Volume XII Number 3 Summer 1996

ANN ARBOR
CULINARY HISTORIANS

No One Ever Called Her Mali!

A Publication of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

When I was growing up in Detroit, my grandmother had dinner for the family every Friday night. Only her brother called her by her first name. We were so diffident and respectful that we called her Mother or Grandmother. I still think about those dinners and the subject comes up often in family conversations. It is a curiosity to me that they are so important to my psyche.

Nathan (Ned) and Mali Gershenson immigrated to New York from a Polish-Russian area. Theirs was an arranged marriage and they had little in common. He was a quiet scholar and student of the Talmud, while she was the beautiful daughter of a comparatively well-to-do family, full of life and dignity. On several occasions my grandmother mentioned to my mother that she did not love her husband, in the sense we think of love today. None the less the two remained together and had seven children and she did not marry again after he died. She and the children expanded his "motorist department stores" into a chain called Ned's Auto Supply Company and before long the family could easily be considered wealthy.

After her husband's death, my grandmother's true talents emerged. She conveyed herself with an authority and a dignity which communicated elegance, stature and assurance. She was a natural organizer, and she held 51% of the company stock and knew its importance. She insisted that her family stay together and whenever possible function as a unit. To achieve her ends, she exercised no small amount of discipline and control. She once told Mr. Harvey Firestone Jr. that if his family "stuck together" they might some day be as important as her own children.

Each son and daughter phoned or called at her home daily. Everyone in the family was late to marry, except for my mother, a beautiful blue-eyed blond. The three daughters each married a physician but they never really left the canopy of the "family." Various personalities within the group reflected individual psychological reactions to this family control and their perceived position in the pecking order. I am sure I was a mature adult before I realized the term "family" generally referred to the Mafia and not the Gershensons. A good deal of this "togetherness" was exercised and opposing views exorcised at Friday night dinners. Everyone who was

within range was expected to attend, and did. I understood that the Friday night high school parties and club meetings were not for me. From about the early 1920's until the early '40's everyone in the family was at grandmother's for supper on Friday.

Dinner was always at seven. Everyone— fourteen to sixteen family members plus guests— entered through the side door and thus directly into the kitchen. That is, everyone except my Uncle Charles. He was attracted to showgirls. Indeed, he lived much of his life on the fringes of the theatrical world. These two— Uncle Charles and friend— announced themselves by the loudest chimes outside of the real Westminster, and were admitted through the front door. I still recall the excitement I felt as a pre-adolescent and adolescent as he paraded one beauty after another into the library where my grandmother held court. As I recall, she handled this with a great deal more calm than I.

The meal itself was an extravaganza of animal protein, saturated fats, nitrates, salt, cholesterol and calories. I loved every moment and cherish every memory of it. It seemed that no matter how early I arrived on Friday afternoon, the women were already working, the small kitchen as busy as could be. My grandmother, Mother the librarian, Aunt Rose the social worker who did personnel work for the company, Aunt Dolly the teacher, and the maid were all hard at work. Yet they would soon find a job for me, usually chopping liver.

It is necessary now to describe the home manufacture of schmaltz. In a Jewish home, schmaltz or rendered chicken fat replaces lard (pig) and butter (not to be eaten with meat) as the ingredient for frying, moisturizing, gluing and lubrication. Fat hens were purchased and skinned. The fat, segments of skin, onions and some salt were all sauteed together. The fat (now schmaltz) was strained off into bottles and stored in the refrigerator. The by-products of this process— the crispy fried onions and skin, called "gribenes," were drained and dried on paper towels and left near the stove as a snack to sustain the arriving family and guests. Until I figured out that this stuff

was the major cause of my adolescent acne, it was one of my favorite indulgences. I would gather up as much as I was able onto a piece of challah (egg bread) and eat it along with a Vernor's ginger ale. I remember this snack as pure heaven. My mother once suggested that I would spoil my appetite with this stuff, to which my grandmother retorted, "How can he be spoiling his appetite by eating?"

Schmaltz was used to saute the chicken livers and more onion. This was combined with hard-boiled eggs, salt, pepper and garlic and was chopped by hand in a wooden bowl— my job and it was tiring. But I was often told not so tiring as cutting the noodles, or rolling the matzo balls, or shaping the kreplach or the gefilte fish. I notice, though, that I am now given mention in Raymond Sokolov's book *The American Jewish Kitchen* as "the coarse blade of a meat grinder" or "a processor using a few very sort pulses." Finally some appreciation!

Chopped liver, gefilte fish or both served as the usual appetizer. Gefilte fish was a real work effort, the technique for

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SUMMER KITCHENS

Growing up in northern Virginia, I once saw a summer kitchen on the country place of a relative. I can't remember the building itself but the concept of a separate place to cook in hot weather sank in, though I was very young. It still resonates in the mature woman who has cooked, a friend recently told me, nearly 50,000 meals in forty-five years of marriage.

Fully furnished, this concept from old Virginia includes the cheerful help who, excellent cooks every one, worked in the summer kitchen, drew water from the well nearby, and passed along the roofed brick walkway to the house to serve the family. I can imagine, because I have seen them, the country hams, the bowls of fresh butterbeans and peas, the ears of incomparable— truly, truly incomparable— Country Gentleman corn, short and fat, on the table a bare twenty minutes after being picked; the string beans cooked with fatback, the ripe red slices of tomato, and the chess pies, crinkled with the faintest of delicate crusts on the pale brown filling.

In my more grown-up moments, I shift this idea to a picture I once saw of a summer kitchen in France. Like a three-sided room, I think, all colorful tiles and bright blue paint; with the all-important brick floor that need not be washed, only swept now and then; with cabinets and full equipment of dishes and utensils, pots, and huge frying pans; with a table that seats eight and maybe a small one for the children.

You see how my mind runs. Because I have never been sure that cooking is an indoor sport, I make these places open, though screened, everything to hand, no fuss about keeping the walls and floors spotless.

In other words, you will say, a common old barbecue.

Not quite. I want the whole process done in the open air, not just the cooking and the serving.

Pursuing this ingrained fantasy, I wrote to the most elder members of both our families. "What do you know about summer kitchens?"

Here is what came back.

From my husband's Uncle John Jennings, who is a historian:

"Actually, the main kitchen was a separate building, connected to the big house by a glass-enclosed passageway. Above the kitchen were quarters for the cook and housemaid. What might be called the "summer kitchen" was another separate building, standing several hundred feet away from the aforesaid facility. It was rarely used for the preparation of meals. On the other hand, it was seasonally called into play for the purpose of canning fruits and vegetables, for making soap (after hog-killing time, dreadful period), for butchering and the preparation of meats to be hung in the nearby smokehouse, and occasionally for steaming (yes) fruitcakes. Come to think of it, it was also occasionally used as a laundry. In the latter years of its life (i.e. in the early 1930's), under greatly changed circumstances, the structure became the residence of a faithful servitor who looked after Father."

From my Cousin Glassell Stringfellow, who is a retired Air Force officer and whose letter I have lost and can't quote exactly, memories of the cook his aunts had when he was a child. She was a dwarf, very nearly his size then, he says. He loved her and she doted on him. Very poor living conditions were provided her, hot, with few facilities, over—the summer kitchen.

From my Cousin Lucy Catherine Bowie, a retired newspaper editor:

"On Red Oak Mountain in Rappahannock County is the home of the Red-Oak-Johnson's. The framed Crown Grant to a 2- or 3- great-grandfather from his king is now in their bank vault, possessed by the widow of the last male heir. The property was sold in the late 1980's.

"The summer kitchen there was about twenty-five feet from the back door of the big house, and the pump and well were located between the two buildings. The kitchen was small with a very large fireplace (you could stand in it), containing cranes and large pots. It had been closed up by 1941 and a small cookstove did the work. FDR's rural electrification didn't get to the top of Red Oak until well after World War II. Before that a refrigerator powered by kerosene was a source of pride to the two ladies, sisters, who still lived there.

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Exotic Catsups

Not for a minute does anyone think they were on every table in 1905, but recipes existed then for catsups mostly unheard of today. Member Sue Lincoln of Toledo has sent copies of some pages from *The Original Buckeye Cook Book and Practical Housekeeping* published that year and they make fascinating reading. This was the ninth edition and the copyright is in the name Estelle W. Wilcox. Dedication is "To those American housewives who cannot afford to employ a French cook." Before you decide that the title of this article is an oxymoron, read on.

To begin, there are extensive directions for keeping the finished sauces, very important in that age of minimal refrigeraton. Mold that forms on the top only may be carefully removed, but if it appears all through, you must discard the whole bottle. We are told to use "a clean bright pan" and wooden utensils, and that an artist's spatula is ideal for scraping down the sides of the kettle. The general directions for catsups say that, when the sauce needs color, a lump of sugar may be caramelized "in an iron spoon over a sharp fire" and added, and that "nasturtium seed will be found a good substitute for capers." There are unfamiliar terms— a blade of mace, mushroom flaps, drachms (which according to my dictionary is pronounced "drams").

But the recipes! Barberry catsup, cucumber catsup, cherry, currant, elderberry, grape, lemon, plum catsups, oyster catsup, *liver* catsup, pepper catsup, mushroom catsup and walnut catsup ("Procure one hundred walnuts at the time when you can run a pin through them"). Oh, and of course, tomato catsup. Instructions for the mushrooms are the longest. Do not wash or skin the mushrooms, put down with salt for three days, bake in a cool oven for an hour or boil for three, strain but do not squeeze the mushrooms, be careful of sediment when pouring into bottles. "[It] should be examined occasionally and if it is spoiling, should be reboiled with a few peppercorns. . . The sediment may be bottled for immediate use, and will be found to answer for flavoring thick soups or gravies."

The ingredients called for are eloquent of presumed supplies on the shelves of local grocery stores. Almost all the recipes call for an array of spices and flavorings familiar to us in our modern abundance: clove, allspice, white and black pepper, celery seed, mustard, cayenne, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, shallots, anchovies, garlic, red pepper pods, and horseradish all make their appearance.

For those who, like me, are into imagining past elegances, silver and crystal castors will come to mind, the sheen of ironed linen, the crowded tables of boarding houses or of large families and the platters and bowls of farmland plenty. We might imagine the dinner table of Mr. Albert Williams, somewhere in Ohio. Seated at one end of the long table, he will say, "Pass the catsup, one of you children."

"Which one?" a child will ask.

"Ah. What have we today, Mother?"

Mother, a beautiful woman of ample proportions, will reply, "Well, Mr. Williams, there are mushroom, plum, cucumber and liver, I believe. Oh, and Maggie will bring tomato catsup from the kitchen, if you want that one."

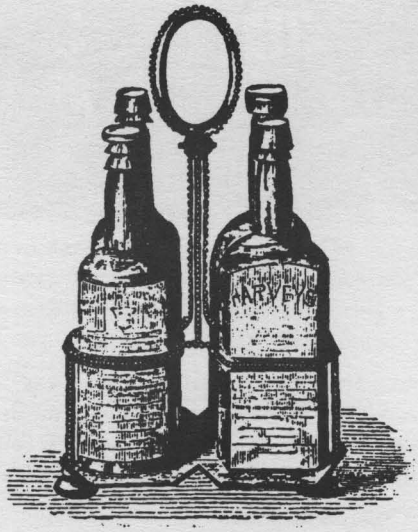
"I say!" This is a visitor who has just arrived from London, who sits tall among the children on one side of the table because they insisted on having him in their midst. They are convulsed with private spasms at the way he talks and Catherine, the thirteen year old, has decided to marry him and live in a tall house with lots of servants. He has been dithering with his food, unused to such quantities at a time of day when he would normally be having tea. "I say, do you make liver catsup here? We always had it at home. At tea time."

"Ugh," says a child, swallowing the rest of his comment under the fiercely bent eyes of both parents.

"Capital, capital," says the Englishman. "Imagine that, liver catsup here in America!"

"I hope you will find," says Albert Williams, "that we are not so simple as to put only one kind of catsup on the table. Not in this country!"

A. W.



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which seems not to have been handed down— not by my grandmother or my mother or my wife's mother or any of our numerous aunts. Now it comes from cans or bottles labeled *Mother's* and appears in the stores only on the highest of holy days, when you are lucky! Today, too, most of the flavor is in the accompanying horseradish. My grandmother used five different fishes. Raymond Sokolov's book calls for three, and the *Mother's* label refers to whitefish.

Back to that chicken we were using to make schmaltz. The meat, some bones, carrots, celery, seasoning and the undeveloped eggs were all used for the chicken soup, an inevitable second course. The rest of the chicken was used for another dish: the necks, feet, gizzards, hearts, the small ends of the wings and even the beaks. These were all combined with tomato, carrots, salt, sour salt, and some juice to make fricassee. It is hard now to believe we ate all this, but it was served as a side dish in a compote, along with the main course.

Our main course was invariably overcooked meat. Either roast beef, sirloin steaks or brisket, all of which matched the over-cooked vegetables and tough potatoes. An occasional kugle substituted for potatoes and was welcome. The desserts were also not remarkable. Pumpkin pies were most sought-after until a certain maid, Olivia, appeared in the kitchen. She created pies made from a butter crust and fresh fruits. I can close my eyes now and bring back those sweet, tart, rich flavors. Olivia was found one morning passed out drunk on the library floor, and though rehabilitation was briefly attempted, we knew her days were numbered. As were those of the Friday dinners.

Did I say that my grandmother's house was kosher? Of course it was not! To my knowledge it never was. The concept of two or even three sets of dishes was considered an impossibility when the family was poor. And apart from Friday night, there was not real meal structuring, so separating meat and milk was abandoned as the family became increasingly numerous and schedules conflicted. All pretense came to an end when that same devilish Uncle Charles took up with an heiress of one of the largest ham and pork processing families in the United States. This lady persisted in sending to the house the most delicious hams imaginable. My steadfast grandmother, though she left it on the counter for all to see and enjoy, forever called it "lunchmeat."

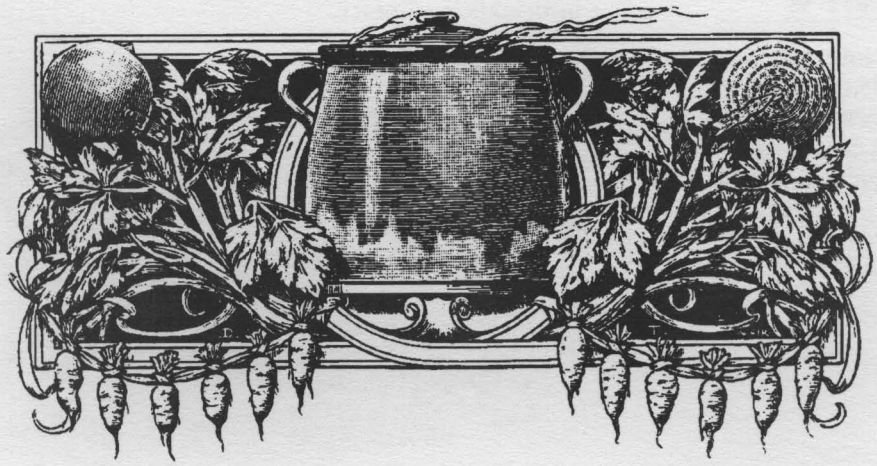
About the time I left for college, first cousins began arriving in a rush. The house was now definitely too small, as was the table. We had always eaten at one table, seated in the same chairs year after year, in a room too small, at a table too large and with too many legs, where there was no periphery for comfortable serving. There were complaints about the soup not being served hot enough. This was a contrived complaint or a mini revolt, I thought, by the outlaws (in-laws and indirect descendants). How would it be possible to serve sixteen or so bowls of very hot soup around that huge table?

But something bad was going wrong with the soup. Towards the end it was no longer rich or full-flavored. Rather it was becoming weaker and weaker every Friday. We always commented that "It is the best you have ever made, Mother!" But it obviously was not. I have never learned the trouble and perhaps I never shall.

For a while, because of its size, the family ate out. But the evenings were not the same. The conversations were never as intimate or as biting, and the need for good behavior shortened or squashed the outbursts. Perhaps the function of holding the family together was also lost. Eventually my grandmother died and shortly afterwards the business was sold— to the Firestone Company, oddly— and my uncles and aunts went their separate ways. The only vestige now is an annual Thanksgiving dinner hosted by two aunts. These meals for fifty or sixty people are sumptuous by any standard and the family looks forward to the feast for the whole year.

Perhaps this is the way with all families. I wish you all might have shared this rich eating heritage with us.

Ned I. Chalat M. D.



Notice has been received of a new quarterly newsletter published by Vinegar Connoisseurs International. Subscribers are promised recipes, buying opportunities, introduction to exotic vinegars and connection with vinegar lovers around the world. The address is:

The Vinegar Man/AKA Lawrence Diggs
30 Carlton Street, PO Box 41,
Roslyn, SD 57261,
Phone: (605) 486-4536.

He will send a free copy, subscription is $10.

Seattle, October 3-6: The American Institute of Wine & Food will hold an international conference entitled Pacific Influences on the 21st Century Table in Seattle. October 3-6. For information contact:

The American Institute of Wine & Food
Attn: Conference Registration
1550 Bryant Street, #700
San Francisco, CA 94103
Phone: (415) 255-2874

Williamsburg, Virginia, November 8-10: HISTORY IN THE MAKING: 200 YEARS OF AMERICAN COOKBOOKS. A splendid program of lectures, symposia, dinners and workshops to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first American cookbook, Amelia

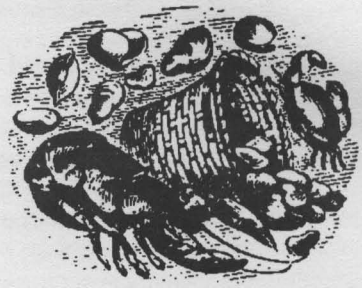
Conferences
Exhibits
Workshops

Simmons' American Cookery, and the centennial of the first edition of Fannie Farmer's Boston Cooking School Cook Book. Keynote talk will be by William Woys Weaver; there will be sessions and panels on American cookbook history, moderated by member Jan Longone, Laura Shapiro, food writer for Newsweek, and Nahum Waxman of Kitchen Arts and Letters. Panel members will include Julia Child, Karen Hess, Mark Miller and others. For additional information, contact:

Brown and Whiting
1113 M Street NW
Washington, D. C. 20005
Phone: (202)371-8126 or
(202)333-3442
Fax: (202)842-3867

Avery Island, Louisiana: Community Cookbook Competition— Cookbooks compiled by local non-profit organizations in 1995 or 1996 are eligible to enter the seventh Annual TABASCO Community Cookbook Awards Competition. Deadline for entries is Monday, September 30, 1996. For more information, contact:

Hunter & Associates Inc.
Public Relations
41 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10010-2202
Phone: (212)679-6600
Fax: (212)679-6607



Activities of other chapters of culinary historians:

The Culinary Historians of Southern California, an organization new last year, meets in Los Angeles. They have had recent programs entitled Coffee, Coffee, and More Coffee, and a three-part series on Wine in Southern California. They meet on the second Saturday of the month at the Los Angeles Public Library. The Culinary Historians of Chicago met in May at Shaw's Crab House for a program entitled "A History of Oysters: Oyster Eating and Oyster Houses in Chicago", after which participants enjoyed an oyster bar and a buffet of gay 90's oyster dishes. The lecture was presented by Jon Rowley, from Seattle, Washington, and Nancy Tauber of Chicago.

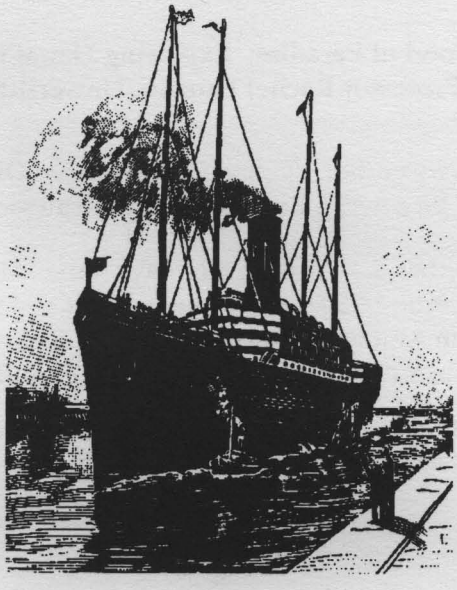
Ricky Agranoff

Cooking in Porcelain is the title of Ricky's first book, published this spring. It is the latest in the popular, handy format series of Nitty Gritty Cookbooks published by Bristol Publishing Enterprises. Ann Arborites know Ricky as a former owner of the Moveable Feast restaurant, bakery, catering and tote cuisine shop. Currently she teaches cooking, is a consultant, and is working on a second book for Nitty Gritty on risotto.

Jan Longone

The Clements Library at the University of Michigan will present an exhibition to commemorate 200 years of American cookbooks from 1796 to 1996 with Jan as visiting curator.

The exhibition runs from August 15 to October 31 with the formal opening and talk by Jan on Thursday, September 19 at 4 pm (see calendar). For specific exhibit hours call the Clements Library at (313) 764-2347. With her husband, Dan, Jan is the owner of the Wine and Food Library, an antiquarian bookshop in Ann Arbor.



Sandra L. Oliver

Saltwater Foodways, published last year by Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut, won the Jane Grigson Award at the I.A.C.P. Julia Child's Cookbook Awards Banquet in Philadelphia this spring. Sandy is editor and publisher of *Food History News*, and her book traces the history of coastal fare in New England.

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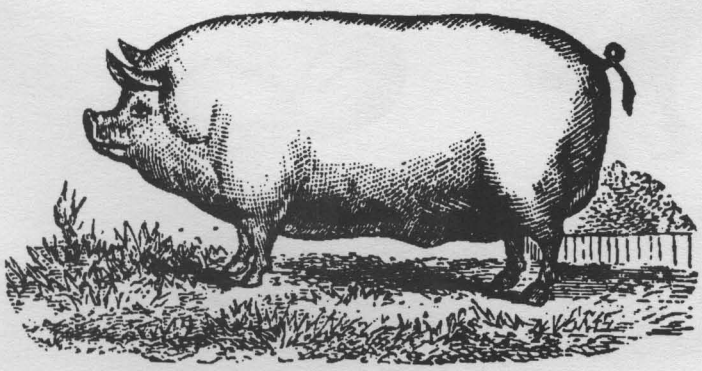
"The winter kitchen was English basement style— kitchen and dining room with a stairway in the center. The winter kitchen went into use after hog-killing, and the basement dining room was used for company all year 'round, especially for the preacher on Sunday. The family used the summer dining room which had a screened-in porch for outside eating and sunset watching. The view from Red Oak was spectacular."

My dream is made somewhat drab by these authentic recollections. It didn't include hog-killing or soap-making. I hadn't thought that the kitchens were usually separated from the house to avoid losing everything when the kitchen caught fire, as Lucy Catherine mentioned, and not to keep everyone cool. And I certainly had no one doing laundry in the summer kitchen of my fantasy. We choose what to remember, or simply make it up, when we get nostalgic.



Yet I have never been sure that cooking is an indoor sport and a summer kitchen still sounds attractive to me, a place where you could fry with abandon, chop in haste and let the bits fly, where the herbs could grow in the very doorway, where your guests or your husband could loll about with glasses of wine while you stir and sauté in your shorts.

Sure, you say, a nice gas barbecue on a shady patch of terrace or lawn.

Well. I bow to progress.

A.W.

September 19 4:00pm— Clements Library, University of Michigan
American Cookery: The Bicentennial 1796 - 1996
Speaker: Jan Longone, Wine and Food Library, Ann Arbor

October 27— The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawai'i's Culinary Heritage.
Speaker: Professor Rachel Laudan, University of Hawai'i

November 17 (tentative)— Olive Oil
Speaker: Ari Wenzweig, Zingerman's Delicatessen, Ann Arbor

December 8— Annual Holiday Dinner Meeting
Celebrating 200 Years of American Cookbooks:
Recipes from Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery*, 1796 and
Fannie Farmer's *Boston Cooking School Cook Book*, 1896

Washtenaw County Extension Service Building, 4133 Washtenaw Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan
Time 7:00 - 9:00 pm (unless otherwise noted)

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First Class