



Repast

Quarterly Newsletter of the Culinary **REFERENCE** of Ann Arbor

KEEPING KOSHER ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Repast editor Randy Schwartz conducted this interview with his father, Hyman A. Schwartz, on November 25, 2000.

Mr. Schwartz was born in 1918, the second of three children in a Jewish family on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His parents were Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Galicia (in northwestern Ukraine). He attended Public School 15, and later Townsend Harris High School, City College and Cooper Union. For most of his career, he managed water resources projects for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Today, he and his wife Clare live in Oakton, VA.

Of course, Mr. Schwartz's views and experiences are his own, and are not necessarily shared by all other Jewish people of his time.

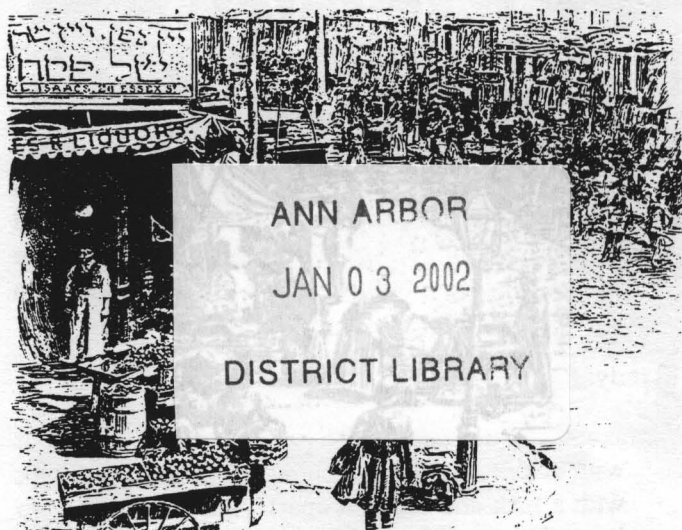
Randy: Let's start with your mom's gefilte fish! (chuckling)

Hyman: (chuckling) Well, gefilte fish was the staple—and traditionally rather common—appetizer on Friday night meals in the Jewish home. The fishmonger would come around in the street with a pushcart made out of sheet metal. And he had like a little tank with the fish swimming around live. He would have a cutting board over the little tank, it was like a rectangular or square tank, maybe about a foot deep, filled with water. And the housewife would pick out the fish that she wanted, or the combination of fish. Usually it was a mixture of different fishes. Carp was one of the most common, but there were other things like whitefish, and something they called *buffel* [i.e. buffalo fish].

And the fishmonger would hit the fish over the head with a heavy mallet or piece of wood. But not hard enough to kill the fish, just to sort of stun it.

Usually, the fishmonger would scrape off the fish, he had a way to scrape off the scales. See, kosher fish had to have two characteristics: one was scales and the other was fins. For example, an eel has scales but no fins, so that's not kosher. Or a shark has fins but no scales, so that's not kosher, and so on. It had to have those two characteristics.

And then he'd cut the fish up, and the different pieces of fish would still be jumping around, quivering and whatnot! It wasn't chopped at all, it was just cut up into slices.



A market scene in the Jewish quarter of Manhattan in the 1890s. Reprinted, with permission, from Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971); permission conveyed through the Copyright Clearance Center.

Randy: Did he wrap those in newspaper?

Hyman: Well, first he'd have a white paper, but the outer wrappings would be newspaper.

Newspapers were at a premium for various purposes. My mother used to use newspapers to cover the floor in what she called the front room, which was the room facing the street, what we'd call nowadays the living room. All of the rooms served as bedrooms at night. We had what they called *aufstellbetten*, in other words standing-up beds that stood up when you folded them. They'd be kept in the back room, and rolled out toward the living room and the kitchen at night. I mean, we wound up with five beds in a three-room apartment. Of course, you'd spend some time, maybe once or twice a week, killing bedbugs (laughing). You know, in a tenement house, it was always because the cockroaches and bedbugs were coming from "the neighbors"—because they weren't keeping their place clean!

So anyway, with the gefilte fish, what the housewife would do, they would scrape out the meat of the fish and scrape off the bones, and chop it up and put in all the other ingredients, and form

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LOWER EAST SIDE *continued from previous page*

them by hand into ellipsoids, or ovals.* And then she would take the fish skin that she had scraped off from the flesh and bones and wrap that around the ball. It wasn't so much a matter of holding it together, it was more a matter of flavor.

Randy: Was there egg used in the mixture?

Hyman: Yeah, egg, to hold it together.

Randy: Bread crumbs?

Hyman: Yeah. I guess different people made things somewhat differently. Then it would be boiled in a broth. They'd put onions in with that broth, and that was also tasty, to have that onion broth with it. It was sort of like a gelatinous thing. They'd put them into a jar or something, with the broth, and put it in the refrigerator. You'd usually have enough leftovers so you'd have it for two or three days after the Friday.

Randy: And was it eaten at room temperature?

Hyman: Cold, usually. You'd put it on a plate and eat it with a fork. It was soft enough to be able to work with a fork and break it apart. And then you'd dip it into horseradish, which was also put on the plate. It could be either white horseradish, or they might put a beet in with it to make it red horseradish.

It seems like the stuff tasted much better than

* Since picking through bones might be considered a form of work, their removal ahead of time is what makes gefilte fish especially suited for eating on the Sabbath.

Repast

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what you get in the way of these bottled— like Manischewitz fish. My mother's gefilte fish was delectable.

There was a custom also, on Saturday afternoon, before the sun set, you'd have something called *shalsheedess*, which was a little festive meal in the synagogue to sort of say goodbye to the Sabbath. We had a young group of fellows and girls that used to have that kind of a little meal. We'd take turns bringing in something for that meal, and we'd sing some Hebrew songs. When it was our turn, my mother would make an extra amount of gefilte fish. But usually the others would bring something like herring, which wasn't as good as gefilte fish. My mother's contribution was always better than anybody else's, so people used to look forward to our turn!

Randy: And how was the herring prepared? Pickled?

Hyman: Yeah, it was pickled with onions, sour cream.

Randy: When your mother bought fish from the monger, would she speak Yiddish with him?

Hyman: Yeah... And when he was finished, when he was pretty much sold out with the fish and done with his Friday morning sale of that stuff, he would pull the plug on the tank and just let the water go into the street, and it was all sort of fish water (laughing), I mean it didn't help contribute to the sanitary condition of the streets! Of course, there were other things in that street that made it unsanitary, like the horses that pulled the ice wagon, or other wagons...

Randy: Now, how would the Friday night meal differ from other meals?

Hyman: It was usually meat. Many of the Jewish families would eat meat almost every day; in our house, there was a lot of dairy meals. And when we started, you know, studying biology and becoming concerned about health and all that, we'd usually have one meal a week that was vegetarian— like making three or four or five cooked vegetables on one plate.

And there was a lot of Jewish bread that was eaten, Jewish rolls. There was usually one or two bakeries on every block. On Friday afternoon, my mother would prepare cookies and *challah*, the woven bread which you'd weave by hand, braided bread. And things like *potatonik*, which was grated potatoes in a flat baking pan. And since the small tenements didn't have enough of a stove capacity to bake a lot of stuff, and because Friday afternoon was the only time you did bake, you'd bring some

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Book Review

A TASTE OF THE TIDEWATER SOUTH

Marvin Woods,
The New Low-Country Cooking: 125 Recipes for Coastal Southern Cooking with Innovative Style
 New York: William Morrow & Co., 2000
 288pp., \$25.00 cloth

by James E. McWilliams

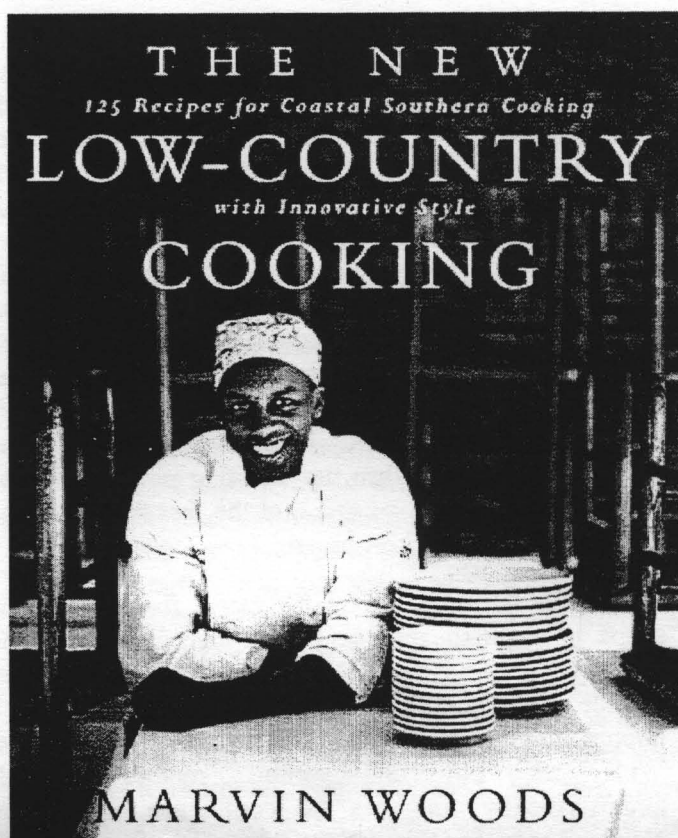
James McWilliams of Austin, TX, is researching a book on historical American cookery. He recently completed a doctoral dissertation on domestic economic development in colonial Massachusetts. Jimmy has previously written for *Repast* on African-American slave foodways (Fall 1999) and on maize in colonial New England (Summer 2000).

Marvin Woods' *The New Low-Country Cooking* provides the home cook with an accessible guide to America's deepest, most diverse, and—all things considered—most significant culinary tradition.

There are a number of reasons why it's taken this kind of book so long to appear. First, cooks in the Low Country—a region stretching along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts, with Charleston as its epicenter—have enjoyed access to spices and ingredients not widely available elsewhere. (That, however, has begun to change; Woods himself is the founder-owner of Diaspora Foods, a product line focused exclusively on the African-American culinary heritage.) Second, as the trend toward healthful cookbooks has gathered steam, Low-Country cooking has stood out as notoriously heavy. A thoroughly *American* style of food, this cuisine lacks the imprimatur of the more popular classical traditions. And, finally, as a tradition that incorporates the vast culinary histories of the Atlantic World, Low-Country cooking seems inherently resistant to easy distillation and summary.

Marvin Woods, executive chef at Diaspora Grill in Charlotte, North Carolina, gets around these problems admirably. With 125 short, well-written recipes (few of them exceed one page), he introduces even the most conservative and amateurish of us pseudo-chefs to a new world of taste.

Some culinary combinations might seem odd at first. Woods serves his roast pork tenderloin with a brown sugar pineapple jam. He marinates pork chops in a bourbon marinade. From grilled filet mignon, Woods reduces a brown oyster gravy. Working from the premise that "much of West African cooking is based on one-pot dishes," he offers a tremendous recipe for



braised oxtail. (Even if you don't have access to oxtail, this recipe is worth reading.) Woods does a good job of balancing the exotic with the familiar. Some meat recipes sound downright French. He presents a beef tenderloin with a rosemary and roasted shallot pan gravy, and his roasted chicken recipe could have been written by Julia Child (okay, well not the paprika). This impressive range is hardly disingenuous, but reflective of the fact that, as he puts it, "in the south, the preparation of meats took its cues from all over."

Special mention must be made of Woods' fried chicken. "Almost everybody likes good fried chicken," he writes, "but I don't think everybody knows how to *make* good fried chicken." Woods, as he does throughout the book, draws on history for inspiration. Traditionally, when people churned their own butter, they used the leftover acidic liquid as a marinade in which to soak meat. Woods thus calls for a buttermilk marinade flavored with paprika, garlic powder, salt, black pepper and cayenne pepper. After letting the chicken sit for up to a full day in this marinade, allowing the meat to tenderize, he applies the breading, then deep-fries the pieces in vegetable oil. Something about the acidic buttermilk makes the breading stick more securely to the skin. The crust turns out amazingly well. When I recently tried this recipe for six friends, I ended up with

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LOW-COUNTRY *continued from previous page*

a splattered ceiling, a plate of golden fried chicken worthy of a KFC bucket photo, and six very happy friends.

Much of Low-Country cooking originated on slave plantations. Slaves required an unusually high caloric intake, because of the back-breaking demands of plantation life. This is a cuisine that, as a result, is generally quite heavy. Not all of Woods' creations, however, wage such an assault on the arteries. A navy bean and okra summer stew uses only a teaspoon of oil, relying primarily on vegetable stock for the base flavor (oh yeah, and two slices of bacon, but those can be left out). Woods' cold vegetable soup strongly resembles gazpacho, but has been playfully tweaked with "Marv's Hot Sauce." An asparagus leek soup and tomato and fennel soup both confirm the "melting pot of cultures" behind Low-Country cuisine and the fact that this food can be as delicate as it is forceful.

While the book covers the gamut from salads and soups to shellfish and chops, the ingredients rice and corn play a fundamental role. The rice-based dishes include, for example, a shrimp and crab pilaf and a hoppin' john, both of which worked quite well for me. With his powerful gumbo recipes, Woods enthusiastically embraces the confluence of African, Native American, Spanish, and French influences, and thus gets to the diverse heart of this cuisine. Forget Emeril. These dishes are what gumbo looked like before it became a New Orleans tourist attraction. His seafood gumbo liberally incorporates just about any seafood that happens to be available, including mussels, shrimp, crab, halibut, lobster, rockfish, clams, cod, sole, and monkfish. "People," he instructs, "there is no limit— just technique." All of his gumbos rely on his master recipe for "creole sauce." Comprised of okra, corn, celery, tomatoes, hot sauce, herbs, several peppercorns and, of course, a classic brown roux, it highlights the lunacy of Alan Davidson's omission of a "Gumbo" entry in his supposedly definitive *Oxford Companion to Food*. Marv's gumbo is culinary history in a pot.

The contextualization of nearly every one of his recipes within the history of the Low Country is what ultimately distinguishes Woods' fine cookbook from others currently on the market. Karen Hess, author of *The Carolina Rice Kitchen*, writes the introduction. Woods prefaces many recipes with an informed commentary on the dish's historical significance. His recipes continually reiterate the important point that food is, ultimately, a local phenomenon. Sure, you might not be able to get hold of Low-Country mussels, or fresh rockfish. But Woods' book, in its attention to food's deeper meanings, belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in culinary history, no matter where they live.

"FEEDING AMERICA" DIGITAL ARCHIVE

The Michigan State University Library and the MSU Museum have received a two-year, \$249,000 grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, to create an online collection of 19th- and early 20th-Century American cookbooks.

The "Feeding America" online collection will highlight an important part of America's cultural heritage for teachers and students at the K-12 and college levels, researchers investigating American social history, professional chefs, and cooking enthusiasts of all ages. The two-year project will be completed in September 2003. A preview site is available at <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/cookbooks/>.

"Feeding America" will include page images of 75 cookbooks in the MSU Library's collection as well as searchable full-text transcriptions. The site will also feature a glossary of cookery terms, essays by culinary historian Jan Longone, and multidimensional images of antique cooking implements from the collections of the MSU Museum.

The full-text search capability of the site will enable students and scholars to locate passages on topics as diverse as 1890s nutritional advice, the uses of nutmeg, Civil War-era apple pie recipes and descriptions of kitchen appliances. The 3D images will help users visualize the technology of 19th-Century cooking by linking descriptions of unfamiliar cooking processes to images of the utensils and implements used to carry them out.

"Many of the older cookbooks are more than a collection of recipes," notes Yvonne Lockwood, curator of folklife at the MSU Museum. "In addition to recipes, some also were manuals on what constitutes a meal, on how to run a kitchen, serve meals, feed a family, and much more," she said. "They provide a glimpse into womens' lives not 'seen' elsewhere. Gleanings from the recipes in cookbooks, such as these that cover a period of time, for example, also suggest influences on food and food habits and document changing food fads."

"Bytes of History," a major article on the project written by reporter Heather Newman, appeared on the front page of the Food section in the *Detroit Free Press* (October 9, 2001). Newman noted that the MSU Museum owns over 1,000 food-related artifacts, and the Library contains 5,000 cookbooks from six centuries, such as Tunis Campbell's *Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers' Guide* (1848), one of the earliest Black-authored American cookbooks. The article was accompanied by eight historical recipes adapted by the *Free Press* Test Kitchen, including rice pudding from Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery* (1798), ham and chicken croquettes from Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* (1838), and Washington tea biscuits from *The Woman Suffrage Cookbook* (1886 or 1890).

The project is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency that supports the nation's museums and libraries. Directors for the grant are Michael Seadle, head of the Digital & Multimedia Center at the MSU Library, and Peter Berg, head of the Special Collections Division at the MSU Library. Principal contributors also include CHAA members Lockwood and Longone.

LOWER EAST SIDE *continued from page 2*

of the stuff that you couldn't fit into your own oven to the bakery. The bakery was pretty much closing down its production, because Saturday was coming up and they were gonna be closed on Saturday. They already had done whatever they needed to do for the rest of Friday. So the bakery ovens were available for people to bring their stuff and have that baked by the baker.

Randy: But wouldn't the oven have to be turned off by sundown?

Hyman: Yeah, by sundown. We would bring the stuff that my mother made for baking, we would bring that over when we came home from school for lunch. In other words, when we finished lunch at about 12:30 let's say, we'd bring that over and then go on to school from there. And then when we came home from school at about 3 o'clock or 3:30, we'd go back over there and pick it up and bring it home. It was already baked by then.

The Purloined Potatonik

Randy: So when the goods were brought Friday to be baked, were the ovens being powered down? Were they going full blast or—

Hyman: Yeah, they were going full blast. Because there was a lot of people, a lot of stuff that was brought in. If there were two bakeries in the block, then half the block's families would be bringing their baked goods there. It was quite a thing, there was hardly any room to put all the stuff. The baker had a long wooden, like a shovel thing, to push it all the way to the back. And when he'd start hauling them out, he'd put them on top of these sacks of flour that were stored in the baking area, in the basement of the bakery. There were a lot of insects infested in that area, and vermin and so on. They tried to keep it as clean as they could, but it was a losing battle!

My mother's *potatonik* was once stolen— I dunno, we never could figure out whether it was done on purpose or just by inadvertently somebody, instead of picking up their own, they picked up my mother's *potatonik*. But in self-defense, she started putting a label on it, and the label came from my *Loew's Weekly*, which was the newsletter from the Loew's Avenue B with the week's upcoming performances described, with a little picture maybe. They were addressed to "Hyman Schwartz, 712 E. Fifth Street, New York, New York." And when that came in the mail, my mother would cut that address label out and put

that on the *potatonik*. I always used to say, "Mom! Why are you taking my *Loew's Weekly*?" Which was junk mail, actually!

Randy: So she'd sort of press the label on top of the—

Hyman: Yeah, you know, the *potatonik* was sort of wet, a wet soggy mess, and she'd just put it on top. And then when it came out of the bakery, it was right there, and nobody could say that it wasn't our particular *potatonik*.

Randy: Her *potatonik* was better than average?

Hyman: Yeah. The relatives that came from the Bronx to visit us, they always used to like my mother's baked goods, including the *potatonik*. See, the ones that lived in the Bronx were a little wealthier than the ones that lived in the East Side; they were people who had restaurants, that were in the fur business and that type of thing.

Another one that she used to make a lot was called *tziblle kuchen* [in Yiddish]— *tziblle* is onions, and *kuche* is like a little cake or cookie. Those were a little onion dough that were cut into diamond shape, maybe about three inches in length one way and two inches in length the other way, like a rhombus. Not sweetened, but they were pretty crisp when they were baked. And so the *tziblle kuchen* and the *potatonik* were very much favored by the relatives who came in from the Bronx.

And then there was *varenikes*, too. My mother would roll out dough and use a glass to get circular pieces. She'd fill them with mashed potatoes and fried onions, and close it up so it was like a half-moon. They were very good just boiled, but then the next day they were fried and browned and were *really* good. They were very good with sour cream. It was like Austro-Hungarian.

She also made *kasha varnishkes* [egg noodles with roasted buckwheat groats], and *farfel* [tiny pellet-shaped egg noodles with fried onions]...

Another thing my mother made that we liked a lot was *gepraegelte tzibbles* [Yiddish for "fried onions"]. It was essentially an onion omelet. In other words, fry the onions, sometimes with potatoes, and then you'd throw in eggs and mix it up in the frying pan. Boy, that was good on an onion roll, with tomatoes on the side. Like if you went on a hike, you'd take that sandwich along. It was a staple with us.

Randy: Did the baker charge people like your mom for his baking of things like *potatonik*?

Hyman: Yeah, like five things— or two tins of baked

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goods— for a nickel. That sort of thing. The baker would pretty much pocket that for himself. He wasn't necessarily the proprietor of the bakery or anything.

Randy: Did you also buy bread ready-made from a Jewish bakery?

Hyman: Yeah. The bakery that we used to get bread at was very Jewish. There'd be everything, dark breads, usually rye bread or pumpernickel, and rolls— either kaiser or onion rolls or hard rolls. There were bagels, they weren't quite as large as those you see today, and they were always plain bagels. On Saturday night they'd have *bialys*, whereas the bagels were sold every day.

Anyway, the rolls were best eaten the same day, but then, when they got old, you'd crumble them up and use them for soup, or as part of gefilte fish. I mean, there was nothing wrong with it, it wasn't moldy or anything, it was just stale. And the bread used to have *kümmel* [similar to caraway] in it, or other seeds, poppy.

Randy: What was the name of the rye bread?

Hyman: "Corn bread." You know, the word "corn" not in the sense of maize, but corn in the sense of grain. *Korn* in Yiddish and German means the most common grain of a region, and rye was the most common grain in the eastern part of Europe. And pumpernickel was made out of rye flour, too.

There was another Jewish bakery on Fifth Street that was for things like pies and pastries. And then there was another bakery on Avenue C between Fourth Street and Fifth Street called Frieda's. That was a little more upscale, it wasn't as Jewish or kosher. There you'd get things like *éclairs* or *Napoleons* and that type of thing. You wouldn't go there for your rye bread.

Randy: But your family would buy things there, too?

Hyman: Yeah, but I mean maybe once a week. It wasn't a staple. Another thing Randy, see if you need a bread on Saturday morning, then the Jewish bakeries are closed. So you'd go to one of the other bakeries.

Randy: Was the Saturday meal different from other meals of the week?

Hyman: Not in our house, we wouldn't make a big deal out of it. But some people used to; I remember one family used to make a thing every Saturday out of oxtail. But usually you'd have cake and cookies and things like that on Saturday, and of course

you'd have some leftovers from the rest of the week. There would be some nice things, like cakes and pies or a small type of dessert. You know, a little bit more festive.

But the meal on Friday night was really the big meal of the week. There'd be the bread made for the Sabbath, and you'd have soup— chicken soup. And then you'd have the meat, it could be beef or it could be chicken. And then you'd have what you call the *tsimmes*, the dessert. It could be another part of the main meal. Like you'd make the dough, and cut it into very small triangles, and you'd cook that with fried onions. Another popular dish was a compote, in other words cooked [i.e. stewed] fruit. It might have a couple of apples or pears that were past the point where you'd eat them raw. And it would have like apricots. Or dried fruit compote, a mixture of dried fruit cooked: prunes, apricots, pears, dried apples, figs, raisins. Or you could have apple sauce.

The Streets Were Thick With Pushcarts

Randy: Would your mom, when she went shopping for things like the fish, she'd go from peddler to peddler?

Hyman: Yeah, she wouldn't just go to get the fish. She would combine that with other things that she was buying for the Friday night and the Saturday.

See, it wasn't really a refrigerator, it was an icebox that they had before they had refrigerators. You'd have to get ice about every other day or so because it would melt, especially in the summer. In order to keep the ice from melting too fast, you'd wrap it with a lot of layers of newspaper. So the upper portion of the icebox was where the ice was, and then the lower portion was where food was kept. It wasn't a very big thing, so people used to go shopping essentially daily.

And shopping, you know with the pushcarts and everything, it was also a social thing. I mean, not just talking to the peddlers, but also the ladies talking to each other. Or if they went to the butcher's shop or a dairy store, people were waiting, and while they were waiting for their turn they'd usually have a bench in there and people would gossip. In other words, shopping was a social thing. Exchange information, exchange news and gossip and so on.

In the vegetable store, the vegetable man, like if there was a potato that was half-rotten or some other thing, carrots and so on, he would throw it in a corner, or a basket in the corner, or a box. And then whenever we kids would build a fire, we would go to those places and get those potatoes that were half-rotten, and bake 'em in the fire and

cut away the bad part. And they just tasted *delicious!* (laughing)

Randy: (laughing) You'd roast them?

Hyman: You'd roast them, yeah. In the fire. Sweet potatoes or white potatoes or other things.

In the winter, the vendors would sell sweet potatoes, chestnuts. The cart had several drawers, like four metal drawers. The bottom one was for the fire, usually a wood fire. The middle ones were for baking the potatoes, and the top one for keeping them warm.

In the summer they'd have corn on the cob. They wouldn't sell the whole thing, but an inch or inch-and-a-half slice for a penny, with a shaker for salt and pepper. In the summer also they had ices, shaved ice with different flavor syrups.

Randy: Would that be Jewish or Italian vendors?

Hyman: No, Jewish. The Italian ices were maybe fancier— *gelato* and stuff— but this was just shaved ice with syrup on it.

In the winter, they also had jellied apple. They'd put an apple on a stick, and stick it in the boiling jelly. Then you'd twirl it around on the stick to get it cool.

Most of the peddlers had their regular positions, along Avenue C for example, between Fourth Street and Fifth Street. I mean, you always knew if you wanted to get apples, the apple guy was in a certain place in the line of those pushcarts. But then there were some that, like my father when he was unemployed— he was a presser of ladies' garments, and when he was unemployed he had, to support us, he became a peddler for a while. He rented a pushcart and was selling fruit, but he didn't have a license. He didn't have a specific place. So he would sort of be on the fringe, and then the cops would chase him. But they'd try to bribe the cops, and they often were successful in keeping the cops at bay by bribing them when they didn't have a license. So it was a question of, you know the economics were worked out as to whether it was cheaper to get a license or bribe the cops! (laughing) That was taken for granted, that the cops made a little extra money in that way. It wasn't considered sinful or thievery or anything, it was just that the cop needed some extra money and the peddler needed to make a living, but he wasn't allowed to without a license. So there was an accommodation.

Randy: About what years was your dad doing this?

Hyman: Between about 1931 or '32, for two or three years. You know, when the Depression came, in

1929, for a while there was no welfare arrangement. Later on, with the New Deal, they started having welfare.

Randy: Would a guy selling apples, for example, be selling only apples or other kinds of fruit?

Hyman: He'd sell good apples that were, let's say a penny apiece, or two cents apiece. And then the apples that you wouldn't eat raw, that you would cook or make a pie or something, that were half rotten or overripe, you'd get like a half a dozen, they were reduced. So his pushcart would be divided into about four or five sections, separated by pieces of wood. And he would sort them out by size or quality and so on. Or if they sold vegetables, usually it wouldn't be a pushcart just full of one type of vegetable, it might be two or three. You know, a guy would sell cabbages as well as lettuce, iceberg lettuce and another type of lettuce.

Randy: And would there be a guy selling pickled vegetables?

Hyman: The pickle man was a store, actually— that wasn't a pushcart. And then he'd have pickled peppers, pickled tomatoes, pickled cucumbers, and sauerkraut. My mother would send me to the store to get what she called sour stuff— "Get the sour stuff"— and the sour stuff was all those different pickled things, which usually you'd have with meat.

A Perfect Report Card Meant a Trip to the Deli

Randy: Was there a place that sold sausages?

Hyman: Yeah, we had what they called a delicatessen store. At a Jewish delicatessen, you could buy food

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Father and son at the time of the interview.

LOWER EAST SIDE *continued from previous page*

and take it home and cook it, frankfurters or cold cuts. But if you wanted to "put on the Ritz," you could eat a frankfurter or other things in the restaurant. They wouldn't serve any dairy in a place that had meat.

My folks used to feel that a delicatessen was sort of unhealthy. My father had once worked in a pie factory and he was always against pies. And I guess some of those people had worked in a delicatessen, they came back with these horror stories about the kind of meat that they used and everything, which was probably exaggerated. But in any case it was considered that if you ate a frankfurter it was sort of unhealthy, so you didn't make it a staple. It was like a forbidden fruit. So what we used to do was, my folks, if you got straight As on your report card, you'd have a frankfurter! And you'd bring the frankfurter home and it would be broiled or fried.

And also in the delicatessen store, the guy had a little grill going, and he had something they call a "hot ring," which would be like a big sausage, maybe about an inch in diameter and sort of circular. That was roasting on the grill continuously at very low heat. It was quite dry and chewy because it was there for so long. And they'd also have some knishes on the grill, and if somebody wanted one of those it was already warmed up and ready to eat.

They used to put mustard into little cones with a sort of a paper that was impervious to leakage, like waxed. The guy would form a little cone, sort of elongated, and fill it with mustard. And if you'd get like a pound of frankfurters, you'd get two or three of these mustards thrown in with them. And we used to take some of those mustards, it was sort of a grainy mustard, and push it against somebody's face and say "Baby shit!" (laughing)

Randy: (laughing) A complete stranger?

Hyman: No, usually it was, you know, your friends. "Baby shit!"

They used to, on Election Day, put flour in an old woman's stocking, at the bottom of a stocking. You'd tie a knot, and then you'd swing it and hit somebody, like if they had a fur coat, you'd smack 'em with that (laughing) and get flour on it! I mean somebody with a black fur coat. I don't know why, but Election Day was when they did that.

Randy: Tell me more about the knishes.

Hyman: The Gabille [brand] knishes, from resting on that grill for a long time, the bottom would get hard and crusty, and the top part was the potato. It

was mostly potato knishes back then. Nowadays the knishes are flat, but these were sort of rounded, maybe 2½, 3 inches high and about 3½ inches in diameter, with like a *phyllo* dough, but it was a yellow color, light yellow. It was some kind of a light dough, like a pastry or very thin dough. And the covering of the potato, it wasn't a smooth covering, it was indented.

Randy: But the filling itself wasn't yellow?

Hyman: No. The potato filling I think traditionally had some onions in it, to give it some flavor. It cost a nickel. The frankfurters were usually a nickel, on a frankfurter roll with sauerkraut. But if you got a good frankfurter, on Coney Island at Nathan's, that was ten cents because it was better quality.

Kosher and Not So Kosher

Randy: You said a place that sold meat couldn't serve dairy items. Could they have things with egg?

Hyman: Yeah, yeah. See, the thing with milk and meat goes back to the Bible. The proscription was that "you shall not boil the meat of the calf in the milk of the mother." And that was sort of, I dunno, a lot of those dietary laws like not eating pork, it had to do with trichinosis and the tropics, and that they didn't have good sanitation in those days. And so instead of teaching them about the principles of health, they'd say that it's a sin to eat an animal that doesn't chew its cud. So that eliminated the pig. A kosher animal had to have two things: split hooves and chewing its cud. So that included sheep, and goats, cows and other things. But it excluded the pig. And also it excluded most game—that was considered the wild man's food, like Esau.

But you couldn't just go out and shoot an animal with bow and arrow, that wasn't kosher. You had to slaughter it in a certain way. In other words, get the blood out of it and so on. And how they rationalized it was saying, that way the animal died without a whole lot of pain. I dunno, but a lot of these things were rationalized by saying it's a holy law to do it this way. God had given man a reason to do it this way. And then the rabbis came along later and made it even more strict. That's where kosher salt came from. The coarse salt, kosher salt, is used to pull the blood out of the meat.

The rule about not working on the Sabbath, well that was a progressive idea, that you got some rest. In those days, work was—like you couldn't make fire [on the Sabbath]. Well, you had to rub stones, it was hard work. Nowadays, you flip a

switch, and that makes life easier than if you didn't. But you're not allowed; the rabbi says no, that's "making a fire."

Randy: So how did your mom make meals on the Sabbath?

Hyman: Well, we weren't *that* religious. But religious people used to keep the gas flame on the stove low, and the theory was that if you weren't actually lighting that, you could move the thing to make it hotter but you couldn't actually start it, light a match. So people used to keep the stove at a low flame. And if the thing burned out, like if you got to the house, for some reason you came in from somewhere and the gas stove wasn't lit, you could hire a Gentile to light the thing for you. In fact, some men would come regularly. Like in Hebrew school, for example, for the synagogue, they'd have a Gentile guy, John, who was the janitor, and he was the guy who'd light the flames on the Sabbath for us.

Now as far as *kashrut* [i.e. dietary laws], they'd have separate restaurants. They'd have restaurants where you could get meat, and restaurants where you could get dairy, and restaurants where you could get vegetarian, neither meat nor milk. And the rule was that if you had a dairy meal, after a half an hour you could eat meat, because the theory was that dairy doesn't take that long to digest. Whereas if you ate meat, you couldn't eat dairy for six hours.

You had to keep separate sets of dishes. I mean you couldn't serve dairy food on a plate that you'd used for meat. And then in the back room, you'd have to have another two sets of dishes for Passover.

The story of Passover is that when the Jews fled Egypt, they couldn't make leavened bread because they had to run quickly and get out of the country. So they baked the bread by putting it on their backs. And that was the matzo. It didn't have time to rise. And now the matzo is sacred, and you can't let it come into contact with ordinary bread. You couldn't even serve it on the same plate, because there might be a breadcrumb.

As a matter of fact, the day before Passover [as a ritual], you'd put crumbs in different corners of the kitchen, and then sweep it up, wrap the crumbs up in a rag with a wooden spoon and give it to one of the kids in the street to burn up for a nickel. In other words, cleaning it out and getting rid of it. The idea was to clear out the kitchen of all the *hametz*, the things having to do with leavened bread. You'd plant some crumbs around the kitchen floor and go around and sweep it up with a special brush, made of fine feathers loosely held



A map of the Lower East Side, included in the federal WPA Guide to New York City (1939), indicates the boundaries of "sub-ethnic districts" of Jews: Hungarian, Galician, Rumanian, Levantine, and Russian. Republished from Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

together. Then that brush would be wrapped in a rag, tied into a knot, and a wooden spoon would be thrown in along with it. And it would be given to the kids in the street to burn in the fires. They'd do all that just before going to school in the morning.

Anyway, for that you'd also have to have two sets of dishes for Passover, again one for dairy and one for meat. So you'd have four sets of dishes.

Randy: But your mom didn't have four sets, did she?

Hyman: Yes, she did. You had to have a whole set of dishes—pots and pans and everything.

Randy: Was matzo something you would eat pretty frequently?

Hyman: Yeah, you'd eat it during the year, but not as much as during Passover. Usually, during the year you wouldn't eat it in the form of what corre-

continued on next page

BRING ON THE SCHMALTZ

by Ned I. Chalatz, M.D.

Dr. Chalatz is a retired otolaryngologist in Grosse Pointe, MI. He and his wife Joann are longtime members of CHAA. Their restaurant reminiscences, "From Marjolaine to Camel's Hump," appeared in our Winter 1999 issue, and Ned's memories of meals at his grandmother's home, "No One Ever Called Her Mali!" in our Summer 1996 issue.

Was this Jewish restaurant experience a carnival, a parody, a restaurant, a social statement, a burlesque, or simply an exercise in gastronomic Judaism?

On Monday, October 22, 2001 at congregation Beth Shalom in Oak Park, Michigan, we attended a talk by Professor Jack Kugelmass of Arizona State University's Department of Judaic Studies. It was entitled "Interpreting a Jewish Meal: An Anthropological Excursion to a Jewish Restaurant." The evening was sponsored by the Cohn-Haddow Center for Judaic Studies at Wayne State University.

If the event was not what we expected, it was, at the least, entertaining. The restaurant in question, Sammy's Romanian Steak House, is on Manhattan's Lower East Side, on Chrystie at Delancey Streets. It is rather more a "phenomenon" than a nostalgic vestige of old New York. The food is apparently neither kosher nor authentic. In its present incarnation Sammy's is owned by Stanley Zimmerman, who purchased it as a going concern in 1974. Stanley seems to be a Jewish Liberace of sorts, and his personality carries the evening along with the help of Yiddish-speaking Asians, music, vocalists, comedians, and quantities of good high-cholesterol food.

According to Prof. Kugelmass, the Lower East Side actually started to lose its Jewish identity as long ago as World War I, when Jews began vacating toward the Bronx, upper Manhattan, and Brooklyn Heights. This made room for a succession of immigrants, currently highlighted by the Chinese. Sammy's, whose decor the speaker described as "remarkably terrible," seems to be stuck in the old neighborhood among an "awful" art museum, several grungy shops, and "Kosher Style" food emporiums. These all remain "to satisfy those of us who are now devoted to American consumerism and seek a nostalgic roots experience," he explained. Most customers imagine they are returning to grandmother's for a typical old-fashioned meal. I should note that Sammy's is not typical of my own grandmother's home, where, for example, she would never have allowed the *schmaltz* (the rendered goose or chicken fat used as a cooking medium in traditional European Jewish cuisine) to be set in a decanter directly on the dinner table!

The speaker noted that the food was excellent, of more than ample quantity, and rather pricey. The *New York Times* rates it three stars, and every other N.Y. restaurant guide touts it. The atmosphere there must be somewhat agitated, anything but serene, but Dr. Kugelmass was sufficiently stimulated by his experience to prepare his paper. And our audience of about a hundred people supplemented the talk with a lively, sometimes nostalgic discussion.

The evening ended on a more intellectual note. Since a large portion of the restaurant's clientele is not Jewish, the question arose whether such dining experiences serve only to fortify negative stereotypes? The consensus reached in the ensuing conversation was that our Jewish culture is advanced enough for us to laugh at ourselves. We Jews have enjoyed doing just that, even back when it was called "burlesque."

LOWER EAST SIDE *continued from previous page*

sponds to bread. You would make *matzo brei*, which means break it up into little pieces, soak them in water and squeeze it out, and fry it in a pan with a little egg until it's brown and crispy. Or matzo-ball soup. Matzo balls were made out of ground-up matzo meal [not baked matzo], which I guess was a little fluffier than regular dough.

You know, that reminds me that in our elementary school, kids were pretty much all Jewish, but some of the teachers were Gentile. As a matter of fact, most of them were "old maids," because it was a pretty poorly paid job; they used to be the more elderly women. So they didn't live on the East Side, they would come to the East Side from the suburbs by train. For lunch, they would send one of the kids out to John's—that was the name of a restaurant about a block and a half away—to get like a ham and egg sandwich, or ham and cheese, on rye. But it wasn't a Jewish rye. So we thought it was—you know, who would eat *that* crap (laughing), I mean you'd have to be in prison to eat *that* crap! And we thought all that stuff that wasn't kosher, like ham and bacon and

all that, and seafood, that wasn't... edible!

And if you went away from the Jewish areas of the East Side and went to like Little Italy, you'd see them selling all the other strange foods, different kinds of vegetables, and seafoods like oysters, clams, shrimp. And we thought it smelled terrible, and we'd think, "How could people eat that stuff!" (laughing)

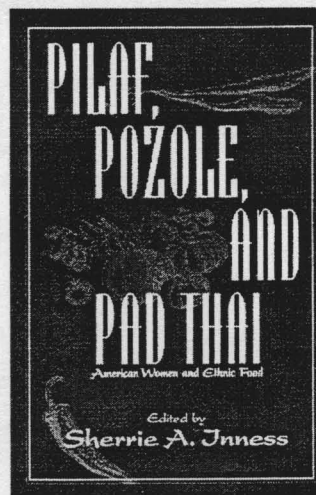
But my father used to say that the vegetables of the Italians were very good, very healthy, because they were very bitter, and that meant that they had a lot of iron in them. And he'd even say that the reason the Christians were so strong is because they ate ham! If you were sick, sometimes the doctor would tell you to eat ham, because it would make you strong. You'd get like a special dispensation to eat ham. The Jewish doctor would prescribe it: "You've gotta eat some ham until you get healthy!" You know, the rationale was that you had to sort of keep body and soul together, so it was alright to do that, to stop eating kosher long enough to get well. And then you'd go back later to how you were eating before. □

MORSELS & TIDBITS

On December 4, **Jan Longone**, our Founding Chair, will be presenting an illustrated lecture at the University of Michigan's Detroit Observatory (1398 E. Ann St. at Observatory St. in Ann Arbor), where she will be speaking on "Dr. Chase and His Famous 19th-Century Recipe Book." Jan has been busy giving a variety of culinary history lectures around the United States this past year. In February, she spoke to the Ann Arbor chapter of the American Association of University Women on the subject of "The Cook Not Mad: 200 Years of American Cookbooks." In April, she addressed the Central Region chapter of the American Culinary Federation (ACF) in Grand Rapids, MI, speaking on "Great Chefs and Their Contributions." In July, she gave the keynote speech, "Chefs Who Also Made a Difference," at the the ACF's national meeting in Las Vegas, NV. (ACF is the oldest professional chef's organization in America, and Jan comments that it was quite inspiring to look out over an audience of 2,000 American chefs, all formally dressed in their white uniforms!) In August, Jan spoke to the Culinary Collectors Society of Cincinnati on "How to Cook a Husband: America's Charitable Cooks." And in October, at the Ford Museum in Greenfield Village, she lectured to the Detroit chapter of the ACF, where her topic was "A History of American Cookbooks."

Food in Global History (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000; 293pp., \$30 paper) is a collection of work based on a conference of the same name, held here at the University of Michigan in October 1996. The volume is edited, with an overview essay, by conference organizer and emeritus UM history professor **Raymond Grew**. The other contributions are as follows: Harriet Friedmann, "Circles of growing and eating: the political ecology of food and agriculture"; Sucheta Mazumdar, "The impact of New World crops on the diet and economy of China and India, 1600-1900"; Rebecca L. Spang, "All the world's a restaurant: on the global gastronomics of tourism and travel"; Joëlle Bahloul, "On 'cabbages and kings': the politics of Jewish identity in post-colonial French society and cuisine"; Elisabet Helsing, "Food policies, nutrition policies, and their influence on processes of change: European examples"; Della McMillan and Thomas Reardon, "Food policy research in a global context: the West African Sahel"; Noel W. Solomons, "Childhood nutrition in developing countries and its policy consequences"; Jeffrey Sobal, "Food system globalization, eating transformations, and nutrition transitions"; Adam Drewnowski, "Fat and sugar in the global diet: dietary diversity in the nutrition transition"; Claude Fischler, "The 'Mad Cow' crisis: a global perspective"; Alex McIntosh, "The family meal and its significance in global times"; Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "We eat each other's food to nourish our body: the global and the local as mutually constituent forces"; and Warren Belasco, "Food and the counterculture: a story of bread and politics."

Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001; 234pp., \$17.95 paper) is a new book edited, with an overview essay "Eating Ethnic," by **Sherrie A. Inness**, asso-



ciate professor of English at Miami University, OH. The scholars in this volume explore the role of ethnic food in American culture, with a particular focus on women. The other essays are as follows: Paul Christensen, "Mac and gravy"; Cathie English, "Humble pie"; Leanne Trapedo Sims, "Dalia Carmel: a menu of food memories"; Lynn Z. Bloom, "Writing and cooking, cooking and writing"; Linda Murray Berzok, "My mother's recipes: the diary of a Swedish

American daughter and mother"; Arlene Voski Avakian, "The triumph of Fassoulia, or Aunt Elizabeth and the beans"; Meredith E. Abarca, "Los chilaquiles de mi 'ama: the language of everyday cooking"; Benay Blend, "'In the kitchen family bread is always rising!': women's culture and the politics of food"; Doris Friedensohn, "Chapulines, mole, and pozole: Mexican cuisines and the gringa imagination"; Lisa Heldke, "Let's cook Thai: recipes for colonialism"; and Heather Schell, "Gendered feasts: a feminist reflects on dining in New Orleans." Prof. Inness also recently published *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (Univ. Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

Terence Scully has published *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection: Cuoco Napoletano, Feasting as a Window into Medieval Italian Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000; 280pp., \$47.50 cloth), an English edition of a cookbook by an anonymous master cook from late 1400s Naples. Through its 220 recipes and accompanying commentary, the reader can glimpse the rich fare available in one of the great Italian houses and trace the influence of the Catalan royal family on the southern Italian diet. Scully, a scholar of medieval European cookery, has previously written such volumes as *Early French Cookery*, *Le Viandier de Taillevent*, and *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*.

The newsletter *Serve It Forth* has organized a conference, "European Cooking from Rome to the Renaissance" in Colorado Springs, CO for Jan. 19-20, 2002. The event includes classes, panels, papers, cooking workshops and banquets. Honored guests include Cindy Renfrow, author of several books on medieval cooking and brewing, and Nanna Rognvaldardottir, Icelandic author and food historian. For more information, consult the website <http://oldcolo.com/~memorman/cookcon2.html>.

Slip and Fall: Your editor got a bit carried away when he wrote, in the last issue of this column, that the banana "can't even be grown in the continental United States." Actually, it *grows* quite a bit in Florida and California; reportedly, however, there is no *commercial production* there at present.

CHAA CALENDAR

(All programs are scheduled for 4-6pm unless otherwise noted.
All programs are at Walden Hills Community Room.)

November 18, 2001

Wendy Esko:

Speaking on Eden Foods and their Japanese products

December 16, 2001

(4-7pm)

Our holiday participatory dinner,
The World on a Finger: Spanish Tapas

January 20, 2002

Marvin A. Brandwin, Asst. Prof. Emeritus of
Psychology (Department of Psychiatry, Univ. of
Michigan Medical School):

Reading his original poems about food—
audience contributions are welcome!

February 17, 2002

Jean Henry and Matthew Banks
Owners of the Jefferson Market, Ann Arbor

March 17, 2002

Kathleen Timberlake:
Speaking on traditional Scandinavian foods

April 21, 2002

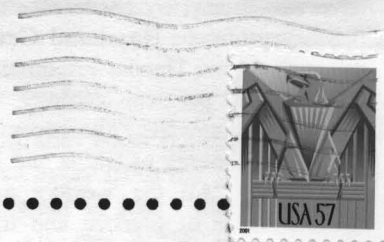
Julee Rosso, cookbook author and chef/owner at
The Silver Palate (New York) and the Wickwood
Country Inn (Saugatuck, MI)

May 19, 2002

Maureen Hathaway:
Speaking on her collection of Michigan
cookbooks

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Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume XVII Number 4, Fall 2001

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