

# Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume VIII

Summer, 1992

## *Food in Marco Polo's Travels*

This article is Part Two of a two-part series. The last article enumerated some of the foods that Marco Polo found in his travels to the Orient.

Significantly, this list fails to include three important items: tea, which is virtually synonymous with China, ice cream and noodles. Surprisingly, no extant manuscript mentions tea. Given his powers of observation and eye for detail, how could Polo have failed to note this item? Most scholars feel that he probably did, but some parts of the original manuscript have perished.

One of the earliest references to tea in European sources dates from 1550, 226 years after Polo's death, and comes from the Venetian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio, who also produced one of the major editions of Polo's Travels at about this time.

Speculation that Polo brought ice cream from China is probably based on his description of dry milk used by Mongols. Having dried the milk in the sun, they would place it in a small leather flask together with water. "And as he rides his horse, the milk in



the bottle is churned up and becomes like syrup. This they drink, and it is their meal." As food historian Margaret Visser suggests, the exact origin of this food is obscure. It is perhaps the result of several strains of sweet iced drinks documented in Europe well after the period of Marco Polo.

The noodle and from it, all pasta, is said to have been brought to Venice by Polo. It is based on his discussion of how the Chinese use wheat, which "in their country does not yield such an increase (as other grains); but such of it as they harvest they eat only in the form of noodles (lasagne) or other tasty foods, but received popular impetus through a 1938 film, the Adventures of Marco Polo in which Gary Cooper as Polo asks a Chinese man what he is eating, and he replies, "we call them spa get", a ludicrous Hollywood garbling of the Italian "Spago" + "etti" (little threads).

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When Marco said he had "discovered" pasta in China, it was taken to imply that he had discovered something new: in fact, he had discovered that the Chinese had pasta "which are like ours". Clearly, Polo's use of the term "Lasagne" implies that this kind of noodle was already known in Italy, if for no other reason than the Italians had a word for it.

Enumerating the food references in Polo's Travels is a complex undertaking as there are at least

90 - 100 of them. This study forms the basis of my efforts What Marco Polo Ate: A Culinary Odyssey.

Carlo Coppolo  
Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan

## Spices

Spices are a magical word, conjuring up images of exotic cultures and heady fragrances, long sea journeys and great riches. Now as we buy one of those uniform small boxes at the store we should recall the ancient history of spices at a period when they were worth as much as gold.

Spices are mentioned as far back as 1550 B.C. in ancient Egypt. They were used for embalming, body ointments and anointing oils and for fumigating homes.

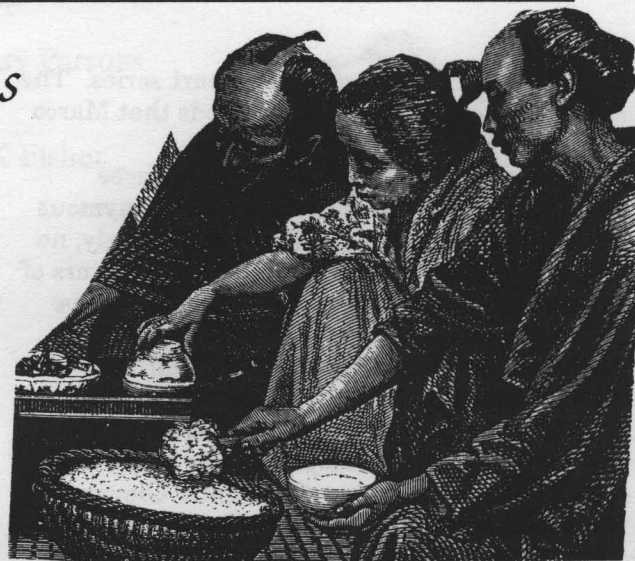
There are numerous references in the Bible, and their value can be inferred to spices from 21 Kings 20.13: "And Hezekiah hearkened unto them and showed them all the house of his precious things, the silver and the gold, and the spice".

For centuries the Arabs controlled the distribution of spices which are grown in tropical countries. They were transported across Asia to Europe along ancient caravan routes such as the Silk Road. The sources were kept secret and the Arabs grew rich off the trade.

But, the monopoly did not last. During the Roman empire seafarers discovered how to make use of the monsoon winds which shifted direction according to the season, and they sailed to the Malabar Coast of India and back to Europe. Wealthy Roman citizens used spices extensively and a recipe book from the first century, A.D. mentioned their use in digestion, to preserve food and to enhance flavor.

Pepper was the most popular spice, followed by ginger and tumeric. By the time the Goths laid siege to Rome in 408 A.D. they too knew the values of spices and demanded among other ransoms, 3,000 pounds. of pepper.

A low point came during the Middle Ages when, because navigation and commerce stood still, Europe was deprived of spices for about 400 years. They were used only by the very wealthy.



However, by the 10th century the trade resumed and Venice, with its great merchant fleet, took spiceloads to Europe. There was intense competition with Genoa over this lucrative trade.

Spices were so costly that a pound of ginger bought a sheep, and pepper was counted out berry by berry; in medieval France a pound of it could buy a serf his freedom.

Although Europe was ignorant about where the spices were grown, Marco Polo's revelations to a fellow prisoner when he was captured in Venice after spending 25 years in the Orient broke the silence. It was the start of the downfall of Venice as a rich market, the end of the Arabian spice monopoly, and the opening of direct trade with the Orient.

Political changes in the Orient in the 14th century once again sealed off the trade routes from East to West. But Columbus, having made note of the publication of Polo's travels, decided to sail west to find Cathay. And the great food exchange began. In addition to the transport of the potatoes and tomatoes to the East, the Spaniards planted ginger in the New World, and hot peppers were imported to the Mediterranean region and the East. Soon afterwards Portugal sent Vasco de Gama to the Indian Ocean



where he found spices aplenty on the Malabar Coast of India.

The next few centuries had battle lines drawn between the Dutch, Spain, England and Portugal as each in turn tried to control the spice trade. Wars were fought and spies were employed to learn about the routes. Spice producing countries were used as political exchanges and natives resisted colonial control of their crops.

The Dutch, at one time, tried to prevent any others from selling spices to the Portuguese or the English from the lands they controlled, which included the Spice Islands (Malaccas), Ceylon, Norther Sumatra and others. They had nutmeg and clove trees uprooted to control production. But the Dutch were foiled in 1770 when a French botanist smuggled trees out of the Spice Islands and planted them in French tropical colonies.

In the New World the colonists were eager to obtain the precious spices and undertook thousands of pepper voyages from the now historic harbors of Falmouth, Portsmouth, and Salem. It was a two-year journey, fraught with danger, but the rewards were great.

Now most spices come from India, followed by Indonesia. The U.S. is the largest importer of spices in the world. Pepper is still the most important one in terms of volume and value. An International Spice Group, set up in 1983 with importing and exporting countries, provides a forum where the concerns of the buyers and sellers are discussed. We've become quite civilized about the trade.

Marion Prince Holt, Ann Arbor

## 1992 CALENDAR

### June - August

#### FOODS OF THE NEW WORLD

Jan Longone will serve as Visiting Curator for an exhibition on FOODS OF THE NEW WORLD to be held at the Clements Library, University of Michigan, until the end of August.

The exhibition will feature historical documents and early writings about New World products as well as more modern evidence of the dispersal of New World foods to the rest of the planet. Please contact the Clements Library for further information (313-774-2347)

### August 19 - 22

#### THE AMERICAN CHEESE SOCIETY'S 9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Entitled "Cheese on the Table: Tastes and Traditions in American Cheesemaking.: the Conference consists of four days worth of events, including the Annual Cheese judging, the largest competition of American specialty cheeses: a hands-on cheesemaking course; panels and presentation of reviving fermented cheese production, goat cheese production, among others; a festival of cheeses including a reception and gala tasting of over 200 American-made specialty

cheeses; and guided tours of some of Wisconsin's best cheesemaking plants. For further information, contact The American Cheese Society, c/o Food Work, 34 Downing Street, New York, NY 10014 (212-727-7939)

### September 4-6

#### THE 4TH INTERNATIONAL FOOD CONGRESS

The 4TH INTERNATIONAL FOOD CONGRESS on "Culinary Influences between Countries" will be held in Istanbul, Turkey. For further information, call (011/90/33/116255)

### October 29-31

#### CONFERENCE ON THE AMERICAN HOME: MATERIAL CULTURE, DOMESTIC SPACE, AND FAMILY LIFE.

This conference will be held at the beautiful and historical Winterthur Museum, Gardens and Library, Witherthur, Delaware. A request for papers has been issued. For further information, contact Neville Thompson, Office of Advanced Studies, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE 19735.



## CULINARY HISTORIANS OF ANN ARBOR

### Fall is Renewal Time

If you are already a CHAA member or subscribe to the Newsletter, it may be time to renew. The numbers in the upper right-hand corner of your address label are the month and year your membership expires. Check these numbers and use the form below to renew.

### The Newsletter

The Newsletter is the official publication of the CULINARY HISTORIANS OF ANN ARBOR. It is published three times a year: fall, winter, and summer. Besides announcements of future meetings and reports of past meetings of the group, it also contains feature articles, book reviews, a calendar of upcoming events of culinary bibliographies and resources, and reports of food-related travel and special events.

We invite contributions to the Newsletter from members and subscribers, although we regret that we cannot pay for articles.

If you would like information, to contribute articles, or comment on the Newsletter, please contact Cheryl Depner, 2215 Derby Troy, MI 48098.

### Who We are

The CULINARY HISTORIANS OF ANN ARBOR (CHAA), founded in 1983 by Jan Longone and friends, is a group of scholars, cooks, food writers, nutritionists, collectors, students and others interested in the study of gastronomy. Groups with similar interests exist in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York.

The CHAA meets monthly in Ann Arbor, September through May, on the third Sunday of the month from 7 to 9 pm at the Washtenaw County Extension Services Bldg, 4133 Washtenaw, Ann Arbor. For more information about monthly meetings, contact the Chair, Julie Lewis, 301 N. Ravena Blvd., Ann Arbor, MI 48103 (313) 662-9211.

Membership in the CHAA is open to anyone interested in culinary history. For those able to attend meetings, dues are \$15 for a single year's membership and \$20 for a family, which includes a subscription to the Newsletter. If you cannot attend meetings but would like to receive the Newsletter, a year's subscription is \$7.50. Use the form below to become a member or subscribe to the Newsletter.

### CULINARY HISTORIANS OF ANN ARBOR

☐ Single Membership \$15    ☐ Family Membership \$20    ☐ Newsletter \$7.50

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone (day) \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to: Dan Longone, Treasurer, 1207 Madison, Ann Arbor, MI 48103



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Fifth Annual CHAA Picnic

Please join us in a celebration of Julia Child's 80th birthday! Use your creative talents in selecting, and making one of Julia's numerous recipes for this festive event.

Sunday, August 9TH  
3:00 pm to 7:00 pm  
(Dining will start at 4:00 pm)

At

Ned and Joann Chalat  
677 Middlesex  
Grosse Pointe, MI 48230  
313-821-1280

From the West:

I-94 east to Chalmers-Outer Drive exit. Service drive to Outer Drive (second light) right on Outer Drive. Continue Straight on Alter Road. Cross Jefferson, turn left on Avondale (3rd Block) to Middlesex.

From the East:

I-94 West to Cadieux Exit. Cadieux South to Jefferson. Right on Jefferson to Whittier. Left on Whittier to Essex. Right on Essex to Middlesex, one block.

Please contact Julie Lewis, (313) 662-9211, for further information.

#### CULINARY HISTORIANS of ANN ARBOR

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Chair; Julie Lewis  
Honorary Chair; Jan Longone  
Treasurer; Dan Longone  
Program Chair; Miriam Imerman  
Newsletter Editors;  
Cheryl Depner  
Julie Levine

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2215 Derby, Troy, MI 48098



## CHAA 1992 FALL PROGRAMS

*The CHAA meets on the third Sunday evening of the month from 7 pm to 9 pm at the Washtenaw County Extension Service Building, 4133 Washtenaw Ave, Ann Arbor.*

**September 20** Maguey, an Ancient Mexican Crop

Professor Jeffrey Parsons and Mary Parsons

**October 18** All You Never Knew About MFK Fisher

Katherine Seestada

**November 15** To Be Announced

**December 20** Traditional Holiday Participatory Dinner



CHAA Newsletter  
2215 Derby  
Troy, MI 48098

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