on to Jim Looney, the Burgoo King, and he had found that recipe or gotten that recipe by either word of mouth or found out about it somehow and then republished the recipe in quantities that would be right for an individual household. And if you look at John's book, that recipe appears in his book. So you can really say, if you go cook John Egerton's recipe for burgoo you're really cooking probably as close to what we know as Gus Jaubert's 19th century burgoo recipe as you can get.

JESSICA STAVROS

Jaubert really kicks off the culture of burgoo in the mid-19th century to late 19th century. And then by the turn of the 20th century, it's everywhere in Kentucky.

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People are making it constantly. He also passed down his legacy, including his kettle pot that he used to another man named James T. Looney. And James T. Looney is known as the Burgoo King. He continued the legacy of Jaubert's work with burgoo. Now, as the Burgoo King, he was so popular they named a horse after him. And in 1932 that horse, Burgoo King, not only ran but won the Kentucky Derby and then won the Preakness Stakes and won 2 of the 3 of the Triple Crown.

RUSS KENNEDY

Burgoo King actually won 2 legs of the Triple Crown. He did not run in the 3rd leg and that is a subject for a podcast in it of itself. The history of Burgoo King, why he did not run, what happened to the jockey...

31:04 - Music Transition

JESSICA STAVROS

I'm Jessica Stavros from the Kentucky Historical Society and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo.

In Kentucky we have a group of people called, the Kentucky Colonels. Colonel Sanders is a famous one. Lots of people in Kentucky have this honor bestowed upon them. And you can only be made a Kentucky Colonel by the governor. People can nominate you to be a Colonel or bestow Colonelship upon you. Originally it was an advisory group to the Governor of Kentucky. So I was honored with the distinction of being a Kentucky Colonel. And when I first joined the group, I was really excited to be involved in all of their social events. And the Kentucky Colonels have a well known Derby Breakfast on the weekend of the Kentucky Derby. Now, the Kentucky Derby is always the first Saturday in May. And so the Derby Breakfast is the first Sunday in May. And when you arrive at the breakfast you are first given, and this is an order, there's an order to it, the first thing you are to have is a Mint Julep. And of course, it's served in a beautiful sterling silver julep cup, icy crushed ice with fresh mint, bourbon on top. And your second course, is a cup of burgoo. So I see this enormous large black kettle over an enormous fire that has clearly been going for more than a day and that is where everyone gets their cup is out of that large black kettle. So I was given a cup of burgoo and it is a great accompaniment to a Mint Julep I might add, puts a little as we say here, 'tar on the roof', and it was delicious.

RUSS KENNEDY

One of the great events that we do each year, we partner on some events with Buffalo Trace Distillery down here. And every year they have a celebration surrounding Derby Day. People come from all across the United States to visit Buffalo Trace on Derby Weekend. And we cook burgoo. Our big day is Oaks Day. Kentucky Oaks Day is the derby for fillies. It's the day before Derby Day.

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And THAT'S the big day at Buffalo Trace so they allow us to come in and we set up our equipment. And tour buses! Now I didn't know there were that many tour buses in the world. But these black tour buses roll in by the dozens, people from all over the country and a large part of them want to have a little bowl of Kentucky burgoo. We have more fun at that event. We've met people from 22 states and 7 countries. We met some folks one year from France. And they kept coming back and they kept bringing people with them. "Come here! Ya gotta have some of this!"

TIM FREDERICK

Keeneland Racetrack is famous for their burgoo over there.

MARC THERRIEN

Turf Catering is the company that had had the concession here since, 1930s. I believe they're the ones that came up with the original recipe. As tradition, is tradition, it stayed and that's what people really connect to. So the recipe's been around for a long time and I haven't touched the recipe since then.

GREG MARSEE

First time I had it, that I remember was Keeneland. Probably about 6 or 7 years ago my wife and I went to Keeneland one day and I knew it was on the menu there so we had it.

MARC THERRIEN

We have 42 concession stands. We've got 12 dining rooms. And we sell burgoo at every location. And the burgoo sells quite well. It's what people are looking for. It brings back memories from when they came to Keeneland as a child having burgoo on a chilly day in November with their father. That's what they're looking for. A lot of good foods like this are memories. So that's sacred to me. Because that's what a good dish should be. It should harken back to your childhood.

STEVE ROSS

I will go to Keeneland, in either the Spring or Fall meet, I will usually make sure if I'm going to be eating lunch there that's what I'll order is some burgoo.

MARC THERRIEN

When Keeneland first started there weren't 12 kitchens and 12 dining rooms all over this place. There was 1 kitchen and 1 dining room. So I think they kept it simple just to be able to pull it off. So they served hot dogs. And that was the first thing they started off. They called them 'red hots'. And that's how they started. Just red hots and beer. And I think burgoo was one of those easy dishes to make in bulk to be able to serve in a very expeditious fashion. And I think that's really where it started.

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Because it's not that expensive to put out, it's forgiving on the recipe...I'm sure they had some tweaks in the beginning, I'm sure they evolved into this recipe that it is today, but yeah, I think they evolved and expanded the menu as they went. But I think stew is easy to hold and easy to serve. So, I think that's why. But I don't know, I could be wrong...

37:12 - Music Transition

AMANDA CARTER

Hi, I'm Amanda Carter with the LaSalle County Historical Society and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo.

This idea had been brought up by one of the first secretaries of our organization. Her name was Connie Fetzer and she went to Arenzville and they have a festival of burgoo as well. And they're about 50 years more than us. I think it's their 103rd or 104th burgoo? And it's always in September they had it. So she had went down there and thought it was such a cool idea, brought back here to LaSalle County and we started the festival in 1969.

SUE TALBOTT

The first Cook-off we had here in Webster Springs was in 1996. The lady that established the Burgoo Cook-off, her thoughts behind it were we have a small community in our county named, Bergoo, so let's have a Burgoo Cook-off. Of course, the 2 names are spelled different.

KENDALL CLINTON

Well, Kentucky has tons of festivals. Especially in the Fall. And Lawrenceburg did not have a festival back in the mid-90s so a lady named, Marva Gill, she called a group of people together and said, "We would like to start a festival. Anybody interested? We'll have a meeting." So they had a meeting and I don't think they had an idea of what the theme was going to be but after they met they decided that Lawrenceburg and Anderson County's long history with burgoo would be a good theme for the festival.

SUE TALBOTT

Well, it was just to have a Fall festival. Something that would be good for the community. And of course we hoped to make a little bit of money from it. But the main reason was just to have a Fall activity for the community.

AMANDA CARTER

My father was president of the LaSalle County Historical Society in 2012 and 2013. It's a non-profit organization so a lot of it is dependent on volunteers. So when he stepped in, a lot of my family kinda got roped in with it. But we've done it since 2013/2014 and it is actually a lot of fun, it's a lot of hard work. I did come in with him, unfortunately he did pass away at the end of 2013 so we felt like we needed to keep up and keep the festival alive.

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Because at that point in time there was only a select few that were making arrangements for it. So I've kinda been here ever since and have tried to make a bigger and better event each and every year.

SUE TALBOTT

We put out an advertisement for the date and so forth and we put out rules and regulations for preparation of the stew. There's 3 kinds of meat and we say bacon and salt pork cannot be counted as a meat. That's just for flavoring. Then fresh or canned vegetables or spices of their choice. The entrants just come the day of the festival and bring their stew. There's a \$10 entry fee. They bring it to the site already prepared and we provide electricity to reheat it or they have their own method of reheating so it can be hot and ready for the judging.

AMANDA CARTER

So unusually we'll start the Friday before. The stew is actually served on Sunday. And this is always Columbus Day weekend. Friday we have volunteers that come and set up our burgoo stand which is basically the tables that we need to work on. We have to get a Bobcat and carry out the kettles. Which the kettles probably weigh 100-150lbs a piece. They are set into almost like cylinders it goes in. So the kettle sets in the cylinder and then there's a wood fire underneath. That's how we do our cooking. So all of that stuff is set up the Friday before the actual festival. Saturday morning we have about 15 or 20 volunteers that come in and they chop up all the vegetables for our burgoo stew. That's the carrots, the onions, the cabbage, anything that the Burgomeister would use, volunteers come in and cut it all up and they get it all ready. Usually once we do all that, we have a refrigerated truck over by the kettles - we actually set the kettles up along the Illinois Michigan Canal, we have 2 museums on either side so we'll set those up - And then Saturday night about 6pm, they light the fires for the cooking. By 7/7:30 we've got the onions and the garlic roasting in there and they gradually add the meat and the vegetables and the tomato base. That all gets added in throughout the night. I would say by 3/3:30 in the morning, everything that's going into that stew is actually in the stew. And then by 7:30/8 that morning it's ready to serve. And I believe we have 6 kettles. They hold in range of 80 - 120 gallons in each of them.

KENDALL CLINTON

The Burgoo Competition usually is teams. Some of them are families who have been cooking burgoo for years. Some of them are businesses that get together and they'll cook. But yeah, it requires several people. Especially if you're making a large amount 'cause there's a lot of cutting up of ingredients and the big thing is the stirring if you're doing it the traditional way in a cast iron kettle over an open fire.

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AMANDA CARTER

Usually once it's ready to go, we announce it and we start serving it and usually it takes about 3-4 hours for us to serve what we have.

KENDALL CLINTON

People pay a little bit of money and they get to sample all the different burgoo entries and select the winners for that year. And all the money they raise goes to the 'Shop with a Cop' program for Christmas. I think last time they had about 7 different entries. And the styles of burgoo vary greatly. Like I said, there's no one recipe for making it and it could have any number of different ingredients.

BENNIE COWGER

Well, when they have the Burgoo cook-off, you buy a ticket and you get to sample all the burgoo different variety. And they always have a winner from the judges and then they have a crowd favorite.

SUE TALBOTT

We use professional chefs to judge each time. We've been lucky in being able to find enough within close proximity. First place is \$500. Second place is \$200. Third place is \$100. And we also have a People's Choice Award which is \$50. And that People's Choice, all the people in attendance who would like to try the various stews pay \$1 and get to taste it and vote for their favorite. Most everybody who attends is really anxious to get to that People's Choice. I mean, they like it. Like to taste it.

KENDALL CLINTON

Well, it's hard to get a count since people can come in from all different directions but several thousand people over the weekend will come through. And a lot of people come back every day. If there's different events going on...

AMANDA CARTER

The weekend we get between 65 and 75 thousand people in Utica. Which the town is about 850 people.

SUE TALBOTT

There's been as high as 5 or 600 and sometimes it's less than that.

KENDALL CLINTON

It's your typical small town festival. You'll have contests, they have silly little contests like ugly lamp contest and pumpkin decorating, quilt block making, they'll have those kinda contests.

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They've got vendors downtown who sell arts and crafts, all kinds of different things along those lines and then they have food vendors who are selling...some of them sell burgoo, but our Cattlemen's Association sells a ribeye sandwich, they're there every year. Then a whole different variety of different food vendors...

AMANDA CARTER

It's not really a fair atmosphere. It's like a street festival is what I would call it. So we have a lot of food vendors that are scattered throughout town. We have a lot of people that do arts and crafts. I always say you can find pretty much whatever you're looking for when you're walking around 'cause it's just a plethora of different types of vendors that are all set up.

SUE TALBOTT

We have some activities for kids. We have pumpkin painting contests because it's Fall. We have a scarecrow contest. Which after the event the scarecrows are used to decorate our downtown area. And we have live bluegrass music.

KENDALL CLINTON

We also have a permanent stage downtown on our green. And sometimes they'll have live music...

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Drag out the kettle and sharpen the knives, Something good a-comin' that ain't no jive, Get the fire burning gonna cook it slow, Stir it all night, Man, don't ya know, Burgoo, Piping hot, Burgoo, Hits the spot, Burgoo, A little or a lot, Throw it all together that's what you got...

TIM FREDERICK

Collectively, we just kinda thought that it might be cool to have a song about burgoo. And to be honest I don't remember exactly how that all transpired. But I remember when the fella that did the documentary came to town. I think he asked if there was a song, maybe, that we could do. And just by fate, the song was already in the works and pretty much done. So that was great that we had that in the can and ready to go for when the festival came about and when the documentary was shot...that's The way I remember it. It was a long time ago though...

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Van Buren, Birdie and Puncheon Creek...

STEVE ROSS

Puncheon Creek is a creek in Western Anderson County, it's also a road by that name and more like a community in that part of the county.

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So, I know when I was in high school I did some farmwork in that part of the county, tobacco and hay. I always thought it was an interesting name. I like the sound of it. It's spelled a little differently. You kinda have to spell it out for people if you're gonna tell them what the name of your band is... But for whatever reason, we threw out ideas and decided on Puncheon Creek.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Tyrone stirring 6 days a week...

KENDALL CLINTON

Seems like the burgoo history in Anderson County, they don't know exactly when people started cooking it here but somebody found and has a photo from early 1900s showing a group cooking burgoo down in a small town on the Kentucky River called, Tyrone. Which is, a couple miles outside of Lawrenceburg. And the photo caption says, "Burgoo supper on the river, Tyrone early 1900s." So we know it's been around for over a hundred years.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Just past Ballard on Baxter Ridge, Looked a little spicy - with salt a smidge - Out in Alton at the Ruritan...

TIM FREDERICK

So it's pronounced, like Brandon said, it's pronounced Ruritin but we had to make it Ruritan in order to rhyme with 'hotdog stand'.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing)...Burgoo boogie at the hotdog stand, Burgoo, Pipin' hot, Burgoo, Hits the spot, Burgoo, A little or a lot, Throw it all together that's what you got...

AMANDA CARTER

I always think that the best part of that whole weekend is actually at night when you see them actually making it. Because it's so much different than you or I going to our stove and making a stew on the stove. I mean, you actually see what they have to go through to get that much soup made. And it is a kettle, it's a metal kettle. You know, where it's cooking with wood. So it's, I mean, the smell and the atmosphere..is just, it's like magical.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Burgoo, Pipin' Hot, Burgoo, Hits the spot, Burgoo, A little or a lot, throw it all together that's what you got...

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SUE TALBOTT

You know it's just it's turned into a nice little festival and it's really appreciated by the community. And really supported by the community. And It's a fun fall activity.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Throw it all together, that's what you got...

AMANDA CARTER

But really at the end of the day, it is so rewarding because it is, I mean, not only is the burgoo interesting, it's unique...with the festival comes like a fellowship I believe...It's harvest season, everybody comes together, it's about community and you can really feel that with the whole festival itself.

PUNCHEON CREEK

(Singing) Throw it all together, that's what you got...stir that pot!

52:17 - Music transition

RUSS KENNEDY

Hey, my name is Russ Kennedy and you're listening to the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo. You know, Burgoomeister, I always thought Burgoomeister was someone that was good at making burgoo. You know? You don't go to school and earn a certificate for it but if you make a concoction called burgoo and it's good, that makes you a Burgoomeister. I call myself a Burgoomeister because I make a burgoo product that people think is good. So, I gave myself the title. Oh, you must be a Burgoomeister! Uh, Burgoo King, it's what people want to call ya. You know, somebody puts their arm around me and says, "Hey! There's the Burgoo King!" Okay. Alright. Well, I'll be that. That'd be okay. Over next door to Franklin County Kentucky is Anderson County Kentucky. There's a family over there, the Warford family, and the Warford family's been making burgoo in Anderson County for decades and probably centuries. They're the Burgoo Kings of Anderson County.

DAVY WARFORD

It was always there. I helped off and on for years with my Dad and Grandfather. I was probably 10/12 helped getting the vegetables, packing the vegetables in the pot, getting the fire wood, running here and there and doing stuff. 'Cause I was young. My Grandfather, Holly Witherspoon Warford, Sr, back in I guess around WWI era, 1917 along that era, there used to be an old distillery down Gimbles Creek Road called Old Joe. And my Grandfather lived not too far from it and he would help get the water, get the vegetables, get the wood, help put the stuff in... Then over the years, he kind done it for Claylick Methodist Church, helped cooking with that and Democrat rallies and 4-H Clubs and Farm Bureau and Church you know it kind blossomed out.

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PATRICK BOSLEY

My grandfather bought a little diner in February of 1963 and it seated about 20 people counting the bar stools. He already had 2 jobs at the time, mostly he was a taxi cab driver. And this was the American dream was to own your own business. And he's been working 2 jobs and the opportunity to buy this little diner had come up for sale. And it was just the American dream to own your own business. And so, him and his wife, they had 5 kids, sold the house to come up with the down payment, moved in with the Mother-in-Law and went into the restaurant business with very little experience and very little education and just hard work. And I think the same people skills he had from driving the taxi cab and the same life lessons he learned cooking...it was family recipes, it was Grandma making pies at home and bringing 'em to the restaurant, it was Granddad cookin' on the pits. From grade school on, I worked here at the restaurant. My days in grade school, like little, was I'd pick up trash in the parking lot and then I'd come in and I'd sweep the floors and then I'd fill up cups of potato salad, prep work. And that would be 2 or 3 hours every day after school when I got a little bit of money. I never got an allowance. But I always got paid for my work. So, a lot of people, even when my family didn't have any money, saw me as having money or being rich because I always had some money in my pocket but I was working at this time. And I've always grown up working and it's just been part of our culture that you have to work together to obtain something. And you're talking about of the 5 siblings, 4 of them ran the restaurant. One of them went on to do something else.

JAY WILLIAMS

There's always someone that's kinda in charge that's the Gus Jaubert who kinda is the keeper of the tradition. Who knows what the standard is supposed to taste like and if he does taste and it passes muster or he'll say you need a little more of this or a little more of that. And that's the tradition keeper, there's somebody who's the one who knows that taste because they were there a lot. Understudying some mentor way back whether it was a grandfather or an older person in the community - man or woman - then that person makes sure that there's a person to pass that tradition on to. When you're around those kinds of people, they make you understand, 'this is why ours is different and special' and you taste it and you say, "That really is different and special". That's different from what I tasted in the town 20 miles away. For them it's better, for me, it's just a great privilege to be able to be a part of their tradition.

RUSS KENNEDY

James Conway was a regular guy. James Conway was a John Doe here in Frankfort, KY. He was employed by the Commonwealth. He was a state worker. Just a local guy. Served in the war. Was a great friend of my Mom and Dad. And that's where I know him from. He's just a member of the local Veteran's Post. BUT whenever there was a burgoo, whenever there was a Veteran's event, he was there. He was the guy.

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If there was a burgoo, James Conway was on site, large and in charge. That's where he got the name Burgoo King because thinking back, how could you have a burgoo without James Conway. James Conway was burgoo around here, that's kinda what he did. I don't even know what his job was for state government. I don't know what he did. I do know he made burgoo. And he made the best and I've spent a lifetime trying to make mine as good as his.

DAVY WARFORD

I used my Grandfather's kettles and he's got a old paddle that I use. They used to renders lard with it. And I use it. And he's got some, he made some homemade paddles. One was out of copper pipe ya know and stuff so...

RUSS KENNEDY

People ask me all the time about the recipe. I don't remember Conway ever having a recipe. I never saw a recipe. My job was stirring the pot. He supervised, then we stirred, he tasted, and he'd put a little more of this and little more of that...and I don't know that he ever really honest to goodness had a recipe.

PATRICK BOSLEY

The time in the kitchen to me was invaluable. You know, I cook with my mother, I cook with my father, I've cooked with my aunts and uncles and great aunts and that's some of the most valuable experiences in my life was cooking. And it wasn't about the science of the food or it wasn't about even the art of the food. It was about the heritage of the food and the time in the kitchen. And sometimes you don't know, you're going to lose something and you can't get it back. If you don't spend that time with your grandparents cooking, you can't get it back later. If you don't figure out how your mother makes your favorite dish, it's really hard for you to make that favorite dish later. And you can't just get a recipe card. We have recipes and then there's the art. I've gotten recipes from my grandmother that I can't match from just the recipe card. Because there's subtle things that go into how you cook. That are hard to write down. So if you want to make a great recipe with a mother, father, grandmother is you need to make notes while you're cooking that go into what and why they're doing things.

BOB GATES

Russ has an excel spreadsheet with all these formulas in it. So when someone calls him up and says I've got 40 people gonna come to this burgoo function you're gonna do; he just puts in the numbers and it tells him exactly how much of everything he needs to buy and which one of his pots he needs to use to make it in. Isn't that cool? Could you imagine Jim Conway coming back, the guy that taught him, who didn't have a recipe and just grabbed everything from the freezer coming back and seeing this spreadsheet. I guess he'd be proud.

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RUSS KENNEDY

I'm a mathematics nerd and I have my recipe on spreadsheet with mathematic functions so that when we become aware of how many gallons we need to cook, say we're doing 60 gallons, then I just put 60 in up there as my variable and then it calculates how many of this and that. It's just a real, real simple excel spreadsheet but it gets us to that consistency in that it's gonna have the same amount of cayenne pepper per gallon. Whether we're making 10 gallons or 110.

MARC THERRIEN

They'll tell ya, they'll call ya on it if it's not consistent. So it's gotta be consistent. It has to be.

PATRICK BOSLEY

Our recipes really haven't changed. Ya know, burgoo's been a part of the restaurant even before it was a restaurant. And so is barbeque. So it's not like our menus evolved. It's actually we have to innovate to stay the same. You know, it's an interesting concept where you don't want to evolve and you don't want to change and you gotta be who you are. So there's this constant struggle with sourcing materials and ingredients to innovate to stay the same. And it's a funny concept 'cause most people are wanting to change their menus all the time. You go to this restaurant and they're always wanting to put new items on the menu. Where we struggle to have the same items on the menu. And it's a big challenge right now. So even if there's no mutton left, there's really no mutton raised around here...we now semi truck the mutton in. It comes out of the Midwest United States where lamb is raised. So I get 2 shipments of mutton in a week cause we use it fresh. And you can't really buy it locally anymore. So even if you can't find the local ingredient the recipes were based on what was locally available. So now you have to source those ingredients in...

RUSS KENNEDY

But luckily, I've got David and Jack and they're young and full of energy and they're just as good at it or better at it than I ever was. And they share the passion for it. They share the passion for wanting to get it right. They share the passion for the history of the product. They share that desire to make people happy. When they're standing there with a bowl of our product on a frosty fall afternoon and they're having fun with their family and friends. And these young fellas that help me get that. And as we've said before, it ain't about the recipe. They understand that the end product is way more important than the recipe. What you get in that spoon when you're sampling...what's in that spoon is way more important than what's on that paper.

BOB GATES

What made me think we should study it is because there's so many people talking about it. In Lawrenceburg and here and they all had stories about it and recipes and things.

"The Local Farey Tale of Burgoo" Transcript

So when you see a food that's regional to a group or a family that's when I think we ought to study that because it means something to that group. It's important to them. It's uh, I always think about if somebody took it away from you would you feel bad about it. Would it hurt, ya know?

DAVY WARFORD

Well, hopefully my daughter and son-in-law and my nephew will take over when I'm history.

PATRICK BOSLEY

I'm worried when I see at our local churches that stewardship is down. And I see less young men and women learning how to cook the chickens and burgoo and the things that go in these church picnics. You wonder who's the next generation of cooks gonna be. It's just like my family. Ya know there used to be about a dozen of us family members working at the restaurant now there's only like 4 or 5. So each generation you peel off some of them. But there's some of the 4th generation here ya know. There's about 5 of the 4th generation currently working down here right now. And 4 of the 3rd generation. But I see every year there's less family in the business. So you wonder who's gonna be the last family member standing and how you're gonna carry on the heritage is always concern. For something like burgoo and mutton is who's gonna carry on the legacy. At the church is who's gonna cook it next year? What happens when the old-timer who's cooking the burgoo can't cook it anymore? Did someone learn from him how to make it? Cause it's gonna be a real challenge to take a recipe card and cook burgoo. You know, we're cooking 70 gallons a day. And the churches are doing the same thing. And so, when you start cooking in these large volumes it gets to be more challenging to produce food and do it consistently. So I worry about who's gonna carry on the legacy...

RUSS KENNEDY

All that equipment that we have? That's theirs. What am I'm gonna do with it when I'm dead? And I figure for the next 20-30 years, burgoo will be in good hands. And then they'll pass it along to their kids and ya know, maybe now I'm the guy that drinks the beer while the young guys are stirring. And that's okay. Maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. Maybe that's the tradition that hands, like oral history, that hands down from one generation to the next..ya know, maybe that's the plan. Maybe that's the intent. I'm good with that. I'm good with that. I feel like I've done my part.

PATRICK BOSLEY

As you're talking about the (local) farey tale of burgoo, it's more than the ingredients in the pot. There's a lot that goes into a pot of burgoo that's not on a recipe card. And that's the emotions and memories and heritage that goes into barbeque and burgoo.

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1:08:02 - Music Transition

NORA VETTER

And that is the Local Farey Tale of Burgoo.

More information about the Burgoo Tale-Tellers can be found at [localfarey \(farey\) tales \(tales\).com](http://localfarey(farey)tales(tales).com) and be sure to follow LocalFareyTalesPodcast on Facebook and Instagram to share your own tales about Burgoo or other local fare. And if you don't know much about your local fare? Ask! There are tale tellers everywhere. Heaping Spoonfuls of Gratitude to Patrick Bosely, Amanda Carter, Kendall Clinton, Pastor Bennie Cowger, Tim Frederick, Bob Gates, Russ Kennedy, Greg Marsee, Steve Ross, Jessica Stavros, Sue Talbott, Chef Marc Therrien, Davy Warford, Brandon Warren and Jay Williams for providing me with a kettle full of burgoo knowledge. And additional resource thanks to Dave Kirk, Chris Graham, Pat Henderson, Mary Perkins, Sarah Schmitt, Saddler Taylor and Stan Woodward. A lot of work went into launching this podcast and I'm extremely grateful for everyone that has supported me along the way. With a special shoutout to my parents, who listened to multiple edits and learned a lot about Burgoo in the process! Concept, Production and Editing by me, Nora Vetter, "That's What You Got" Song by Puncheon Creek, Music by Anisha Thomas, and Artwork by Jonathan Reich. More Local Farey Tales are coming soon so be sure to subscribe on your favorite place to listen to podcasts.

1:09:57 - End of episode