



"Roadkill Soup": The History of Brighton's Burgoo

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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BRIGHTON - As Brighton gears up for the 117th Betsey Ann Picnic, the town's tradition of Burgoo soup continues.

Infamously known as “roadkill soup,” the Burgoo tends to elicit strong emotions, both from people who love it and those who are wary of what it contains.

“We like to keep people guessing,” Jody Dwiggins, a Brighton resident who will be logging his third year as a soup chef, said. “It’s pretty funny because everybody asks what’s in it. It’s not really a secret, but it is.”

No one knows for sure how the soup became a Picnic staple, but Brighton resident TJ Hughes — known locally as the Burgoomeister — enjoys both the love and lore that Burgoo elicits.

“A lot of people try it and don’t like it, and a lot of people try it and love it,” Hughes said. “It doesn’t look very good, actually, but I would say it’s the taste that counts.”

Despite the nickname and jokes around town about the soup’s recipe, Hughes explained that the meat is actually a combination of beef, turkey and ham ground together.

The process starts at 9 a.m. on the Thursday morning before the Picnic. The Burgoo team boils whole ham bones until the meat falls off the bones. The meat and vegetables (Great Northern beans, corn, tomatoes, potatoes and onions) cook all night on Thursday, which is monitored by the soup-making team. The Burgoo is ready by Friday afternoon, when the Macoupin County Health Department stops by to check it out.

Betsey Ann Association President Reggie Conlee notes that preparing the soup is “a big undertaking.” Dwiggins said that he typically puts in 70 hours of work over the Betsey Ann Picnic weekend. He plans to set alarms throughout the night so he can check in with the chef on duty and watch the Burgoo’s progress.

“It’s a process, not only getting the material but getting it prepared and getting it cooking,” Conlee said. “It cooks all night long and it has to be monitored all night, so it takes a lot of people and help to get that done.”

Hughes said that they usually make between 650–700 gallons of soup; it almost always sells out. The Picnic food booths will open at 4:30 p.m. on Friday and noon on Saturday. Customers are always quick to beeline to the Burgoo.

Many people want Burgoo all year long, so they’ll buy extra soup to freeze. The Betsey Ann Association occasionally cooks or thaws a batch during the winter, which attracts more customers.

But Burgoo isn’t only famous in Brighton. Every summer, Hughes receives a phone call from a man in Troy, Missouri who travels to Brighton solely to buy a few gallons of

Burgoo. The Betsey Ann Association boasts Brighton as “The Burgoo Capital of the World.”

Hughes joined the Burgoo team in the early 1980s. He’s passed the baton down to people like Dwiggins. Dwiggins said he’s still trying to prove himself to Hughes and other Brighton residents who have spent years cooking Burgoo, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love cooking. I love the tradition,” Dwiggins said. “We’re just trying to keep the tradition and ingredients the same as places go away and new ones come up.”

Dwiggins, Conlee and the Burgoomeister himself agree: Burgoo is more than a soup. It’s a tradition that honors the history of the town. And during the 117th Betsey Ann Picnic next week, it’ll be the food that brings together people across the region.