

SAY (BEER) CHEESE

A quirky Kentucky specialty, beer cheese has its own festival and trail as well as legions of fans, many with homegrown recipes

By Louis Guida

It's not a communal stew like burgoo with a cryptic and romanticized past of ship galleys, Confederate work camps, and random wild game. It hasn't been — at least not yet — internationally commodified from small-town roots like fried chicken. And it doesn't have the tearoom propriety of Benedictine spread or the clubby comfort of a (real) Hot Brown.



MARK MAHAN, OPPOSITE; MELISSA YOUNG IMAGES



Crackers, pretzels, and celery and carrots go well with beer cheese. Keeneland executive chef Marc Therrien presents a simple and stylish beer cheese plate.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAIN STREET WINCHESTER BEER CHEESE FESTIVAL

Above and below, the annual Beer Cheese Festival in Winchester draws thousands who come to sample the endless varieties of beer cheese, enjoy music and family activities, and browse arts and crafts and Kentucky Proud booths.

Beer cheese is different. Newer perhaps on the arc of culinary history, it's elbowing for a spot alongside those more hallowed dishes in Kentucky's indigenous foods pantheon. It's populating market shelves and moving across state lines. It's become a fast-food burger and fries add-on. And it has its own festival and tourism trail.

"Many of Kentucky's iconic foods came about because of the econom-

ic constraints of the frontier," said John van Willigen, an emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Kentucky and author of *Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage*. "What can be produced?" was the first important question.

"Beer cheese, though it's made in other places, has become a Kentucky dish because of different reasons. Like some other iconic foods, its rise is about local communities claiming and identifying

with a food and then promoting it."

For beer cheese — leave aside a link to Welsh rabbit (more commonly known now as rarebit), a melted cheese sauce made with beer as far back as the 1700s — two Kentucky locales, Louisville and Clark County, claimed provenance. Louisville was boosted by a reference to beer cheese as common bar food in the days of free lunches and five-cent beer in Marion Flexner's pioneering 1949 book *Out of*





Winchester is considered the birthplace of beer cheese, and street signs reinforce the claim.

Kentucky Kitchens, but Clark County was more specifically connected to people and time, and its claim proved ascendant. The Kentucky legislature settled the matter — bureaucratically at least — in 2013 when it designated the county as the birthplace of beer cheese.

But before its (Clark County) genesis tale, there's the question: What is beer cheese? Its name just about defines it. It's a spread of beer and cheese (usually a yellowed cheddar) with spices — garlic, mustard, and cayenne are traditional — added. That simplicity may not be apparent from some of its cur-

IF YOU GO

The 2017 Beer Cheese Festival takes place Saturday, June 10 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in downtown Winchester.

The festival will feature:

- beer cheese tasting
- shopping
- 10 live music acts
- arts and crafts vendors
- Kentucky Proud vendors
- food court
- UK Alumni Beer Garden
- amateur beer-making contest



MAIN STREET WINCHESTER/BEER CHEESE FESTIVAL

Festival-goers can vote for their favorite beer cheese and also learn to make it.

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ON THE BEER CHEESE TRAIL IN CLARK COUNTY



rent container labels, which can read like food science mixtures, but that's essentially what beer cheese was when it was served about 70 years ago at a Clark County restaurant on the Kentucky River.

The restaurant was the Driftwood Inn, a roadhouse on the banks of the river near the junction of Lower Howard's Creek about a mile north of Boonesborough, where Daniel Boone first settled in the region, and 20 miles southeast of Lexington. The inn was opened in 1939 by Johnnie Allman, a retired Kentucky State Police captain from nearby Richmond. Allman's cousin, Joe Allman, worked with him and created the recipe for what the family called snappy cheese. (Joe, according to his son Tim, was a cook from the Southwest and later a head chef for Turf Catering, a food and beverage concessionaire for numerous racetracks, including Keeneland until 2015.)



Everybody's got their own twist on it, but we're sticking to our original family recipe."

—IAN ALLMAN, A GRANDSON OF JOHNNIE ALLMAN

"My father and his cousin John wanted to come up with something that would increase the drink thirsts of the customers," Tim Allman wrote. "The result was a sharp cheddar cheese with a cayenne finish. People would be given that in a small soufflé cup with saltine crackers, radish-

es, and celery when they were greeted at their table or bar, before they put in their drink order. By the time the bartender came back with their drinks they ordered more drinks. It worked, and that was the birth of snappy cheese."

After the Driftwood Inn, the beer cheese story took a few turns. In 1945 Johnnie Allman moved his restaurant, renamed Allman's, to a site on Lower Howard's Creek (where Hall's on the River now stands). He sold the business in 1950, with a non-compete agreement, and had restaurants near Winchester and then in Lexington for a few years, making beer cheese at each. He returned to the creek in 1955 and built a new Allman's on a site near his former locations. In 1978 a fire destroyed that restaurant and marked the end of the original Allman's beer cheese era.

What followed were years in a wilderness, with beer cheeses appear-



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& Grill**

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**Gaunces
Deli and
Café**

853 Bypass Rd.

**DJ's Bar
& Grill**

836 Bypass Rd.

ing in restaurants and stores around the region. Many of them were made by people who had worked at some point at one of Allman's restaurants. "Authentic" versions proliferated and a following developed. But the cheese spread remained a mostly Central Kentucky product.

A breakthrough to wider fame and fortune occurred in June 2009, when the first Beer Cheese Festival was held in Winchester, about 25 miles southeast of Lexington and the seat of Clark County. (Winchester is the postal address for the region's original beer cheese restaurants, though the town is about nine miles northeast of them.)

The festival, now in its ninth year, benefits Main Street Winchester, a downtown improvement organization within the National Main Street Cen-

ter, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

"The idea was to capitalize on something unique to Winchester and the region as a fundraiser," said Rachel Alexander, Main Street Winchester's executive director. "Organizers were completely shocked at and unprepared for the number of people who came that first year."

The festival has continued to grow beyond expectations, Alexander said. Last year, an estimated 20,000 people overall attended it, with 4,000 of them paying \$5 to sample and judge beer cheeses. About \$40,000 was raised to support downtown projects.

Ten commercial beer cheese vendors participated, each offering several spreads. Peoples' choice went to a Hall's on the River entry, and a panel of food judges selected a Full Circle



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say (beer) cheese

Market gluten-free version.

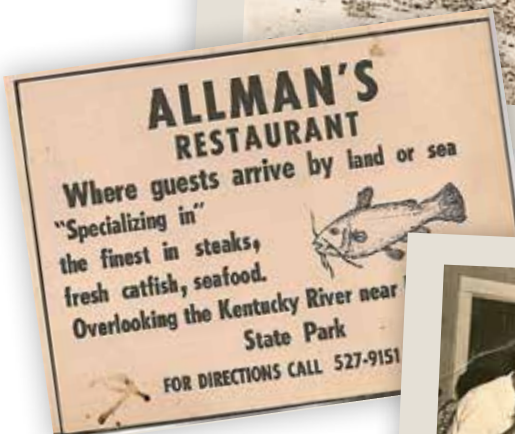
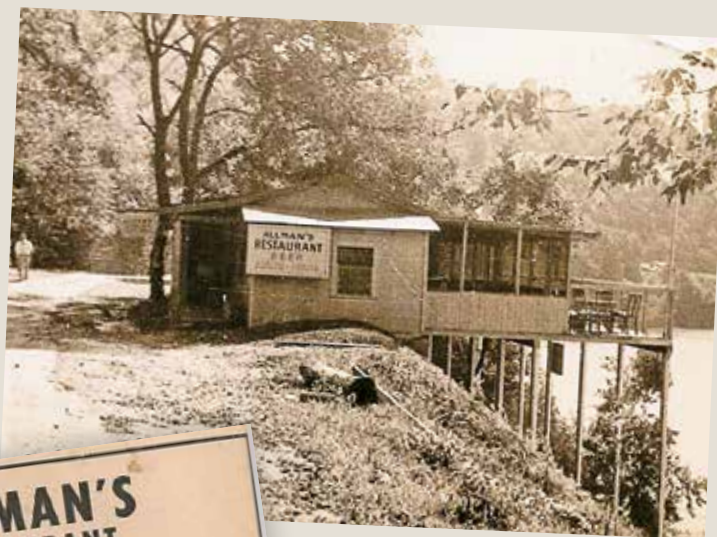
Besides the festival, there's now a beer cheese trail, launched by the Winchester-Clark County Tourism Commission in 2014, the year after the county received its "birthplace" designation from the state.

"We wanted to boost economic development and capitalize on the culinary movement and the trail movement," said Nancy Turner, executive director of the commission. "It's gone really well and played out exactly as we planned."

Turner said more than 300 people from 27 different states have "conquered" the trail, which consists of eight Clark County restaurants, by buying a beer cheese item from the menu of at least five of the restaurants. Their reward is a free commission T-shirt.

The success of the festival and trail, which will collaborate starting next year, are evidence of what their organizers see as a beer cheese boom. There are apparently no official economic statistics on the industry in Kentucky, so the current number of commercial producers, production volume, sales figures, markets outside the state, overall economic impact, and the like are educated or observational estimates. And those estimates are bullish.

"It seems to be popping up everywhere," said Ian Allman, a grandson of Johnnie Allman who began making his own commercial product, Allman's Beer Cheese, in 2009, just before the first festival. "Everybody's got their own twist on it, but we're sticking to our orig-



From top, Allman's first restaurant, 1946; an ad for the restaurant in the 1974 Richmond, Kentucky, phone book; the Driftwood Inn circa 1940, with Joe Allman (right) and Johnnie Allman (second from right) pictured; outside Johnnie Allman's last restaurant, from left, Alvine and Marie Manuel, Jenó the cook, and Ruth and Johnnie Allman, 1959

inal family recipe.” Allman said he makes 4,000 to 5,000 pounds a year for retail stores in Kentucky.

Nancy Turner said there are 12 or 13 producers in Winchester alone, and that one of them, River Rat, has begun supplying 1,200 pounds of beer cheese a week to Walmarts throughout Central Kentucky. Other Kentucky producers, including Hall’s and Howard’s Creek (endorsed by Joe Allman’s son Tim), distribute widely in the region and ship nationally.

It’s apparent from economic estimates that beer cheese has a growing customer base and that its brand identity and messaging — think proletarian food even the elite should value — is resonating, in Kentucky and beyond.

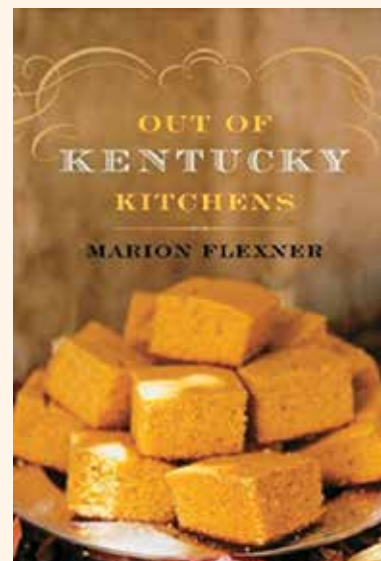
Beer cheese has been written up in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Food & Wine, and Southern Living; touted on the Food Network; and will this fall be the subject of a new book from the University Press of Kentucky. It’s available in major supermarkets and specialty food shops. It appears, often kicked up a notch with designer brews and spices, on chef-driven, upscale Kentucky restaurant menus. It’s featured on burgers and with fries at Hardee’s and Carl’s Jr. fast-food chains. Oh, and Queen Elizabeth carried containers of it back to Buckingham Palace after a visit to Bluegrass horse farms.

For a humble spread created in a roadhouse and seeking status — commodified or otherwise — as an iconic Kentucky food, those seem like big steps up to prominence. **KM**

KENTUCKY CLASSIC

Louisville’s Marion Flexner, who died in 1992, wrote several books on cooking and entertaining as well as articles for *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Gourmet*, and *House and Garden*. Her most famous work, *Out of Kentucky Kitchens*, is a culinary guide to the state’s traditional foods and celebrated people. First published in 1949 by Franklin Watts in New York and reissued in 1989 by the University Press of Kentucky, *Out of Kentucky Kitchens* was called “definitive” by the late, influential Southern history and food writer John Egerton.

In her entry about beer cheese in the book, Flexner says she and a friend experimented with preparations until they developed a recipe for “a very tangy sandwich spread” that “will keep for weeks in a covered jar in the icebox and is a boon to the busy housekeeper.” After calling it a “perfect understudy” for Welsh rabbit, she says she usually serves her beer cheese on a tray, surrounded with toasted crackers.



Beer cheese recipe

- 1 lb. aged Cheddar cheese (sharp)
- 1 lb. American or “rat” cheese (bland)
- 2 or 3 garlic pods (to taste)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of a 12 oz. bottle of beer (about 1 C more or less)
- 3T Worcestershire sauce
- 1t salt, or more to taste
- 1t powdered mustard
- Dash Tabasco sauce or cayenne pepper

Grind the cheese (do not use processed cheese) with the garlic pods. Mix with this: Worcestershire sauce, mustard and Tabasco or cayenne. Put in a bowl in an electric mixer and add slowly enough beer to make a paste smooth enough to spread. Store in covered jars and keep in the icebox until needed.

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