

SUNDAY
JANUARY 10, 2016



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A melange of ancestry, recipes

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During the 18th century, a mysterious legend began easing its way out of the hills and hollows of the southern Appalachians. Tales, whispered as quietly as the morning mist, of a people who had settled in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. With their intense eyes and swarthy complexions, some thought that they were gypsies on the run. Others were convinced that they were powerful demons. They brought strange instruments with them, too, called zithers, with which they sang strange, new songs.

Some of them had six fingers on each hand. It was said that the women spoke with a musical lilt in their voices. Their children were beautiful. The men minted their own pure gold coins from secret deposits known only to them. And no one knew where these strangers came from.

They were the Melungeons, a word derived from the French, *melange*, meaning, “mixture.” It was originally intended as an insult toward those of ambiguous ancestry. Among the many other terms used to describe this group were Redbone, Black Dutch and Lumbee Indian.

Some believed that the first Melungeons were descendents of the Roanoke colonists and had been here in America even before the Mayflower pilgrims. Others thought that they could have been the free-born children of African slaves and Europeans. Still others believed that they may have come from Portugal, Spain, the Middle East, or that they were among the lost tribe of Israel. The real answer may be all of the above, and more.

Initially, all manner of ill circumstance was blamed on these newcomers. In the 1890's writer Will Allen Dromgoole described them as lawless moonshiners with strange customs. Parents even threatened their children to “behave or a Melungeon will get you.” Eventually, though, most Melungeons earned their place right alongside their neighbors and began to thrive in the quiet mountain hollows. In time they spread to Kentucky, Virginia and the Carolinas.

A MELTING POT WITHIN THE MELTING POT

Before the advent of DNA, researchers relied mostly on appearance as a way to identify the origins of various populations. But the Melungeons were a puzzle, further complicated by the isolating nature of the Appalachians. In one hollow, dark eyes and skin might be common, but in the next, olive skin and gray eyes were seen more often than not.

Despite their unusual appearance, many so-called Melungeons shared similar traditions. Scholars discovered that some of the burial customs of many Melungeon families closely resembled Jewish customs, such as burying the deceased before sundown. However, other burial traditions were clearly English or European, such as covering all of the mirrors, and stopping all of the clocks at the time of death.

Unexpectedly, I learned of another clue to Melungeon ancestry when hubby Chuck was stationed in Cleveland, Ohio. Shortly after our arrival we discovered that there is a large population of Hungarians in the area. In fact, there are more Hungarians in Cleveland, Ohio, than there are in Budapest, Hungary.

We learned from our neighbors that many Hungarians do not celebrate Christmas on December 25, but rather, on January 6. This was the traditional date of Christmas prior to the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. Until that time, Europe recognized the Julian calendar



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Mediterranean Beef Stew is a mixture of beef with Italian spices and vegetables.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Topped with spinach-artichoke dip, this flatbread is made of chickpeas, which are common among many cultures around the world.

which was devised by Julius Caesar in 46 A.D. Most European Protestants who opposed Catholic rule rejected the new calendar and continued to abide by the old one. Like those protestant rebels, Melungeon families settling in the Appalachians continued to celebrate Christmas on January 6.

Though it was assumed — in part because of these traditions — that Melungeons descended, at least in part, from European protestants and the Jewish diaspora, it didn't entirely solve the mystery. These interesting people also held to cultural expressions and foods that were common among Africans and Native Americans, too.

A BEAUTIFUL BLEND

Even before the arrival of DNA technology, physicians noted that certain illnesses commonly found in the Mediterranean, Africa and the Middle East were also common among the Melungeon populations of Appalachia. Most notable are Familial Mediterranean Fever and favism, found especially in Armenian, Turkish and Jewish populations. Ironically, it has been discovered that many individuals with favism are resistant or even totally immune to malaria.

Recent DNA projects are helping to solve part of the Melungeon mystery. One study concluded that a group of Melungeons that still inhabit eastern Tennessee were of African, European and Native American ancestry. But this is not a complete answer. Through other research efforts, it has been

determined that the Melungeon peoples are not an homogenous group. Instead of a race of people, the first Melungeons were a collection of people united by time and circumstance.

And they thrived in the mountains, adding their own ingenuity to the settlers already there. In fact, the Melungeon population soon came to epitomize the Appalachian lifestyle of self-sufficiency and independence. Much of our Bluegrass, folk and country music stems these often multi-talented people.

Today, those who proudly identify themselves as Melungeon can be found throughout the country. You may even be one yourself. If so, you are in good company. Among famous Melungeons were Abraham Lincoln, Elvis Presley and Bill Monroe. You can also count in Tom Hanks, Jennifer Lawrence and George Clooney. All in all, Melungeons are one beautiful blend.

THE RECIPES

Melungeon dishes are quite the norm here in western Kentucky, with offerings such as Chocolate Gravy, Pickled Eggs and Fruit Cobblers among them. However, since blending is at the heart of Melungeon life, I chose to include these interesting combinations of food and spice in the true spirit of the word.

Mediterranean Beef Stew

Chunks of beef and a rich gravy blend with Italian herbs and plum tomatoes for a delicious cold weather combo. To really mix things up, try replacing the



Public domain photo

Iconic image of the King, Elvis Presley, perhaps the most famous Melungeon ever.

beef with venison. This recipe originally called for cremini mushrooms, which I replaced with portobellos. Note that carrots are listed twice.

¼ cup olive oil
1 large onion, chopped
½ cup chopped carrot
1 tablespoon minced garlic
2 pounds lean stew beef
¾ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper, or to taste
¼ cup flour
1 28-ounce can plum tomatoes
½ cup red wine
2 cups water
2 teaspoons beef base
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon dried basil
8 ounces cremini or portobello mushrooms, quartered
¾ cup sliced carrots
2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

Heat the olive oil in a large kettle; add onions, carrots and garlic and saute until soft, 5-6 minutes. Meantime, place the meat in a large bowl and season with the salt and pepper. Sprinkle the flour over the beef and toss well to coat. Add the beef to the onion-carrot mixture and brown thoroughly. Stir in the wine and cook until liquid is reduced by about half. Add the tomatoes, water, beef base, oregano, basil and mushrooms; cover and simmer on low for 1½ – 2 hours. Uncover, add the sliced carrots and cook on medium for about 35 minutes or until meat and carrots are tender. Stir in the parsley just before serving. Serves 6-8.

Chickpea Flatbread

Chickpeas are enjoyed by a number of cultures around the world, and this mild, nutty chickpea flatbread lends itself well to saucy dishes where it can really soak up the flavors. For variety, try adding different combinations such as cumin and dried chili, or lemon pepper and garlic. If you cannot find chickpea flour, it is easily made by putting dried chickpeas in a high-speed blender until finely ground. Beware the grinding process is noisy! Once mixed it will have to sit for 3

hours, so plan accordingly. This is an ancient recipe.

2 ½ cups chickpea flour
3 ½ cups water
1 ½ teaspoons salt
Black pepper to taste
¼ cup olive oil

Stir together the chickpea flour with the water, salt and pepper. It will not form a normal batter, but instead resemble a sand and water mix. Let the mixture stand for 3 hours. Preheat oven to 350 degrees; coat a large, rimmed cookie sheet with the olive oil. (My pan was 18x26.) Give the chickpea mixture a stir and pour it into the pan. Carefully tilt the pan to evenly disperse the chickpeas and any remaining water. Bake for about 35 minutes or until the bread is lightly browned and pulls away from the pan. Cool slightly, then cut into triangles, or single serving squares depending on how you wish to serve it.

Spinach-Artichoke Spread

This classy recipe pairs perfectly with chickpea flatbread as an appetizer or light lunch.

2 8-ounce packages cream cheese, softened
¼ cup sour cream
¼ cup mayonnaise
1 10-ounce package frozen chopped spinach, thawed
1 14-ounce can artichoke hearts, drained and chopped
⅓ cup grated Parmesan
⅓ teaspoon cayenne pepper
½ teaspoon garlic salt
1 cup shredded mozzarella

Preheat oven to 350 degrees; grease a shallow casserole dish. In a large bowl stir together the cream cheese, sour cream and mayonnaise. Add the spinach, artichokes, Parmesan, cayenne pepper and garlic salt and blend well. Pour mixture into prepared casserole dish. Evenly sprinkle with the mozzarella cheese and bake for about 30 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Turn broiler to high and broil dip for about 3 minutes or until browned. Serve with chickpea flatbread, tortilla chips or sourdough toast triangles. Serves 6-8 as an appetizer.