

Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume 4

Fall, 1989

A Delicate and Beguiling Cuisine

In honor of CHAA's November, 1989, meeting, a Vietnamese dinner of seven regional dishes held at the West East Restaurant in Pontiac, Michigan, CHAA member Christopher Kent has written a short history of Vietnamese food and cooking.

The culture of Vietnam developed side by side with that of China, and indeed, for the thousand years ending in 939 A.D., Vietnam was under China's colonial yoke. Thus, it is remarkable that the Vietnamese have been able to maintain their own separate identity, language, and ways of life.

To some extent, the foodways of the Vietnamese people have been influenced by Chinese methods of cooking and eating. Rice is a major staple, and stir-frying is used in preparing some dishes. The Vietnamese, however, use only miniscule amounts of oil or fat in their cooking. Also, Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian nation to eat with chopsticks. In spite of these influences, Vietnamese food is fundamentally different from and would not be mistaken for Chinese food.

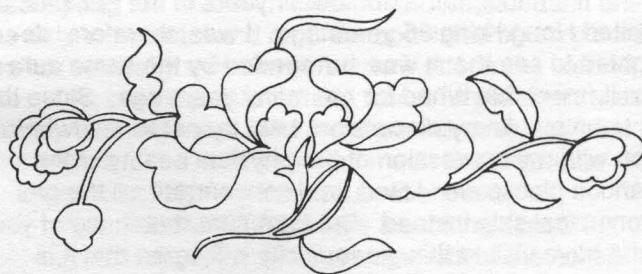
Through the use of different cooking methods, including slow simmering, and different flavorings and spices, the Vietnamese have achieved a delicate and beguiling cuisine that is unforgettably different. *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne has called the Vietnamese kitchen "among the most outstanding on earth."

In addition to rice, the food materials available in Vietnam include a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry, and seafood. Regional differences in the food-stuffs, cooking methods, and spice level are typically encountered in the North (Hanoi), Central (Hue), and South (Saigon).

Two characteristic seasonings often used in Vietnamese cooking are a fish sauce called *nuoc mam* and lemon grass. *Nuoc mam* gives a lighter accent than the soy sauce used in Chinese cooking. When this fish sauce is combined with fresh lime, chili peppers, garlic, and sugar it becomes *nuoc mam* sauce, which is served with many dishes and takes the place of salt. It sub-

merges itself in the flavors of the other ingredients and adds a subtle and delicious dimension to this enchanting cuisine. *Nuoc mam* and its variants (*nam pla* in Thailand and *tuk trey* in Cambodia) are the nearest modern equivalents to *liquamen*, the fermented fish sauce used so liberally in ancient Roman cuisine. Lemon grass is used in many Vietnamese dishes for its slightly aromatic character and its haunting flavor, which is reminiscent of lemon but milder and essentially different.

With its emphasis on cooking with a minimum of fat, its unthickened sauces, and significant use of vegetables, Vietnamese cooking is healthful as well as delicate, complex, and sophisticated.



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A Restaurateur in China

Raquel Agranoff

CHAA was very fortunate to have Raquel Agranoff, epicure, cooking teacher, and former co-owner of The Moveable Feast (Ann Arbor), speak at our October, 1989, meeting. She has kindly provided the Newsletter with a written account of her trip.

Recently, I accompanied my husband on a trip to the Far East. Our five week long journey included Tokyo and Hiroshima, but the main purpose was to visit cities in China where my husband would be lecturing. Since we are both very interested in food, we made it a point to seek out the interesting culinary experiences.

I had spent a number of years in the Far East and visited Hong Kong 35 years ago. I was, therefore, delighted to see that it was surrounded by the same aura of excitement that it had for me many years ago. Since this is to be a culinary discussion, I will try not to overwhelm you with my impression of the physical beauty of the various places we visited, and concentrate on the gastronomical side instead. But I am sure that those of you who have visited this glorious city will agree that it is spectacularly beautiful.

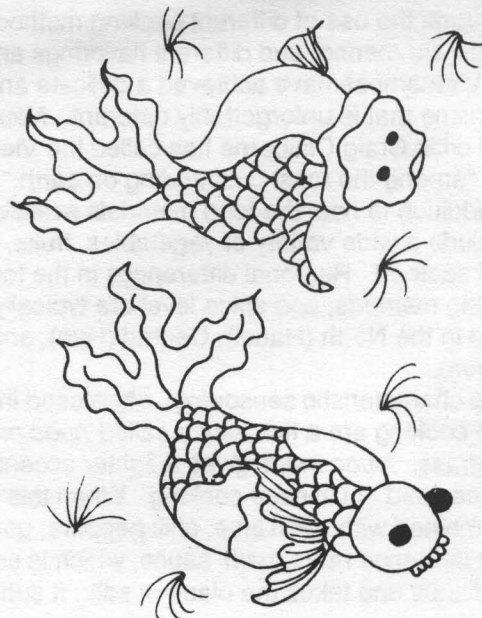
My first impression of Chinese food in Hong Kong reminded me how limited our exposure has been in America. It is only during recent years that we have experienced anything except Cantonese cuisine. There, in only a few days, we sampled Szechuan, Chiu Chow, and Hunan styles of cooking. We had roast goose with sliced goose liver in vinegar sauce; crystal shrimp -- chopped shrimp and wild leeks in an almost transparent rice dough; and clear duck broth loaded with lemon juice and garnished with a quarter of a duck. On our last day there, just before our flight to Beijing, we had dim sum at eight in the morning at a restaurant recommended by the hotel staff. The spring rolls were cooked tableside, and the staff were very friendly, which as you know makes all the difference.

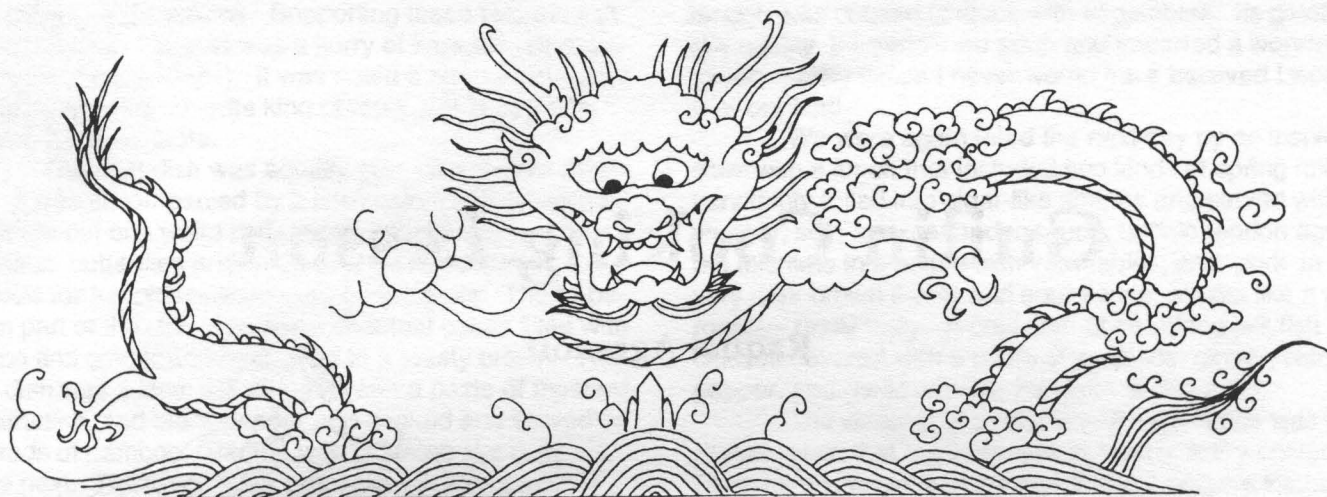
My first impression of Beijing was one of enormous numbers of people riding bicycles, avoiding cars, and eating street food. There are open free markets

everywhere on the street, selling mountains of leeks, radishes, cabbages, and celery. One indoor market I visited had at least 100 vendors offering everything from rice to quail eggs, shiitake and oyster mushrooms, pears as large as grapefruit, and live fish.

The people of Beijing are very friendly and openly curious. The Mandarin dialect spoken there has the cadence and hard sounds of the Midwest, so that, unless one really tunes in, the overall hum sounds almost like English.

Of course, the one dish to try here is the Peking duck, and we were guests of honor at a banquet which included Peking duck. The ritual of serving this dish is quite prescribed and uses every part of the duck. We





started with a very attractively arranged cold dish of gizzard, liver, and vegetables. Along with this were fried ducks' feet which had been coated with a mustard bread crumb mixture. The digits of the feet had been separated, so that it was not until I asked that I knew what it was. That was followed by pieces of very crispy duck, duck skin, thin pancakes with scallions, and a special sauce. The meat was placed inside the pancakes with the sauce and scallions, rolled up, and eaten — really delicious, and not too difficult to get here. When it was learned that I was a restaurateur, I was invited to go downstairs to the area where the ducks were prepared. I went through the kitchens, down some rickety stairs, and into a large room where there were a special chef and two or three helpers whose only job was the preparation and cooking of this famous regional dish.

From Beijing we went to Shanghai. Parts of this city are very western, especially along the waterfront, but the most interesting is the old city, a labyrinth of winding streets filled with tiny shops, restaurants, and one-room dwellings. It was not uncommon to see food being prepared at the open doors and along the gutters of the street. It was in this section of the city that we found a wonderful restaurant called Yuan Gardens. On the ground level, where dim sum was being made, I had the opportunity to watch from an open window the entire preparation of a particular dim sum that is found only in Shanghai.

We were accompanied by guides everywhere we went in China, and the one in Shanghai proved to be delightful and very accommodating to our particular gastronomic requests. While we were there we ate in another restaurant in the old city during the hairy crab season. It was extremely crowded, and our guide found us seats at a table already occupied by five men who were obviously celebrating an occasion. They good-naturedly crowded together, and we three sat down. It turned out that the celebration was in honor of the tax collector who was sitting opposite me, relishing the meal as well as the attention of his hosts. My husband enjoyed the hairy crab, and, following the lead of the others at the table, ate the yolk-like sack with great relish.

From Shanghai we went on to Kunming in the province of Yunnan. The food is spicy here and much to our liking. The Kunming Hotel, where we stayed, included breakfast with our room, offering the choice of a Chinese or Western breakfast. The Chinese breakfast consisted of a congee or porridge made of rice, pickled vegetables, and tea. The Western breakfast was eggs, toast with jam, and tea or coffee. One day there was a flurry of excitement in the dining room because the congee was special. It was made with a violet rice which came from a very small area southwest of Kunming near the Burma-Laos border. It was a purplish black color and very gelatinous.

One of the gastronomical highlights at this hotel was a spring roll filled with chicken and herbs. Each one was only a mouthful and an order consisted of ten pieces. Another specialty was skewered pork, much like Indonesian satay, but very delicate and spicy. We ordered these at every evening meal. The local goat cheese and ham were superb. The ham was very much like prosciutto — dry, chewy, and perfect with the goat cheese.

We discovered there was a cooking school in Kunming. There was a small area in front of the school where baked products were sold and a large restaurant where one could enjoy a meal prepared by students.

Along with impressions of China's natural beauty and the friendliness of her people, I came away with a bit of nostalgia for the way I grew up. Then produce was only available in season and the anticipation of the first strawberry or orange or tomato only added to the delight of eating it. It is still that way in China.



Please see Ms. Agranoff's accompanying article, **Guilin Cooking Lesson**, page 4.

Guilin Cooking Lesson

Raquel Agranoff

In Guilin, China, which is famous for its scenic mountains, we had a most interesting experience. When the chef at the hotel where we were staying learned that I was experienced in restaurant cooking and was co-owner of a restaurant, he asked if I would give him and his staff a Western cooking lesson. I enjoy teaching cooking, and, although it's been some time since I've taught formal classes, this sounded fun and challenging at the same time. They wanted to learn Western dishes because they are part of a cuisine with which they had no experience, and because of the increasing numbers of foreigners who visit their city and crave Western food.

I decided to teach a number of things which were straightforward in execution, easy to understand in concept, and which would not require exotic ingredients. Our interpreter spoke pretty good English, but I wasn't sure how far his knowledge would extend. We arranged to meet with some of the young cooks the next day to give them a list of items I would need. Most of the ingredients presented no problem. In retrospect, I probably should have been a little suspicious of how many things they indicated they had on hand.

Despite the assurance of Zhen, the sous-chef, that they did have everything I had listed, when I got there it was necessary to make last-minute substitutions, but it all worked out fine. There were ten of them and one of me, and they were all very eager to learn. The interpreter was the local foreign affairs officer, and between his dictionary, my dictionary, and lots of gesturing I managed to teach ten different items including: pork medallions with apples, flamed with local "white lightning"; chicken breasts stuffed with black mushrooms, rice, and coriander; steak *au poivre* (no peppercorns, no cream — I used some finely ground pepper and canned cream — not great, but it worked); leek and potato soup (no leeks — I used scallions — although Kunming, whence we had just come, had enormous horse-drawn wagons of leeks); *pommes duchesse*; deep-fried onion rings; puff pastry (there was butter); pastry cream; and a salad with a mustard vinaigrette which they did not like at all.

The enthusiasm and warmth of the young cooks inspired me to overcome the complete lack of cooking



utensils and make whatever substitutions were necessary. It was a marathon seven-hour lesson, and I enjoyed every minute of it. They especially liked the chicken dish, and asked me what it was called. It was so improvised that I was at a loss for a name. Finally I said Chicken Agranoff! This they all dutifully put in their notes.

To repay me for the lesson they gave a banquet for us which consisted not of things on the hotel menu, but rather local dishes superb in presentation and really delicious. We started with shredded beef and celery in a vinegar sauce with small dried eels. The next dish was called Iron Pot Fish. It was a small cast iron pot brought to the table red hot, filled with a half-cooked fish along with seasonings and a broth. This was immediately covered and after a minute or so was opened to reveal the fully cooked fish and deliciously flavored broth. The fish was tender and for once boneless, and the broth subtle and sublime.

The next presentation was an edible basket made of local rice noodles pressed into a form and deep-fried. There was even a little handle on the basket. This was filled with large marshmallow-shaped balls of mashed taro

root, ginger, and scallions. Supporting these taro balls at the bottom of the basket was a flurry of kroepuk (shrimp and tapioca paste chips). It was again a new taste. The taro balls were my favorite kind of food: starchy, exotic, yet with a homey taste.

The next dish was equally gorgeous in presentation. It was accompanied by a hand-carved white cockatoo made out of a white radish and was surrounded by vegetable butterflies and flowers. Two hand-carved symbols for happiness were also on the plate. The to-be-eaten part of the dish was water chestnut cakes filled with shrimp and ginger and deep-fried to a toasty brown. The next dish was a local fish covered with a paste of mustard, horseradish, and black pepper and cooked and served on thin rods of bamboo. Shrimp with jalapeno-like peppers came next. The word "Wellcome" (sic) was cut out of a white radish and placed on a green leaf to border the plate.

Another dish was made of pieces of boneless chicken and slices of taro root wrapped in lotus leaves and served in individual bamboo steamers. The meal ended with a rice noodle soup and a buffalo tendon soup. The

tendon was cooked in stock with vegetables. Its gelatin-like quality thickened the soup and imparted a wonderful chewy quality which I never would have believed I would like, but I did.

We were again feted the next day by an inspired cook with a lunch that included two kinds of spring rolls very thinly rolled into cigar-like shapes and served with a vinegar, soy, and coriander sauce; buffalo tendon again, but this time in a sauce with vegetables; and pork in a very dark brown sweet and sour sauce, almost like a pot roast — really tasty. A cold dish of shredded jellyfish and chicken covered with a paste of scallions, ginger, black pepper, and garlic was the highlight of this meal.

The nicest part of this whole experience was to realize again that the language of food is really universal. From my experience years ago in the Troisgros kitchens in France to the middle of China and all the places in between, my interest in food has enriched my life over and over again.

Please see Ms. Agranoff's accompanying article, **A Restaurateur in China**, page 2.

The Cook's Bookshelf

Some recent and not-so-recent titles of interest to culinary historians -- a holiday wish list.

Charles Carter. **The Complete Practical Cook: or, a New System of the Whole Art and Mystery of Cookery** (1730). Prospect Books, London, 1984. Only facsimile edition of cookery book for noble households. 60 marvelous engraved menus including the coronation dinner for King George II.

Claire Clifton. **The Art of Food**. The Wellfleet Press, Secaucus, 1988. Examination of food in great paintings by food historian. Color plates, recipes.

Bridget Ann Henisch. **Cakes and Characters -- An English Tradition**. Prospect Books, London 1984. Story of English Twelfth Night cakes. Appendix of 17th- to 20th-century recipes.

Constance B. Hieatt (ed.). **An Ordinance of Pottage**. Prospect Books, London, 1988. 15th Century culinary recipes from Yale University manuscript. Commentary and adapted recipes by Eulalia Pensado.

Hugh Johnson. **Vintage: The Story of Wine**. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989. Wine as a hallmark of Western civilization. Many fine illustrations.

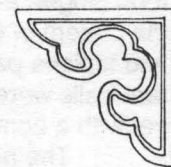
Gervase Markham. **The English Housewife** (1615). Edited by Michael R. Best. McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston and Montreal, 1986. Practical, comprehensive book written for 17th-century women. Scholarly, annotated reprint.

Calvin W. Schwabe. **Unmentionable Cuisine**. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1979. History, lore, and anthropological significance of diverse food habits in all parts of the world. Recipes for unusual animal protein sources.

Terence Scully (ed.). **The Viandier of Taillevent**. University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1988. Without question the definitive edition of this important French work. Comments on all extant manuscripts.

Amelia Simmons. **American Cookery** (1796). The Silverleaf Press, Green Farms (Connecticut), 1984. Another reprint of the first American cookbook. Compares several early editions. Introduction and updated recipes by Iris Ihde Frey.

Catharine Parr Trail. **The Canadian Settler's Guide** (1854). The New Canadian Library edition. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1969. "Manual of Canadian housewifery" according to author. Half the book is growing, preparation, preserving foods.



Membership News

Busy Fall for CHAA Founder

CHAA founder and Honorary Chair, Jan Longone, has spent most of the last few months on the road -- nothing unusual for Jan and her husband, Dan Longone. In addition to running the Wine and Food Library (Ann Arbor), they travel widely to lecture, attend meetings, buy rare books, and visit wineries and restaurants.

On September 11, 1989, Jan was the guest of the Women's Culinary Guild of Boston. The following day she addressed the Boston Culinary Historians at Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library. Her topic was "The History of Cookbooks." She took the opportunity to deliver greetings from our group, and they in turn conveyed their best wishes to us. Jan reports that they enjoy our newsletter.

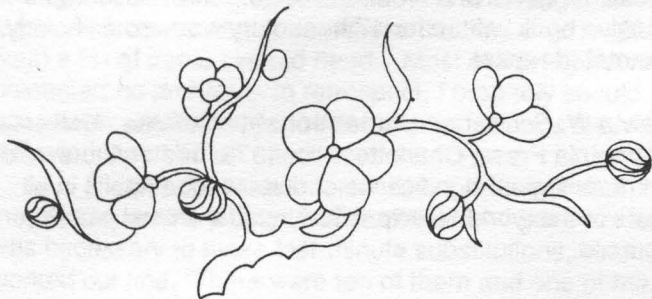
In October Jan gave a talk titled "Mother Maize and King Corn" to the New York chapter of the American Institute of Wine and Food.

New Job for AGA Chef

Any of our members who attended the AGA stove demonstration (November, 1988) at Kitchen Studio in Sylvan Lake, Michigan, will be sad to hear that Judith Asphar is leaving Michigan. She has accepted a job in New York with the British company Laura Ashley as Public Relations Director for North America.

She writes, "I have always felt very connected with Laura Ashley and have attired my homes and myself with their clothes and furnishings for many years. If it had not been something that felt very special to me, I would not have undertaken this move away from here and back to Manhattan from whence I came."

CHAA was very fortunate that Judith was at Kitchen Studio long enough to give us a fascinating look at the AGA and a memorable meal. (See the Winter, 1989, issue of the Newsletter for a full account.) We wish her well in her new position.

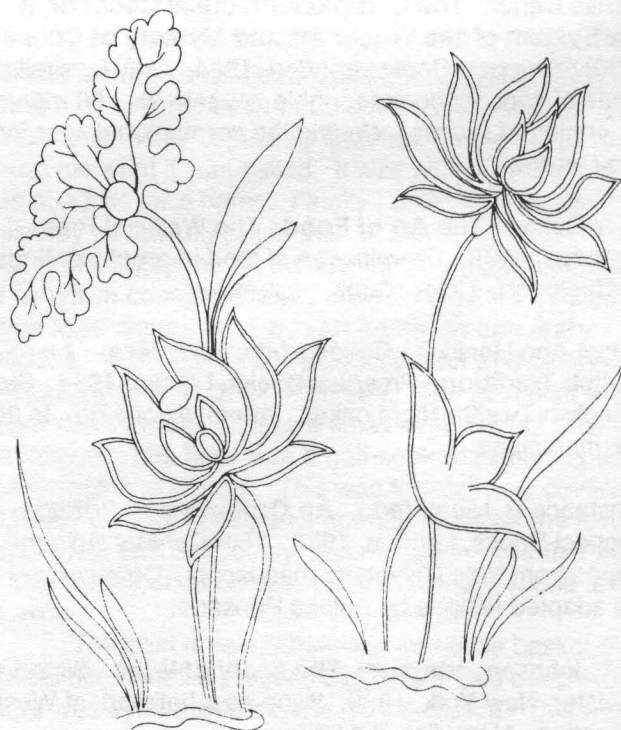


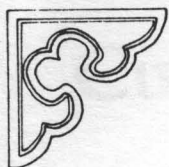
High Honor for Marion Prince

CHAA member Marion Prince recently received the Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Extension Home Economists. This is the highest level of recognition a staff home economist can receive from this organization.

Marion is a nutritionist who works for the Washtenaw County Cooperative Extension Service, lecturing and educating the public about foods and nutrition.

CHAA is very grateful to her for arranging our meeting facilities, including the use of a large kitchen, in the Extension building.





Announcements

Another Chance to Hear Jan Longone

Next year (next decade!) Jan will be one of the speakers in the "Booked for Lunch" series at the Ann Arbor Public Library. Her talk, on Tuesday, January 9, 1990, will be a review of *Pomp and Sustenance* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1989) by Mary Taylor Simeti, an American who has lived in Sicily for the last twenty years. This is a well-researched book of recipes and discussion of the food of Sicily. The author has also written an account of her life on the island. If you would like to do some pre-talk research, take a look at *On Persephone's Island -- A Sicilian Journal*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986.

This is a brown bag affair that begins at 12:10 p.m. in the Public Meeting Room (in the basement) of the main branch of the library at 343 S. Fifth Ave., Ann Arbor.



Membership and Subscription Renewal Time

October is the month we collect annual dues and renew subscriptions to the Newsletter. If you have not renewed, we urge you to take care of this before the end of the year. Any membership or subscription not paid up by January 15, 1990, will be considered lapsed. This will be your last issue of the Newsletter and your last reminder.

Membership fees remain the same as last year. If you would like to be a full member and plan to attend meetings, the cost is \$15/year for an individual and \$20/year for a family. Both memberships include a subscription to the Newsletter (3 issues/year). If you do not attend meetings and would like only the Newsletter, the cost is \$7.50/year.

Please make checks payable to Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor and send to:

Dan Longone
1207 W. Madison
Ann Arbor, MI 48103

Julee Rosso at Kitchen Port

Did you know that Julee Rosso, former owner of The Silver Palate (gourmet food shop in New York City) and co-author with Sheila Lukins of *The Silver Palate Cookbook* and *The Silver Palate Good Times Cookbook*, lives in Michigan? She has been traveling to promote their latest book, *The New Basics*, and, fortunately for us Michiganders, will wind up her tour at Kitchen Port in Ann Arbor.

Ms. Rosso, who has been described as "a friend of all culinary historians," will be autographing her book from 5-6 p.m. on December 14, 1989. Kitchen Port is on the second floor of the Luick Building in the Kerrytown Shopping Center. For more information please call (313) 665-9188.

Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

The Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor (CHAA) is a group of scholars, food writers, collectors, cooks, nutritionists, students, and others interested in the study of culinary history and gastronomy. For more information about the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor you may contact:

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Please address contributions to the Newsletter and editorial questions to the editor:

Susan Fussell, Newsletter Editor
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CHAA Winter and Spring Programs



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

1989 *December 17*

Food and Mystery, Annual Holiday Participation Meeting. Please bring a mysterious food anecdote and a holiday dish to share.

1990 *January 21*

The History of Coffee and Its Place in the World,
Tom Isaia, owner of Coffee Express, Ann Arbor, Michigan

February 18

To be announced

March 18

Grains of the World, John Nystuen

April 15

To be announced

May 20

Herbs in the Victorian Era, Lois Young

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