Is it a ride at the fair? A breed of hunting dog? Fishing tackle?

What is sonker?

There’s a festival for it near Mt. Airy, west of Winston-Salem, North Carolina—has been for years.

Having lived and eaten in North Carolina since the age of three, I thought I knew about what people in this state liked to cook. But there are always surprises, and one is sonker.

It turns out sonker is one of a collection of odd terms—grunt, slump, buckle, Betty, cobbler—for variations on the fruit-and-batter-dessert theme. The name, so far as I can tell, is unique to the Surry County area.

But connoisseurs of sonker believe it is different, and far better, than its similar sisters.

I asked a friend, whose parents grew up in Mt. Airy, if she knew about sonker. Her eyes lit up and she bounced in her chair (not her usual way of expressing enthusiasm—sonker must have inspired her behavior). She remembered eating her aunt’s sonker on visits to Mt. Airy. What she liked about it was that it was more fruit than dough or batter. Most cobblers, she sniffed, don’t have enough fruit for her taste.

I know what she means. I was raised in a family that was miserly with the fruit in cobblers. Both my grandmother, who was a meticulous and good cook, and my mother, who seldom made desserts, produced cobblers with a batter-to-fruit ratio of about three to one. Sometimes I’d swear that was just orange food coloring in my bite of peach cobbler.

I broke the cycle. I use the same easy recipe they did, but double or triple the fruit. Heck, I don’t even really measure it. The result is a molten slurry of blueberries, blackberries, or peaches (sometimes a combination) held together by a minimal amount of sweet, cake-like dough.

So, if a lot of fruit is key to sonker, maybe I’ve been making it all along.

Cama Merritt, who has worked with the Sonker Festival in Lowgap, North Carolina, for many years, says that even in the heart of sonker country, there are a lot of opinions about what constitutes the dish. The festival, which includes daylong performances of bluegrass music, is held on the first Saturday in October. Proceeds go to the upkeep of Lowgap’s historic Edwards-Franklin House.

“There’s one where you make regular pie crust dough and make it like a deep-dish pie. Sometimes, there are strips of dough in it that come out like dumplings. One old traditional one is to take old biscuits, crumble them up, and put them in with juicy fruit like blackberries so the biscuits soak up the juice,” she says. “It’s taking what you had and making a dessert out of it.”

I figured that if any book contained information about sonker, it would be North Carolina and Old Salem Cookery by Beth Tartan.

Beth Tartan was the name under which Elizabeth Hedgecock Sparks wrote as food editor for the Winston-Salem Journal from 1948 through 1991, which included my growing-up years in Winston-Salem. She was part of that generation of food editors who produced recipes and food sections that were firmly rooted in the Betty Crocker era, when the kitchen was the domain of the woman of the house—and the only place where women ruled.

During that time, there were also variations of Beth Tartan on TV, demonstrating family-pleasing recipes while wearing fluffy skirts, but showing that they had solid cooking knowledge (no perky chicks opening jars of salsa).
Everything about food sections and magazines has changed since then—rightfully and thankfully so. But there’s one thing those women of Beth Tartan’s generation had that’s hard to replace: the knowledge of food that comes from a lifetime spent in a particular place. It still takes study as well as an open mind to understand a region and its food, but if you know and love an area, that’s a head start.

*North Carolina and Old Salem Cookery* is as much about the history and culture of the Piedmont area around Winston-Salem as it is about food. Sections describe what it was like to cook on a wood stove and what was typically served at meals in the 1900s, and they give information about different groups who settled the area, especially the Moravians of Old Salem and Bethabara. The book was originally published in 1955; a revised edition from the University of North Carolina Press came out in 1992, the year Tartan died.

Sure enough, Tartan knew about sonker in Surry County. She writes that one difference between traditional sonker and other cobblers or pies is that it was big, designed to feed a large group of, say, farmhands. In the days before electricity, it was baked in something called a “bread pan,” a 4-inch-deep pan that was sized to fill the oven of a wood stove and usually used for biscuits. Sonker today is still cooked in a deeper dish than those used for pies or cobblers.

Many sonker recipes also call for an unusual ingredient—sweet potatoes. Tartan doesn’t say why, but I speculate that cured sweet potatoes were something that, before refrigeration, families would have had in the winter, after other dessert fruits were gone.

Cama Merritt says that cooks in the old days used what they had in the house, so that’s a reasonable theory. She says sweet potato sonker is the crowd favorite at the festival, and people are disappointed if it runs out.

What fans call a dip is traditionally served with sonker, especially the sweet potato variety. Despite the name, it’s a simple sauce of milk, sugar, and vanilla (sometimes cornstarch), cooked until thick, that you pour over your serving to your taste.

Well, now we know. That’s one of the great things about food—just when you think you know it all, you get socked by sonker.

**Maxine Dockery’s Sweet Potato Sonker**

In *North Carolina and Old Salem Cookery* Beth Tartan writes that the woman who gave her this recipe was once called the “Julia Child of sonker.” The pastry she refers to is pie crust. What she calls “topping” is also known as “dip.”

6 to 8 sweet potatoes, cooked and peeled
3 to 4 cups sugar
3 to 4 cups self-rising flour
½ pound (1 cup) butter
Pastry to cover top of pan

**Topping**

Stir ½ cup or more of granulated sugar into 1 to 2 cups sweet milk; heat, stirring. Remove from heat and add 1 teaspoon vanilla. Pour the hot topping over the hot sonker. Serve warm.