

SOUTHERN FRIED SKIING



Blizzards, moonshine, pulled pork, family hills—it's all part of the North Carolina skiing experience.

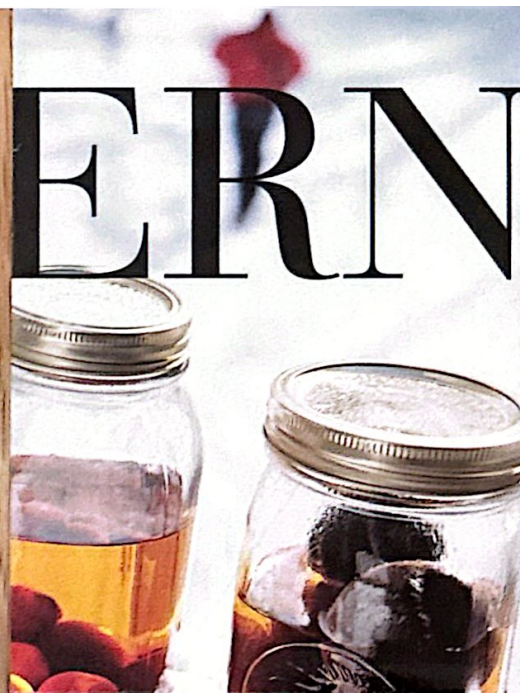
BY LOLLY MERRELL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY VISKO HATFIELD

Basically, you got four distinct types of barbecue in North Carolina," draws the man with the aviator sunglasses as our chair hangs over a mass of denim-clad skiers from the Cumberland County Southern Baptist Church. He looks over the snow-dusted Great Smoky Mountains and gives me his analysis of the South's most popular culinary art form. "In the mountains you got more vinegar, a zing. Move toward the coast, and the flavor mellows. Keep going, and you get a bit more smoky, a little more fat." We don't speak for a moment out of reverence for pulled pork kissed with creamy coleslaw and sandwiched

between the whitest enriched bread. We unload at the summit of 5,300-foot Sugar Mountain, but before my chairlift partner skis away, he leaves me with a barbecue benediction often heard in these parts: "Hope you find a good platter."

As I turn against the jet-engine blast of a snowmaking gun, I realize that this is my third barbecue discussion of the day. The Barbecue Method is the small-talk tool I use to pry open conversations with skiers from Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Florida. Everyone is eager to share their own special recipe for cooking, turning or braising the meat, for dunking it in salty vinegar or dabbing it with sourwood honey. In the Rockies, the conversation would more likely concern a parabolic carve or a real estate deal. But here in Appalachia, chairlift chat reflects enduring Southern interests, and since I know little about stock-car racing or the latest basketball statistics, I go pork.

A Carolina sampler (opposite, clockwise from top left): moonshine; an Appalachian lift; honey; and the Bishops, reserve ski patrollers.





SUGAR MOUNTAIN

Two thirds of the resort's 15 slopes and trails are rated as intermediate and advanced. Snowmakers cover all of Sugar's 100 skiable acres. The season usually lasts from mid-November until mid-March.



My last ski trip to the northwest corner of North Carolina was with a college boyfriend in February 1988. We drove three hours west from Wake Forest in Winston-Salem to Appalachian Mountain, one of the four principle ski areas in the Boone-Banner Elk area near the Tennessee line. After just two runs, a gale-driven rainstorm swept in. Lift operators shut down the chairs, and patrollers evacuated us to a summit warming hut, where they gave us hot chocolate to fend off hypothermia. After an hour, I went outside, squinted through the driving rain down all of 365 vertical feet and picked out my car in the parking lot. The dome light was on. I tried to bargain with a patroller to let us ski down to save the car battery. "You're at altitude here," he warned, guiding me back to my seat. "You just can't hurry things up like at sea level." When I moved from the South to the Rockies in 1990, I told that story to my Colorado friends, shamelessly denigrating my home state's ski hills as I launched into perfect powder and thousands of vertical feet. But I know there's more to skiing in North Carolina than 365-foot verticals and stormy weather. And so do 260,000 other skiers who drive up to 900 miles to hit the Boone-Banner Elk resorts.

Although the four ski areas are within 20 miles of each other, they have their own personalities and dedicated followings. In fact, resort loyalty here can turn into high-spirited partisanship, with more personal jabs and belligerent bumper stickers than a rowdy, old-fashioned mudslinging political campaign. When outsiders criticize any of the Carolina hills, however, watch out: Southern skiers fiercely defend their territory from external slander with a united front.

The resorts here attract the same kinds of skiers as small operations anywhere: first-timers; cautious beginners; and intermediates honing their technique before a trip to marquee mountains out West or in the

Northeast. The small verticals, limited amenities and frequently less-than-perfect conditions in the first ski areas north of Florida don't deter the South's avid sliders. It isn't unusual to see a church group gamefully snowplowing in a hard rain.

Appalachian Mountain, with its well-maintained children's facilities and beginner runs, appeals mainly to families. Sugar Mountain is for more serious skiers, who come for the state's highest verticals (1,200 feet), biggest terrain (20 slopes and trails on 115 acres) and staffers with Olympic experience. Beech Mountain, with 830 vertical feet, 100 skiable acres and the region's fastest quad, lures recreational skiers who hit the resort as much for the terrain as for the numerous restaurants and bars near the ski area. Local politicians, ministers and judges once surreptitiously sampled local sour-mash spirits during the area's Temperance era. Tiny Hawksnest, which has night skiing and a pair of black-diamond runs, attracts the region's speed demons.

On my trip to the resorts last January, the highway from Charlotte, North Carolina, was a droning 18-wheeler thoroughfare until it turned into a two-lane road winding through the foothills of the Smokies. I passed a NASCAR raceway, peach-tree groves, a hand-painted sign announcing HAMS ARE IN and the Blue Ridge Parkway turnoff. The

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traffic was thick with white-knuckled Cadillac drivers braking into icy turns. A storm was moving in, and the mountain laurels that crowded the banked turns held the new snow like deep gravy ladles.

Fifteen inches had fallen by the time I met Dick Trundy, the director of operations at Sugar Mountain. Trundy's office is filled with the sounds of the Weather Channel and the squawk of a walkie-talkie. The 60ish Michigan native is a former marine and two-star general. Photos of bombers and Trundy in his flying days line the wood-paneled walls. He took a journal from a file safe and gave me the 1993 stats, when the last big snowstorm came to town and dropped 30 inches. "The whole place almost shut down," he said with a smile. "I'd hate to say anything too soon, but I think this one will make the top 10."

Hit-or-miss weather almost prevented development of Sugar and Beech mountains. When talk of building ski areas in the South first surfaced in the 1950s, established New England resorts snickered. Annual snowfall in this stretch of the Smokies, however, measures 85 inches, which is comparable to depths in, say, Burlington, Vermont. But the snow usually arrives in two or three big storms, separated by temperatures in the '70s and frequent rain at lower elevations. So when the temperature drops, the resorts' extensive snowmaking kicks in. On most days, you can expect 30 inches of packed powder.

By the late 1970s, the resorts had taken root. Marketing was targeted at skiers south of Maryland, a savvy move since most of the people who drive to the resorts also take the opportunity to visit extended family in ramblers tucked into the surrounding hills. Many people beyond the Bible Belt are unaware of this area's \$180 million ski industry.

You don't need generations of Southern blood or fluency in barbecue to enjoy the mountains. Take Gunther Jöchl, for example, Sugar

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Mountain's general manager. Jöchl is an Austrian with an acquired Southern accent—which I mistook as Cajun—who wants his customers to fall in love with skiing. Jöchl brought Olympic skiers Krista and Kim Schmidinger to the mountain, married Kim and hired Krista to run the ski school. His snowmaking equipment is top of the line, and his mountain—with arctic temperatures and fierce winds at the 5,300-foot summit—is certainly no speed bump. Steep runs flare off the top of frosty Sugar. One of the cruisers doglegs into a terrain park where snowboarders and Big Foot patrons (the resort rents the gear) work on their moves.

At the top of Yellow Lift, I dodged a smattering of hunched intermediates sporting baseball caps embroidered with "Tarheel," "NC State Wolfpack" and "Demon Deacons," then glided over the 4 inches of powder—I couldn't tell whether it was natural or not, thanks to Jöchl's newest snow recipe—to the start of Tom Terrific. There were two mogul patches that started from the top of the mountain, where the bumps were spaced haphazardly, making it more of an obstacle course than a typical Western mogul run. Nevertheless, Tom Terrific took on mythological proportions on the chairlift. "They love the run," Jöchl said that evening as we mowed down the last truck-size lump in a



BEECH MOUNTAIN

Six doubles and a quad whisk sliders up to the peak. The longest of Beech's 14 slopes and trails extends more than 4 miles. The resort also has a terrain park and a halfpipe for snowboarders.





APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN

Owner Grady Moretz (above) oversees an orderly six-lift resort that caters primarily to first-time-skier families. The ski school, home-style lodge food and ice-skating rink are popular features.



brand-new Sno-Cat. "But they don't know how to ski it." We were angled down almost 90 degrees, my feet were against the front wind-shield and the snow was falling so thick that we couldn't see beyond 6 feet. Earlier that afternoon when I first met the barrel-chested Jöchl, he had just walked the entire mountain—in spite of an Achilles injury—to check on his men and his equipment. "I like to see for myself what's happening," he says, "And I like the exercise."

Most of Jöchl's employees are from the hollows in the lowlands and have names like Mushroom, Crooked Bird and Junior. They can tell you five different ways to make moonshine, but they don't know how to ski. Nevertheless, many of the employees at the region's main resorts have worked there for decades.

This familial connection extends to management as well. Beech Mountain was once run by Fred Pfohl, the former mayor of the town of Beech Mountain; the Elder family, who own much of the land, still has kin working in the restaurants and service shops. The traditions nurtured in the centuries-old homesteads have filtered to the ski areas. At Beech, for example, I met members of the ski patrol who are fiddlers, dulcimer players and storytellers in the Southern tradition.

Next I visit Beech Mountain. It takes me almost four hours to get there from Sugar. The resorts are close to each other, but Sugar is only 2 miles off the main highway, and to access Beech you have to negotiate a corkscrew summit road. The road is fine when the weather is clear, but when it snows more than 2 feet, as it has in the last two days, the few snowplows in town are busy clearing the main arteries. I finally catch a shuttle to the ski area, which is hidden entirely in a blizzard whiteout. There are lots of people on the mountain, but they stay on the lower slopes, leaving the steeper trails up top empty. I run into a

college friend who leads me through an untouched expert trail, Southern Star. The powder is so deep that it takes me a while to get into my stance. The run is surprisingly steep, and we manage a nice rhythm, and then it's over. Total descent time: 10 minutes. But no matter, the conditions are better than anything I've skied in the Rockies this year, and our trip back to the top is just as fast as the ski down. But if another foot of snow falls, the mountain will have to shut down.

"In '93 my wife was shuttling biscuits at all hours of the night to people who couldn't get out to find food," Pfohl tells me of the last major blizzard while we settle into lunch. Pfohl, who looks like a lumberjack, owns Fred's Mercantile, the most popular place on Beech Mountain Road. His basement restaurant serves some of the area's finest Southern comfort food. I dig into a delicious pulled-pork sandwich while Pfohl tells me about mountain people. "The area around here is home to some of the best-known Appalachian storytellers, guys like Ray Hicks. He was born in the house that he lives in today." I've heard of Hicks, a sought-after source for Ph.D. students studying Appalachian linguistics. I want to visit with him, but he's bedridden with pneumonia. "Well, if you want history," says Pfohl between exchanging hearty greetings with well-wishers, "you should talk to Grady. He's seen it all."

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Grady Moretz is the patriarch of Appalachian Mountain and the son of a family that owns the largest lumber business in the region. Some ski-industry experts say he runs the most efficient ski resort in the nation. The entire mountain can be skied in 30 minutes, but service is nappy and the layout is well designed to handle chaotic families and stumbling first-time skiers. I'm led through the operation by Grady's son Brad Moretz, who comes across with the earnestness of a country parson. As the assistant general manager at the resort, though, he clearly demonstrates the skills of a keen businessman. "These were made from local pine," he says as we walk past beautifully crafted wooden lockers, recently added to the dressing room near the ski-rental area. The pine, I find out later, is from the family lumber mill in Deep Gap. The ski-rental area is packed with families, and Moretz tells me that most of his skiers don't own equipment and don't want to. "We can let them up completely," he says as we enter the largest clothing-rental operation I've ever seen. Brad's mother, Reba, oversees all apparel purchases and personally chooses every glove, bib and balaclava.

I'm already having a good time, and I haven't even made it to the slope. Once again I'm drawn to the cafeteria and a steaming selection of more great Southern fare. Drowsy with chicken-fried steak, green beans, hush puppies and homemade cake, I head to the mountain to make some turns and see what Appalachian is like with a carpet of new snow instead of the rain-soaked crud I endured a decade earlier. What I notice more than anything is the orderliness of the operation: The lines for the lifts are sectioned into tidy rows with safety gates at each loading point (one of many ideas that Brad lifted from Utah resorts during his reconnaissance missions to the West); a P.A. system reminds skiers that skiing too fast results in ticket revocation; and the lift is so

fast that I'm at the top before I have a chance to reminisce about my life-threatening trip to this same summit years ago or talk pork with strangers. Clearly, improvements have been made.

The mountain is what it is: small. But it's also a good place for first-time-skier families. In many ways, the resort's philosophy is Southern conservative: There's no alcohol or snowboarding, and staffers are all clean-cut. Thanks to these edicts, many regulars feel that their little ones are safe to roam the mountain. Grady doesn't ski, but he's been here for 30 years. "When the other ski areas got started," he draws, "they hired people who just didn't have their hearts in it." He sits in the lounge above the rental area, watching the activity below. "We look for polite, considerate people to work with us. Brad has studied employee relationships, so now I just let him pick the staff. He's better at it."

Brad has also made it clear that he wants to lose the unfair but persistent image of the mountain hillbilly skiing on barrel staves, what he likes to call the "Snuffy Smith problem." But capitalizing on Southern culture is part of the lure for many first-time visitors, and promoting it without sliding into stereotype is a challenge.

Certainly anyone who runs a ski area with as much attention to detail as the Moretzes would like to think that the main draw is, well, the ski area. In fact, Southerners like to ski in this beautiful part of Appalachia because it feels familiar, there are lots of relatives to visit nearby and the resorts have retained their down-home hospitality since they were established three decades ago. And, as happened during my visit to North Carolina, sometimes a storm dumps enough snow to set a record and earn a place in Dick Trundy's file cabinet. ▲

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ESSENTIALS

APPALACHIAN SKI STARS

How to reach and enjoy a quartet of Carolina ski resorts

Getting There: The nearest major airports are in Charlotte (120 miles southeast) and Greensboro (115 miles east). Sugar Mountain is in Banner Elk, 17 miles southwest of Boone via Highway 184. Beech Mountain is another 8 miles west. From Boone, Appalachian Mountain is 2 miles off Highway 321 near the Blue Ridge Parkway turnoff. Hawksnest is 10 miles southwest of Boone on Highway 105. ● **Where to Stay:** The eight-room colonial-era Inn at the Elk River between Sugar and Beech off Highway 194 overlooks rolling hills and Christmas-tree farms. Doubles start at \$95, including breakfast; call (828) 898-9669. Your best bet among the hotels and chalet-style condos on Beech Mountain Road is Archer's Mountain Inn, where 15 rustic rooms have river-rock fireplaces. Doubles are



The Pfohls, owners of Fred's Mercantile, a popular country store-restaurant near Beech

\$75 to \$200, including breakfast and a shuttle to the ski area; call (828) 898-9004. ● **Where to Eat:** Don't miss superb breakfasts with fresh grits and country ham, pulled barbecue-pork sandwiches with coleslaw and other comfort food at Fred's General Mercantile on Beech Mountain Park-

way. Lunch for two, without drinks, is about \$20; call (828) 387-4838. Jackalope's View, farther down Beech Mountain, is a sophisticated bar and restaurant that offers an international beer selection and several daily steak and pasta specials. Dinner for two is \$50; call (828) 898-9004. The Inn at the Elk River's elegant dining room serves mountain trout *almondine*, filet mignon and roasted duck. Dinner for two is \$65; call (828) 898-9669. For a hearty lunch, try the home-style fare at Appalachian Ski Area's lodge restaurant. ● **Ski Details:** Sugar Mountain's adult weekday passes are \$30; weekends and holidays are \$47; call (800) 784-2768. Beech's adult weekday tickets are \$28; weekends and holidays are \$45; night skiing is \$22; call (800) 438-2093. Appalachian's adult weekday tickets are \$21; weekends and holidays are \$32; night skiing is \$17; call (800) 322-2373. Tickets to Hawksnest are \$22 for weekdays, \$39 for weekends and holidays and \$25 for night; call (888) 429-5763.

ALTERNATIVES

More Mountain Adventure

Forested backcountry surrounding the resorts has attracted snow-sports enthusiasts since the 1930s.

Telemark and cross-country: Locals ski the cave-pocked slopes of 5,964-foot Grandfather Mountain and the untracked bowls of 6,300-foot Roan Mountain, accessible from the Appalachian Trail. Rental gear is available at the Pineola Inn and Ski Shop near Banner Elk; call (828) 733-4979. **Snowboarding:** Riders generate almost half the business at Sugar, Beech and Hawksnest; snowboarding is not allowed on Appalachian. Rentals are available from the Alpine Ski Center in Banner Elk; call (828) 898-9701.

Hiking: Valley trails ascend to overlooks with views to Tennessee and lead to waterfalls fringed with icicles. The U.S. Forest Service backcountry manager provides updates on snow conditions and trail maps; call (828) 733-2013.