

# Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume 3

Winter, 1989

ONLY COPY

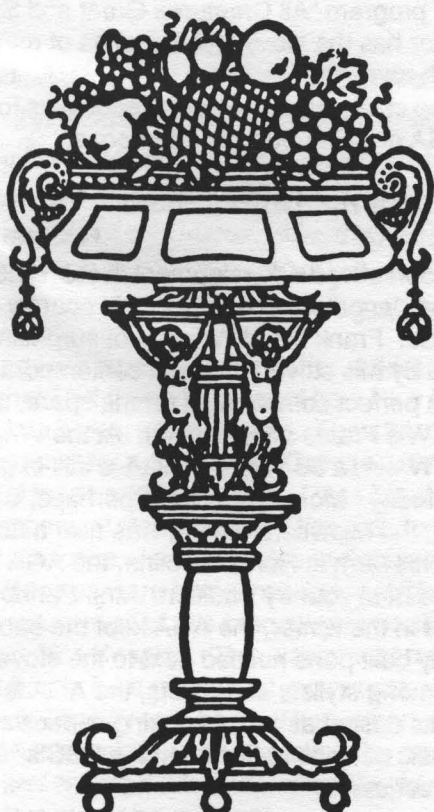
(1988/89)

## The AGA: King of Stoves and Stove of Kings

If anyone could sell refrigerators to Eskimos, it would be Judith Asphar. Fortunately for the Culinary Historians, she is selling AGA stoves to Americans instead. CHAA members who attended our November program on the AGA stove in Sylvan Lake were as charmed by Judith's warmth and hospitality as they were impressed by the AGA's cooking capabilities.

### What makes the AGA stove special?

The AGA is indeed an impressive stove. It can bake, broil, roast, steam, simmer, grill, toast, stew, and boil — all at the same time, all without heating up the kitchen, all without splash, splatter, or spill. How does it achieve this impossible feat?



Most of the cooking (80-90%) is done within the stove's four ovens (warming, simmering, roasting, and baking) rather than on top of the stove. Two extra-large top burners for simmering and boiling and a warming plate round out the AGA's versatility.

Built of cast iron and powered by gas (or coal for traditionalists), it is designed as a heat storage unit with both convection and radiant heat ovens. Although it always remains turned "on" in the same way that a refrigerator is always running, the stove is never hot enough to the touch to burn. Jeremy Brett, the English actor, remembers the AGA from his childhood because it was the only warm spot in their house, and he would sit on top of it to keep warm on damp, chilly mornings. It is entirely regulated by one control, a simple on/off switch that is always kept on (unless you are going away for an extended vacation).

Paradoxically, the AGA is cooler to work at than ordinary stoves and safer as well. Not only does it come equipped with an automatic gas shut-off valve that eliminates the risk of explosion, but there are no open flames or poisonous fumes to worry about.

see *The AGA Stove*, page 2

### Contents

<i>Food Writing Cliches Snap, Crackle, and Fizzle</i> Pat Cornett	4
<i>Membership News</i>	6
<i>The Cook's Book Shelf</i>	7
<i>Calendar</i>	8

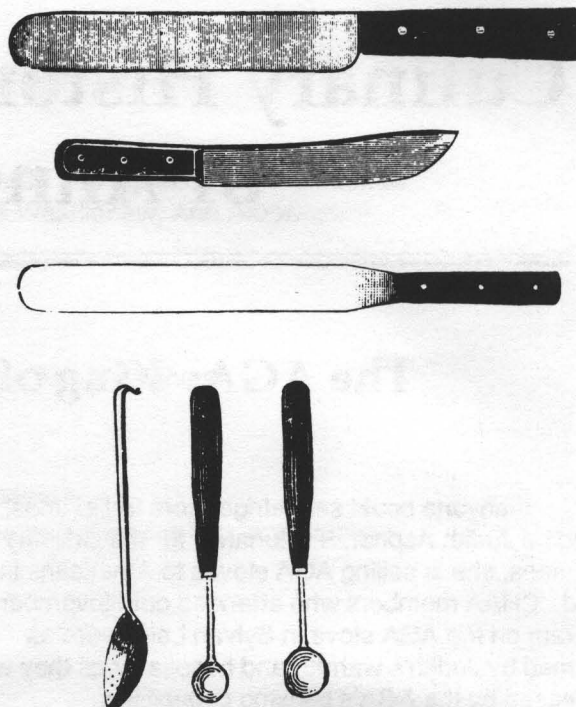
## The AGA Stove, *cont. from page 1*

As a result of these unique features, the AGA provides superior cooking with little effort and less mess than ordinary stoves. It is almost impossible for food to scorch, burn, or overcook because cooking in closed ovens means that foods retain their moisture, taste, and texture longer. The AGA also offers more flexibility of timing. Food doesn't have to be as closely watched or timed as in conventional ovens. Conversely, however, because of the closed heat source, there are none of the usual cooking smells emanating from an AGA. You can't use your nose to judge when food is cooked. A timer is such an essential item for cooking on an AGA that Judith keeps one on a long cord tied to the oven handle.

## History of the AGA

The AGA was invented in 1922 by the Swedish physicist, Dr. Gustaf Dalen, who received the Nobel prize not for designing the AGA stove but for an instrument called a "sun valve" that automated lighthouses. His idea for the AGA was the result of a tragic laboratory accident. While he was bottling oxygen in a laboratory experiment, the bottle exploded and blinded him. During his convalescence at home after his accident, he listened to his wife cooking on their stove. Combining his knowledge of combustion, metallurgy, and nutrition, he developed the concept of the AGA, which really should be called the Dalen stove. In fact, AGA stands for Amalgamated Gas Accumulator.

Brought to England in its early years of production by an English manufacturing company, it soon became *the* stove to own in Great Britain. Originally, the AGA was a stove exclusively for the grand and wealthy, a status symbol in estate kitchens, like a Rolls Royce in the garage. Gradually, however, its fame spread throughout the country, and the AGA became indispensable in country kitchens as well. So prized is the AGA today that an English house containing an AGA stove commands a higher price on the real estate market.



For Britons who grew up with an AGA, the stove has taken on almost legendary proportions. It represents the warmth and glow of hearth and home. One of the more unusual uses for the AGA, according to Judith, is to keep orphan lambs warm by wrapping them in a towel and placing them in the warming oven (with the door left open, of course). Friends of Judith refused to believe this story until they saw the AGA used in exactly this way on the British TV program "All Creatures Great and Small."

Nor has the stove lost its patina of royal glamour. The British royal family swears by the AGA. Princess Diana even claims that she cooks pancakes for her family on her AGA on rainy Sunday afternoons.

## The AGA in the United States

Soon after its development in the 1920's, the AGA had a short period of popularity in this country among the avant-garde. Frank Lloyd Wright, not surprisingly, was captivated by this stove. Its sleek contemporary design makes it a perfect complement for the spare, unadorned look of FLW's Prairie style houses. At the Wright complex in Falling Water, a 50-year-old AGA is still in good working condition today. More surprisingly perhaps, Carl Sandburg, the Midwestern poet, was also a fan of the AGA stove. At his farm in North Carolina, the AGA stove was used in the best country tradition. Mrs. Sandburg raised goats, and in the winter, the AGA kept the baby kids warm in specially built pens nestled next to the stove.

Among stylists and artists, the AGA is noted as much for its design as for its cooking capacities. It is one of six classic designs featured on the BBC's "Design Classics" series.

### Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Jan Longone, **Chairperson**  
1207 W. Madison  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103  
(313) 663-4894

Susan Fussell, **Editor**  
316 Westwood Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103  
(313) 996-1412

Pat Cornett, **Associate Editor**  
Judy Goldwasser, **Contributing Editor**

Membership: Individual - \$15.00/year, Family - \$20.00/year (both include newsletter subscription). Newsletter only - \$7.50/year (3 issues).

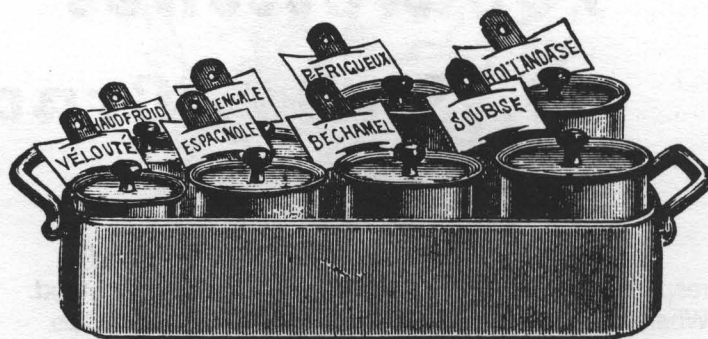
see *The AGA Stove*, page 3

## The AGA Stove, from page 2

### Judith Asphar and the AGA

Despite these remarkable credits, the AGA stove remained practically unknown in the United States until Judith Asphar became involved with its distribution several years ago. A Graduate of the Cordon Bleu School, Judith was a chef and caterer in her native Scotland before she came to the United States four years ago to serve as Executive Chef for the Rockefeller family. She had an AGA stove in her farm house in the Scottish Highlands, and until she came to this country, she took it for granted that all well-equipped kitchens had an AGA. She quickly realized that the AGA stove was a rarity in the U.S.

One evening she was serving an elaborate dinner for David Rockefeller when one of his important guests was called away to take a phone call from the White House. Naturally, the dinner stopped until he returned. However, Judith had prepared a souffle for dessert and had timed its preparation carefully. When dinner resumed, the souffle had sunk as low as Judith's spirits. She was able to salvage the dessert, but she realized that an AGA stove could have saved the souffle because of its unique capacity to hold cooked foods at the right temperature for longer periods. It was at that moment she decided to have the AGA stove imported to the U.S.



Today, Judith Asphar at the Kitchen Studio in Sylvan Lake is one of eight American distributors of the venerable stove. She and her partner Pete Walker sell about one AGA stove a month. At about \$9,000 each (including installation), that's a considerable accomplishment in itself. For more information, contact Judith at the Kitchen Studio, 2011 Orchard Lake Road, Sylvan Lake, MI 48053, (313) 335-6111.

*Pat Cornett*

*Editor's Note: The March, 1989, issue of Connoisseur magazine has an article on the AGA that includes a glorious color photograph of the stove.*

## The Rice Krispie Bar Story

*A chance remark at dinner with a friend, Pat Daoust, led to this article. Pat mentioned that his aunt, Mrs. Mildred Day, was an early home economist and had wondrous stories to tell. We suggested that Pat ask his aunt to write a brief memoir for the CHAA Newsletter. Mrs. Day agreed, and this charming bit of American culinary history is the result.*

*Jan Longone*

For a long time Sandra and her children have requested that I tell them the story of how Rice Krispie Bars came into being, so here goes. The 12th of March, 1928, I graduated from Iowa State College with a major in experimental foods and journalism. I was hired by the Kellogg Company of Battle Creek, Michigan, to head their experimental kitchen. I arrived there in September, 1928, when Rice Krispies were being introduced to the market. The factory was proud of this product and wanted recipes tested to use Rice Krispies. This was one of my first projects. It had to be a recipe that every cook could make. First we made Rice Krispie balls. Then, when we were satisfied with the recipe, we tried putting the mixture into cake pans and cutting it into bars. We thought we had something that would be a winner.

As is usual in big companies, they wanted the bars market-tested in the field. The salesman in the Indianapolis territory contacted the director of the Campfire Girls in that city. She liked the idea of making the bars, and the girls would take orders and sell them. She asked that a definite plan be submitted to her. This also was my job.

We needed a large space to work in, and we needed equipment sent from Battle Creek. The mechanical department cooperated with us and made large sheet pans with sides. Then the mechanics made cross-bar dividers to fit the new cake pans so each bar would be the same size. We needed a wrapper for each bar. Kellogg provided just the right size wrapper, and printed them so the consumer knew what was in the bar and who was conducting the sale. We secured warehouse space with gas burners, hot water, big sinks, and coverings for the tables where the girls would work. The director scheduled the girls to come in after school, and I demonstrated their duties. Within a week or 10 days we had finished the project, and the Campfire Girls had completed their fund-raising for their camp and other activities.

So this is how, where, and when Rice Krispie Bars became a favorite snack with the young folks.

*Mildred Day*

# Food Cliches

## Snap, Crackle, and Fizzle<sup>©</sup>

It is probably not fair to hold Andrew Marvell responsible for today's crop of overripe writing about food. When he wrote, "What wond'rous life is this I lead!/Ripe Apples drop about my head;/The Luscious Clusters of the Vine/ Upon my Mouth do crush their Wine;/ The Nectaren and curious Peach/ Into my hands themselves do reach," he could not know that "ripe" and "luscious" would become stale cliches in the popular food writer's vocabulary. Even today, Marvell's stanza from "The Garden" has more sensuous power than whole reams of ad copy for the latest food product or a gushing review for a fashionable new restaurant in town.

The language used to describe food in the popular media is an instructive and often amusing topic. Descriptions for recipes in cookbooks or newspapers and magazines, advertisements for food products, and restaurant menus are especially good sources of examples, although they are usually not the most original.

How do food writers convey the quality of the dish or recipe they are describing? Good food calls into play all of the senses for its ultimate gustatory satisfaction. How a food tastes or smells are obvious qualities to be conveyed, but how a food looks, or sounds, or feels on the tongue are important considerations. What linguistic resources do food writers use to impart these sensory qualities to their descriptions?



Perhaps the most commonplace technique is the use of descriptive adjectives and hackneyed phrases. Here is a representative list picked almost at random: delicious, plump, juicy, tasty, natural, piping hot, hearty, luscious, ripe, succulent, flavorful, nutritious, mouth-watering, homemade, tender, fresh, crunchy.

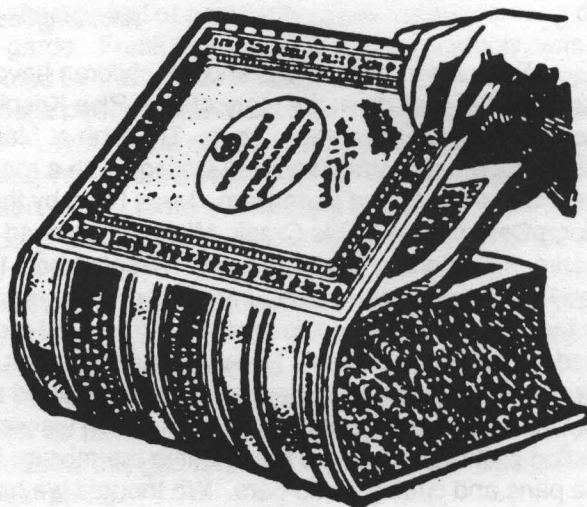
"Delicious" is undoubtedly the most overused word in the food writer's stock. Bad writers rely on it, but even good writers can't avoid it. If "delicious" is no longer vivid enough to arouse anything but a yawn, perhaps intensifying it will somehow be more effective — so one line of thinking goes. As a result, we get such ludicrous extremes as promoting the "double delicious taste" for — of all things — cat food!

One common characteristic of many of these words is that they are full of sibilant sounds — from "delicious" or "luscious" to "succulent" and "juicy." Their sounds are meant to suggest the salivating experience we have when we eat a food like Marvell's luscious clusters of grapes. These words are almost as mouth-watering as the foods they describe.

Hyphenated combinations like "mouth-watering" are favorites of ad writers looking for catchy, short-cut ways to describe their products. We can blame Colonel Sanders for making "finger-lickin' good" part of the American linguistic heritage. If this phrase has achieved such exalted status, it probably won't be much longer before "rib-sticking" or "rib-tickling" joins it. Not long ago, a food article in my local newspaper headlined, "These ribs will tickle your fancy." Detached from their hyphens, these combinations convey an image as unappetizing as the foods they are meant to sell. Do I lick my fingers because they taste good?



Food writers also use onomatopoeia. Linguistically, it's only a short step from using words with sibilant sounds to using onomatopoeic words like "sizzling," "crisp," or "crunchy." Ask any American who grew up in the '50's what "snap, crackle, and pop" means. Ask anyone from England what "bubble and squeak" is. These phrases are meant to suggest the experience of those foods by imitating the sounds they make. Even now, "snap, crackle, and pop" has the power to make me recall cold milk splashing into a bowl of Rice Krispies and to make me hear the dry kernels breaking musically into the sounds of snap, crackle, and pop. The copy writer who invented that phrase thirty or forty years ago has a worthy successor in the writer at the Kellogg Company today who created the recent ad for the "flaky, bumpy, crispy, crunchy vitamins" in Product 19 cereal.



The term "piping hot" deserves special mention. I was intrigued by its obscure origin — why piping? Perhaps, I guessed, it has something to do with pipes used in steam heating or the intense heat that emanates from radiator pipes. But a quick check in the *Oxford English Dictionary* turned up the answer. "Piping hot" is at least as old as Chaucer, since the *OED*'s first citation is from "The Miller's Tale": "Wafres piping hoot out of the glede [hot coal]." The term means to be so hot as to make a piping or hissing sound, i.e., hissing hot. I like that phrase. With its onomatopoeia and alliteration, "hissing hot" comes closer to the intended meaning than "piping hot," which has long since lost its meaning.

My sample list of food terms also includes several that illustrate another device popular with food writers, a technique that might be called "good by association." Words like "homemade," "natural," or "country-style" are supposed to evoke images of a warm country kitchen with the fragrant aroma of Mom's cookies baking in the oven or her hot apple pies cooling on the windowsill. Mom sings happily as she bakes the daily bread, and shafts of sunlight bounce merrily off the gleaming kitchen floor. This is the scenario of popular folklore promoted and extended by such masters of the American home myth as Norman Rockwell and Walt Disney. In food writing, it is the culinary equivalent of the back-to-nature movement, with Betty Crocker aproned in the kitchen instead of the noble savage naked in the woods.

There is often a direct correlation between poor writing and bad food. Beware the restaurant that describes its dishes in pseudo-French or entices you to try its home cooking. The chances are good that the food will match the writing; one is an attempt to disguise the other, and both are bad. As Fred Ferretti said in a *New York Times* article on airline food, you know that "haricots verts et carottes au beurre" will be frozen string beans and carrots without butter."



Exaggeration is another device food writers are fond of, ranging from tired superlatives devoid of any meaning ("It's never been done before!") to hyperbolic coinages. My favorite example of the latter is "extra-virgin olive oil." To the producers of olive oil, this phrase may have a technically accurate meaning. But to the collector of linguistic curiosities, it is unintentionally funny. Extra-virgin olive oil is like a slightly pregnant woman.

There must be something about olives that encourages exaggeration. Possibly it's the fertile Mediterranean soil in which the olive tree thrives, for olives also give us another notable hyperbolic example of food language. The heroic imagination of Homer survives among olive packers who size their olives on an epic scale, starting with "extra-large" through "jumbo" all the way up to "gigantic." Whatever happened to small, medium, and large? The unsuspecting buyer of canned olives who expects a jumbo olive to be much larger than a pea is the same innocent who looks for a genuine pearl in the oyster or a diamond ring in a box of Cracker Jacks.



Sometimes the hyperbole in food writing is intentionally humorous, however. A dessert called "Mile-High Pie," for example, might have been devoured by Paul Bunyan himself.



My attack on the stale language of popular food writing is not intended as a general assault on writing about food. Next to eating good food there is nothing more enjoyable than reading about good food by good writers. And today we enjoy a rich bounty of good food writers: M. F. K. Fisher, the grande dame of American gastronomy, Calvin Trillin, a happy eater and happier writer, James Beard, Evan Jones, Jay Jacobs, and others who write for publications as varied as *Gourmet* and *The Village Voice*.

Even the clichés of food writing can provide us with renewed sustenance when used by a good writer, like the contemporary Chicago poet, Kelley Williams, in her sensuous poem "Arriving at Onion":

...and I progress to Orange  
a hotter fruit;  
I can be complicated stripped  
and difficult to eat  
but I am succulent  
and luscious, lusty, joyous  
winning, wicked, sweet;  
I'll lick the inside  
corners of your jaws  
and linger on  
odiferous  
too sticky to forget.

Pat Cornett

© Copyright, 1989

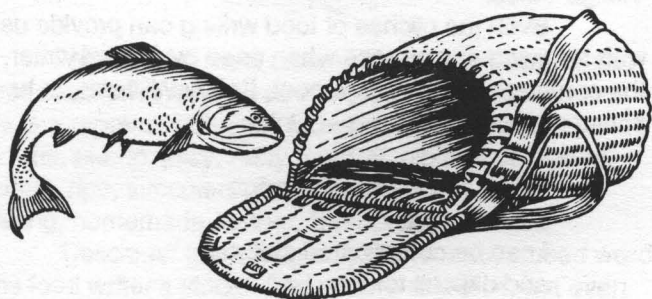
## Membership News

### Timely Topics

It appears, as the old song goes, that "everything's up-to-date" with the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor. No sooner do we hold our December holiday meeting on humor and food than the *New York Times*, on December 28, 1988, headlined its food section with an article entitled "Food for Thought and Humor." Among other things mentioned in the article is a reference to the restaurant as a microcosm of life. We have briefly touched upon that at some of our meetings, and there is a possibility we will explore that subject in greater depth during the coming year.

Then, no sooner do we begin to anticipate our February 19, 1989, meeting with Dawn Clark and Lynn Marie Hinojosa of Cuisine Couriers, a natural foods restaurant in Royal Oak, when *Detroit Monthly* features them among the best restaurant finds of the year in its January, 1989, issue. Our speakers are startlingly pictured, dressed all in vegetables (I mean *all*) on the front cover of the magazine.

Finally, the very morning of our January meeting featuring Bill Carlson on "Great Lakes Fish and Fishing," the lead editorial in the *Ann Arbor News* discussed chemical contamination of the Great Lakes and the resultant health and environmental problems. A cartoon featured the PCBs found in the lakes being retrieved by an ordinary fisherman. Our discussion by Mr. Carlson was most timely!

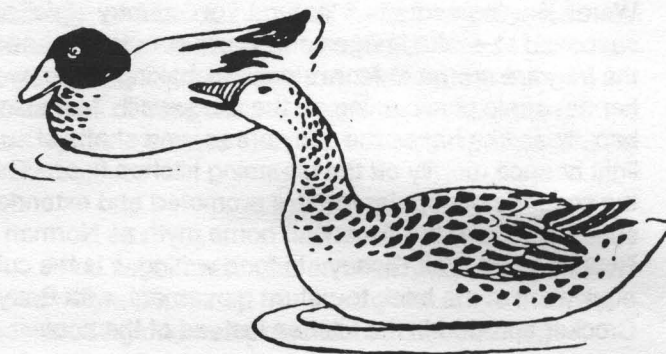


### Too Busy to Cook?

An interesting article appeared in the January 4, 1989, issue of the *New York Times*. Written by Trish Hall and titled "New Spectator Sport: Looking, Not Cooking," it discussed a new breed of person -- one very interested in food (buys cookbooks, watches cooking shows on TV, is conversant with "foodie" news) but too busy to cook. The article is funny, sad, and thought-provoking. If you have not seen it, you might want to look it up.

### New Position for CHAA Member

An update on one of our members, Chef Charles Solomon, who was featured in the Fall, 1987, issue of our newsletter: In renewing his membership, Charlie informs us that he is now working in the kitchens of The Quilted Giraffe, one of New York City's finest restaurants.



### The Healthy Gourmet

Fellow Culinary Historian Barbara Bassett, founder and editor of *Bestways*, a magazine devoted to food, health, and fitness, has just notified us of a new venture. She will be publishing *The Healthy Gourmet*, a newsletter which will appear ten times a year. Volume 1, Number 1 was published in January, 1989. For further information on either the magazine or the newsletter, write:

Barbara Bassett  
The Healthy Gourmet  
P.O. Box 2167  
Carson City, NV 89702

### Participation Meeting in May

Our final meeting of the season on May 21 will be a special participation meeting. Members and newsletter subscribers are being asked to tell us about their favorite cookbooks on a questionnaire distributed at recent meetings and mailed with this issue of the newsletter (see insert). If you are able to attend the meeting, please bring the questionnaire along with a copy of your favorite book. If you are a subscriber or a member unable to attend, send your nomination to Pat Cornett, P.O. Box 1175, Birmingham, MI 480120. The next issue of the newsletter will feature an article on all our favorites.

## ☞ The Cook's Book Shelf ☞

*We welcome the recent trend of commercial publishers, scholarly presses, and independent printers to publish books of interest to culinary historians. The following are among the more interesting of recent publications.*

Frances de Talavera Berger and John Parke Custis. ***Sumptuous Dining in Gaslight San Francisco, 1875-1915.*** Doubleday, New York, 1985. History of people and restaurants of the time.

Joseph Conlin. ***Bacon, Beans, and Galantines. Food and Foodways on the Western Mining Frontier.*** University of Nevada Press, Reno, 1986.

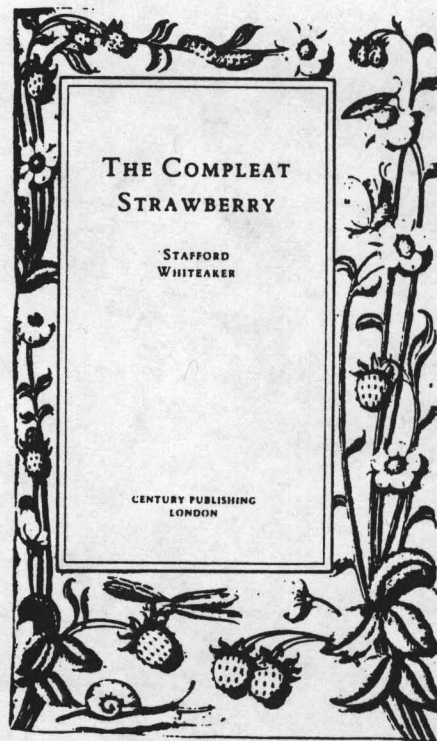
Henry Hobhouse. ***Seeds of Change: Five Plants that Transformed Mankind.*** Harper & Row, New York, 1986. The five plants are quinine, sugar, tea, cotton, and the potato.

Theodore and Lin Humphrey (editors). ***"We Gather Together" — Food and Festival in American Life.*** UMI Press, Ann Arbor, 1988.

This is part of the UMI Research Press American Material Culture and Folklore Series. The book contains essays by anthropologists, folklorists, and others on foodways in relation to festivals, celebrations, and social history.



FRANCES de TALAVERA BERGER  
and JOHN PARKE CUSTIS



Pat Kelley and Barbara Wheaton. ***Bibliography of Culinary History: Food Resources in Eastern Massachusetts.*** G. K. Hall, Boston, 1988. A compilation of cookbooks and related material found in and around Boston, including the holdings of Harvard, Radcliffe, the Boston Public Library, the Boston Athenaeum, the Essex Institute in Salem, The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, the Massachusetts Historical Society, etc. Great tool for culinary historians.

James Prescott (translator). ***Le Viandier de Taillevent.*** Alfarhaug Press, Eugene, Oregon, 1988. First English translation of the classic 14th century French text that is one of our major sources for studying medieval cookery.

Radcliffe Salaman. ***The History and Social Influence of the Potato.*** First printed in 1949, now revised, updated, and reprinted by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986. This is the definitive work on the potato and its role in history.

Stafford Whiteaker. ***The Compleat Strawberry.*** Crown Publishers, New York, 1985. The lore, history, and the literature of the strawberry. Handsome color illustrations.

*Jan Longone*

---

## CHAA Spring Programs

Meetings are held the third Sunday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Washtenaw County Extension Service Building, 4133 Washtenaw, Ann Arbor.

*March 19*

**Cooking of Aztec Mexico**

Professor Liz Brumfiel, Albion College, Albion, Michigan

*April 16*

**Korean Cooking: History and Customs**

Moon Ja Yoon, R.D., author of *Korean Cooking for You* and dietitian at Beaumont Hospital, Detroit

*May 21*

**Participation Meeting**

Share your favorite cookbook or book on food or wine (see insert)



**CHAA Newsletter**

c/o Susan Fussell  
316 Westwood Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103

---

# Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume 3

Winter, 1989