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Newsletter of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor



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ANN ARBOR

AUG 13 2004

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"LET THEM EAT MUSKRAT"

by Dennis M. Au

Dennis Au is a native of Monroe, MI and a descendant of the French-Canadian pioneers who settled there in the 1700s at the mouth of the River Raisin. He holds an M.A. degree in history museum studies and American folklife studies from the State University of New York. After working for 15 years as Assistant Director of the Monroe County Historical Museum, Dennis moved in the late 1980s to Evansville, IN, where he is the Historic Preservation Officer. A past President of the Center for French Colonial Studies (Naperville, IL), he is the author of several works, including the book War on the Raisin: a Narrative Account of the War of 1812 in the River Raisin Settlement, Michigan Territory (1981). The article below originally appeared in Digest: An Interdisciplinary Study of Food and Foodways Vol. 8 No. 1 (Spring 1988) and is reprinted here by permission of the author.

"Let Them Eat Muskrat: Marie Antoinette 1987" is what the bumper stickers say. It sounds bizarre. But this bit of ephemera—this rallying cry—is a part of a campaign that has pitted state regulators and ordinance enforcers against a foodway that has come to represent an ethnic group and to define a culture region. This controversy and a related problem with fasting rules of the Catholic Church have raged on in southeastern Michigan from Port Huron in the north to the Ohio border in the south. It is an interesting case that lays bare the importance of a foodway in culture.

When the State of Michigan and the Archbishop of Detroit took on the muskrat they were tackling a tradition with deep historic roots. Although the documentary evidence is non-existent, we assume that the early French *voyageurs* who settled Detroit and Monroe, Michigan in the 18th Century were introduced to this North American delicacy by the Indians. The foodway became established in the French homesteads to such an extent that by the end of the 19th Century these people and their dialect were dubbed "Mushrat French."¹ The muskrat tradition is without question the most vibrant aspect of French folk culture to survive.

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REFERENCE

MUSKRAT AND THE EARLY FRENCH SETTLERS

by Laurie K. Schultz

Laurie Schultz of Monroe, MI is a descendent of French-Canadians who settled in about 1805 in that area, where the River Raisin drains into Lake Erie. Laurie is a member of the Genealogical Society of Monroe County and editor of its newsletter, the G.S.M.C. Record. This article is reprinted, with her permission, from the August 2003 issue of that newsletter (Vol. 27, No. 3).

With the recent decision to use the muskrat as a tourist attraction or a piece of our tradition to draw attention to Monroe,¹ I thought it appropriate to elaborate on this little water creature that has been placed on kitchen tables in Monroe for many years. Although some would turn up their noses at the very thought of eating muskrat, Vern Sneider, Monroe's author, stated in his article "The Land of the Muskrat Eaters" that he just assumed everyone ate muskrat. It was available to buy at most meat markets (in the days of the meat market), and his family had it at least once a week when he was a kid growing up. His neighbors had it, too. As Vern went off to the university they asked him incredulously, "You mean you eat that?" Later, on a troop ship in the Pacific, they expressed it more bluntly.

When Vern questioned the editor of a national outdoor magazine about eating muskrat, the editor replied, "I never saw a muskrat recipe before. Are you sure?" Vern mentioned that, in fact, its edibility is so little known that even *Larousse Gastronomique*, the bible of cookery, carries no mention of it. Thus, it is a true regional dish, a part of what the French call *la cuisine régionale*. "We're proud of this, our contribution to the culinary world," Vern said.

A legend persists in Monroe that local Catholics, forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, successfully petitioned the Pope in Rome to declare the muskrat to be a fish since it seems to live mostly in and around water. With the lake frozen and fish inaccessible, the

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MUSKRAT & THE FRENCH

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muskrats were easily accessible and plentiful for the humble, early Monroe French settlers. Decades later, at a 1938 meeting of the Monroe Exchange Club, several members claimed the local arguments were powerful enough to gain a special dispensation from the ecclesiastical authorities to permit the eating of muskrat in the Monroe vicinity on Fridays or fast days. No paper document has yet come to light in support of this legend but not for lack of believers, stated Vern.

Local Reau families stated that the tradition started in the winter of 1813 when their family members were driven from their homes during the aftermath of the Battle of the River Raisin.² Fleeing south across the ice, they ended up on Guard Island in North Maumee Bay, near what is now Toledo. When Father Gabriel Richard found them huddled together there in some native huts, they were starving and asked for dispensation to eat muskrat on Friday. Father Richard granted their wish. Since then, the settlers in the bay area (today called Erie Township) have claimed the dispensation applied only to them, not to the rest of the French of Monroe or Newport, further north.

The land of the muskrat French stretched from Port Huron (at the southern tip of Lake Huron) southward through eastern Michigan and along the Lake Erie shoreline of Ohio.

Regardless of the early legends, muskrat dinners are here to stay. The meal is served with beer, celery, coleslaw, and mashed potatoes. Just in case you are unable to attend one of the many muskrat dinners held annually in Monroe



Minnesota Trappers Association,
mntrappers.com

County, I've included the recipe below. That way, you can enjoy this traditional meal at your convenience and on your own kitchen table. Find a local Frenchman and invite him over! ■

Repast Editor's Notes

1. In May 2003, the Monroe County Convention & Tourism Bureau commissioned a prototype for a series of public 4-foot-tall painted fiberglass muskrat statues, conceived as a way to attract more visitors to the city and to spark interest in local history.
2. Reau is the surname of an early French family in the Erie area of Monroe County. They and their descendants have long been associated with the Lake Erie marsh, where muskrats are caught every winter.

Sources

Interview with Mary Ellen VanWasshenova, Battlefield Visitor Center, Monroe.
Vern Sneider, "The Land of the Muskrat Eaters," *Monroe Evening News* 17 May 2003.

Repast

Published quarterly by the
Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor (CHAA)

Editor.....Randy K. Schwartz
CHAA President.....Carroll Thomson
CHAA Program Chair.....Julie Lewis
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For information about memberships, subscriptions,
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Randy K. Schwartz
1044 Greenhills Drive
Ann Arbor, MI 48105-2722
tel. 734-662-5040
Rschw45251@aol.com

Recipe for Cooking Muskrat *La Cuisine Régionale*

1. Clean the animal and remove all musk glands (in legs and shoulders) and as much fat as possible. Parboil in unsalted water for 20 minutes. Run cold water over the parboiled carcass to set the remaining fat. Now remove all fat.
2. Parboil a second time with celery, onions, bay leaf, apple and salt for 1½ to 2 hours. These two parboilings may be done the day before and the muskrat refrigerated until ready for use.
3. When ready for use, put the parboiled muskrat in a roaster. Cover with cream-style corn. Place strips of bacon on top and dot with butter. Cook at 350° F. until the meat falls from the bones, about 2 hours. About ½ hour before removing from the roaster, pour cream sherry over the corn-muskrat combination.

Bon Appétit!

"LET THEM EAT MUSKRAT" *continued from page 1*

In the 20th Century this foodway spread beyond the French. Both Germans of Monroe County and the Poles in Down River Detroit have taken it on as their own. The most important manifestation of muskrat tradition outside the home environment are public dinners that annually attract hundreds. Since 1902 churches, sports clubs, and veterans' organizations have held muskrat dinners as fundraisers. They are such an important aspect of social and cultural interaction that politicians consider it imperative to attend the dinners.

As a food, muskrat has well-defined rules for preparation. The rodent must be trapped in the winter.² It is imperative to remove all fat and musk glands³ before the animal is parboiled with onions, celery and spices. When tender, the rat is then either fried with onions or roasted with creamed corn. This twice-cooked process is essential. Those who eliminate one stage of this process are regarded as violators of cultural mores.

The wholesomeness of muskrat is possibly assured by this strictly maintained cooking process. However, the inspectors of the Michigan Department of Agriculture regarded the situation differently. On Ash Wednesday, 1987, the *Detroit Free Press* ran a feature story on Kola's Kitchen, a Down River restaurant that served muskrat to customers observing the meatless fast. The story not only hit the press wire; it also attracted the attention of both the Archbishop of Detroit and the inspectors at the Department of Agriculture. For as long as anyone could remember, muskrat had been benignly neglected during inspections of restaurants and meat markets. But prodded into action by the extensive press coverage, the Department of Agriculture banned the public sale of muskrat, citing the lack of facilities and regulations to inspect the meat officially.

Devotees of muskrat and especially those who coordinated the public dinners were outraged. A great hue and cry went up for action. It was as though the State had banned the sale of apple pies at church bazaars. The state representative from Monroe County, Jerry Bartnick, who had already attended six muskrat dinners that year, took on the fight. Commissioner Richard Reed from Monroe County also took action and organized a protest demonstration at the county court house. By this time, the great groundswell of community members was matched by the media, who saw an opportunity to make something out of what they perceived as people eating "rats." The media attended the protest demonstration of April 15 in full force; local press, major newspapers and television from Detroit and Toledo were on hand to record the event.

On the evening of the protest demonstration, two other community issues had also attracted crowds of supporters and protesters. At issue were the licensing and operation of the Fermi II nuclear power plant and a bid to locate the Superconducting Super Collider. However, it was the muskrat issue that brought the crowd, dwarfing the other two issues. The county commission adopted a resolution supporting Representative Bartnick, who had until the fall either to work out a deal with the Department of Agriculture or to pass special legislation.

During the summer, muskrat was again in the spotlight. It was selected as a Michigan foodways presentation at the 1987 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, along with three

local residents closely identified with muskrat foodways traditions.⁴ The pride brought by this attention sustained the community for a while, but as a new winter season approached, the status of muskrats and public muskrat dinners was still confusing. Representative Bartnick unofficially informed the organizers of public dinners that the Department of Agriculture would ignore muskrat until legislation could be passed that would exempt all wild game from inspection when served by non-profit organizations. Despite the uncertainty of this oral, informal assurance, the organizers made preparations for this season's public dinners. Promotion was limited to word of mouth among the large number of loyal devotees.

The dinners were in full swing until January, 1988, when a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* investigated what seemed to be a violation of the law. The worst fears of the organizers were realized: the Director of the Department of Agriculture denied that an agreement had been made with Representative Bartnick to allow uninspected muskrats to be served at public dinners. Bartnick and Senator Chris Dingell quickly pushed through a "Sense of the Legislature" resolution stating that it had not been the intent of the elected houses to include wild game dinners of non-profit organizations in the meat inspection regulations.

In the meantime, ways and means were found to meet the demand for muskrat on the local level and to continue the dinners, despite regulations. Some solutions were reminiscent of Prohibition. Market owners, who had been instructed to dispose of their supply of muskrats, removed the advertisements and relied on a network of patrons to spread the word about where muskrats could be purchased. Not unlike obtaining booze in the Roaring '20s, only a face-to-face request of the market owner at the appropriate time would produce a muskrat from his concealed store.

The planners of public dinners and Kola's Kitchen, the restaurant that started the controversy, came up with a timely solution to keep muskrat on the table: they imported muskrat. The source of meat for the public dinners was Ohio, a state that does not regulate muskrat; Kola's Kitchen imported muskrat from Canada, where the inspection is perfunctory. Because the meat crossed borders, it was outside the jurisdiction of state inspectors.

The controversy with the Archbishop of Detroit also began with the article in the *Detroit Free Press* on Ash Wednesday, 1987. The article reported that one of the Archbishop's priests had affirmed that a dispensation had been made declaring muskrat a fish so people of the region could eat it on days of abstinence. The Archbishop was appalled at this statement and a frantic search was made of the archdiocese archives, but no dispensation was found. The Archbishop decreed that muskrat no longer could be eaten as fish.

The people were outraged at yet another disregard for a long-standing tradition. Many had been told of the legendary dispensation by priests and nuns, and they cite a priest's petition to the bishop (or Pope) to grant this favor to alleviate the suffering wrought by the War of 1812 (or in updated versions, the Great Depression). In the past this belief was accorded some respect. Father Lambert LaVoy, an elderly

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priest who grew up in the area, said that he had been asked hundreds of times in the confessional whether muskrat and diving ducks could be eaten as fish. While not affirming that a dispensation existed, Father LaVoy simply asked the person whether it was fish or flesh. If the answer was fish, he assured the individual that they could eat it as such. But if the response was flesh, he reminded the person that they must not violate the fast.

The Archbishop's decree was without such latitude. The people believed in what they had once been told and were not about to change. Even some of the bishops took action. In his monthly column in the *Michigan Catholic*, Bishop Kenneth Povich supported the muskrat eaters. He remembered that this very question had been resolved in his diocese in 1956 when the bishop declared that the tradition was of such antiquity that it was an "immemorial custom" and, hence, allowed by Canon Law. With a remark that echoes that of many outsiders, he ended his article with an expression of disdain for muskrat as food: "anyone who could eat muskrat was doing penance worthy of the greatest of the saints."

Conceptions of what is or is not edible are part of the issue. In a knee-jerk reaction, the state quickly banned muskrat (a rodent) as unacceptable (uneatable). The media exploited the situation to amuse their audience with stories of an aberration of acceptable cuisine. Both ethnocentric views ignored the cultural mechanisms that have functioned for over a century to assure a wholesome, "clean" food specialty.

The question of muskrat in state law and Canon Law is still unresolved.⁵ For the lovers of the rodent, there has never been much of a question: they will eat muskrat, and they will eat it as fish, even if it means defying authorities. This defiance brings to light the cultural importance of food. Obviously, muskrat is more than just a food or a recipe. Among other things it has come to represent an ethnic group and to define a region. People eat it to assure a continuance of tradition, one that dates back to their great great grandparents, and, thereby, to reassert their ethnic heritage. In the grand scheme of life, these people place this muskrat tradition head and shoulders above issues of nuclear power and high-tech jobs. And it will survive, with or without the support of the state, the Church, and the press. ■

Repeat Editor's Notes

1. "Mushrat" was, and remains, the standard local pronunciation.
2. This is the period, from about mid-November to late January, when temperatures remain below freezing and before muskrat mating season has begun.
3. Otherwise, an unpleasantly "gamey" aroma and flavor will result.
4. Au's 1987 work with the Smithsonian and Michigan Folklife Festivals was carried out jointly with CHAA member Yvonne R. Lockwood, Curator of Folklife at the Michigan State University Museum. A fuller treatment can be found in their article "Mushrat on the Mall and on Campus," *Folklore in Use* 2:2 (1994), pp. 253-262.
5. Eventually, the Michigan legislature passed an ordinance that waived Department of Agriculture inspections for wild meat served at churches, clubs, and charity dinners.

MONROE MUSKRAT

This article originally appeared in the Monroe [Michigan] Democrat for May 13, 1910, page 1, column 1. We have downloaded it from the "Bygones of Monroe" web page of the Monroe County Library, www@monroe.lib.mi.us.

"Uncle Jim" Wilson, secretary of agriculture, is at last up to date.¹ At least he is beginning to catch up with Monroe in his knowledge and appreciation of our muskrats as an article of food. A short time ago Sec. Wilson got nationwide publicity and made his name a household word— especially in the kitchen— by his *Uncle Sam's Cookbook*, in which he told how to make high toned dishes out of low breed cuts of meat. But his latest booklet, telling of the muskrat and incidentally giving Monroe prominent mention therein, has on its first appearance drawn ever wider attention, particularly from the cartoonists and newspaper paragraphers. His awakening to the fact that the muskrat is good to eat, leads a clean private life, knows how to do his own sanitary plumbing, keeps his back yard and front yard clean without proclamation from the mayor of Muskrat Town, is a strict vegetarian, has a heavy fur that feels very soft and snug in the winter time— all this is being hailed by the press as a piece of alert statesmanship and is viewed by many as a genuine, startling, sensational discovery.

But down here in Monroe all these facts are decidedly ancient history, and could have been obtained from our French citizens a hundred years ago, and in far more picturesque language than that of "Uncle Jim's" book. But let's be thankful that he has finally come up with us and given official status to the hundreds of our citizens of all nationalities, who eat muskrat regularly in season and also out of season. With this government O.K. to refer to, it will no longer be necessary for us to apologize for our supposedly vulgar taste. "Uncle Jim's" book gives the muskrats' pedigree unto the primeval generations and sets them up with a family tree that will enable them henceforth to travel with head erect in the best of game society.

Still, the secretary of agriculture has not quite caught up with us. Eating muskrat is no longer the novelty, mark of distinction, sign of individuality or proof of eccentricity that it was considered by the world outside of Monroe. The yacht club's muskrat carnivals have educated whole counties to the merits of the rat. Mr. Wilson's rediscovery of the muskrat is hardly a thriller for us, but it enables us to get into the told you so class with bells on. He seems to have missed the fact, however, that those who love the muskrat, most call him "mushrat." But in return for his official endorsement of our favorite four footed "vegetable" we perhaps had better meet him halfway and accept the bon-ton spelling.

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MONROE MUSKRAT *continued from page 4*

The secretary's booklet has 38 pages and in urging the public to try muskrat meat, he cites the example of the Monroe Marsh club as one of his leading arguments.

"The muskrat dinners of the Monroe Marsh club... have been celebrated for many years. Nearly a dozen years ago, when the club desired the enactment of a law to protect the muskrat in the marshes adjoining the Great Lakes, they packed the chefs off to Lansing and invited the entire legislature to partake of their hospitality. The chief dish was muskrat, but no hint of it was given out until the banquet was over. Then the toastmaster informed the guests that the club desired to have a law passed giving protection to the excellent game of which all had just partaken. That was muskrat. The law went through."

The book further gives the information that there is already a considerable demand in different parts of the country for muskrat meat. It even cites the market price at various points and tells that the carcasses sell for from seven to ten cents each around Chesapeake Bay country, while in Michigan they find a ready sale at 15 to 20 cents, the dealers finding customers for all they can secure. The value of the fur is also commented upon in the book. It says that the total value of the muskrat fur exceeds that of the Seal Islands of the Bering Sea, and that the demand for it will increase as other sources of fur supply diminish or disappear. Muskrat pelts have been on the London market since 1760 and the sale has increased steadily every year, until in 1906 the London market bought no less than 5,300,000 muskrat skins.

Sec. Wilson advocates the starting of muskrat farms, and in the book gives instances of the big money being made by some. He tells of one man who bought up a piece of marsh for \$2,700 three or four years ago and leased it to a trapper for half of the fur, and made 33 1/3 percent on his investment. Another man bought 49 acres of marsh for \$150 and his income from muskrats, figured at 6 percent, makes his farm worth \$40.00 per acre. The owner of one tract of 1200 acres trapped it last season and secured more than 5,000 skins which he sold for \$2,300. The Cedar Point Hunting Club of Toledo owns 5,000 acres of marsh at the mouth of the Maumee River and in one month, January 1904, took 5,000 skins, which were sold for 25 cents each. ■

Repast Editor's Note

1. James Wilson, of Iowa, served as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture from 1897 to 1913 under Presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft.

REPORT ON C.H.A.A. FALL PROGRAMS

We were delighted listening to our three CHAA presentations this autumn, which were given by informative speakers all of whom had previously presented to our group on other topics.

"Let's Go Nuts Together" was the enthusiastic title of the Sept. 21 program by **Linda and Fred Griffith**. These Cleveland-based authors described some of the legwork they carried out in writing their sixth book, *Nuts: Recipes from Around the World that Feature Nature's Perfect Ingredient* (St. Martin's Press, 2003). A cookbook with 200 recipes, it's also a comprehensive treatment of nuts, both true nuts as well as peanuts, chestnuts, and coconuts. The Griffiths visited a 4900-acre pecan grove in Georgia owned by Turkish immigrants, and included a Circassian recipe of pounded nuts and pounded chicken from a relative of these farmers, the chef-owner of Ayse's Café in Ann Arbor. In California, the Griffiths hunted down producers of almonds, walnuts, and pistachios. In Italy, they visited growers of chestnuts and, in the Piemonte, the Ferrero hazelnut concern, which also produces Nutella® spread, torrone, and other sweets. In Kerala state, India, they visited leading coconut plantations and cashew groves. They also did historical research, tracking down nut uses in places like John Gerard's herbal (1597) and Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery* (1796).

CHAA members **Patricia Pooley and Raquel Agranoff** shared their "Moveable Feast Memories" with us on Oct. 19. Pat and Ricky are two of the founders of The Moveable Feast, the acclaimed Ann Arbor restaurant, bakery, and catering business. Meeting in a women's group in 1968 and inspired by Julia Child's cookery, the five bought a shop in Kerrytown by the Farmer's Market to sell their own French sourdough bread, croissants, fruit tarts, patés, and quiches. Overcoming some unfamiliarity with equipment and undercapitalization, they were soon catering for large affairs and charity events. In 1983, they expanded to a restored 1870 house on the Old West Side with space for a dining room and a wine cellar, setting a pattern of cooking excellence and slow-paced elegance for local restaurants to follow. "Every woman who can read thinks she can cook," Irma Rombauer once said, but commercial cooking is very different from home cooking, and even in the 1970s there were major barriers to woman entrepreneurs. Today, 65% of new food enterprises fail within one year.

Jeffrey R. Parsons, University of Michigan anthropology professor, gave a Nov. 16 slide talk, "Edible Aquatic Insects in Chimalhuacan, Mexico: Survival of a Prehispanic Economy." Through fieldwork and excavations in the central Valley of Mexico, as well as historical research, Jeffrey and his wife Mary have reconstructed how insects and other aquatic life were systematically harvested from lakes and marshes in prehispanic times. Several local *pescador* families survive, using nets to scoop the insects. These are eaten fresh locally, or sun-dried for sale in Mexico City. There, they can be ground by *metate* into a protein-rich paste that is eaten with *tortillas* or mixed into scrambled eggs, soups, and stews. Insect eggs, gathered from uprooted aquatic plants, are served as delicacies in fine urban restaurants. It was the Parsonses who interested the cookbook writer Diana Kennedy in exploring such insect dishes. ■

A DINNER TRIBUTE TO JAMES BEARD

Nearly 40 members of the CHAA made their way through a snowstorm to gather at the Huntington Woods Public Library this past December 14. There, we assembled the meal that we'd prepared, each and all, in celebration of the centennial of pathbreaking American cookbook author James Andrew Beard (May 5, 1903 – Jan. 21, 1985).

The large room where we dined, in the library of an affluent Detroit suburb, was lined with a display of artworks— one of them by CHAA member Linda Doros—that had been created in a benefit for local homeless people.

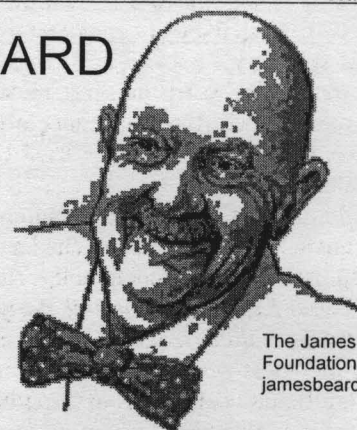
A Quilt of Childhood Memories

Many of the dishes that we brought to this dinner can be traced back to James Beard's childhood in the Pacific Northwest. "In Portland, when I was young," Beard recalled in introducing one of his recipes, "the hominy man passed through our neighborhood in his little horse-drawn cart twice a week. Friendly and pleasant, he sold horseradish as well as hominy, and carried all the gossip with him." It was this recipe that CHAA member Ann Evans Larimore followed in making creamed hominy, simple but delicious. The moist kernels of hulled corn are simmered in butter and cream, then seasoned with chopped parsley, salt, and pepper.

Salmon tartare [made by Margot Michael] and marinated spiced shrimp [Barbara Staples] are two dishes that reflect Beard's fondness for seafood, instilled from a young age. Salmon, trout, and other Columbia River fish are a major asset of Portland, which was his home town. James' father, John Beard, was an appraiser at the Customs House of that inland port. His mother, Mary Elizabeth Jones, a feminist-minded woman from Wiltshire, England intensely interested in cookery, ran her own boarding house, the 3½-story Gladstone. One of her three Chinese cooks, whom she trained herself, would play a huge role in raising James.

The youngster and his mother spent a good part of their summers at a cottage that she bought in the beachside resort town of Gearhart, OR, near the mouth of the Columbia. They would make meals from whatever foods they'd caught or gathered: salmon, halibut, sturgeon, and Dungeness crab from the Pacific; razor clams, crayfish, and oysters from beaches and streams; berries, game, fresh peas, and Tillamook farmhouse cheddar. Sometimes they would eat in the tiny cottage, cooking on the wood stove there; otherwise they would carry the meal in a picnic basket to the dunes, or build a fire and grill out in the open air. Robert Clark, Seattle author of *The Solace of Food: A Life of James Beard* (1993), writes that these meals at Gearhart were "the food that would blanket James' memory and consciousness like a warm, slightly frayed but freshly laundered quilt for the rest of his life" (p. 45).

Back at the Beard house, on Salmon Street at 21st in Portland, a dish of scalloped oysters [made by Julie Lewis] was traditional for Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's a rich dish, baked casserole-style with cream, butter, and cracker crumbs. Beard wrote that he was also sometimes lucky



The James Beard Foundation,
jamesbeard.org

enough to sample oysters cooked in a sherry/velouté sauce and served in warmed patty shells, a fashionable *hors d'oeuvre* that his mother prepared for late-evening supper parties. But they also ate oysters in more routine ways. By the time Beard was growing up, the coast was rich with beds of transplanted Eastern oysters as well as the native Olympia species. "I was brought up on these," he wrote of Harry Hamblet's Fried Oysters, a recipe named for one of the men who introduced Eastern oysters to the Northwest.

Game and fowl were also highly appreciated. In autumn, the Beards often ate roast duck or pheasant, served with squares of polenta. The turkey breast at our meal, prepared by Kay Oldstrom, was served Swedish-style with lingonberry preserves.

A typical winter dinner at the Beard home might feature roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, following a warming bowl of tomato soup. Looking back late in life, Beard reflected that in his childhood years "soups played a much more important part in diet than they now do. Many families had a soup every night at dinner, and soup and salad luncheons or dinners were common. Nearly every kitchen boasted a stockpot, and soup bones were given away by the family butcher for the asking." He went on to give a recipe for Hot Beef Borsht [prepared by Doris Miller] that he said he'd known since he was young. The soup, introduced by Russian immigrant communities in cities like Portland and Seattle, is made with beef stock, diced beef (Doris used brisket), shredded beets and cabbage, chopped potatoes and onions, lemon juice, and sugar. By the 1930s, some decent Russian restaurants had appeared in Portland, along with Chinese, Italian, and German.

In one of many articles he later wrote for *Woman's Day* magazine, Beard gave his mother's recipe for 1-2-3-4 Cake [prepared by Toni Hopping], which he said was a standard in their house for birthdays and other occasions. It was a layer cake that had evolved from a very old and simple loaf cake named for its key ingredients (1 cup butter, 2 cups sugar, 3 cups flour, 4 eggs). On picnics, the Beards often carried a Chess Pie or Chess Tarts [John and Carroll Thomson]. Beard claimed that his chess tart recipe was the historically accurate one, with brown sugar, chopped walnuts, raisins or dates, orange or grape juice or sherry, and a cream and egg custard. These tarts, he said, were especially popular at tea time in New England and the Virginias, a sign of their British provenance. (For a summary of theories of the origin of the name "chess pie," see John F. Mariani's *Dictionary of American Food and Drink* [1994].)

Finding a Place in the World

By the time he was a young man, Beard was dreaming of being an actor. He lived in Europe for several years studying voice and theater, and he tried to make it on the New York stage, but his career never really took off. Back in Portland in his 30's, searching for a more reliable source of income, in quick succession he launched a catering business, a food shop, and his first cookbook, *Hors d'Oeuvre and Canapés, With a Key to the Cocktail Party* (1940). Each of these featured *hors d'oeuvre* that were more substantial and impressive than most people had seen before, and they were very successful. His next two books continued to showcase the types of cooking that he'd learned from his mother: *Cook It Outdoors* (1941) and *Fowl and Game Cookery* (1944).

After the foods of his childhood, the foods of Beard's travels abroad exerted the greatest influence on his cooking career. From Dec. 1942 to Dec. 1945, with war raging, he worked as a roving manager for the United Seamen's Service, which ran clubs and hotels for the U.S. Merchant Marine. Beard set up canteens for sailors in Puerto Rico, Rio de Janeiro, Cristobal in Panama, Naples, and Marseilles. Violating official policy, he introduced local recipes into these clubs.

Moving to New York after the war, Beard compiled *The Fireside Cookbook* (1949), a comprehensive and lavish 1,000-recipe work that established his reputation. "America has the opportunity, as well as the resources," he foresaw in its pages, "to create for herself a truly national cuisine that will incorporate all that is best in the traditions of the many people who have crossed the seas to form our new, still young nation." Beard began to appear frequently on TV and radio while continuing his travels across North America and Europe, giving cooking demonstrations, meeting with chefs, and sampling new dishes.

In these years, Beard also worked part-time as a salesman at Sherry Wine & Spirits (forerunner of the Sherry-Lehmann Wine Store), a Madison Avenue establishment owned by Sam Aaron and his family. At one point, Aaron sent him to Paris to prepare the ground for establishing a branch office there. Beard's subsequent book *Paris Cuisine* (1952), co-authored with Alexander Watt, benefited from a push by California food writer Helen Evans Brown. Beard and Aaron also worked together to write *How to Eat Better for Less Money* (1954), not surprisingly one of the few Beard cookbooks that dispenses much advice about wine. For instance, the authors commend Beaujolais if it's consumed "as soon as possible." Appropriately, Dan Longone supplied our meal with bottles of Georges Duboeuf's Beaujolais Nouveau.

How to was a welcome departure from prevailing trends in American cooking. The co-authors vowed to "stimulate the imagination and challenge the ingenuity" of the home cook; in postwar America, with its canned-soup casseroles and other high-convenience family fare, this was tantamount to heresy! Salt cod [Joanne and Art Cole], for instance, inexpensive and delicious, is hardly a snap to prepare, since it has to be soaked ahead for hours and then gently simmered before use. It's introduced in this book as a favored ingredi-



Salmon tartare, prepared by Margot Michael [photo: Randy Schwartz]

ent in many European countries and in New England (it should also be noted that codfish balls, along with other New England foods like brown bread and baked beans, were traditions that had been brought to Oregon by early settlers and had become fixtures there). The Coles prepared for us one of the book's four recipes for salt cod, substituting real polenta for the called-for cornmeal. "For us, this has been one of James Beard's most useful books," the Coles wrote. "We bought it as a young married couple, and it was an introduction both to James Beard and to simple but adventuresome cooking."

In 1955, Beard began teaching cooking classes right out of his Greenwich Village brownstone, and in the 1960s he established a second school in Seaside, OR, just south of Gearhart. One of his star pupils at Seaside would be Marion Cunningham, who became Beard's protégé and went on to publish a revision of the 1896 *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* in 1979.

Increasingly, Beard was including in his writings European-style recipes borrowed from his travels and from professional chefs. His take on Continental bread [prepared by Sherry Sundling], which he modeled after the breads found in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Cuba, was included in *The James Beard Cookbook* (1959), the book that thrust him to center stage in the U.S. food scene. Roquefort Mousse with Seafood Salad [also Sherry Sundling], a recipe published in *James Beard's Theory and Practice of Good Cooking* (1977), was created by Helen Corbitt, Director of Restaurants for Neiman Marcus in Dallas. Pastitsio for a Crowd [Jean Kluge], which appeared in *Beard on Pasta* (1983), came from Leon Lianides, Greek owner of the Coach House Restaurant in Greenwich Village.

The Grand Synthesis

For two months in the summer of 1966, Beard lived in Provence, southern France, at a residence of Simone Beck, Julia Child's co-author for *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*; Julia and Paul Child had a home just down the road. It was during these months that Beard first conceived of writing something along the lines of *Mastering the Art* for American food. After he returned to the States, biographer Robert Clark said, Beard "immersed himself" in community

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JAMES BEARD DINNER

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cookbooks, spending at least \$100/month at local antiquarian bookshops.

It speaks very highly of Beard that he made such efforts to dig deeply among the roots of American cookery. As Clark put it in *The Solace of Food*, "He was perhaps the most curious, cosmopolitan, and unbigoted person in his profession" (pp. 253-4). Later, this was brought home in a striking way for our founder, Jan Longone, when she received a phone call from him one day in 1984. Beard, the octogenarian and major cooking celebrity, wanted to review an exhibit on American culinary history that the Longones had assembled at the Clements Library.

A product of years of such curiosity and research, and the crowning achievement of his career, was *James Beard's American Cookery* (1972). Named after the first American cookbook, Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery* (1796), this work of over 800 pages synthesized what Beard considered the best techniques from the entire course of American culinary history. The book restored regional ingredients and traditions that had all but disappeared, and it rescued recipes that had languished in obscurity.

An example that suggests the general approach of this book is its discussion of Country Captain [made by Randy Schwartz], a curry of chicken, tomatoes, toasted almonds, and currants, which is especially popular in the Southern U.S., particularly in the Carolina Low Country. First, Beard quotes the earliest published recipe he can find—from *Miss Leslie's New Cookery Book* (Philadelphia, 1857)—in its entirety, including her prefatory note explaining that the dish was brought by the British from East India, where it was likely introduced to English tables by a captain of the "country" troops, i.e., of the native Sepoy fighters hired by the colonists. Next, Beard gives a version from Alexander Filippini, chef at the famed Delmonico's Restaurant in New York in the early years of the 1900s, noting why his recipe is an advance over Eliza Leslie's. Finally, he gives a version from The Florence Crittenton League's charity cookbook *Specialty of the House* (New York, 1955); this recipe had been refurbished by A.P. food columnist Cecily Brownstone, who was fascinated by the dish and had studied it thoroughly.

James Beard's Essential Contribution

As we selected and prepared James Beard's recipes for this dinner, we were struck by the fact that his earliest ones had sometimes become outmoded in certain ways. Largely that is a measure of the very success that he, Julia Child, and others had had in rousing the taste buds of American diners. As markets in the U.S. offered a greater variety of foodstuffs, and as palates grew more sophisticated, repeatedly Beard found himself writing new, updated editions of his older works.

We noted above that in making their saltcod dish, the Coles decided to replace cornmeal—the relatively bland stuff sold in cylindrical drums, degerminated to prolong its shelf life—with polenta, which is available in this country today much more widely than it had been before. Bob



Roquefort Mousse with Seafood Salad, prepared by Sherry Sundling [photo: Randy Schwartz]

Lusardi, who made Shrimp Fritters from *James Beard's New Fish Cookery* (1976), found them plain and decided to add ingredients like buttermilk, cornmeal, and horseradish. Pat Cornett, who made us several different kinds of bread from *Beard on Bread* (1973), mentioned that she'd had to reduce the amount of salt and adjust the yeast in the recipes. And Jan Longone noted that in *James Beard's Menus for Entertaining* (1965), the recipe that she followed for Mushroom and Barley Casserole calls simply for "mushrooms," reflecting the fact that white buttons were virtually the only type of mushroom widely available at the time.

By 1976's *New Fish Cookery*, Beard was calling for "Italian mushrooms" (nowadays routinely known by their Italian name, *porcini*, in U.S. markets) in his recipe for Cioppino [prepared by Richard McDonald]. Earlier, in 1941, Beard had included a recipe for "Chippino" in *Cook It Outdoors*. Introduced to coastal California by Portuguese and Italian immigrants, Cioppino is a stew of seafood, tomatoes, and red wine; Richard's version used sea bass and chopped Dungeness crab. "It's a great recipe—I didn't find it boring at all," Richard told us at our dinner. "James Beard makes you passionate about food. He introduced us to these ingredients, and taught us to cook with what we have and what we like. He taught us how to love food like this."

In 1980, when a paperback edition of his *American Cookery* was released, Beard led off his Introduction with this paragraph:

In the years since this book was first published in 1972, the stature of American cookery has grown tremendously. Whereas eight years ago people sneered at the notion that there was such a thing as an American cuisine, today more and more people are forced to agree that we have developed one of the more interesting cuisines of the world. It stresses the products of the soil, native traditions, and the gradual integration of many ethnic forms into what is now American cooking.

It's a passage that registers well the changes James Beard and his colleagues had helped bring about in the world of food, showing why it's fitting that Beard is known as "the Father of American Gastronomy."

BOOK REVIEW

GIVING THE POTATO ITS DUE

Larry Zuckerman,
The Potato: How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World
Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1998
304 pp., \$23.95 cloth.

by Stephen C. Oldstrom

Steve Oldstrom is a recently-retired attorney who, with his wife Kay, joined our group three years ago. Both Steve and Kay are University of Michigan alumni, and they found their way back to Ann Arbor in the late 1990s. In between, they lived in places like Panama, where Steve served as a counsel for the Panama Canal Company in the 1960s, and Grand Rapids, MI, where he worked as an unemployment-compensation magistrate for many years.

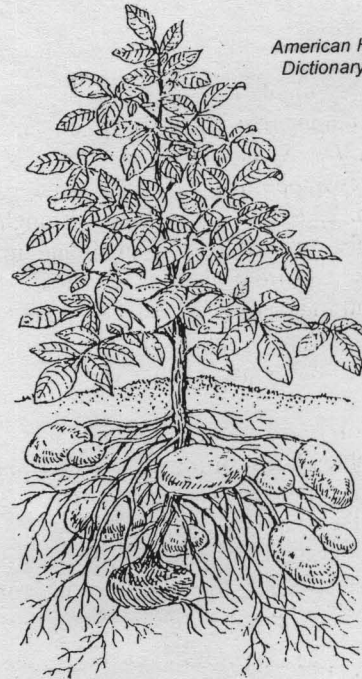
This interesting book follows the potato's travels from Chile's highlands to Europe and the United States and discusses its social, political, and economic effects.

A passage from the book's last chapter provides a thumbnail sketch of the potato's impact on the Western world:

Over the last four centuries, the West's attitude toward the potato has gone through different shades of disrespect. In the seventeenth century, the tuber was exotic and fearsome, feeding only those who couldn't afford anything better or were too uncivilized to care. During the eighteenth and into the nineteenth, the potato lost some ominous qualities but kept its lower-class label because of its cheapness and ease of preparation. Now, in the late twentieth century, the potato is no longer beneath contempt. It's almost beneath notice.

The last two sentences don't quite match up with the potato's present impact— a plant that's grown in 100 countries and accounts for 290 million tons of food demands notice and respect.

Zuckerman traces the potato's origins from the coast of Chile some 13,000 years ago to the *altiplano* in the central Chilean highlands 7,000 years ago, where people cultivated it with spades almost identical to the ones the Irish used thousands of years later. A plant must be tenacious to grow between 12,000 and 15,000 feet. The potato not only endured the thin atmosphere, searing sunlight, sharp temperature changes, little rain, and poor soils of the *altiplano*— it thrived in those harsh conditions.



American Heritage Dictionary, 1971

The Spanish brought the potato to Europe about 1570 as an herbal curiosity. Centuries later, potatoes yielded huge amounts of food on small amounts of arable land. An acre's production of potatoes can feed up to 10 people for a year! Fresh potatoes provide all major nutrients except calcium and vitamins A and D. Potatoes and dairy products provided a complete diet that many Europeans otherwise lacked.

For a Hand-to-Mouth Subsistence

The ease with which the potato could be cooked was also very important in its acceptance. The majority of homes lacked rudimentary cooking implements. But only the most basic equipment and cooking skills were needed to prepare these tubers— simply boil them in pots or bake them in ashes. Small children could, and did, cook potatoes by throwing them in the ashes when they were hungry. Potatoes could be eaten with the hands— something that horrified the European upper classes.

The author compares the ease of potato culture and cooking with Europeans' love of bread— a substance accompanied by weighty cultural and religious overtones. (Readers will recall the Lord's Prayer: 'Give us this day our daily bread,' not our daily potato.) Bread took time and skill to make— it was necessary to cultivate the proper soil, sow the seed, reap the grain, thresh it, grind it, get the yeast, knead the dough, and bake it in a proper oven. Most folks did not have ovens and fuel was scarce and expensive. The resulting bread was terrible— hard on the teeth and generally truly bad stuff. It was also expensive. Nonetheless, Europeans thought only of bread, especially wheaten bread, and spent a great deal of their income on the stuff. Now a new food, the potato, showed up at the table— easy and cheap to grow and to convert to edible food. Potatoes could be dug up and instantly dropped into a pot of boiling water. What could be better?

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THE POTATO

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So, the question arises, why didn't the potato take Europe by storm soon after its introduction? After all, its virtues were well-known—at least among the upper classes who did not eat the tuber but encouraged less fortunate souls to eat potatoes.

By 1600, potatoes were being grown in most of Europe, but only by botanists. At that time, the plant, although beautiful, had a savage appearance, according to Zuckerman. The tuber's ability to sprout and produce new plants, the writer claims, terrified people. The potato also has infamous relatives in the nightshade family, including mandrake, belladonna, and henbane. These toxic plants carried associations of poisons, narcotics, and witches' spells. If this was not enough to frighten folks, people were suspicious of underground stems which were thought to provoke lust, upset the body, and corrupt the blood. Such beliefs, not to mention farmers' inherent conservatism, explain the potato's failure to become a significant food source for the first two centuries of its residence in Europe.

Ireland and the Great Hunger

The book considers the potato's impact in four countries: Ireland, England, France, and the United States. In Ireland, growing conditions were ideal for the potato, and the Irish were the first Europeans to grow it as a crop for human food. Peasants there came to rely on the potato as a safeguard against the hunger resulting from unemployment, overpopulation, and land scarcity. Potato yields in Ireland were 6.5 to 8.5 tons per acre. The Irish population was about 4 million in 1780 (by which time the potato was a chief crop) and surged to 8.2 million in 1841.

Zuckerman believes that the potato did not itself cause the population growth in Ireland. Rather, it sustained a growth that was driven by other forces. The goal of every Irishman was to acquire land, for without land there was no food and no place to live. But the country overrelied on this one crop, and disaster was inevitable. The author states that before 1845 in Ireland,

potatoes had been the capital, wages, subsistence, and the means by which tenants diverted other resources to pay the rent. Potatoes had also been a social currency that resolved issues of land tenure and marriage settlements. Altogether, the tuber had granted a sense of security, however fragile, that life would continue.

Although potato and other crops had occasionally failed in Europe prior to 1845, the crop failures of 1845-49 were unlike previous ones. Potato blight caused by a fungus struck crops on the European mainland in August 1845, and in mid-September killed off 40% of Ireland's potato crop. The following year, 90% of the potato crop failed. The potato had been virtually the only food for 40% of the Irish population. As a result of the famine, one million Irish people died and 1.3 million others emigrated. By 1911 Ireland's population stood at 4.4 million people, about half the 1841 figure. There were crop failures in other European countries, but the results there were not as disastrous for reasons that the author explains.

Zuckerman also discusses the long-term changes the potato wrought in England and France. In England, the Industrial Revolution and the potato grew in importance in a kind of symbiotic relationship. It appears that the Industrial Revolution probably would not have occurred as it did without the potato. I will leave those parts of the book dealing with France and England to each reader's study.

A Warm Reception in America

The impact of the potato in the United States was far different than in Europe. Even early Americans loved potatoes. Zuckerman tells us that George Washington planted them as early as 1767, and Amelia Simmons' cookbook *American Cookery* (1796) gave the potato first place among American vegetables. What accounts for such a warm reception when so many Europeans had greeted the plant with a cold shoulder? The author cites some theories (see below), but it seems to me that first and foremost, the kinds of folks who crossed the seas in search of a new and better life in America were congenitally more adventuresome than their stay-at-home friends and relatives. This daring, in my opinion, extended to the foods Americans were willing to grow and eat.

Explaining the potato's greater acceptance in America, the author points out that in Europe poor people had been looked down upon by the upper classes for eating potatoes; this was particularly true in Ireland, where so many peasants subsisted solely on potatoes and lived in near-feudal conditions. In America, the class structure was not quite as strict, and social notions were correspondingly different. Poor Americans ate many different foods, such as chocolate, that were denied to their counterparts in Europe. In addition, thanks to Americans' practical outlook the potato was seen as a labor-saving convenience for the housewife who, with the time saved, was able to do even more work!

The cultural gulf between the finicky European upper classes and the practical Americans has been evident for centuries. As Zuckerman writes, when it comes to food,

Americans overlooked defects that would have stopped a European cold. For example, an English visitor to Philadelphia in 1791 complained that milk and meat tasted of 'an ugly weed': garlic. It may have been a common problem, because in upper New York state, cows ate wild leeks, giving the milk and butter a particular taste. The best way not to notice it, said one resident, was to eat leeks before drinking the milk.

Here was a truly practical American solution to a problem!

Zuckerman's *The Potato* is well worth reading because of the understanding it gives the reader about the potato's importance in the development of Europe. It also provides useful insights into the differences between Americans and our European cousins. ■

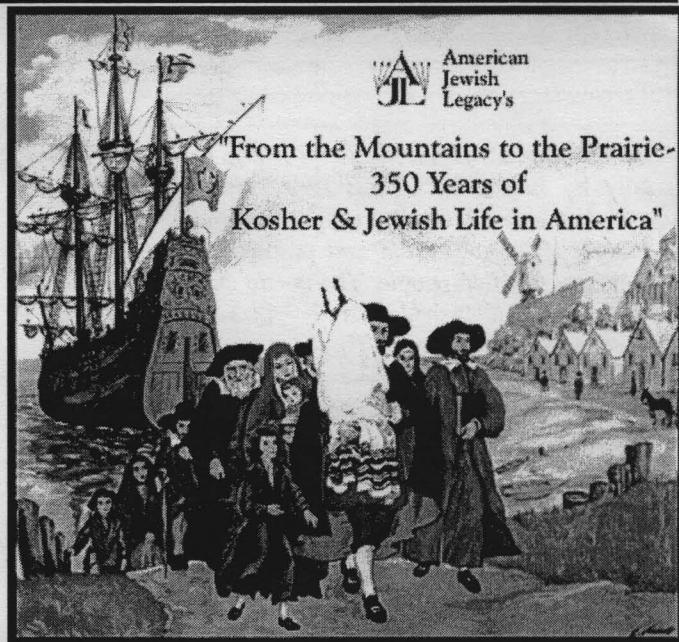
MORSELS & TIDBITS

A group of 23 Jews who disembarked at New York harbor in 1654 are believed to have been the earliest Jewish immigrants to the New World. Rabbi **Yaakov Y. Horowitz**, founder of the nonprofit historical organization American Jewish Legacy (AJL), has created a traveling exhibit to mark the anniversary of their arrival. "From the Mountains to the Prairie: 350 Years of Kosher and Jewish Life in America" is a carefully-researched 400-square-foot exhibit depicting kosher practices and other aspects of traditional Jewish life through the Colonial period, the Gold Rush, and the Civil War, with special focus on the prairie and the West. Tour stops have included the Kosherfest trade show in New York in November and the Kosher World conference in Los Angeles in January (for more info, visit www.kosherworld.com/historyofkosher.html). Horowitz works as a supervising rabbi assigned full-time to the B. Manischewitz kosher foods company, which recently lost **Bernard Manischewitz**, the last family member to serve as president (1964-90), who passed away on Sept. 20 at age 89.

Meanwhile, an exhibit **Chocolate, Coffee, and Tea** (now through July 11, 2004) at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is displaying historical European pots and other utensils used for these beverages. At the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery in Washington, **The Tea Ceremony as Melting Pot** (now through July 18) shows items traded to Japan as far back as the 1500s and eventually copied there, such as Chinese tea-leaf storage jars, Korean tea bowls, and vases from central Vietnam.

A number of books dealing with Asian food have also caught our attention lately. **Naomichi Ishige**, director of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, has written *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001; 280 pp., \$144.50 cloth). He divides this history into six periods, and his book covers everything from the ingredients of foods and drinks to kitchen implements, dining etiquette, and cultural and political contexts, both for domestic and public eating. **Shoba Narayan**, a young immigrant from Chennai, near Madras, has published her first book, *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (New York: Random House, 2003; 240 pp., \$22.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper). She intersperses about two dozen vegetarian recipes among her frank, funny reminiscences of South India and America, commenting on social customs, family meals, train travel, parent-arranged marriage, and college life. **Nawal Nasrallah** has self-published *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine* (Bloomington, IN: 1stBooks Library, 2003; 664 pp., \$22.95 paperback). The book was edited by Nawal's husband, **Shakir Mustafa**; both literature professors, they left Iraq in 1990 and now live in Boston. Her 400+ recipes include dishes such as spinach soup, stuffed tripe, and sweet-and-sour salmon in almond-prune sauce. She also includes interesting anecdotes, folktales, and tidbits of Iraqi history and customs.

With sadness we note that food scholar **Alan Eaton Davidson**, 79, passed away on December 2. Davidson, a British former diplomat, was the driving force behind the scholarly journal *Petit Propos Culinaires*, the cookery imprint Prospect Books, the reference work *Oxford Companion to Food*, and the annual Oxford Symposia on Food and Cookery. Recently, we applauded the awarding of the Erasmus Prize to Davidson (see



this column in *Repast* Summer 2003). A few years back, his associate, food writer **Tom Jaine**, took over the work of heading Prospect Books. Jaine is one of the scheduled speakers at an April 1-4 conference at Oxford University's Christ Church College, "Food and Drink: A Nation's Food—A Nation's Fortune."

We also note the death of the elderly **Russell E. Bidlack** on September 18. Bidlack, former dean of the School of Library Science at the University of Michigan, was well-known for his researches in the early history of Ann Arbor. In March 1999 he spoke to our group about *Dr. Chase's Receipt Book*, which was the heart of a local publishing empire here in the last half of the 1800s when literally millions of copies were sold.

CHAA member **Margot Michael** wrote to us after attending a gala 50th birthday celebration for **Rick Bayless**, CHAA friend and well-known advocate of authentic Mexican food. The all-day event, held in Chicago on November 23 and enjoyed by Rick, his wife Deann, and several dozen friends and employees, included a gospel-serenaded brunch at Fortunato, talent shows at Harry's Velvet Room and the Mexican Fine Arts Museum, and a catered dinner and discothèque at the Baylesses' home. Margot writes, "I came away realizing that there are few people in this world who have consistently generated the kind of deep love that Rick has among such a variety of people. Above all, he wants everyone to eat well and healthfully and works hard to this end. Even in the business of his restaurant he cares about the people who supply the food and actively supports small sustainable family farms around Chicago."

Food, Culture and Society, the newly renamed semiannual journal of the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), has announced the theme of its Fall 2004 issue. The issue will feature articles that seek to understand the process of globalization via the study of food in the past, present, and future. Deadline for submissions is May 1, 2004. For more information, contact ASFS Newsletter editor **Warren Belasco** at belasco@umbc.edu. ■

CHAA CALENDAR

(Unless noted, programs are scheduled for 4-6pm at Ann Arbor Senior Center, 1320 Baldwin Ave.)

February 15, 2004

Member Participation (2-5 mins. each),
"Gastronomic Events I Would Like to Have
Attended or Would Like to Relive"

March 21, 2004

Thomas C. Cornillie,
University of Michigan history graduate
and specialist in railway history,
"Dining on the Rails"

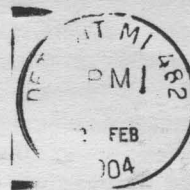
April 18, 2004

Howard Paige, researcher and author,
"A Review of African-American Foodways"

May 16, 2004

Dinner at the Five Lakes Grill,
424 North Main Street, Milford, MI
6pm (further details to be announced),
hosted by chef-owner Brian Polcyn,
author of a forthcoming book on
charcuterie for the home cook

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Volume XX Number 1, Winter 2004

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