

From Lunch Wagons to Grand Restaurants

Dining Out in America

Part 2



Kolb's, the late lamented German restaurant that was in the heart of the New Orleans business district. Cynthia LeJeune Nobles recalls Kolb's and its history on pages 4-9 inside. (Photo ©Mitchel Osborne)

MORSELS & TIDBITS

Collector **Michael D. Barber**'s fascination with Pyrex began with his mother's blue bowl from the Primary Colors series. In time to celebrate 2015 as the 100th anniversary of the introduction of Pyrex by Corning Glass Works, he wrote two books, *Pyrex Passion: The Comprehensive Guide to Decorated Vintage Pyrex* (2013) and *Pyrex Passion II: Vintage Opal Dinnerware, Beverage Items, and Storage Containers* (2015), both from Alvaro Publishing in Washington, DC. Opal Pyrex dinnerware was sold in hundreds of patterns from the 1950s through the 1980s, and Barber spent a whole decade just amassing examples of nearly all such products ever made.

"How Suffragists Used Cookbooks as a Recipe for Subversion" was an entry in NPR's food blog "The Salt" that was timed for Election Day last November. The piece details how fundraising cookbooks, descendants of Civil War-era charity cookbooks, were published as part of the movement for women's voting rights in the U.S. Examples from each of the four decades of the movement are *The Woman Suffrage Cook*

Book (Boston, 1886), *The Holiday Gift Cook Book* (Rockford, IL, 1891), *The Washington Women's Cook Book* (Washington, DC, 1909), and *The Suffrage Cook Book* (Pittsburgh, 1915). Writer **Nina Martyris** included some information and quotes from CHAA co-founder **Jan Longone**'s Sept. 2008 talk at the Univ. of Michigan's Clements Library, "'The Old Girl Network': Charity Cookbooks and the Empowerment of Women".

In conjunction with **Jan Longone**'s Fall 2013 exhibit on "American Foodways: The Jewish Contribution", there were a number of campus lectures (summarized in *Repast*, Winter 2014). One of the speakers, **Ted Merwin**, Assoc. Prof. of Religion and Judaic Studies at Dickinson College, has just published *Pastrami on Rye: An Overstuffed History of the Jewish Deli* (New York Univ. Press, 2015). The book analyzes how, for a few decades in the middle of the last century, the delicatessen became the most important center of popular Jewish culture. The mainstream popularity of the deli was boosted by the multiethnic street life of big-city America, most visible on Manhattan's Lower East Side (LES). If you crave actual photos, stories, and recipes from delis and other LES Jewish eateries, turn to *Eating Delancey: A Celebration of Jewish Food* (PowerHouse Books, 2014), co-authored by **Aaron Reznay** and **Jordan Schaps**. Prominently featured are Katz's Delicatessen, Ratner's, Russ & Daughters, Yonah Schimmel's Knish Bakery, and Sammy's Roumanian Steakhouse. The book has an Introduction by the late Joan Rivers, and reminiscences by everyone from Bette Midler to Rabbi Seth M. Limmer.

Making the Case

At one point in his book on the deli (just noted), Ted Merwin makes the case that "[t]he serving of 'overstuffed' sandwiches in theater-district delicatessens presaged the contemporary hot-dog-eating contests sponsored annually by Nathan's on the Fourth of July, which, like the Thanksgiving feast, are a celebration of American bounty and excess" (p. 55). Later he notes that the original Nathan's menu had only four items: hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, and chow mein (p. 97). By coincidence, 2016 is the centennial not only of the founding of Nathan's Famous frankfurters in Coney Island, NY, by Jewish Galician immigrant **Nathan Handwerker**, but also the founding of Koegel Meats in Flint, MI, by German immigrant **Albert J. Koegel**. In addition to hot dogs and sausages of many kinds, Koegel's makes the dry-meat topping of ground beef-heart that is traditional on a Flint-style "Coney dog". To learn more about Nathan's, you can view online the documentary "Famous Nathan" (2015; 86 mins.), made by the founder's grandson, Lloyd Handwerker.

With the possible exception of New Yorkers and Michiganders, few would dispute Chicago's status as head honcho of the hot dog. "The Hot Dog and Encased Meat of the World", a pop-up on N. Dearborn Street, was the debut exhibit this past Fall from Chicago's new Foodseum (<http://www.foodseum.org/>). Founder/ director **Kyle Joseph**, a California tech entrepreneur, teamed up with over 100 local firms and over 80 volunteer professionals to kick-start the nonprofit museum.

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Repast

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C.H.A.A. FALL PROGRAMS



DIVERSE PRODUCTS FROM MICHIGAN'S FIELDS

We Americans now consume about 60% of our meals outside the home, and our overall diets consist of about 63% processed foods. Our commodified eating patterns also reflect the efficiencies of industrial agriculture. Michigan, for instance, is a leading agricultural state—second only to California in its diversity of growing conditions—but when local farmers' markets declined in the 1970s, farmers had to sell more of their crops to canners and other large commercial firms producing highly processed foodstuffs. On Sept. 20, Chef Frank Turner outlined this diagnosis and his prescription for healthier eating in a talk to the CHAA on “**Culinary Wellness: A Recipe for Success**”.

Turner, currently Executive Chef at the Grosse Pointe War Memorial, was Director of the Culinary Wellness program at Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital during 2008-11. There, he fought for the principle that healthful food should taste so great that it can be promoted mainly for its flavor rather than its healthfulness. In the course of a cooking demonstration preparing Michigan Carrot Hummus, Turner showed us some key strategies: use heirloom fruits and vegetables, which contain a wider variety of nutrients; whenever possible, start with whole rather than ground spices to maximize flavor; and instead of shopping with a fixed recipe in mind, buy whatever is fresh and then figure out what to make with it.

Putting a new spin on the meaning of “Culinary Historians of AA”, nearly three dozen of us descended thirstily upon a local micro-distillery on Oct. 18. The brand-new **Ann Arbor Distilling Company** heralds a trend in which Michigan leads all states in the number of craft stills per person, thanks to such factors as quality growing conditions for the ingredients, a 2008 state law facilitating the establishment of artisanal stills, and a premier distillery-training program at Michigan State University. Ari Sussman, who learned about the craft at an MSU spinoff, Red Cedar Spirits, has just put A² Distilling online after two years of preparations.

Sussman first became interested in beverage alcohol while working at a Langeudoc winery in the mid-2000s. Later, tending bar in Ann Arbor for five years, he grew thirsty for knowledge: why, for example, is there much greater diversity among Scotch than among American whiskeys? Still recovering from Prohibition, the U.S. industry now boasts some 715 micro-distilleries, representing exponential growth since 1982. Sussman is initially producing vodka, gin, and light rum, made in 1000-gallon batches a few times per week with 90-95% locally-sourced ingredients. Vodka can be made from seemingly anything—corn, potato, rye, etc.; at 95% alcohol content, one cannot taste its formative ingredient. Vodka can also be used as a base for making gin, which is then flavored with juniper berries. Light

rum, made from molasses or other sugarcane products, is often used in cocktails. Eventually, the firm plans to produce additional spirits such as bourbon and other whiskeys (distilled from grain), brandy (from fruit), etc.

In the mid-1990s, local biochemist Dick Dyer started growing organic garlic on a plot rented through Project GROW, and this experiment became his hobby and eventually his new career. In a Nov. 15 presentation, “**Garlic is Divine**”, Dick and his wife Diana described how they grow garlic on the three-acre Dyer Family Organic Farm just north of Dixboro, MI. They have sold as many as 40 different varieties to local stores, restaurants, and producers such as The Brinery. By contrast, in a typical U.S. grocery store, most of the garlic has been grown in China and has suffered through long storage. The cultivation of domesticated garlic (*Allium sativum*) is believed to have begun as long as 10,000 years ago in northwest China, where some little-known varieties still grow. Garlic, which was useful for flavoring, preserving, and in medicine, spread westward along the Silk Road routes; it became well-known in the ancient Mediterranean.

The *Allium* genus also includes the onions, ramps, and leeks; “elephant garlic” is actually a bulbing leek. The two subspecies of true garlic are called soft-neck and hard-neck; the latter, or “gourmet”, garlic has a stronger, more complex flavor and is easier to peel, but has a shorter shelf life. Garlic is grown clonally, not by pollination. The Dyers plant their cloves with straw and other organic matter in raised beds in October. In April and May, the young green garlic stems can be harvested; roughly similar to scallions, they can be grilled or used to provide a fresh, delicate taste in pesto, salads, soups, etc. Mature garlic bulbs, harvested in late June or July, are dried or “cured” on strings for about three weeks in a barn; sun-drying, useful with onions, actually degrades garlic. ■

MORSELS

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We note with great sadness the passing of **Sidney W. Mintz**, who died from a fall on Dec. 27 in Plainsboro, NJ, at the age of 93. An anthropologist at Yale and then Johns Hopkins Univ., he was the author of several groundbreaking works about sugarcane and soybean production and the impact of such products on world history. Dr. Mintz was a member of CHAA during 2005-09. Among those in our group who knew Sid personally were Jan and Dan Longone and Bill and Yvonne Lockwood.

Three upcoming conferences are scheduled in the British Isles:

- Apr. 23, 2016: 31st Leeds Symposium on Food History and Traditions, theme TBA, Friends' Meeting House, Friargate, York, England (<http://www.historicfood.com/leeds.htm>)
- May 31 – Jun. 1, 2016: Second biennial Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, “Food and Revolution” (keynote speaker Rachel Laudan), School of Culinary Arts & Food Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland (<http://arrow.dit.ie/dgs/>)
- Jul. 8-10, 2016: Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, “Offal: Rejected and Reclaimed Foods”, St. Catherine's College, Oxford, England (<http://oxfordsymposium.org.uk>).

KOLB'S RESTAURANT



A SLICE OF GERMANY IN FRENCH-CREOLE NEW ORLEANS

by Cynthia LeJeune Nobles

Cynthia LeJeune Nobles is Editor of the Louisiana State University Press cookbook series "The Southern Table", and a member of the Newcomb College Culinary History Writers Group based at Tulane University in New Orleans. She is a freelance writer for the Baton Rouge/New Orleans Advocate, and also the author of The Delta Queen Cookbook: The History and Recipes of the Legendary Steamboat (2012) and A Confederacy of Dunces Cookbook: Recipes from Ignatius J. Reilly's New Orleans (2015). Nobles fondly recalls the first time that she went to Kolb's, in the 1970s, dining on knockwurst, schweinebraten, and sauerbraten.

There's no doubt that Kolb's, the iconic German restaurant that was in the New Orleans business district, rightly distinguished itself as "The Restaurant with an Individuality". Kolb's operated from 1899 to 1994, and this grand, yet reasonably-priced, eatery specialized in dishing out *sauerbraten*, *schweinebraten*, and *strudel* right alongside seafood gumbo, crawfish *étouffée*, and barbecued shrimp. Sometimes borscht accompanied fried oysters, and excess pumpernickel often wound up in bread pudding.

For some reason this culinary marriage worked, and Kolb's became one of the most prominent purveyors of a cuisine that came to be known as German-Creole.

A Grand Interior

Kolb's was also distinctive because of its décor, which was decidedly Teutonic. Dining rooms in the massive building were decorated with dark paneling, stained glass, and immense serving sideboards. Walls were lined with German regalia that included insignia, plaster gnomes, faded portraits of humble fourteenth-century Germans, and shelves of gigantic beer steins, including a four-foot-tall, 32-liter stein that was at one time reputed to be the world's largest.

The homey Dutch Room featured captain's chairs and two gigantic fireplaces decorated with antique brass and copper cookware, along with large beams supported by ceramic Rubenzahl, the legendary German mountain spirits. The second floor was made up of several large private rooms paneled in red oak, and they opened onto wide, covered balconies.



Kolb's Restaurant (2015). The façade is updated, but the inside is still gutted. (Photo by Cynthia Nobles)

The quirkiest of the rooms was the first floor's dark-paneled Main Dining Room, which featured antique copper and brass, along with a long, well-worn bar from the late 1800s. (In the early days, diners paid a nickel more to eat on this side because it had tablecloths.) What caught everyone's attention, however, was the ceiling, which featured about a dozen fans that ran on a Snediker & Carr long belt and pulley system. The unique, two-blade fans were originally operated by hand, and were manufactured for the exhibit hall of the 1884 Cotton Centennial in New Orleans. After the Exposition they were installed in Kolb's, where, attached to a single shaft that joined to the pulley system, they ran continuously. During the early 1960s, a creative employee cobbled together a mechanical, life-sized Bavarian *lederhosen*-clad dummy that "turned" the crank from up in the rafters. (Christened "Ludwig," the dummy didn't actually do the heavy work; the motor was in the floor above.)

All of these elements combined to make the place look like an Old Bavarian Inn, and throughout its many years in operation, this landmark's German trappings changed very little.

German New Orleans

It is not at all surprising that a gigantic, successful German-centric restaurant popped up in New Orleans in the late 1800s. Germans were one of the biggest groups to migrate to the city, with the first few hundred arriving in Louisiana in the 1720s. Large numbers began arriving in 1817, and by 1900, over 100,000 German immigrants were calling New Orleans home.

Clustering together in their own neighborhoods, they took to politics, opened funeral homes and plant nurseries, and became



Ludwig hard at work cranking the Kolb's ceiling fans (the motor was actually in the ceiling above).

(Photo ©Mitchel Osborne)

gold- and silversmiths, stonemasons, mechanics, and carpenters. German butchers virtually monopolized the French Market, the city's premier open-air meat and produce market. German bakers eventually took over their industry, and they, not the French, are credited with inventing the brittle-crust New Orleans French bread still so wildly popular today.

Early New Orleans Germans also opened numerous grocery stores and breweries. Then there was the myriad of restaurants, hotels, and beer parlors. Modeling their businesses after what they knew, most of these establishments followed the German *Gasthaus* tradition, where the like-minded met to eat, drink, and socialize. Some of the more notable and long-gone German restaurants were Stevedores' Exchange and Coffee House (coffeehouses were really bars that sometimes served food), Fabacher's Restaurant, Krost's Beer Parlor, Vonderbank's, and Gluck's.

An Immigrant Finds His Way

Conrad Kolb was an orphan from the German town of Landau, and at age 15 he decided he wanted to move to California. It was the year 1889, and on his voyage from Bavaria on a French steamer, he worked his way in the ship's kitchen. After making a stop in New Orleans, Kolb caught up with family friends named Huber, who ultimately convinced the young, broke adventurer to forgo his California dreams and stay in the city.

Kolb first worked as a dishwasher and general handyman, and finally landed employment as an assistant barkeeper at a saloon owned by Valentine Merz, a German from a beer-brewing family. At age 25, Kolb secured financial backing from Merz and from the Pabst Blue Ribbon brewery, and on October 1, 1899, Kolb, along with fellow barkeep Henry Schroeder, bought the business from Merz. Merz went on to become president of the New Orleans Brewing Company and to build the Dixie Brewing Company.

During all of its years in business, Kolb's was located at 125 St. Charles Avenue (originally St. Charles Street). The address is a prime business location in Downtown New Orleans, and just a block from the then-fashionable Canal Street department stores and close to the city's premier hotel, the St. Charles. When Kolb and Schroeder took over Merz's business, the three-and-a-half-story brick Greek Revival townhouse already had a rich history, having been built in 1846 as a residence for Georgia native and cotton gin salesman Daniel Pratt. By the 1850s, the third floor had become the city's first upscale art gallery, and it included collections from the likes of Glendy Burke, the New Orleans mayor whose name was attached to the steamboat that was the subject of Stephen Foster's famous folk song "The Glendy Burk". For a while, the building also housed the Jules Krost Saloon, and it was that business that Valentine Merz bought in 1884.

Kolb and his partner Schroeder quickly parted ways, and by 1900, Kolb was the sole owner of the one-room saloon. He initially operated as a reading room and beer joint that gave away free sandwiches for lunch, the practice then fairly common with local bars trying to attract business. Although Kolb had a ready-made clientele with the New Orleans German population, he worked particularly hard to lure in St. Charles Hotel guests and river-boat and ship captains. For them, he kept magazines from 45 different cities, and regulars were made to really feel at home by having personally engraved, pewter-topped beer steins.

It was one salty sea captain's complaint about the tavern's single menu item that spurred Kolb to expand. The restaurant business began small, with Kolb cooking the only thing he knew, German food. In the beginning, he had five or six employees and opened between noon and 2:00 p.m. and charged 25 cents for lunches. On his first day, he earned a whopping 75 cents. But business was increasingly steady, and in 1909 he remodeled in the old German tavern style and renamed his saloon Kolb's German Tavern. The Dutch Room, decorated in Flemish style, was added to the rear of the Dining Room in 1911. In 1913, Kolb expanded again to include the adjoining four-story townhouse that had been home to Peter Fabacher's Restaurant and the Fox Hat Store, and which had formerly been Louisiana's original and fabled Jockey Club. He rebuilt this new addition in the old English style, and utilized all four floors for the restaurant.

He also bought a hotel building located in the rear, and turned this part of his now-substantial real estate holdings into Kolb's Bachelor Hotel, which, according to papers left to a succeeding owner, was really a row of 10 tiny rooms used as a brothel. The brothel closed in 1914, and the space eventually ended up as rooms for waiters to take naps between lunch and dinner service.

Out front, both of the adjoining townhouses had a main door opening to St. Charles Avenue. One half of the mismatched restaurant building had two exterior balconies facing St. Charles Avenue, and the other half had three. All five balconies were festooned with lacy ironwork cast in France. In later years, those balconies served as backdrops for scenes in the movies "JFK" (1991) and "Storyville" (1992).

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KOLB'S RESTAURANT *continued from page 5*

Kolb would tie his horse down in a back alley that accessed the kitchen from Carondelet Street. Somewhere along the line he hung the huge "Kolb's" sign that used bulbs to light up the letters (instead of neon tubes). He also renamed the business "Kolb's German Restaurant", and it was later changed to just "Kolb's".

Offering three meals a day, Kolb's easily attracted travelers staying at the St. Charles Hotel. The after-theater crowd was tempted with special menus featuring items such as lobster cocktail, oyster brochette, and Waldorf salad, along with chafing dishes of Welsh rarebit and then-trendy Chicken à la King. Then there was the upscale Ladies Tea Room and bridge parties, and menus featuring chilled seafood, steak, salads, sandwiches, wines, beers, and cocktails.

Customers remembered Kolb as extremely welcoming, and his staff was grateful for their boss's kind heart. (Many times the reprimand for a lax but loyal employee would be to "fire" him until tomorrow.) Too, he was a perfectionist known for preaching to employees that "Nothing is as good as the best, and the best is not good enough."

Kolb Farm

Conrad Kolb's quality-is-everything philosophy clearly applied to raw ingredients, as well, because in 1911 he bought a 20-acre farm to supply the restaurant with meats and produce hard to find through regular wholesale channels. In 1918 he doubled that acreage.

At various times, Kolb Farm was home to sheep, goats, pheasants, horses, and peacocks. Part of this animal menagerie also included cattle, whose milk was used to make *schmierkase* (cottage cheese), and cream often ended up in *schlagsahne* (thick German-style whipped cream). The farm also raised suckling pigs that not only provided fresh meat for hams, sausages, and chops, but also served as recyclers by eating much of the restaurant's scraps. At the restaurant, "hog-killing Saturday" became extremely popular, because this was the day for liver dumplings, fresh sausages, and pork pie.

Kolb Farm operated on a strictly commercial basis, and not only supplied the restaurant, but sold on the premises to the public. Eggs were hot sellers, and they were also sold to retail grocers and were used on the farm for hatching. In the 1920s, the hens that laid those eggs were single-comb White Leghorns, and they, too, often went for sale.

The farm was a restful place, with a large Victorian house for Kolb and his wife, Mamye Elizabeth Schlosser Kolb, and an expansive solarium filled with plants. Over the years, many social and school groups were invited over for meetings and to tour the grounds.

Kolb Farm operated until the 1950s. It was located six miles away from the restaurant at 5046 Gentilly Road, in a rural area that today is highly commercial and residential.

KOLB'S COMPLETE DINNERS—Served Until 9 P. M.		
Price Indicated Covers Complete Meal		
APPETIZERS		
Chilled Fruit Cup	Chilled Tomato or Orange Juice	
Cup of Onion, Chicken Noodle or Turtle Soup		
Shrimp Cocktail .75 Extra	Shrimp Remoulade .75 Extra	
SALADS		
Mixed Green Salad with "House" or Thousand Island Dressing (with Bleu Cheese Dressing .25 Extra)		
Or . . . A Visit to Our Salad Bar is Included		
ENTREES		
Pot Roast of Beef, Jardiniere Sauce		
Choice, Tender, Oven Roasted Beef, a Kolb's Favorite, with Macaroni and Cheese		
		6.95
Tenderloin Tips of Beef a la Deutsch		
Diced Tenderloin with Green Peppers and Mushrooms, Pan Roasted Potatoes		
		6.95
Roast Turkey with Kolb's Special Stuffing		
Cranberry Sauce, Served with Candied Yams and Green Peas		
		6.95
Pan Fried Filet of Flounder		
The "Pick of the Catch" with Tartar Sauce and Saute Potatoes		
		7.95
Sauerbraten mit Kartoffelkloessen		
One of Kolb's Specialties as Described Below, as a "Complete Dinner"		
		7.95
Vienna Schnitzel		
Without a Doubt, One of Our Most Popular Dishes, As Shown Below, Served as a "Complete Dinner"		
		8.95
Braised Duckling, German Style		
One Half Duckling in a Sauce Made with Sliced Cherries, Mushrooms and Sliced Olives. Served with Two Favorites, A Boiled Potato and Red Cabbage		
		8.95
Barbecued Shrimp, New Orleans Style		
Distinctly Different, in a Peppery, Buttery Sauce That Makes a Perfect Dip for Our New Orleans Bread. Served with French Fried Potatoes		
		8.95
DESSERTS		
Bread Pudding with Rum Sauce	Kolb's Cheesecake .50 Extra	
Apple Strudel	Sherbet	
BEVERAGES		
Coffee	Iced Tea	Hot Tea



A 1977 German-Creole menu from Kolb's.
(Photo courtesy of New Orleans Public Library)

Lying Low During War

In 1912, Kolb's menu was chock full of all manner of beef, chicken, fish, and vegetable-based Creole dishes. And it was also bursting with German specialties such as bratwurst, sauerkraut, various schnitzels, and imported frankfurters and Rhine wines. The German part, however, changed when World War I rolled around.

Conrad Kolb had become a prominent New Orleans citizen, and one who spoke German. He entertained in his restaurant with German folk songs and music, and he was also a member of several German societies and associations. But identifying strongly with America's overseas enemy was especially a problem in 1918, when the Louisiana state legislature passed Act 114, making all expressions of German culture and heritage illegal, including the printed and spoken use of the German language. Essentially, this law marked anyone with a German-sounding name as a potential enemy.

To ease tension at the restaurant, Kolb dropped the German music, along with the schnitzel and the strudel. Sauerbraten was renamed Kolb's Special Roast with Potato Pancakes, and almost anything else to do with Germany, including wait staff, was dismissed. Kolb also owned three other businesses, including Rheingold Tavern around the corner from the restaurant at 622 Common Street, and they all closed. But in spite of attempts to

Kolb's *Sauerbraten*

[Kolb's occasionally published recipes in its newspaper advertisements. This undated recipe appeared in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.]

Makes 8-10 servings.

3 cups tarragon vinegar
4 cups water
½ cup sugar
¼ cup salt
4 bay leaves
12 whole cloves
½ teaspoon ground allspice
2 medium carrots, sliced
2 medium onions, sliced
1 bell pepper, sliced
1 stalk celery, diced
¼ bunch chopped parsley
4 pounds bottom beef round
1 tablespoon flour
1 tablespoon ginger

Combine all ingredients except beef, flour, and ginger, whisking to dissolve sugar and salt. Place the beef in this marinade. Cover the bowl and refrigerate. Let it stand a week, turning occasionally.

Remove beef from marinade, wipe dry with paper towels. Sear on all sides in hot oil in Dutch oven. Pour marinade back over meat, cover and cook slowly until tender.

Remove meat. Strain liquid and thicken it with mixture of flour, ginger, and any necessary additional vinegar and/or sugar to get "just the right sweet-sour gravy." Slice meat and serve covered with the hot gravy.

tamp out anything that screamed "German", many locals shunned Kolb's Restaurant. And descendants of the extended Kolb family still pass along the undocumented story that during World War 1, Conrad Kolb's effigy was burned on Canal Street.

To affirm his American patriotism, on April 27, 1918, at a "loyalty meeting" of the "Americanization Committee" of Americans of German descent, Conrad Kolb stood and vocalized that "We must all stand behind the President and help win the war." He urged all present to buy Liberty bonds, and before the meeting had ended he had secured \$15,500 in subscriptions. Another result of this meeting was a resolution pledging support to the "cause of the United States or any of its allies in the successful prosecution of this war." The resolution was signed by the assembled and sent on to President Woodrow Wilson. A May 29, 1917 blurb in the *Times-Picayune* reported that Kolb put a whole week's worth of restaurant receipts in Liberty Loan bonds.

Louisiana's anti-German law was repealed in 1921, and in spite of the earlier hysteria, Kolb's Restaurant survived. With Conrad Kolb again in the public's good graces, in 1929 he was part of a delegation that entertained the German ambassador to the United States.

Business was actually robust after the war, and in early 1927, Kolb installed a lunch counter on the uptown side of the restaurant, the move aiming to attract rushed businessmen. In these days before air-conditioning, Kolb also advertised that he served "cooling summer dishes" such as cold meats, [Creole] cream cheese (the local fresh cheese specialty), and iced drinks. The building renovation and advertising worked, and until the day the doors closed for good, the restaurant was a popular place for the business crowd to gather for lunch.

During the Great Depression, Kolb's stayed open for breakfast through dinner, and proudly advertised that they made "a specialty of German food" with menu items that included *wiener schnitzel*, stewed goose with dumplings, pig knuckles with sauerkraut, and homemade pork sausage with red cabbage. And during these hard times when so many businesses were closing, Kolb's once again managed to survive.

Conrad Kolb died on September 30, 1938, and his widow, Mayme, originally from Indiana, continued operating the restaurant with the help of her brother-in-law, Joseph Reising. By 1942 the restaurant had 120 employees, and fortunately for them, New Orleans's anti-German mania was not nearly as intense during World War 2 as it had been in WW1. But with bad memories obviously still lingering, menus from 1941 and 1945 are awash with seafood-based dishes such as Creole gumbo, fried frog legs, boiled crabs, river shrimps, broiled pompano, and crawfish bisque— all traditional, local Creole fare. The only items hinting that this was a German restaurant were pig knuckles, imported frankfurters, apple strudel, and a few German wines. And one undated menu from the era shows absolutely no German beer or wine or dishes with German names.

Let Kolb's Entertain You!

In addition to striving to serve high-quality food, Kolb's almost always offered some form of entertainment. Early performers included dancers, such as Flora Ascott Sander, who would shower her audience with flowers as she did an original waltz she named the Kolb Flower Waltz. In 1923, a song-and-dance Ziegfeld artist named Mary Jane performed at Kolb's after-dinner café. After Prohibition and before World War 2, a regular act was the costumed Tyrolean Singers, a group with members who were actually Mexican, Italian, Swedish, and Jewish. And throughout the restaurant's years, numerous bands, even Cajun groups, almost always played dinner music.

Notably, Kolb's was instrumental in the early jazz movement. Jazz originated in the joints of the legal red-light district called Storyville, just outside the nearby French Quarter. During World War 1, Conrad Kolb, who needed to divert attention from his German roots, made a daring move by becoming one of the first to host jazz musicians and dances in a "respectable" place. For that audacity, Kolb's Restaurant earned a place in jazz history.

Beginning in 1919, one of the most famous groups to perform regularly was jazzman Johnny De Droit and his orchestra, who usually played during dinner, and then to a full house from 10:00 p.m. to midnight. De Droit recorded in New Orleans for the OKeh label in 1924.

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KOLB'S RESTAURANT *continued from page 7*

In 1950, Mayme's nephew Andreas Reising, the head of Reising's Sunrise Bakery, bought Kolb's. This was during the time Kolb's was advertising that it sold goose grease for use as a body rub that supposedly cured croup and other Winter ailments, and which was rendered from the roast goose and *ganssepfaffer* (pickled goose) sold at Christmastime. It was also the time when bars, strip clubs, and restaurants in the French Quarter across Canal Street were declining, which made the gaudy, yet wholesome, atmosphere of Kolb's an attractive dining option.

Customers were also lured in by Kolb's heavy advertising. Local newspapers carried numerous glowing "news" articles about Kolb's, along with paid ads. During the 1950s, Kolb's also hosted a breakfast-time radio show, and at one time the restaurant even opened a special Press Room "for the convenience of reporters".

Always up for a promotion, Kolb's, through the years, hosted many "festivals", such as a May Wine Festival, Fall Festival, and Sportsman's Holiday Festival. Since the restaurant faced a major Mardi Gras parade route on St. Charles Avenue, it also offered packages for watching parades, and that included food, drinks, and the use of the balconies and the bathrooms, which are especially coveted during this street event. These packages virtually always sold out.

Another extremely successful promotion was Oktoberfest. Kolb's is credited with bringing this beer-centric event to New Orleans in 1971, and securing a reservation meant wearing Tyrolean Alpine hats and drinking numerous rounds of beer. Food included pretzels on strings to be worn around the neck, along with the consumption of bratwurst, red cabbage, sauerbraten, and strudel. Entertainment revolved around singalongs and doing the chicken dance to a five-piece oom-pah-pah band, complete with accordion. At the end of the day, everyone went home with a souvenir beer mug.

The One and Only

In 1960, a group headed by New Orleans attorney K. K. Mizza had purchased the restaurant. By that time, the demographics of south Louisiana were changing, and Kolb's was advertising that it was the only German restaurant within 100 miles. In reality, that distance was probably further. In 1970, when the restaurant was essentially still the only German one in New Orleans, Kolb's was bought by Pacesetter Limited, a Houston investment firm. In 1980, a group of investors that included Piet Kessels, Margaret Kessels, Angela B. Kelley, and Robert Monroe bought Pacesetter out, and they took ownership of what was still a German novelty.

For many years, owners used this distinction almost to the point of gimmick, with an eye-popping number of German-titled dishes such as *Huhn im Topf, mit Gemuese und Nudeln* (chicken in broth with vegetables and noodles), and *Gebratene Ente* (roast duck with fruit dressing, red cabbage, and potatoes). At one point this German-heavy menu even prompted management to print a "Glossary of German Words" on the back of the menu. This focus on all things German apparently impressed the National Restaurant Association, which, in 1967, gave Kolb's first place in its Menu Idea Exchange Contest.



A Kolb's beer stein.

(Photo courtesy of Peggy Scott Laborde)

Having a monopoly on Bavarian-style food certainly had its own cachet, but this was not the restaurant's main draw. This was the age of a large concentration of downtown corporations with employees who went power-lunching, and that often included plenty of alcohol. Tourists filtered in at night, but at noon, Kolb's was often so packed with businessmen and politicians that many were willing to sit at tables with strangers.

The lunch crowds were certainly attracted to the reasonably-priced and reliably good broiled trout, oyster cocktails, shrimp remoulade, and filet mignon, as well as German specialties, such as bratwurst, knockwurst, sauerbraten, and Kaiser Schnitzel, a breaded veal cutlet topped with a white wine sauce with capers and lemon rind. But what they mostly went for was familiarity and camaraderie. And throughout the 1970-80s, lunch customers were typically regulars who sat at the same table and had the same waiter who often brought the same meal without having been asked.

The wait staff was a loyal bunch, with the average server working 25-30 years. Chef Alan, for example, was there 40 years. Joe the bartender lasted 50 years, and a waiter known as Mr. Angelo stuck it out for 65 years. It is still widely remembered that Angelo had his favored customers. But to just about everyone else he was "grouchy", so famously so that during his tenure, management had seriously considered launching an advertising campaign asking diners to "come to Kolb's and get yelled at by Angelo."

Aside from Mr. Angelo, Kolb's waiters were legendarily accommodating, and one was even openly known to take care of customers' bookmaking needs (even though betting on the premises certainly was not sanctioned by management).

Many regular customers entered the building through the back alleyway, the same one where Conrad Kolb had parked his horse, and they walked through the kitchen and waved to the chefs as they checked out what was cooking. This was a time when house accounts were still common, and at one point in the 1980s, Kolb's had 900 regular customers who did not pay until they received a bill at the end of every month. To many, Kolb's was like home, and this resulted in the kitchen serving as many as 300 lunches a day, and over a million total meals a year.

Auf Wiedersehen

Kolb's venerable building was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1981. But as with any old structure, things needed constant attention. Back in 1951, Kolb's had made needed repairs in reply to a condemnation order by the New Orleans City Council. But that refurbishment didn't put a stop to the building's crumbling and leaking. One particular problem was the plumbing in the men's restroom. In the restaurant's latter decades, to keep patrons from gagging from the smell, employees had to pack urinals with ice before lunch and dinner.

But it wasn't the old building that led to the restaurant's closing. The end had almost imperceptibly started in 1974, when the nearby hotel that had started out as the St. Charles went out of business and was torn down. The demise steamrolled in the late 1980s, after the birth of the celebrity chef and the farm-to-table movement, both of which spurred upscale, bistro-type restaurants to open in the part of New Orleans known as Uptown. This new breed of eatery also found a place in the formerly rundown French Quarter. All this culinary excitement left diners with little interest in throwback German foods such as sauerkraut and knackwurst. To catch up with the times, Kolb's tried adding Mexican foods, brunches, grilled foods, and inventive sauces, but none of that spurred interest.

In addition to a menu perceived as a dated stereotype, some of Kolb's old waiters were retiring. Government tax laws had also put a damper on boozy lunches, and the city's formerly bustling business district was shedding corporate jobs. All of this combined to put the proverbial nail in Kolb's coffin; dining habits had changed drastically, and this icon needed a lot more than reputation to keep it in business. By 1992, the restaurant was mostly catering to tourists. By 1994 it was closed.

For a restaurant to stay open almost 100 years, regulars must crave a few of its dishes, whether those menu items actually be good or not. Over the years, Kolb's did hire top-rate European, as well as talented local, chefs, and they helped develop a clientele that swore by certain things.

Aside from the Prohibition years, Kolb's always had excellent beer and a decent wine list that boasted the "largest choice of German wines in the Southeast." At one point it even bottled its own German wine. As for food, Eggs Pontchartrain, for one, had many fans. This misnamed dish was actually a crab and shrimp salad garnished with tomato and egg slices, and topped with an equally-loved house salad dressing heavy with

Creole mustard. Sauerbraten, sauerkraut, pigs' knuckles, and all manner of wursts, dishes hardly anyone would consider tackling at home, had their devotees, as did Kolb's Schnitzel, a pounded and fried veal scallop topped with sautéed lump crabmeat. Barbecued shrimp was also a long-time menu item, as were Creole gumbo and red beans and rice. Desserts mostly revolved around old standards such as Creole bread pudding and German apple strudel, as well as Eva's Kiss Cake, which was vanilla ice cream sandwiched between two slices of German-style cake topped with chocolate sauce. Probably the most requested dish was turtle soup, a dark, thick, undeniably Creole concoction that spurred some devotees to drive hundreds of miles to purchase five gallons at a time.

So, yes, Kolb's did have a clientele that swore by certain foods. But ask anyone who remembers why they kept going back again and again, and they'll tell you about waiters who spoke French, Spanish, Italian, as well as German. Then there were the beer steins, the Mardi Gras and Oktoberfest festivities, the oom-pah-pah bands, the chicken dance, and the ceiling fans and Ludwig. From the beginning, Kolb's was more than just a restaurant. It served as a meeting place for civic groups such as the Kiwanis, and it was an excellent venue to hold a private dance, wedding, or party. Mostly, however, Kolb's was a welcome slice of Germany in an overwhelmingly Creole-French city. And it grew to be a beloved survivor of events that would have doomed any place with less gumption.

The bankrupted business went into liquidation in September 1994, and on November 3 that year an auction was held for the building's contents. Out went the beer steins, the dishes, the copper, the bar, the fans, the gnomes, and, eventually, Ludwig. And it's sort of inglorious that this landmark ended up being sold twice to be converted into a hotel, and it's even worse that neither of those ventures nor anything else ever materialized. A \$500,000 escrow account and an order by the local Historic District Landmarks Commission did, however, result in a tidy refurbishment to the façade. The rotting service buildings in the back were also torn down. But the vintage sign still hangs, albeit unlit. And a peek through the front window reveals that, at an arm's length away, there's a blank wall of plywood that mostly hides a vast, gutted emptiness. Somewhere, Ludwig is crying. ■

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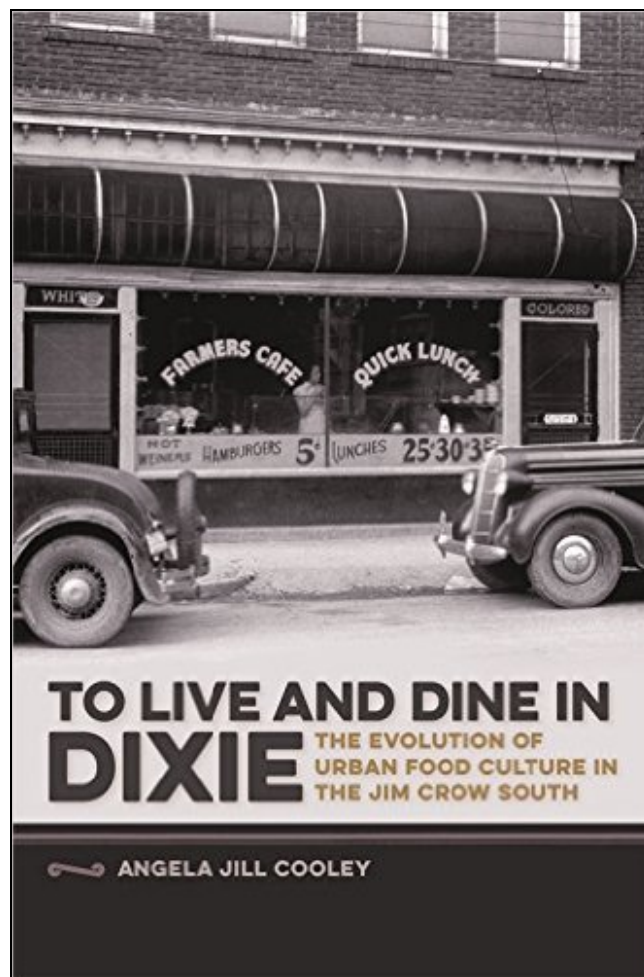
Book Review

SOUTHERN RESTAURANTS AS CONTESTED TERRAIN

Angela Jill Cooley,
*To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of
Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South*
(Southern Foodways Alliance Studies in
Culture, People, and Place)
Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2015
208 pp.; \$69.95 hbk., \$24.95 pbk.

by Wendell McKay

CHAA member Wendell McKay of Ann Arbor is a cook at Zingerman's Delicatessen, where he has been employed for several years. Originally from Baton Rouge, he holds an M.A. in history from the University of Akron and has taught classes on Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian history and culture. Wendell has reviewed several other books for Repast, most recently Gary Paul Nabhan's Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey in our Summer 2015 issue.



The “Southern way of life” has, for most of its long and torrid history, been one of the most iconic and fiercely defended of American folkways. Was it the defense, maintenance, and expansion of the slave labor system as fiercely declared by antebellum and Confederate Southern leaders of the 19th Century? Was it the defense and preservation of “states’ rights”, however they were defined, as declared by so many white Southern leaders of the 1950s and 1960s? Whatever the case, one of its primary and most enduring expressions, as with so many of the world’s storied cultures, was in its food and cooking, not least for how deeply embedded in the latter were the region’s central contradictions of race and power. White and Black Southerners shared the same cooking, but the way that cooking was split down the middle, culturally, politically, and economically, both strengthened and challenged the power of the Jim Crow racial segregation that dominated the region until the last 50 years. Much of it, too, although later coded “white” as “country cooking”, took place in the suburbs and cities that grew throughout the South during the economic transformations that paralleled Jim Crow.

Such contradictions lie at the heart of Angela Jill Cooley’s debut history, *To Live and Dine in Dixie*, an adaptation of her 2011 doctoral dissertation at the Univ. of Alabama. Cooley, an Alabama native and former lawyer, is now an assistant professor of history at Minnesota State Univ., Mankato. She brings her legal expertise to a twisted, illuminating story of fluid borders, delicious food, and a unique, changing culture bitterly contested

in courthouses, the media, and— perhaps most notably— dining rooms and kitchens, both commercial and domestic. Though a fascinating and important study for anyone interested in food or American history, it may well be especially interesting for those of Southern background or ancestry (such as the present reviewer). Cooley herself references the fascination, reminiscing of her days in a Northern law school as the only person who’d eaten at a place like Ollie’s Barbecue— let alone Ollie’s itself, a former Birmingham eatery that landed at the center of a notable civil rights-era legal decision, 1964’s *Katzenbach v. McClung*. Her unusual experience informs her history throughout.

The “traditional” basis for Southern cooking belies the fact that such “traditions” were direct results of the post-Civil War transformations in Southern culture and technology. The immense influence that African-Americans had on Southern cooking was modified by white tastemakers— mainly middle- and upper-class, urban or suburban, white housewives and homemakers— into a quasi-scientific discipline reflecting standardization and uniformity of taste, these latter coded as “white” values. More advanced kitchen equipment— stoves and iceboxes in particular— enabled the concept of “scientific planning”, when it came to family meals, to become a reality. At the same time, the movement of African-Americans into paid domestic labor proved both a boon and a trouble for white housewives. The choice that domestic workers now had between the kitchen and factory work led many to choose the latter, generating endemic complaints about the “servant problem”

(complaints echoed even by progressive thinkers of the time such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman). Just as the new ways brought culinary opportunities, they also made many white women of means uneasy, leading them to assert greater control over Southern foodways. This assertion took a number of forms, whether through paranoia over the rural habit of “clay eating” (a much-exaggerated practice especially reviled because it allegedly crossed racial lines) or through the promotion of supervised domestic education for both white and Black domestic workers.

Such norms proved harder to enforce when it came to the spread of public eateries such as cafés and restaurants, establishments that became lightning rods of comment and criticism, largely for their location outside the domestic sphere and outside all the assumptions of control that went with it. Most cafés and restaurants, particularly those in cities, initially appealed to a working-class customer base until upwardly-mobile restaurateurs led the charge to outlaw buffet-style “free lunches” offered with drinks. The resulting need for cheap eateries was often filled by immigrants— especially Greeks— and their novelty often attracted native-born suspicion and occasionally legal action, as when four Greeks were arrested at Jim Hanjaras’s Atlanta café (these included Hanjaras himself) in 1906 for gambling. Anti-immigration sentiment, racism, and Prohibition all combined to target alcohol service at primarily immigrant- and Black-owned establishments, stoking the fires of such suspicion and contributing to the image that non-white culinary culture was a shady and disreputable world. The campaigns may well have solidified existing Greek sympathy for African-American woes and certainly complicated the simple picture of Black-white relations.

Worries about “race-mixing” certainly pervaded white attitudes toward public food culture, but they also stretched to include female participation of *any* color in a non-domestic sphere. These concerns included both customers and workers; a Mississippi planter’s comment of 1938— “the pretty and smart ones get [waitressing] jobs like these” (p.61)— prefigured certain unpleasant modern-day attitudes toward female servers. A number of commentators seemed to recognize what was going on in real time: South Carolina Governor Coleman Blease’s 1914 campaign to ban smoking in restaurants allowing women featured the contemporary exposure of an eternal human stream of “kids these days” rhetoric. The ability of cafés and restaurants to function as they wanted was overlaid with a confusing network of local and state laws enforcing segregation by race (and occasionally gender), despite such practices being already *de facto* more or less everywhere throughout the South. While the standardization of Jim Crow eating did allow Black eateries to flourish after a fashion by catering to a specifically Black customer base, it would set the stage for the often violent culinary transformations of the 1950s and 1960s.

The changes brought by the Depression, New Deal, and postwar abundance echoed just as loudly in Southern food culture as in other areas of American interest and endeavor, possibly even more so. Southern tastemakers, as had those of the century’s earlier “New South”, welcomed technological changes that made life easier but warily greeted the inevitable uniformity that such changes brought, worrying that an ineffable (white) Southern identity was being crushed by the arrival of electric stoves and refrigerators. Such amenities not only made the South

more like the rest of the country but also had the potential to put Black and working-class white households on a more equitable footing with those of their “betters”. Reactions contributed further to the Southern myths that had grown up around the “Lost Cause” mystique after the Civil War, in which plantation culture was eulogized and held up as an Edenic culinary paradise to which the newer, more standardized methods and practices of cooking had to aspire. Black domestics found a higher place in this new hierarchy, but an insidiously patronizing one that praised their “innate” cooking abilities (previously derided by earlier Southern “authorities” as “sloppy”) but further reinforced their segregation to the duties they performed as the only ones in which they could possibly excel. Southern cookbooks of the period— like the Ginter Park Women’s Club’s *Famous Recipes from Old Virginia*— championed the new system with stories and reminiscences of old, pre-Civil War plantation culture.

A more seismic transformation came with the postwar metamorphosis of small-scale eateries into both full-fledged restaurants and fast-food empires, especially Southern-oriented varieties like Hardee’s (inspired by a McDonald’s in Greensboro, North Carolina, and opening in 1960, the same year Greensboro saw the first restaurant sit-ins). Hardee’s and its more nationally successful Southern competitor, Burger King, took note of the success of companies like McDonald’s (founded in California) and White Castle (founded in Kansas) and followed suit, taking advantage of the new automobile culture that postwar economic success and the 1950s interstate highway system helped to produce. Although the companies’ national orientation and distribution appeared at first to be a threat to the segregationist order, the reality proved somewhat trickier. Companies like McDonald’s, however standardized in terms of the food they served, rarely interfered with local employment practices, and the hazards Black customers and motorists found, particularly in unfamiliar places and especially in the South, helped to restrict Southern Black patronage to its existing Jim Crow reality, despite these restaurants’ glowing and illusory promises of equality and progress. Attempts at nationwide boycotts of such national chains for their Southern practices— occasionally led by such activist luminaries as Bayard Rustin— foundered on logistical barriers. Chains of all stripes, worried that attempts to integrate would threaten their profits, found themselves relatively safe, at least for a short time.

The resulting importance of public eating spaces in general ensured that they would be among the primary targets of desegregation campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s. Places such as Woolworth’s offered a pernicious education on Southern racial mores from childhood as such establishments offered Blacks a largely necessary shopping experience fundamentally stratified by segregation. The cultural practices revealing the South’s Jim Crow approach to public food culture— Black customers buying food from segregated cafés and restaurants and then eating nearby, occasionally outside— reinforced white notions of Black inferiority and made it a symbolic as well as tangibly important arena for civil rights activists.

The variegated structure of public segregation which had so bedeviled lawmakers and consumers earlier in the century meant that these activists had their work cut out for them in more ways than one. Not every place in the South was segregated, and the choice of eventual targets for desegregation drives proved tricky.

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At an F. W. Woolworth store in Greensboro on Feb. 2, 1960, North Carolina A&T College students Ronald Martin, Robert Patterson, and Mark Martin stage a sit-in protest at a lunch counter reserved for white customers. Theirs was the first in a wave of roughly 100 lunch-counter sit-ins across the country in the early 1960s.

UPI photo from
Library of Congress collection
"Voices of Civil Rights",
LC-DIG-ppmsca-08095.

SOUTHERN RESTAURANTS *cont'd from p. 11*

The choice of Woolworth's, whose Greensboro location became sit-in ground zero in 1960, partly derived from its national profile as well as its familiarity with (and presumptive fear of) such tactics, both from earlier desegregation campaigns in the North and labor action in general. Here, however, neither reactionary mob violence nor progressive legal action carried the day. The first was thwarted by the determination of sit-in participants and other activists, the second by the existing (and confusing) judicial corpus that had made the regulatory world of Southern restaurants such a tangled jungle in the first place. Supreme Court cases such as 1963's *Peterson v. City of Greenville*, which characterized municipal actions to preserve segregation as "state action" under the 14th Amendment and the *Civil Rights Cases* of the 1880s, both emboldened white conservatives to further (though generally fruitless) resistance and white moderates to accustom themselves to the new order, most famously enshrined in the national Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The conjunction of legal battles and subtler white resistance really brings Cooley into her own as a legal scholar. Confronted with a new reality, the strategies (such as they were) and rhetoric of segregationist restaurateurs took on many forms. Many insisted that they weren't particularly racist themselves, but that desegregation would hurt business due to the still widespread racist sentiment throughout the white South and that "forced" desegregation was a violation of individual, perhaps even Constitutional, rights. The latter argument had already been demolished in cases like *Peterson*, but its demolition was confirmed by later judgments, particularly 1964's *Katzenbach v. McClung*, cited in the introduction as not only a little-known civil rights landmark but also an educationally important example for law schools, illustrating the legal nature of interstate commerce. Though the attempts of many restaurateurs to reclassify their businesses as "private clubs" (white only, despite—as with the vast majority of Southern restaurants—employing a great many African-Americans, often as cooks) met similar legal challenges and were largely defeated, the tension simply flowed into different channels.

Like the wider "Southern strategy" that became a central plank of Republican electoral doctrine after 1964—courting conservative Southern whites through a combination of buzzwords and dogwhistle appeals to retrograde racial and social mores—Southern establishments with any kind of stake in the pre-1960s status quo learned to soften their image while still appealing to segregationist desires or impulses. While the act of dining itself has been desegregated, it can be subtly redefined as "white" (the terminology surrounding Southern cooking—"soul food" or "country"—a case in point, despite its being more or less the same food). A key player in the popularization of "country" cooking has been Cracker Barrel, opening in Tennessee in 1969 too late for the major political battles, but nevertheless continuing many of the segregationists' ideals, if not outright hostility. Basing their appeal on the country stores that historically abused African-Americans even as they "served" them, and indulging in Confederate nostalgia through gift shop items, Cracker Barrel built at least part of its public image on segregationist principles, and this image hasn't improved with a number of discrimination suits during the 1990s and in the last decade—filed by Black workers and customers—revealing the lingering existence of "whites only" attitudes at numerous locations. Cracker Barrel, at least, continues to illustrate the uneasy tension that's characterized Jim Crow dining in the South from its beginning, even if in a less violent and more publicly acceptable form.

Though relatively short, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* packs a considerable punch with its connection of modern Southern dining attitudes to their Jim Crow predecessors, substantiated by wide-ranging research and refreshingly informed by Cooley's expertise on legal matters. It's an eye-opening read for anybody, but those who either live or were raised in the "post-racial" South might find it an especially educational experience, the early history of still-active regional chains like Hardee's and Cracker Barrel, and perhaps readers' own personal memories and experiences, testifying to the seeming permanence (and protean forms) of a fundamental Southern divide. ■

Book Review

Province and Provincialism

TERROIR AND FRENCH GASTRONOMIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Thomas Parker,
Tasting French Terroir: The History of an Idea
Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2015
248 pp.; \$34.95 hbk.

by Mae E. Sander

Mae Sander, a CHAA member and long-time Ann Arbor resident, frequently blogs about food (<http://maefood.blogspot.com/>), travel, and Jewish culture. Her article on the "Dining Out" exhibit at the Janice Bluestein Longone Culinary Archive appeared in our last issue. Mae is also active in the Culinary History Reading Group, which meets monthly at Motte and Bailey Bookshop.

The inventive thinkers of France have a theory for everything. French inventions and theories often have a special-purpose word assigned to them, and such words are widely borrowed: examples include *carte blanche*, *dossier*, *maître d'hôtel*, *déjà vu*, *coup d'état*, *gourmet*, *à la carte*, *hors d'œuvres*, *croissant*, *raison d'être*.

In his book *Tasting French Terroir: The History of an Idea*, Thomas Parker explores an influential French theory and the French word for it: *terroir*. This word means not only the territory, but also the distinctive soil, climate, the social environment where crops are grown, and how the produce from the territory is affected. Parker's approach to his subject is historical: he examines French texts, mainly from the 16th through the 18th Centuries. He says little about the adoption of this word into other languages in the 20th Century.

In some eras, Parker found, the French valued *terroir* and French writers and thinkers loved local produce and its reflection of the climate where it grew. In other eras, writers were basically contemptuous of the realities of the countryside and its idiosyncratic tastes, valuing Parisian ideals. Whatever their judgment, French theorists of food, wine, and agriculture included larger beliefs about national unity, language, and identity in their views of *terroir*. The connection in French thought between local agriculture and national culture, Parker suggests, is unique, underlying a difference between France and the rest of the world in the sphere of gastronomic discourse.

Parker's subtitle says that his book is "the history of an idea"—not a history of cuisine, of agricultural practice, nor of foodways. He limits his study to a select few French writers and the texts in which they mentioned *terroir*. In some eras, he finds, these texts idealized peasants on the land and the delights of fresh foods. At these times, the *goût de terroir*—taste that derived from the local soil, climate, and process—was valued. In other eras, the texts idealized courtiers living at court and serving the king: anyone who lived in the countryside was tainted by an objectionable *goût de terroir*.

The belief that French foods and wines embody important regional differences was already firmly in place by the 1500s when Parker's analysis begins. François Rabelais (1494-1553), in particular, appreciated provincial specialties. In his satires, exaggerated characters such as Gargantua and his father devoured regional products, notably sausages, from everywhere in France. Rabelais showed a wide knowledge and appreciation of the many French regional flavors, which, he felt, combined to create a distinct French identity. Contemporary poets of the group known as *la Pléiade*, writing in a very different tone, praised the way that food and especially wines varied according to their *terroir*.

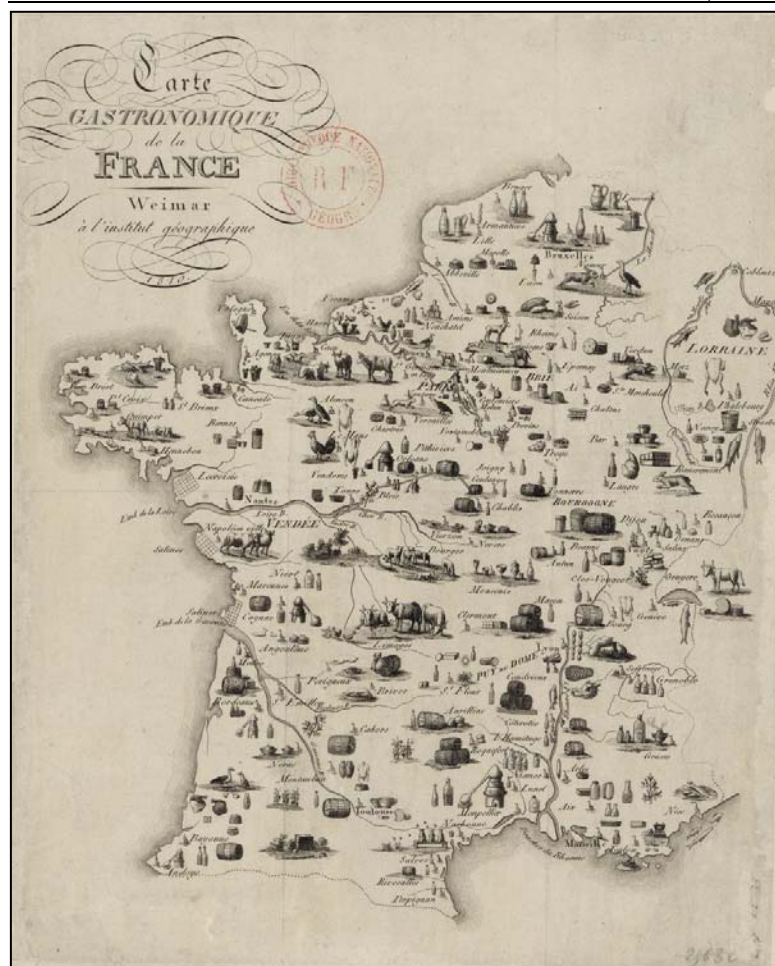
Agriculture manuals of the 16th Century, particularly the work of Olivier de Serres (1539-1629), illustrate how local foods were central to French identity, values, and culture. De Serres, Parker points out, used the term *terroir* eighty-seven times in one of his manuals. De Serres wrote: "The climate and the *terroir* provide wine with its taste and force in accordance with their properties, so that it is completely impossible to account for the diversity of wine by the species of grapes." Texts about the regionally-varied products valued the land and its people as a symbol of collective French identity and national culture (p. 50).

Under the increasingly centralized royal court in the 1600s, the French view changed. Writers began to see *goût de terroir* as a fault, even a taint, associated with "unrefined flavors, unpleasant smells, and in the case of people the poor behavior they displayed." Crude country nobility with this taint couldn't become sophisticated courtiers who served the king. "Blood and speech as clear as water were conflated as signs of nobility, while the connotations of *terroir* were just the opposite" (pp. 56-59).

Parker quotes La Quintinie, an expert of the era, as saying that the best *terroir* was no *terroir*, that is, wine should have no aromas from soil and its minerals. "The soil should have no flavor at all, in order to allow for the purest expression of the fruit in question." Like pure language, pure water and pure soil should characterize the "perfected French garden" (p. 82).

Food snobs at court admired produce that was grown out of season or cultivated far from its normal climate. Parker cites a number of texts praising the discriminating individual who could taste delicate flavors: "a refined character, pure in mind and body, and not tainted by *terroir* nor marked by the provincially and crassness associated with the earth's influence" (p. 94).

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This “Carte Gastronomique de la France”, showing the best food products according to region, was created by Charles-Louis Cadet de Gassicourt in 1809. (Image: Bibliothèque nationale de France; *Tasting French Terroir*, p. 151)

blood. Parker explores how Rousseau (1712-1778), who was a best-selling and influential writer, associated an idyllic countryside with purity and freedom from foreign influences. Voltaire (1694-1778), in contrast, considered *terroir*— the influence of the countryside— as a factor that corrupts purity (pp. 123-138).

Agricultural experts in the 18th Century, such as Parmentier and Chaptal, discussed distinctions between “artificial” and “natural” tastes of the *terroir*. Others made maps showing regional specialties, and praised the produce of the countryside, though they thought that the tastes and foods in Paris were always superior (pp. 140-146).

During the Revolution, the reorganization of the old provinces into the modern departments of France was a major undertaking. The members of the political body that created the new map in 1790 considered natural boundaries that used “rivers, mountains, and *terroir*” as well as a model for a modern “flavorless” nation (pp. 148-149).

At the beginning of the 19th Century, tension remained between the perceived value of food in Paris and the rest of France. Grimod de La Reynière (1758-1837) was “the most authoritative voice in French cuisine.” His view: “Even if food was naturally better at its place of origin, the skill of preparation in Paris made for the best culinary experience.” Connoisseurs in Paris, “the culinary capital of Europe”, were told to announce the region of origin for each wine they served. However, Grimod de La Reynière never used the word *terroir* in his writing (p. 152).

FRENCH TERROIR *continued from page 13*

The relative merits of white and red wine concerned experts of the era. Medical writers believed reds and whites contained different nutrients, which came from *terroir*. Abraham de la Framboisière, the royal physician of Henri IV and Louis XIII, considered white wines best for “those who live preciously, with affected deportment” – the “effete drinker, students, residents of cities, and all those who live sedentary lives.” Red wines were better for laborers who could sweat out the “obstructions” from richer reds with their rustic, more dominant taste of *terroir* (pp. 98-99).

As Paris and the court at Versailles became the center of French government and culture, admiration for the countryside declined. Although ordinary agriculture obviously supplied most actual nutrition, formal palace gardens at Versailles included carefully laid-out vegetable beds, orchards of highly trained trees, orangeries, and greenhouses. Gardeners, not rural peasants, provided the court with fruit and “new trendy vegetables— artichokes, peas, asparagus, lettuce, chicory, etc.” (p. 102).

National Identity and National Cuisine

By the mid-1700s, another reversal in attitude was taking shape. Writers began again to view climate and *terroir* as allied with national identity, a “nobility” based on soil instead of

A brief conclusion to *Tasting French Terroir* quotes several specific 20th-Century theorists who dealt with the topic, and who replicated many of the issues of earlier centuries. Parker quotes writers such as the French novelists Colette (1873-1954) and Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987). Those who collected regional recipes included some prominent scientific writers and authors of cookbooks, such as Curnonsky (pen-name of Maurice Sailland, 1872-1956) and Pampille (pen-name of Marthe Daudet, 1878-1960). Further, Parker stresses the importance of the concept of *terroir* in the development of the *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC) and other legal designations of wine and agricultural products in the years between the World Wars. Both continuing and new values were placed on *terroir* in all its various meanings.

The book wraps up thus: “Indeed, the premodern origins of *terroir* are just below the surface in the contemporary culture of food and wine. They issue forth daily as individuals continue to associate taste, identity, and place at the French table” (p. 163).

Terroir Beyond Parker

The Taste of French Terroir left me with an uneasy feeling that I’d been offered only an appetizer. A tasty, large appetizer, thankfully— but I felt that I’d been deprived of the rest of the meal. Yes, in France the idea of *terroir* emerged in a certain way, but was it really unique? What about the rest of the world? What about the rest of the history of the idea, with or without the

exact word *terroir*? Parker's limits on his book seem frustratingly narrow and ultimately misleading.

Herewith, then, are some specific questions that I think Parker could have productively acknowledged.

Didn't lots of other countries find the question of terroir important, and perhaps even have an influence on the emerging concept in France? Though he claims uniqueness for the French idea of *terroir* and its association with identity, many cultures, past and present, made similar connections with the *terroirs* where their food and wine grew. Ignoring these facts undermines the book's effectiveness.

Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans identified wines and foods by their origin and resulting special qualities. Wine jars in Tutankhamen's tomb were labeled with date, place, and vintage. Roman writers praised particular wine-growing areas. Cleopatra coveted the date palms belonging to King Herod because Jericho was a unique *terroir* for growing this fruit.

The strong bond of ancient people with their *terroir* is illustrated by food historian Rachel Laudan, who writes that in the belief systems of ancient times,

Every individual was locked into a place, not only in the social hierarchy, but in the cosmos The healthiest place to be was where you were born, where your humors and the fluids circulating through the universe were in harmony. To move away was to expose yourself to great danger. In the ancient world ... most individuals were culinary determinists, believing that what you ate made you what you were in strength, temperament, intelligence, and social rank (Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire* [2013], p. 50).

Does the French word terroir itself make the idea unique, as Parker claims? French food has for centuries been closely linked to French identity: a unique concept, Parker concludes, because the word *terroir* is unique to French.

Parker does not go into detail about the way the word *terroir* has spread to other languages. Without details, he claims that even when the word is borrowed, it is still uniquely French. This is not only a historical claim, but also a claim about linguistics: no word in any other language, he says, denotes a combination of human, botanical, geological, and geographic factors that create the essence of foodstuffs. If other languages didn't express the idea in a single word, he implies, then their speakers are unable to grasp the concept.

Linguists regard this type of one-concept-one-word belief as a fallacy. In fact, other languages do express the concept of *terroir*, either in a phrase or by borrowing the word. *Terroir* and *goût de terroir* are commonly used in English and other languages, and the same concept is also discussed in other terms, as shown previously. Parker makes too much of a fuss about the linguistic issues as a demonstration of French uniqueness.

Can human sensory ability really detect the taste of minerals from the soil where wine grapes grew? Parker would surely dismiss this issue as irrelevant to his book: his sources believe in this ability and that's all he needs to know.

Modern wine writers discuss this question at great length, and their insights could be important in Parker's evaluation of historic texts. A statement from food chemistry writer Harold McGee summarizes a modern scientific view: "The idea that one can taste the earth in a wine is appealing, a welcome link to nature and place in a delocalized world; it has also become a rallying cry in an increasingly sharp debate over the direction of modern winemaking. The trouble is, it's not true" ("Talk Dirt to Me", *New York Times*, May 6, 2007).

Does produce grown in a particular terroir actually affect the health of those who eat locally? Parker cites a number of texts that consider this relationship, but accepts what his texts say without the discussion or critique that might have added depth to his study.

Ecologist Gary Paul Nabhan has written extensively on the way that a people who lived for a long time in a particular *terroir* could evolve to have special reactions to the food grown in their environment:

The longer the chain of ancestors who lived in one place—exposed to the same set of food choices, diseases, and environmental stresses for centuries—the greater the probability that selection was both for a diet and for genes that worked well in that landscape. The less that our ancestors intermarried with individuals from other lands, the greater the probability that we still carry genes that allow us to survive, thrive, and successfully reproduce under those particular environmental conditions. Call this deep-time pressure on our diets *evolutionary gastronomy* (Gary Paul Nabhan, *Why Some Like it Hot: Food, Genes, and Cultural Diversity* [2004], p. 30).

My Bottom-Line Appraisal

Would reading this book appeal to you? I think that depends on your interests:

- If you are interested in literature and the history of ideas, then you will probably find this book appealing. For a scholar interested in the minutiae of textual and historical study, Parker's chosen limitations are perfectly logical. He accomplished what he claimed to do—his book "demonstrated that from the Renaissance on, individuals in France discovered, essentialized, and developed a national and regional existence in relation to *terroir* and the local geographic features of the country" (p. 155).
- If you are interested in food and wine history, then you might find much to like in this book. However, you might be frustrated by the rigorous absence of references to other times, places, and cultures. A relatively casual reader might be slightly unnerved by the lack of a broader context and by the emphasis on the theoretical. Fortunately for non-academics, Parker's writing is not exaggeratedly obscure in style, so the book is not infuriating like some academic prose.
- If you read food history and criticism mainly to learn about the varieties of wine and food and how to enjoy or judge their qualities, then the narrow scope might be disappointing.
- Finally, if you still hold the semi-cultish 20th-Century view that France alone predominates in the fields of cuisine and culinary theory, then you will adore this book! ■

C.H.A.A. THEME MEAL



SPICE OF LIFE

The cloth-covered dining tables of the Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti were elegantly decorated last Nov. 22— with bowls of dried chili peppers! But perhaps that's not so strange, because 29 members of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor were gathering for a participatory meal on the theme, "Spice of Life".

People enjoyed every tasty morsel of information— and the food was great, too! For organizing the whole affair we're grateful to Phil Zaret— our master of ceremonies, our Man for All Seasonings. We also thank member Wendell McKay, whose book review "Spicing the Planet" (*Repast*, Summer 2015) inspired the idea for this theme. And of course, as always we're indebted to facility caretaker Susie Andrews and several of our members for their assistance with the logistics.

What, exactly, is a spice? When it comes to spices, "a little bit goes a long way", and that might be taken as definitional: a spice cannot be a dish unto itself, but is instead a small but significant addition, a condiment augmenting the main stuff. The primary uses are for flavoring, fragrancng, coloring, and preserving foods and boosting their nutritive value (notably with vitamins, minerals, and anti-oxidants). Secondly there are medicinal, religious, and other uses.

Also definitional is that a spice must be an actual plant part, a "botanical", which rules out salt, sugar, lemon juice, vinegar, catsup, soy sauce, anchovies, and various other flavorings. However, not just seeds, fruits, and stems, but virtually any type of plant part might be used as a spice: ginger is a rhizome; ginseng, a root; cinnamon, a bark; and saffron, the styles and stigmas of a flower. The term "herb" is used specifically for leafy green parts (whether fresh or dried), such as parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.

Roots of Civilization

"All in One Holiday Bundt Cake", contributed to our meal by Rita Goss, put the pleasantly pungent gingerroot in a double-starring role. Following a recipe in Dorie Greenspan's *Baking: From My Home to Yours* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), Rita used ground ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg in the cake itself, and she augmented this with a buttercream icing featuring crystallized ginger and vanilla extract.

Ginger is native to south China, but the same rainfall-loving family of plants, *Zingiberaceae*, also includes turmeric and cardamom from India, and galangal from Indonesia. Traditionally in China, ginger was harvested when the stalk withered, and the knobby rhizome or "root" was immediately scalded to kill it and prevent sprouting. The root was sometimes dried and ground up for use in the famous Five-Spice Powder, which combines *yin* and *yang* elements and five basic flavors (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and spicy), a doctrine that had become



Left to right, Dan Longone, Jane Wilkinson, and Howard Ando were among the participants at "Spice of Life". (Photo: Mae Sander)

firmly established in Chinese culinary theory by the 300s BCE. Eventually ginger was also cultivated in South and Southeast Asia, West Africa, and the Caribbean. In Jamaica in 1585, ginger became the first Asian spice cultivated in the New World for export to Europe.

Another famous fleshy root, but this one a real root, was used in hot green tea with ginseng [supplied for the meal by Phil and Barbara Zaret]. Interestingly, ginseng was indigenous to both Eastern Asia and North America, but nowhere else. Typically the fleshy roots are sliced, dried, and used as an herbal medicine. Wild and cultivated ginseng have been harvested in North America since the 1700s. Ginseng, Kentucky, is named after this valuable wild plant, which is now extinct in China and endangered elsewhere. The multimillion-dollar Appalachian harvest is mostly exported to Asia. That industry is highly regulated, but "Appalachian Outlaws" (History Channel), a very popular reality TV show that began last year, focuses on the poaching of wild ginseng in five West Virginia counties.

Plantations on the Spice Coast

Chana masaledar, or chickpeas in *masala* [Julie and Bob Lewis], is a snack most famous in the Punjab region of North India. A *masala* (from the Hindi word for "spice") is any type of spice mixture, whether dry or wet. This dish uses a type common in North India, *garam* ("hot") *masala*, often featuring cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves, which are spices that elevate body temperature according to the Ayurvedic system of medicine. Sometimes, *garam masala* is dry-toasted and then ground for use as a "finishing spice", i.e., as an aromatic that is sprinkled on a dish after the cooking is done.

Following Madhur Jaffrey's instructions in *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* (first published by Knopf, 1973), Julie gave the whole cumin seeds the "pop and sizzle" treatment by frying them in very hot oil. This traditional technique of whole-spice preparation is unique to India and is known there variously as *tarka*, *baghaar*, or *chhownk*. The spices are added to the pan in a certain order according to the difficulty of preventing burning. As they heat and brown, their flavors modify and intensify. The seasoned oil is then poured over previously-cooked foods, or

else, as in this dish, fresh new ingredients such as the chickpeas can be added to the pan of spice-infused oil to be cooked themselves. This *chana* recipe also incorporates ground versions of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and coriander, together with fresh garlic and ginger, cayenne, tomato paste, and lemon juice.

Hemalata Dandekar, who spoke to CHAA in January 1984 about her book *Beyond Curry: Quick and Easy Indian Cooking Featuring Cuisine from Maharashtra State* (Univ. of Michigan Ctr. for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1983), recalled in that book how home cooks would obtain their “green” (fresh) spices in the old days:

There was a time, I remember, when one bought vegetables in India (an almost daily occurrence since most households do not have refrigerators), that the vendor would give you some sprigs of fresh coriander, a little piece of ginger root, a few bay leaves, and some fresh green chilies— enough to spice up that day’s meal. With inflation this is no longer the case and people have to pay for these ingredients (p. 14).

Besides the Bundt cake and the chickpeas, a couple more examples of dishes that made use of cinnamon include:

- warm apple cider [Phil and Barbara Zaret], spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, and cloves
- homemade apple sauce [Rich Kato], spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg and mace, allspice, cloves, and ginger, using a recipe from Jean Hewitt’s *The New York Times Natural Foods Cookbook* (Times Books, 1971).

Cinnamon is produced from the inner bark of trees of the genus *Cinnamomum*, which is native to the Malabar Coast (in southwestern India, often called the Spice Coast) and what is now Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Burma. It was already a luxury commodity more than 3000 years ago, traded from ports on the Spice Coast to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. In the cargoes of fineries that were hauled by land and sea, spices had less weight and higher profit margins than silks, precious stones and metals, etc. On the Spice Coast today, in the Indian state of Kerala, vast plantations of black pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, vanilla, and nutmeg make a very popular and aromatic tourist destination.

Masalas that include a blend of three key spices—cumin, turmeric, and coriander— are very common in Indian cooking. Adaptations can be seen in:

- lamb stew with chickpeas and butternut squash [Laura and Dan Gillis], which uses cumin, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, cayenne pepper, and black pepper. Laura used a recipe from a Molly O’Neill column about stews, “A Simmer of Hope” (*New York Times*, Jan. 30, 1994), available online.
- ten-spice lentil salad [Howard Ando and Jane Wilkinson], which uses cumin, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, mustard, cayenne pepper, and black pepper, plus red onion, apple cider vinegar, maple syrup, capers, and Muscat-soaked currants, and was garnished with fresh parsley.

Anglo-Indian merchants and later colonial settlers made such *masalas* a fixture of their often lavish meals. They even created their own somewhat corrupted, off-the-shelf versions, almost invariably containing the “big three”: dried ground cumin, turmeric, and coriander. They called this “curry powder”,



Bob Zorn’s mini-samosas. (Photo: Mariam Breed)

curry being an Anglicized version of some native word (but which word is a matter of dispute). It was used in at least three of our dishes:

- miniature *samosas* [Bob and Mariella Zorn], a version of the famous deep-fried savory pastries of South Asia, stuffed with potato, green peas, and raisins, and spiced with curry powder, cumin, coriander, and ginger
- *ensalata Dominicana* [Sherry Sundling], a salad of shrimp, rice, melons and nuts with a curry-lime-mayonnaise dressing, in the Caribbean style of the Dominican Republic, as interpreted by innovative and prolific cookbook authors Mable and Gar Hoffman in their *Make-Ahead Entertaining* (H.P. Books, 1985)
- Danish-style pork-veal meatballs [Mariam Breed and Randy Schwartz], cooked in a creamy curry sauce along with chunks of carrot and apple, and served with basmati rice, as recommended by Copenhagen chef Trina Hahnemann in her *The Scandinavian Cookbook* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2009). Did you know that there were both Danish and Swedish East India Companies?

These contributions exemplify the versatility and worldwide impact of such ingredients as curry, with “each spice or recipe beginning in a specific region but gaining many more selves during its travels”, as Wendell McKay put it in his book review.

The Head of the Shop

Tagine of Marrakesh Lamb [Judy Steeh] is a stew flavored with a celebrated spice mixture called *rā’s al-hānūt*, as well as with cilantro, parsley, onion, garlic, tomato, and pickled lemon. Judy served this with white rice topped with pine nuts. She found this recipe on the impressive website of Ontario spice provider Epicentre (<http://theepicentre.com/>). It originally appeared in *The Recipes of Africa*, an e-book by British culinary historian Dyfed Lloyd Evans.

continued on next page

SPICE OF LIFE

continued from page 17

Judy brought a supply of *rā's al-hānūt* back home from a trip to Morocco—and the rest of us are so jealous! The Arabic phrase means “the head of the shop”, suggesting the apex of a cascade of ingredients. Traditionally, upwards of 20 different spices, herbs, and blossoms would be combined and pounded together in a mortar. Typical ingredients might include cardamom, cumin, turmeric, cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, ginger, galangal, coriander seed, fennel seed, fenugreek, black pepper or long pepper, cubeb, ash berries, and orris root. While the custom arose in northwest Africa in medieval times, *rā's al-hānūt* is still widely used in that region, where people consider it an aid to health and longevity.

Two other famous Middle Eastern herb/spice mixtures were used in our meal:

- *Za'atar* was used to season cauliflower “couscous” [Joanne Nesbit]. Particles of cauliflower mimic couscous in this popular grain-free recipe, posted to the food52.com website a couple of years ago by a New Yorker named QueenSashy. The dish also includes golden raisins, cumin, garlic, and lemon zest, and is garnished with lemon slices and roasted cashews. *Za'atar* is a term that can be applied to thyme, basil thyme, or mountain oregano, but here it refers to an off-the-shelf mixture in which one of those dried herbs is combined with sesame seeds and with the tart, dried, brick-red powder made from the berries of *summāq* (a type of sumac).
- *Bahārāt* was used to season *kabāb b'il-karaz* [Robin Watson], which are meat kababs in a sour-cherry sauce. *Bahārāt* is one of the Arabic words for “spices”, this one with the connotation of “dazzling”. Here, it refers to an off-the-shelf mixture of 8-10 finely-ground spices, typically including black and red pepper, allspice, cardamom, coriander, cumin, nutmeg, and cloves.

The prevalence of such elaborate spice mixtures in Middle Eastern cuisine might be seen as simply a matter of taste, but is actually deeply rooted in culture and history. After the birth of Islam in the 620s, Muslim scholars adopted the Hellenistic medical doctrines of Galen and others. They saw health and nutrition as symptoms of the balance or imbalance among four bodily fluids or “humors” (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm), which in turn expressed elements of the cosmos and their qualities: air (hot and wet), earth (cold and dry), fire (hot and dry) and water (cold and wet), respectively. Spices and all other food ingredients, each labeled in one of these four ways, were to be combined together to maintain or restore balance among the elements.

Due to the unprecedented reach of the Islamic realm, hundreds of new foodstuffs were available for use in these cascades of ingredients. Black pepper, cinnamon, ginger, galangal, and other spices from the East were added to the pot to aid digestion because of their “hot” quality, while coriander became the most heavily used spice of all because it was the only one with a corrective “cold” quality. One famous cookery manuscript, written under the Marrakech-based Almohad dynasty (1130-1269), asserted that “an understanding of the use of spices is the main basis for preparing dishes, for it is the foundation upon which cookery is built”.

As McKay noted in his book review, “The power of Islam was further strengthened through the connections forged by families of spice merchants— Muslim, Jewish, and some of other faiths— connections stretching across the entire Eurasian landmass. ... The spice trade turned into a cultural conduit as much as an economic one.”

Fresh mint figured heavily in two of our dishes:

- *māst o khiār* [Jan and Dan Longone], Farsi for “yoghurt and cucumber”, is a cool Persian dip akin to the Iraqi *jajeek*, Armenian *cacig*, Turkish *cacık*, and Greek *tzatziki*. The Longones used Greek yogurt and chopped cucumber, and topped it with golden raisins and chopped fresh spearmint and peppermint.
- baked minty chicken squares [Phil and Barbara Zaret] included egg, sharp cheddar, onion, spinach, and fresh mint, and were served with a garlic mayonnaise sauce.

Ten Uses for Tarragon

Spinach Mushroom Tarragon Quiche [Jan and Tavi Prundeanu] is one variety of the famous, savory egg-custard pastry of eastern France. The tarragon, eggs, Parmesan and cream cheese, and other relatively mild ingredients go magnificently well together.

Tarragon is an aromatic herb made from the leaves of the tarragon plant, a member of the huge family of composite-flowered plants. Aside from cultivation, the plant also grows wild in much of Eurasia and North America. The leaves can be preserved by drying, or else used fresh, as in *fines herbes* (“finely-chopped herbs”), a mild French mixture often used to flavor an egg omelette; the mixture also includes fresh parsley, chives, and chervil, and in former times chopped mushroom and even truffles were added. Tarragon, or *estragon* in French, is the leading flavor component in *sauce Béarnaise*, alongside chervil, shallot, and black pepper. The 1961 edition of *Larousse Gastronomique* notes that tarragon can be used fresh to flavor green salads, then proceeds to give instructions for how it can be dried, bottled, pickled, puréed, creamed in a *sauce Béchamel*, or made into vinegar or liqueur. Jan mentioned to us that tarragon is also used to flavor *tarhun*, a bright-green, sugary, carbonated soft drink that's popular in the Caucasus and neighboring regions.

It's interesting that the French grocery store, or *épicerie* (literally, “spicery”), evolved from a type of medieval retailer who mainly sold spices. Herbs and spices played an important role in the development of European cuisine, despite— if not because of— the fact that they were often luxury items there in ancient and medieval times. Several other dishes at our meal highlighted classic European seasonings:

- *contorni* (“side dishes”) [Judy Steeh], an Italian-style platter of three cooked and seasoned vegetables: diced potato with rosemary and Brown Tempest garlic; green beans with basil and German Mountain garlic; and sliced red bell pepper with oregano and Purple Glazer garlic
- green herb bread [Phil and Barbara Zaret], a home-baked, yeasted, wheat-flour, baguette-shaped loaf incorporating oregano, rosemary, thyme, sage, savory, basil, marjoram, parsley, and powdered onion and garlic, plus grated Parmesan cheese



Jane
Wilkinson's
"Lavendery
Rosemary
Shortbread
Cookies".

(Photo:
Mariam
Breed)

- roasted chicken [Mae and Len Sander] featuring Clementine oranges, fennel bulbs and seeds, mustard, thyme, and Pernod, based on a recipe from *Jerusalem: A Cookbook* (Ten Speed Press, 2012) by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi
- shortbread cookies [Jane Wilkinson and Howard Ando] boasting lavender from the couple's own garden, as well as rosemary
- brownies for chocolate-intolerant constitutions [Margaret Carney and Bill Walker], made with carob powder (which is ground from the dried leguminous pods of the carob tree, a Mediterranean member of the pea family) as well as vanilla extract (about which more below).

Chilies Changed the World

Muhammara [Bob and Mariella Zorn] is a brick-red paste or dip that delightfully combines rich, sweet, tart, and hot flavors. It originated in Aleppo, Syria, where it's used on bread, *crudités*, and grilled kababs. It's made with roasted red bell peppers and also includes fresh hot chili pepper, ground walnut, bread crumbs, tomato paste, pomegranate molasses, and lemon juice; see the recipe from Paula Wolfert's food column, "Aleppo's Allure" (*New York Times*, Jul. 15, 1990, Sunday Magazine, pp. 57-58; also available online). The recipe that Bob used, from Seattle's Golden Beetle restaurant (by way of the R.S.V.P. reader-request column in *Bon Appétit*, Nov. 2012, p. 18; also available at <http://www.bonappetit.com/recipe/muhammara>), takes a clever shortcut: instead of roasting the peppers from scratch, it uses commercially-available *harissa* (a Tunisian paste usually made with roasted red pepper, hot chili pepper, garlic, and coriander seed) along with crushed red pepper and the other ingredients.

A second example of a dish relying on chili heat is shrimp-stuffed eggplant [Marion and Nick Holt], which is seasoned with chili powder, black pepper, and garlic powder. In her Mar. 15, 1992 talk to CHAA, "Spices Around the World", marking the 500th anniversary year of the Columbian Exchange, Marion underlined how spices such as chili pepper from the West and black pepper from the East have played an integral as well as integrating role in the development of world cuisine and world history.

The European craving for the exotic spices of the East reached a crescendo in Renaissance and early modern times when it became a motive factor underlying the voyages of

discovery, as Columbus and others searched for a sea route to the spices and other riches of the Orient. It's reported that when Vasco da Gama finally reached the port of Calicut in northern Kerala in 1498, his sailors took to shore with shouts of *Christos e especiarias!* ("For Christ and spices!"). After Magellan's crew reached the Spice Islands and then completed the first circumnavigation of the world in 1522, the Spanish monarch awarded the surviving commander a coat of arms decorated with the images of two cinnamon sticks, three nutmegs, and 12 cloves. The subsequent planting of colonies, the establishment of the Indies trading companies, and the formation of the first truly global networks of commerce changed the course of history.

The hot American capsicums, which ripen from green toward red or yellow, are rich in vitamins and other nutrients. The Nahuatl word was *chilli*, but the Europeans used "pepper" because the hot taste reminded them of black pepper and other Old World peppers. Columbus tasted the peppers being cultivated by the Taíno "Indians" in Haiti and recorded:

Theirs is of finer quality than ours and no one eats a dish without seasoning it with this spice, which is highly beneficial to health. On this island alone, 50 caravels of this article could be loaded every year.

On the second voyage across the Atlantic in 1493, Columbus's physician brought chili peppers from the West Indies back to Spain, where they made their first appearance in that hemisphere. Already by 1500, Portuguese traders had introduced the plant to India, and by 1600 it was being cultivated in China. Sir George Watt, a botanist and writer living in Kolkata, reported that chilies in India, "ground into a paste, between two stones, with a little mustard oil, ginger and salt... form the only seasoning which the millions of poor can obtain to eat with their rice" (*A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India*, 7 vols., 1889-1899).

Today, India is the world's largest producer, consumer, and exporter of chili peppers. But let's not forget their titanic role in the cuisines of places like Szechuan, Thailand, Syria, Tunisia and Algeria, Italy and Spain, Latin America, Louisiana—and even Hungary, where they became the basis for paprikosh (*paprikás*) and other celebrated national dishes.

Let's not forget, as well, all those other New World spices and seasonings that aren't fiery hot, such as cacao, annatto, allspice, and vanilla. The last two figured into these sweet confections:

- Early American pumpkin spice cake [Sherry Sundling], flavored with vanilla, allspice, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, and raisins, and topped with dollops of whipped cream sweetened with brown sugar, all from a recipe in *To Market, To Market* (Junior League of Owensboro, Kentucky, 1984)
- Swedish apple cake with vanilla custard sauce [Pam Dishman], the cake itself made by layering browned buttered crumbs with applesauce and baking for 30 mins.

Vanilla, derived from the fruits ("pods") of a Mexican orchid, was brought, along with cacao, by Hernán Cortés back to Spain in the 1520s. Allspice consists of the dried unripe fruits ("berries") of a tree native to the Caribbean, southern Mexico, and Central America. The British came up with the name "allspice", perceiving that its flavor combines those of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. That's a whole Asian spice mixture in one American berry! ■

CHAA CALENDAR

(Unless otherwise noted, programs are scheduled for 3:00 – 5:00 p.m. and are held at Ann Arbor Senior Center, 1320 Baldwin Ave.)

Sunday, January 17, 2016

CHAA Co-chair Joanne Nesbit,
“Cookbooks from A to Z”, a tour of cookbook follies.

Sunday, February 21, 2016

TBA

Sunday, March 20, 2016

Rob Hess, founder of the artisanal
company Go! Ice Cream (Ypsilanti)

On the Back Burner: We welcome ideas and submissions from all readers of *Repast*, including for the following planned future theme-issues. Suggestions for future themes are also welcome.

- Spring 2016: Reminiscences of Food Professionals
- Summer 2016: The Food Culture of Portugal.

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Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

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First Class