Pride and Food Shame in Southern Appalachia[1]

By: Samantha Castleman

Abstract: Through interviews with western North Carolinians and an analysis of the discourse in online articles, this essay first argues for the importance of foodways research into one insular culinary practice by acknowledging its use in community identity formation. Livermush, a square, sausage-like product made of pig liver, face meat, and cornmeal, is closely related to scrapple but only available in the western portion of North Carolina. Often when locals try to introduce the food to others they are met with disgust, causing shame for the food and the community who eats it. This essay examines food shaming reactions to livermush both in person and in print to detail how capitalizing on these negative judgments has allowed locals to manifest representations of regional pride that are changing the tradition by allowing livermush to be used both as an ordinary food and a reason for celebration.

Keywords: livermush, pork, thrift, food shame, community festivals, North Carolina, regional foods

Postmodern food studies scholars have often examined questions of identity and how personhood may be influenced by what an individual eats, as food is an important philosophical subject that structures what counts as a person in a given culture (Curtin 1992: 4). Foodways studies grounded in theories of "the biformity of eating behavior" as both a social and individual activity demonstrate the importance of vernacular food traditions in the creation of community and personal identity, illustrating the relationship between geographic place, food, and community (Bronner 1981: 122). As Blake, Mellor, and Crane point out, "place . . . cannot be alienated from the food system as a marker but rather is *part* of the food system helping to define what foods are consumed and how people value and engage with those foods" (Blake 2010: 412, emphasis added). Maine lobster (Lewis 1999), the pasties of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (Lockwood and Lockwood 1999), and Louisiana's crawfish (Gutierrez 1992), foods that are still associated with their regional origin when consumed elsewhere, all exemplify ways in which regional cuisine becomes geographically symbolic.

Similarly, the Southern United States as a geographic and cultural region is often cited for its culinary traditions, most notably dishes like biscuits, fried chicken, and sweet tea. While these dishes are considered by many to be the height of culinary excellence, other regional foods that may be less aesthetically pleasing are overlooked to emphasize more approachable items. Disregarded culinary traditions are often based in poverty or made from ingredients not widely accepted as appetizing. Less appealing dishes are often not awarded the same attention in public discourse as their more tourist-friendly counterparts, but when they are, the focus is commonly in the guise of "extreme" food experimentation that capitalizes on an abject fascination with products that are both intriguing and revolting. Foods like tripe that do "not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4) of what counts as edible in a given system represent the attraction to the abject, which "turns [rules] aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of

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them, the better to deny them" (15). By experiencing extreme and unknown foods, outsiders may experiment with their own understandings of culture and propriety.

Food has proven highly symbolic and often figures in public discourse to construct nostalgic visions of heritage. Associating local foodways with idealized narratives of "the olden days" in turn encourages regional tourist capital initiatives that profit from visitors looking for a distraction from their modern, mechanized lives. Often, however, the traditional nature of these dishes, such as their ingredients or cooking method, are no longer commonly in practice, making the dish appear exotic and challenging to eaters. In addition to heritage tourism, then, consuming traditional foods that deviate from mainstream standards of palatability has in many ways become an extreme sport, creating culinary tourism that emphasizes their unique ingredients or cooking methods. Both strands of tourism allow the local economy to profit.

Foods exoticized as "extreme" by gastronomic media presently include livermush, a dish specific to the Piedmont and southern Appalachian region of western North Carolina. A square, sausage-like product made of pig liver, face meat, and cornmeal that are boiled down into a thick, stew-like mixture and poured into a loaf pan to cool for slicing and frying, livermush is closely related to scrapple (Cohen 2015). A common breakfast option akin to bacon or sausage, although more peppery than both, livermush has a dark brown crunchy outer crust with a smooth light brown center and is often served with egg and cheese on a biscuit or toast (see Photo 1), although some prefer grape jelly for the combination of sweet and savory flavors.

Photo 1: Homemade livermush biscuit with fried egg on top.
Lenoir, NC, March 10, 2019. Photo: Paula Castleman.

Although there are close cultural and, especially in North Carolina, geographical similarities between "southern" and "mountainous" regions, there are important distinctions between the two, and the dish should not necessarily be considered a

"mountain food." Despite its appropriation by those in the southern Appalachian Mountains, its history is based in white communities, many of German descent, in the state's flat Piedmont region.

Perhaps due to its lack of visibility, almost no studies have been completed on the importance of this food to the local community. Lucy Long's entry on livermush in Jonathan Deutsch's *We Eat What?: A Cultural Encyclopedia of Unusual Foods in the United States* is attentive to both the history of the dish and its racial specificity that excludes African-American communities (2018: 203). A North Carolina native and foodways scholar, Long claims that "livermush is sometimes called 'liver pudding' and is sometimes confused with other types of liver puddings, headcheese, liverwurst, scrapple, and similar sausage-like mixtures," placing the food within a larger gastronomic context, and acknowledging the confusion these differing products present. Yet this observation effectively conglomerates the differences in food products that vary by ingredient and cooking method, asserting their similarities without recognizing their variances. Although a member of the same culinary family, the starch mixed with the organ meat varies by dish, a topic due further examination. That South Carolina liver pudding is composed of rice instead of the cornmeal of its northern neighbor, for example, is in part a consequence of differing food production geographies with similarly localized crop reliance. Although rice is a gastronomic staple in the marshy eastern regions of North and South Carolina, prior to industrialization its availability in the mountains, where corn was more plentiful, was limited.

Through interviews with North Carolinians and an analysis of the discourse on livermush online, I argue for the importance of foodways research into this insular culinary practice by acknowledging its use in community identity formation. I examine both in-person and in-print narratives of food-shaming reactions to livermush to detail how capitalizing on these negative judgments has allowed locals to manifest representations of regional pride that are changing the tradition by constructing a celebratory festival practice.

Methods

This essay draws on fieldwork completed in Fall 2017 for a "Foodways and Literature" course at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette where I investigated the media rhetoric surrounding my favorite food. I began my research by searching online for the term "livermush" and asking family and friends from North Carolina to send me any publications where livermush was mentioned. By narrowing my focus to sources that discussed livermush directly, I compiled a small corpus that informed my study: seven print articles including titles such as "Livermush is King" (Bashor 2015), "The Liver Mush Mystique" (Clevenger 2016), "Everything You Need to Know About Scrapple" (Cohen 2015), and "Every State's Grossest Food" (Fulton 2017); an episode of *Bizarre Foods*, a Discovery Travel Channel reality show in which the host travels to "exotic" locations sampling the local food and experiencing the culture in which it was created (Zimmern 2014); and a YouTube video called "How to Make Livermush" based off popular cooking how-to shows.

Because the published reviews did not strongly depict the relationship between livermush and the community, I found it necessary to give voice to local perceptions of the food. I recorded interviews with seven individuals who I knew were familiar with livermush and who consented to being referenced by name in this project. Three of

these, John, Jeff, and Annie, were interviewed as livermush fans who had *left* North Carolina. A fourth, Peter, was suggested to me by another, Paula, because he was an outsider who had recently moved into the area. Delbert, Judy, and Paula, who have each lived all their lives in Caldwell County, North Carolina, were able to provide thoughts from the perspective of locals deeply entrenched in the culture. Their specific relationship—Paula is Delbert and Judy's oldest daughter—further allowed me to investigate the generational nature of the food.

My analysis is based on comparing the comments of locals to the rhetoric surrounding the food in popular media. By scanning and comparing the interview responses and media for keywords, I could see that the theme most often emphasized by media outlets is the notion of heritage and family that is relied on to create local livermush festivals and, in recent years, generate tourist capital. The perception of livermush that has led to its festival nature is one carefully constructed by the media, reinventing the tradition into a celebratory one that can contribute to local economic growth. It is not, however, what members of the community find most important: the regional history of economic struggle which they see as the impetus behind the creation of the dish.

Livermush and Interpersonal Community Building

In the words of Andrew Zimmern, host of *Bizarre Foods*, livermush represents a "microregional food tradition" due to its small geographic availability. One North Carolina journalist writes, "draw a line through Mecklenburg County northwest to Guilford and Rockingham counties. If you grew up west of that line, you know livermush" (Bashor 2015), highlighting the food's relation to place as described by Michael Owen Jones (2007: 134). This boundary, established by someone familiar with North Carolina geography and the livermush tradition (Photo 2), sets apart only one-third of the state's landmass—the western portion of the state that includes part of the Piedmont and the foothills and Appalachian regions.

Photo 2. Map of North Carolina counties with line added by author to represent Bashor's description (2015) of where livermush is eaten. Map: Amy Rudersdorf (2010).

The history of livermush is based in Piedmont pig farming, where livermush has remained a staple of the community, even as the balance of local industries has changed. The low cost of raising pigs and the myriad uses of their organs and flesh made hog farming not only the predominant source of income in the region, but the most sustainable source of food as well. It was in finding new methods to preserve the meat

that livermush was created. As industrialized furniture production increased the nation's need for wood, western North Carolina residents who had traditionally worked as farmers had transitioned into the more lucrative lumber sector. The number and size of individual family farms lessened with the formation of the mega-farm system common today, diminishing the importance of hog farming in western part of the state. The lumber industry, and the ancillary industry of furniture making, were important to the economy until 2008. With the global recession, furniture making has moved overseas, leaving the local economy weak.

Originally livermush was only cooked in the home by farmers and their families, but in the 1920s two family-run Piedmont companies, Jenkins' and Hunter's, began mass-producing and supplying it to local grocery stores. This industrialization altered the dish's consumption patterns, making it more readily available to a wider market, but not to the extent of other mass-produced common products like canned goods.

Most North Carolina families now purchase pre-made livermush loaves (see Photo 3) to slice and fry in their own homes. In the western part of the state, working class eateries like diners and gas station food stands serve the dish along major highways. While it may be easier for families to cook livermush, since it no longer requires the time or room to boil a pig's head, neither Jenkins' nor Hunter's supplies livermush outside of western North Carolina. Their products can be shipped out of state on direct order, but the cost outweighs the economic value of the dish itself.[2]

Photo 3. Blocks of livermush sold by the pound alongside other breakfast meats like sausage at a local grocery store. Lenoir, NC, March 10, 2019. Photo: Paula Castleman.

Although the mass production of livermush is historically linked to Piedmont region towns around Charlotte, the liminal nature of foothills counties like Caldwell, Burke, and Lincoln, which are located closer to the base of the mountains than they are to the Piedmont plateau, means these communities experience a mingling of mountain and Piedmont culture and are exposed to both regions' economic systems. The location of roadside livermush vendors allows the dish to travel along major thoroughfares, away from its home in the Piedmont to more mountainous locales. Consumers purchasing quick, cheap meals on the run can experience the economic viability of livermush and can tell others of the dish along their route.

It seems, however, that livermush has only expanded into the state's mountainous region. North Carolina maps that separate the state into geographic regions make no

mention of the foothills; instead, counties that self-identify as such are divided by mapmakers between the mountain and Piedmont zones according to their proximity to the Appalachian Mountains. Like the dish itself, many of the communities who eat it are unnoticed in mainstream discourse and annexed into the larger systems around them, muting the specificity of the region.

Area tourism and the outward migration of the younger generation have marked clearly where the food is eaten and where it is not. With a growing tourist industry based in activities like skiing and hiking, Appalachian residents have increasingly come face-to-face with outsiders who respond ambivalently to the food, and those who have left the region have to negotiate the shock of learning not everyone eats livermush the first time they look for it at their new local grocery.[3] As locals begin to navigate interactions with people unfamiliar with the food, one thing becomes clear: livermush belongs to western North Carolina.

This regional specificity makes livermush valuable for foodways research. Despite the mechanization of its production, diffusion of the food has largely stalled out, due possibly to its "ugly" appearance, as one interlocutor called it, and its distasteful sounding name. The food simply looks and sounds unappetizing and so is often overlooked by those who are unfamiliar with it. For residents who have left the state, consuming the food induces a nostalgia for a geographic place and a specific time, recalling memories of childhood and suggesting the important social uses of the food.

The longevity of livermush consumption, which is commonly passed generationally, demonstrates its importance to group identity formation. The *habitus* that has been created and maintained through family transmission—described by Christiane Paponnet-Cantat as "a set of attitudes ingrained in agents so early that they internalize predispositions such as food tastes that become rooted in their national identity as cultural capital"—is clear when speaking with locals, especially in a subregional sense (2003: 12). While no one seems to remember how they learned about the food, western North Carolinians stress livermush as inherent to their culture. Passed from family member to family member, it has offered physical and financial stability in otherwise turbulent times. Most of those I interviewed emphasized the impoverished nature of the region. This theme is so significant that it is often privileged over memories of initial experiences trying livermush—locals may not remember the first time they ate it, but they can tell you why it was created, and they know it's usually eaten with family.

Annie, who now works as a plaintiff's attorney in coastal South Carolina, states, "it would be like asking me the first time I drank orange juice," claiming no memory of her first experience eating livermush but acknowledging its common appearance as a meal throughout her childhood. Delbert and Judy, now grandparents in their seventies, echo this sentiment, claiming respectively, "I grew up with it, I don't remember," and "that was something we just always had." Their daughter Paula notes, "it's just always been there," and has become to her an emblem of the value of thrift.

This cultural *habitus* illustrates the importance of family tradition. While locals may not be able to identify when they learned about livermush, family heritage is commonly cited as explanation. Annie's husband, Jeffrey, an elementary school guidance counselor, claims his mother enjoys livermush "more than anybody else" in his family,

but also cites his grandmother as a consumer, presenting the multigenerational aspects of foodways. Judy echoes this tradition, stating not only did both of her parents eat it, but "they grew up eating it too." By intentionally connecting the consumption of livermush to family heritage, my western North Carolinian interlocuters emphasize its importance to community stability.

Passing on culinary traditions is one way families socialize children into a culture. As Henderson explains, "either explicitly and consciously or implicitly and unconsciously, adults teach children foodways that are often associated with their ethnic identity" (2007: 82). Introducing the dish to children at a young age allows parents to provide cost-effective meals for the family and encourage children to internalize the necessity of thrift. Such lessons start early. When "I wanted livermush for dinner one night," around 30 years ago, Paula, the oldest daughter of Delbert and Judy, first served it to her daughter, who was "only a year or two old" at the time. John, a new father in his late twenties, happily admits he's already introduced his son to livermush despite now living in Iowa, and claims "so far he likes it" even if he's not quite two years old.

The accessibility and low cost of livermush that contribute to its popularity symbolize important cultural attitudes like the value of thrift and hard work. Livermush sandwiches and biscuits are available in minutes for only a few dollars, requiring little investment of time or money. The locations of its vendors further suggest the relationship of livermush to a community that is struggling economically. Unlike fine dining establishments, places that offer livermush are often older family-owned buildings in need of repair. Rather than the sensory experience of haute cuisine, livermush is important to the community because it fulfills the necessity of thrift.

The cost-effective appeal of livermush was emphasized by my interlocutors. Judy informed me that livermush was "an important local food" because it had "saved a lot of people from starving" during regional economic hardships. Jeffery similarly referred to livermush as "poor people food" and Peter and Paula both mentioned the financially destitute nature of the area as a reason for the food's consumption. While Peter only described Caldwell County as a "very poor environment," Paula was more specific, characterizing local residents as "low-income, scrambling to get by and fighting to make ends meet." The two agreed that while livermush had historically been used to benefit from all available natural materials, today it maintains its popularity because mass production has continued the tradition of thrift. Although based in a Piedmont-area pig farming tradition and the "snout to tail" method of consumption inspired by limited access to resources, the industrialization of the food market has not deterred the transmission of livermush but rather increased its accessibility. The contemporary push for sustainable eating among elite "foodies" has further enhanced the acceptability of animal parts that had previously been considered unpalatable by those with means, allowing its appropriation as a tourist attraction.

My interlocuters' comments illustrate the importance of livermush as a fixture in the community's foodways and confirm western North Carolinians' comfort with the "strange" nature of the dish. They do not have to negotiate ingredients that may be unfamiliar to outsiders. In an economy blighted by economic downturn and the overseas relocation of furniture production, livermush's low price has made it a reliable staple of the local community.[4] It has become a marker of regional identity mainly because

members of the community have never been without it, even when other elements of the local economy have left the region.

This practice has created two populations interested in sustainable eating: people who have historically practiced it as necessity and others who have appropriated it to live an eco-friendly existence by limiting food waste from animal slaughter. While these may be divergent worldviews, both are important philosophies of consumption that together have maintained the livermush tradition into a new century by positioning it as a local food with the potential to attract culinary tourists.

The Cultural Implications of Food Shame

The depiction of livermush in the media is not uniformly positive. Descriptions of the dish to those unfamiliar with it are often met with disgust at both its ingredients and its very name. Andrew Zimmern presented his own analysis of the dish on *Bizarre Foods,* a show in which the very title labels the foods he features as odd, exotic, and othered simply by calling them "bizarre." Zimmern, visiting the Hunter's and Jenkins' shops, claims the food has an "indelicate name" (2014: 00:43) and states it "doesn't look like much to celebrate" (1:00), poking fun at both the name of the dish and its presentation before he ever tries it.

Zimmern's commentary, combined with juxtaposing images of locals enjoying the food and the "parts" which make up its ingredients, creates a visual contradiction for viewers who have been trained, via a popular media obsession with certain class-based appearance standards, to privilege their visual senses differently. Although in other communities appearance may be regarded differently, in a culture centered around visual entertainment, for a dish to look unappetizing means it should be disregarded. This, however, is not what Zimmern's program depicts. While the dish may not look or sound appetizing, clearly people familiar with it think otherwise. This presentation of livermush as "bizarre" is media food shaming at its most explicit, affecting an audience's tendency to associate the food with those who eat it.

Zimmern's show is premised on finding foods deemed unpalatable by middle-class Western societies—mostly in urban communities assumed to be disconnected from the land and the resources it provides—and proving them to be enjoyable. While this argument is not *intended* to shame the cultures he encounters, it effectively exoticizes both the foods and their cultures of origin. Zimmern's strange foods advocacy is only possible because first, through the titling of the show and his commentary, both the dish and the culture are denigrated. As phenomenological scholar Jean-Paul Sartre claims, shame is directly related to selfhood: "Now, *shame*, . . . is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging" (Sartre 1984: 350). By feeling shame over their food, North Carolina residents could attribute the emotion to both their own bodies and the community around them. If the food is dismissed as questionable or inedible, as Zimmern seems to suggest, then by correlation those who eat it must have different standards from the mainstream and effectively feel this difference as othering treatment, the very type of behavior locals claim they receive when introducing the food to others. Being met with disgusted reactions and asked "how can you eat that?" creates a distinct rift between the two parties.

Zimmern's abject fascination with the ingredients and name of livermush represents the majority of media discourse on the dish, marking its place within the discourse of "extreme" foods tourism, although his program differs from many others in its aim to advocate for culinary experimentation. In January 2017, Thrillist.com released an article titled "Every State's Grossest Food (That People Actually Love)" that focused on foods the author Wil Fulton considered to be "offensive." While food items like "Rocky Mountain Oysters" and "Roadkill" are also on the list, livermush was awarded the title of North Carolina's "grossest food." Fulton seemed primarily fixated on its name, stating, "it never had a chance. It's called . . . livermush. Could anything called livermush ever be appetizing? Both 'liver' and 'mush' are so gross on their own, not even a space wants to be stuck between them" (Fulton 2017). This comedic assault on the sensory aspects of naming is followed by only two sentences on the food's ingredients and no description of taste or sensory enjoyment, emphasizing the unappetizing aspects of the dish instead of flavor, the chief characteristic Zimmern uses to promote it. Despite outright labeling the food as "gross," which might typically be associated with taste, smell, or even texture, it is the brick-like aesthetic of the food which the author ridicules, stating, "how are you going to adore a food that could double as the foundation of the YMCA?" further attributing the food a sense of weightiness that deems it indigestible and unappetizing.

Articles like Fulton's draw readers in with the fascination of things considered "gross" and the people who consume them. Meant to increase website views, articles such as this simultaneously seek to shock readers through the presentation of "gross" topics and connect with them personally by referencing foods they might find familiar. In Fulton's article, the author's tone plays closer to the entertainment value of disgust than to regional pride, often denigrating the foods he discusses and, by association, the people who eat them. Unlike Zimmern, however, Fulton does not sample any of the foods he attacks but passes judgment from a distance on what he believes to be their disgusting qualities. This difference allows for disgust to be negotiated on *Bizarre Foods* but not in articles like "Every State's Grossest Food." Without culinary exploration, articles like Fulton's shame both the food and the geography associated with it and offer no redemption. Zimmern's show may exoticize the foods and communities he visits, but the host's willingness to try livermush serves as armchair culinary tourism for viewers, alleviating shame by educating outsiders to a food's taste and cultural value, ultimately the point of the show.

In his work investigating the disgust response, Jones claims, citing William Ian Miller, "'disgust is a feeling *about* something in response to something, not just unattached feeling'; it assesses (negatively) what it touches, proclaiming the object's meanness and inferiority" (Jones 2000: 54). This "inferiority" is an ethical judgment premised on stereotypes and power differentials. Sartre asserts that disgust "can be explained only by the combination of this physical quality with certain moral qualities," suggesting that the lived physical reaction of disgust is impossible without a related emotional judgment that is both negative and directed towards one source (Sartre 1984: 771). When livermush is labeled as disgusting, a moral judgment, so too are the individuals and communities who create and consume it. In this way, food shame implicitly leads to cultural shame.

Foods are labeled disgusting when they and the people who consume them are unfamiliar. To feel shame when traditional foods are met with disgust, however unintentional, is understandable. To suggest a food is inedible because of its lack of

familiarity is at heart a fear of contagion and the unknown. Unknown foods appear dangerous *because* they are unknown, and the refusal to consume these substances is premised primarily in the fear of becoming *like* them and those who eat them—individuals who are stereotyped as lesser because they are willing to eat such rough dishes. These interactions do not necessarily have to be cross-cultural, and in many cases are issues of class within one bounded community. Nevertheless, labeling food as disgusting and inedible is a shaming and stereotyping gesture which privileges one group over another by claiming the latter's consumption patterns do not fit the standards of the dominant party. Livermush, a food created by and for those who struggle economically, is unfamiliar both to those outside of the geographic community and those who are not familiar with the conditions of financial hardship, encouraging locals to interpret this action as cultural shaming.

While authors who write about livermush cannot see the reactions of readers, such judgments are still palpable, calling forth images of the face-to-face food shaming reactions western North Carolinians receive when explaining the food to outsiders. North Carolina residents, perceived as conservative, impoverished, and backward, cannot help but interpret the treatment of their unique foods in a similarly derogatory manner.[5]

The shaming reactions with which locals are met have the ability to cause long-lasting damage to an individual's self-esteem and community pride. Advocating against the use of disgust and shame as punishment in the judicial system, Deigh argues that "shame is destructive of the ideals of liberal democracy when it is elicited in the service of enforcing standards that represent what it is to be 'normal' and thus stigmatizing those who depart from these standards" (2006: 392). When judging foods, and by relation those who eat them, a person's sense of worth is accordingly at stake. Shaming traditional foods is an on-the-ground representation of stigma drawing from inequitable power distribution, and it is the resolve of North Carolinians to continue with their tradition in spite of the stigma which converts their practice into a demonstration of pride. Locals know how their food is interpreted and are aware of the food-shaming it is likely to instigate, yet they eat it nonetheless, unbothered by the ways the meal has been stigmatized. While livermush consumption contradicts widespread popular judgments of what parts of an animal are considered undesirable to eat and what food should look like, western North Carolina locals refuse to allow food shaming to affect their enjoyment of the dish.

As demonstrated by Zimmern and Fulton, disgusted reactions to livermush commonly have little to do with taste; the name of the dish alone can provoke disgust. When asked why people react negatively to livermush, five of the seven individuals I spoke with cite its name as the problem. Delbert's comment, "liver—that's the word," is a direct explanation for disgust which was echoed by others in the interview process. John responded, "it just doesn't *sound* good," while Paula replied "the word liver in it" was the problem. Annie reported, "the name turns people off" and Peter, a North Carolina transplant, admitted his hesitation to try the food was due to its name. He claims livermush is "combining two words that set off a psychological alarm" because neither liver nor mush are foods he's keen on eating.

Despite the reactions the name can engender, no one in the area seems interested in relabeling. There have been no restaurants or manufacturers who have tried to sell the

product under another name, and I've never come across anyone who used a different term for the food. Judy explains there is simply no desire to rebrand the food because its name is something familiar to locals and changing the name of the dish would only create confusion. The conservative nature of tradition has meant that, as Judy says, "we like the things we're used to," and livermush will maintain its insiders' name despite the perception it gives to outsiders. Locals, while aware of this negative perception—a phenomenon not mirrored in scrapple foodways—are not bothered by its occurrence so much as they are encouraged to defend the beloved dish. It is because of this reaction that a renegotiation of food shame into cultural pride can occur.

While livermush consumption contradicts widespread popular judgments of what parts of an animal are considered undesirable to eat and what food should look like, western North Carolina locals refuse to allow food shaming to affect their enjoyment of the dish. Locals I interviewed note that disgusted reactions such as scrunched noses and stuck out tongues sometimes accompanied by gagging sound effects or even the explicit "that's gross," are common when they first introduce the food to outsiders. Paula claims a co-worker who is originally from New York once "shivered" when she brought up livermush, while John told how his wife, who grew up in Iowa, responded with "that sounds disgusting" when he explained the food to her.

Whether physical responses associated with fear or unease, or moments of literally labeling "disgust," these initial responses can moderate with time and familiarity. Through experimentation and interacting with locals, people who originally distrust livermush, like Zimmern and Peter, often change their minds about its palatability. Peter, a pastor who lived in Connecticut for 28 years before moving to Caldwell County, has recently tried livermush for the first time. Although originally describing the meal as "ugly, sad," and "disgusting" and claiming he was "brave" enough to sample some, he now states, "if someone put it in front of me I would probably eat it. It's not the most God-awful thing that I've tasted." Peter's commentary demonstrates the importance of visual and gustatory aesthetics when outsiders first taste the dish, but Peter now finds himself less antagonistic as he has become more familiar with it, admitting he would eat it again, even if he considers it "ugly."

Reconfiguring Shame

Peter's commentary as a recent newcomer to the area is informative in other respects as well. Having encountered many situations in which locals have spoken to him about livermush, he claims "they have a big smile on their face like they know . . . it's almost like they know that you're not going to like it" and wonders if "people know in their minds that to outsiders it's not going to be something that's going to appeal to them," a recognition of the differences in taste that contribute to positive or dismissive judgments. These negotiations demonstrate what Barthes refers to as "not only the manifestation of individual, anomic prejudices, but also elements of a veritable collective imagination showing the outlines of a certain mental framework" (2008: 29). For western North Carolinians, this framework is often one of jest. Livermush is commonly presented to new consumers in a playful manner—as a prank or a dare. Introducing the dish this way allows locals preemptively to address the disgust issue and thereby disarm the attack.

"Pranking" or "daring" outsiders to try the food lowers their expectations and tells them to *expect* disgust, while at the same time challenging their courage and forcing them

either to sample the dish or accept defeat. By acknowledging and playing with negative feelings towards a beloved food, locals can renegotiate disgust to serve their own ends. Bringing these adverse judgments of the food into the culture allows community insiders to interact with cross-cultural discourse to claim and revise perceptions from dismissive to encouraging.

North Carolina native Kelli Clevenger's article, "The Liver Mush Mystique," is one such example of positive reinterpretations of negative judgments. Using descriptions like "deliciously weird" and "poor man's pâté,"[6] and giving instructions to "savor the strangeness," she advocates for livermush by finding joy in its uniqueness through word play and socially elevated referents (2016). Aware of negative perceptions of the food and speaking as an insider, she uses rhetoric similar to those who denigrate it by subverting the power of negative judgment. By labeling livermush in terms that are both negative and enticing—such as "weird" paired with "deliciously"—she claims the term "weird" for herself, removing the power of judgment from culinary outsiders and making livermush distinctly local. Referencing her grandmother when discussing the food, she foregrounds the familial aspect of the dish, positing its "bizarre" nature as something to be celebrated rather than mocked, communicating with community insiders and outsiders alike by using family to bridge the gap created by food-induced cultural shame. Although Clevenger is proud of her dish, she is aware of the comforting effects of family and relies on this motif to create empathy between livermush eaters and people who may judge them negatively.

In the resulting discourse created, livermush is appreciated, negative judgments are voiced and dismissed, and stigma against the tradition is neutralized by culinary tourism. This multivocality reaffirms ideas of personhood as they relate to regional foodways based on an individual's stance in the livermush debate. While not all locals love livermush, that individuals have opinions about the dish serves as a defining element of community. Residents either love the dish or hate it; there is no middle ground, yet all are familiar enough to have an opinion. As community insiders choose sides and force newcomers to do the same, community identity is reified, confirming Claude Fischler's contention that "human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat" (1988: 279). Both groups demonstrate regional membership in their ability to speak to what livermush *is* and their feelings about it.

Food shame, a type of devaluing treatment which specifically targets an individual's food consumption patterns, directly relates to body shame, as what a person puts in their body is often directly correlated according to varied scientific and folk dietary and medicinal systems to what form that body will take. For example, eating a "natural" diet is thought to improve heart health, weight, and blood sugar and skin, while diets built on fatty and processed foods are thought to impair digestion leading to obesity, increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and even acne. Although little work has been done on the implications of food shaming, Daniel Martin elaborates three methods of body-shame negotiation—redemption, activism, and rationality—that may help individuals overcome the negative perceptions of their bodies. He advocates that reactions to shame must have the energy to overcome such judgment and empower the denigrated, claiming "shame work" to be "emotional labor aimed at evoking, removing, or managing shame" (2000: 134).

Martin's activist model of shame negotiation—in which members of the shamed community attempt to combat their stigmatization by educating others about their status and advocating for representation and equal treatment—is applicable to western North Carolina's livermush consumers, offering ways for shamed individuals to reclaim agency through outreach and education. Food shame activism among what Annie calls "livermush evangelists" operates in a similar way by taking pride in the dish and educating others to its tastefulness. Peter relates his first sampling of livermush to Delbert's influence, claiming that until then "it was totally a foreign entity" to him. "Everyone was trying to set me up to try it," he says, "especially Delbert." Delbert and Peter's interaction exemplifies how food shaming tensions motivate locals to act with advocacy and education to neutralize negative judgments (Bronner 1981: 121). Although Peter originally rejected the dish, Delbert was motivated to educate him hoping to negate culinary shame.

Delbert's encouragement was successful. Peter reports he chose to eat livermush again a few weeks after this initial introduction: "it's just been there and now my radar is attuned." This perception that livermush has "been there" reflects the cultural *habitus* of the food as established by community locals and demonstrates Peter's status as part of that community. While he may be new, the pastor has been initiated into an important and ingrained aspect of the local culture. It is not his feelings about the way livermush tastes that classify Peter as a community member, but rather his awareness of its presence.

Instances of personal livermush crusading are echoed throughout discussions with North Carolinians, yet these interactions are not the only way anti-food shaming activism occurs. Media portrayals of the food demonstrate similar reform efforts, as in articles like Jason Cohen's "Everything You Need to Know about Scrapple" that redefine livermush in terms devoid of disgust by connecting it to a larger gastronomic tradition. By educating readers on "the scrapple universe" of which livermush is a part, Cohen aligns the dish to traditional foodways practiced across the Eastern Seaboard, establishing variations in cooking method and ingredients. Cohen takes an aggressive stance on matters of disgust, reprimanding those who would shame consumers that "among people who like food, such scrapple-shaming is both off the mark and out of fashion" (2015).

The negotiation of food shame in recent years has transformed livermush from an everyday food to a dish for special occasions. As family members move out of the area, eating livermush has become an event during times of celebration and homecoming. John pointedly equates livermush with special events, claiming, "for me it's like a holiday . . . . It's definitely an event for me just because it is so rare and I love it so much." The value of livermush in this case increases for John because the food is "ordinary," but only within a specific regional context. "Ordinary" matters are given value because they are integral to our everyday lives (Curtin 1992: 4), but foods and traditions that are "special" acquire a heightened symbolic importance. For John, the "ordinary" consumption of livermush became a holiday-like occasion because he no longer had easy access to it.

Livermush is not alone in its symbolically marked space of disgust, comfort, and celebration. In examining turtle soup, Bronner speculates how a regional food with its

own disgust negotiations "perhaps becomes a ceremonial food that defines the community, maintains social relationships . . . and provides a framework for interaction essential to the stability of a group" (119). Similarly, Laretta Henderson notes the continuing symbolic relevance of soul food as a historical, regional, black ethnic, and variably valued meal system. Even though no longer cooked regularly, in favor of less time-consuming options, soul food appeared in magazines for children in the 1980s as "consistent with the traditional southern black food served on Sundays, holidays, and special events" and is therefore still a valuable community symbol (2007: 94). Like soul food and turtle soup, livermush has for many become a cultural symbol because of its heightened context during special events rather than its daily availability. More a ceremonial dish for many than a culinary staple, livermush still holds value for the community and helps to maintain social bonds, even when locals have left the area. Although the context may have changed, eating livermush still holds importance to people from western North Carolina. For John and numerous others who have left the region, livermush is no longer simply a local food, but a symbol of the home and family they left behind that carries connotations of celebration. As Peter states, having only lived in the area a few months, "when I think of Lenoir, I think of livermush."

A New Take on an Old Food

There is no doubt the livermush tradition is undergoing change, and new developments seem to negate food shame in ways that demonstrate cultural pride. The celebratory nature of homecoming livermush consumption has led to activities meant to buffer the state's dwindling economy. The first annual "Mush, Music and Mutts" festival (see Photo 4) began in 1985 in Shelby to celebrate the local food tradition and has been

Photo 4. 2018 flyer for annual Mush, Music & Mutts festival in Shelby, NC—the first livermush festival in the state and still the only one funded by state government. Image: Courtesy of Shelby Chamber of Commerce.

sponsored by the state government since 1987. While originally a small event, the 2015 festival is estimated to have drawn over 15,000 individuals (Clevenger 2016) and is the same festival Andrew Zimmern visited for *Bizarre Foods*.

Negotiating negative perceptions of local food is imperative to maintaining cultural identity. Roger Abrahams might classify "Mush, Music and Mutts" among festivals that break boundaries regarding culinary experimentation, allowing people unfamiliar with a dish to investigate the rules and expectations of consumption. He argues that in a festival atmosphere, all attendees "become equal-opportunity eaters," without being forced to fake enjoyment of a dish or use proper table manners in the name of "politeness" (1984: 23). Such festivals eschew expectations of proper behavior and encourage experimentation, allowing individuals to bypass judgment for the sake of trying something new and the local community to profit. "Mush, Music and Mutts" provides a space for livermush fans to celebrate their food alongside outsiders experimenting with the dish for the first time.

The popularity of "extreme foods" tourism has not eliminated more traditional consumption practices among locals. Visitors to western North Carolina may see eating livermush as a special event, but its continued availability in grocery stores, diners, and at food stands demonstrates that for thousands in the region livermush is still ordinary. Regional tourism has not replaced family tradition but added a complementary strand of discourse. To western North Carolinians, the availability of livermush continues to represent the value of thrift, yet when they use the dish as a special event food, they posit livermush as a celebration of regional culture and family heritage.
While it may be outsiders—both tourists and locals who have relocated—who have given livermush its celebratory nature, they are not the ones who have created the events that use it as such. After the introduction of the "Mush, Music and Mutts" festival, numerous other events began popping up across the region funded by local communities to attract tourists. These celebrations aim to capitalize on culinary tourism inspired by shows like *Bizarre Foods* and demonstrate an intricate negotiation of the ethics of thrift and heritage through which livermush is understood.

Locals who have introduced livermush festivals understand its unique draw for tourists and use this to support the local economy by refiguring the heritage outsiders see as celebratory into an economically viable product in line with local understandings of the symbolic thrift of livermush. These two systems, while differing in their intent, are inextricably linked, each requiring the other in order to be successful. Without the everyday, ordinary use of livermush, tourist-centric connections to heritage would never be viable, yet this perception has also allowed the community to profit, redoubling the importance of livermush to the economy.

Activist food shaming negotiation establishes livermush as a source of cultural pride and economic value. As more events appear, new tourism initiatives decontextualize it from its origin in the foothills to support a mountain locale enticing to out-of-state tourists, in effect erasing the historical and cultural differences of the mountain and Piedmont regions and allowing the dish to be associated with a history that may not be accurate. But accuracy is hardly the point. While livermush may have originated in the Piedmont, contemporary tourism initiatives have both broadened the geographic range in which the food is consumed and influenced more positive reactions to it. It is the popularity of livermush festivals which undermines the food shaming reactions the dish often elicits,

encouraging both community pride and economic sustainability. As Jane Dusselier states, "cuisines are dynamic, emergent, fluid, evolving, momentary, and improvised," and how tourists and locals alike negotiate meanings of livermush in differing systems will continue to influence both groups' perceptions of the tradition (2009: 332).

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Delbert and Judy. 2017. Interview with author, Lenoir, NC. November 10.
John. 2017. Interview with author, Iowa. November 9.
Paula. 2017. Interview with author, Lenoir, NC. November 12.
Peter. 2017. Interview with author, Lenoir, NC. November 18.

Notes:

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[2] Blocks of livermush at the grocery store average about $3 US per pound and offer around 8 servings, making a serving of locally produced livermush cost roughly $.38. Livermush biscuits available in diners and food stands average $2 US. To ship one block of livermush costs roughly $60, making a single serving of the dish approximately $7.50, almost 20 times greater than the local grocery store cost.
[3] While this statement may seem dramatic, it's drawn from my personal experience. After moving to Kentucky for graduate school, I decided one day I was homesick and went to the grocery store to buy livermush as a reprieve. After walking the meat aisle for several minutes, I asked a shop worker where the livermush was. He looked at me like I was crazy and asked what livermush was. At that moment I learned it wasn't regularly available in stores outside my home region.
[4] Although the improvement of local roads increased the accessibility of the mountains and spurred an economic transition from farming to lumber production in the early 1900s, the region became a hub of furniture production until the financial crisis of 2008, considered to be the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. On September 15, 2008, investment bank Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, beginning what became known as the Great Recession, which continued to affect global markets into the next decade.
[5] One of the state's many nicknames is "the Rip van Winkle state." Local legends claim, during the 1800s, that North Carolina's economy was "asleep" while states around it were booming with trade. North Carolina, it seemed, was stuck in the past (https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/rip-van-winkle/). More contemporary political issues have not alleviated this mentality, either, as shown by the sequence of

same-sex marriage legislative action and inaction evident during 2012-2018 (see for example, https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/politics/north-carolina-hb2-agreement/index.html). Even by modern standards the state's political issues seem to be behind the times.

[6] "Pâté" is a French-derived spread or paste made from chopped up meat, liver, fish, or other animal parts. Despite sharing similar ingredients with livermush, pâté is served as an hôrs d'oeuvre and considered a delicacy while livermush is commonly associated with poverty.

[7] Most links were first cited by the author during early research in November 2017. All links posted were active and accurate as of final preparations of this essay for publication in December-January 2020-2021.