

ANN ARBOR

CULINARY HISTORIANS

OUT OF AFRICA



HISTORIC SOUPS AND STEWS FROM NIGERIA

by Apollos N. Bulo

Dr. Bulo, a staff development specialist at University of Michigan's Plant Building Services, is from the Ogoni tribe in the Niger delta basin in southeastern Nigeria. He holds a Ph.D. in public health, and has also carried out Christian missionary work.

“Did you taste the soup?” This was the question on the lips of many people who participated in the seventh annual Multicultural Food and Arts Fest, held at the University of Michigan on June 10. Despite the blistering sun and high humidity, the hot Nigerian soup I prepared for the occasion was gone before noon.

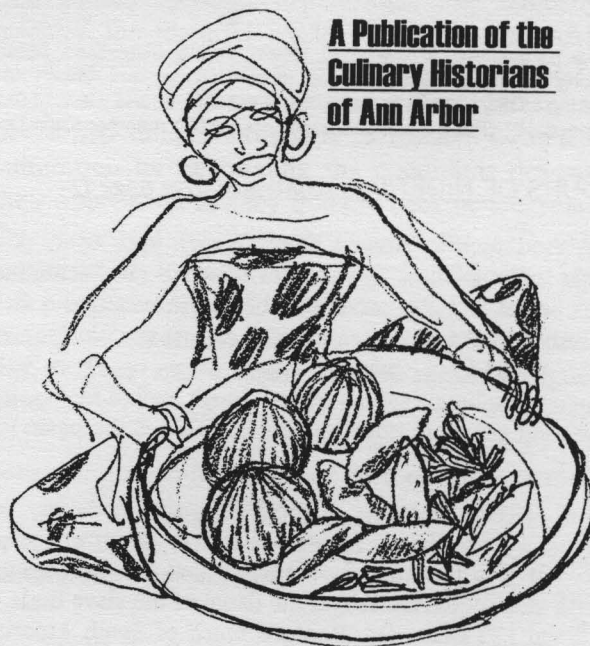
The soup I exhibited was made with meats (beef, chicken and roasted turkey), vegetables (okra, spinach, tomatoes and onions), vegetable oil, and spices (green and red hot pepper, and salt). Fish can also be used. The meats are washed thoroughly and boiled in water until medium cooked, then stewed in a frying pan with the oil, onions and tomatoes. The water used in boiling the meat is added to the stew and heated for 5-10 mins., then the spices are sprinkled in while the soup boils. Okra, spinach and salt are added near the end of the cooking process.

In this article I would like to discuss where this soup, and similar African foods and their ingredients, came from.

Foodways in the Motherland

African foods, like Asian foods, consist mostly of natural flora and fauna. They date back to man's earliest appearance on earth, in northeast Africa. The continent was very rich in vegetation and animals, and its people utilized these natural gifts for food, selecting the most palatable and healthy ones by trial and error over the centuries.

In the tropical parts of Africa, i.e., the lands surrounding the Equator between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the vegetation is mostly tropical forests, and the food is made up of vegetables, fish and meat, eaten along with fibrous tubers such as cassava, yams, cocoyams (taro and its close relatives), and sweet potatoes. Another ingredient, often used in West African



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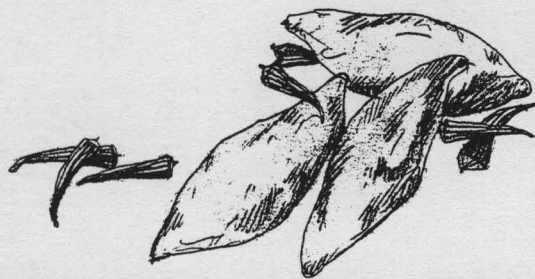
soups, is a flour made from the seeds of *egusi*, a native melon. In the savanna regions, the food consists mostly of seeds, including peanuts (“groundnuts”) as well as cereal grains such as corn, wheat and millet. These are boiled or baked with meat and eaten as a full meal.

Food ingredients used in Africa vary not only by geographical region, but also according to religious dispensations. Muslims tend to eat less meat and Roman Catholics more fish, while Protestant Christians eat a wide variety of foods except during fasts and periods of special prayer. Those parts of West Africa lying in the tropical forest areas, such as the southern parts of Nigeria, Cameroon and Ghana, are largely inhabited by Christians and share a similar food menu. The soup that I made last June comes from this menu.

Traditionally in Africa, cooking was the special role of mothers and housewives, and people were never sent to schools of culinary art but rather learned at home. It is neither the ingredients nor the method of preparation that give an African dish its special taste, but rather a type of “magic touch” on the part of the person preparing it. This touch is acquired through years of experience watching one's mother work in the kitchen, and trying out a dish several times until one masters it.

Africans traditionally do not eat a soup by itself, as many Europeans might. Soup, like most protein-rich foods, is served with a solid or semisolid base of starchy or other carbohydrate-

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Okra (Ghanaian *nkruma*) and sweet potato (Arawakan *batata*) are among the many foods important in both African and African-American cooking. They are indigenous to West Africa and Central America, respectively. (Page 1 and 2 drawings by CHAA member Karin Douthit.)

SOUPS OF NIGERIA (continued from page 1)

rich food such as cassava flour (*garri*), yam flour, or cereal grain flours such as Beswick or pancake mix, semolina, etc. This cereal or tuber product is heated in water on a fire, and mixed until it becomes a dough. A turn in color shows it is fully cooked. A person eating soup or stew will dip manageable lumps of this mixed dough, called *foofoo*, into the soup and eat these with his fingers. This is the basic food of Africa.

Echoes in the Diaspora

It was this rich food agenda that Africans brought to North and South America at the dawn of the slave trade, in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Because much of South America and the southern region of North America have humid climates similar to those of tropical and semitropical Africa, key plants were able to be grown in areas where slaves worked the plantations. Thus, although the methodologies of preparation of foods by Africans in the Americas might have been modified after centuries of separation from their motherland, yet the ingredients of foods are basically the same among all people of the African diaspora.

Thus in Barbados, where my wife is from, the food called *foofoo* in West Africa is called *cocoo* in the local dialect. It is usually prepared with pounded yam or sweet potatoes, along with okra and other ingredients. However, fingers are not used for eating in the Caribbean or elsewhere in the diaspora. Whereas in Africa the use of fingers became a symbol of resistance to European ways and of the movement to "boycott all boycottables" from western civilization, in the diaspora the Africans lost this habit and learned to eat with cutlery. The practice of eating *foofoo* was also brought by Nigerian slaves to America, where it became the basis for spoonbreads and cornmeal mush.

In West Africa, tubers such as yam or cassava can be boiled or deep fried and eaten with soup or stew. Or they may be formed into a paste that is flattened and deep fried in groundnut oil or palm oil, and eaten as a pancake.

Black-eyed peas or native beans are another popular addition to African dishes, and are prepared in many different ways according to region. In West Africa, they can be cooked with water and salt and then eaten with a stew of meat or fish.

Alternatively, they can be ground into a flour that is formed into balls, which are fried in a little oil ("dry-fried") to make *akara*. Thirdly, the bean flour can be combined with oil, minced onions and tomatoes to make a paste, which is wrapped in leaves and boiled. Once unwrapped, the balls, called *maimai* or *moyin-moyin*, are eaten with a sauce and are very flavorful.

Among African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, black-eyed peas are also a popular food. They are prepared by boiling and are made a part of other meals, eaten with cornbread, collard greens and other "soul food." Slaves in the American South combined the peas with rice and bits of pork to make "hoppin' john," still popular today.

The similarity of these foods between West Africa, the Caribbean and the American South shows that they date from as far back as the shipment of slaves out of the African homeland in the 16th Century. No wonder people of African descent the world over prepare these foods when they want to "come back to the land," back to their roots.

Every time I prepare an African dish here in America, it reminds me of home and I feel like weeping because, among other things, I really miss the home cooking of my mother's kitchen. It also reminds me of the situation in which the children of Israel found themselves during their captivity in Babylon, as the Psalmist described their condition: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalms 137:1). But while the children of Israel refused to sing their songs in a strange land, we the children of Africa are here singing our song, enjoying our African food and sharing it with everybody, as I did at the Food and Arts Fest.

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A SMALL TASTE OF FREEDOM



OPPRESSION, OPPORTUNITY, AND SLAVE FOODWAYS

by James E. McWilliams

Recently relocated to Austin, TX, James is now completing a doctoral dissertation on domestic economic development in 17th-Century Massachusetts for the History Dept. at Johns Hopkins University. His article on colonial beer brewing appeared in the New England Quarterly (Dec. 1998).

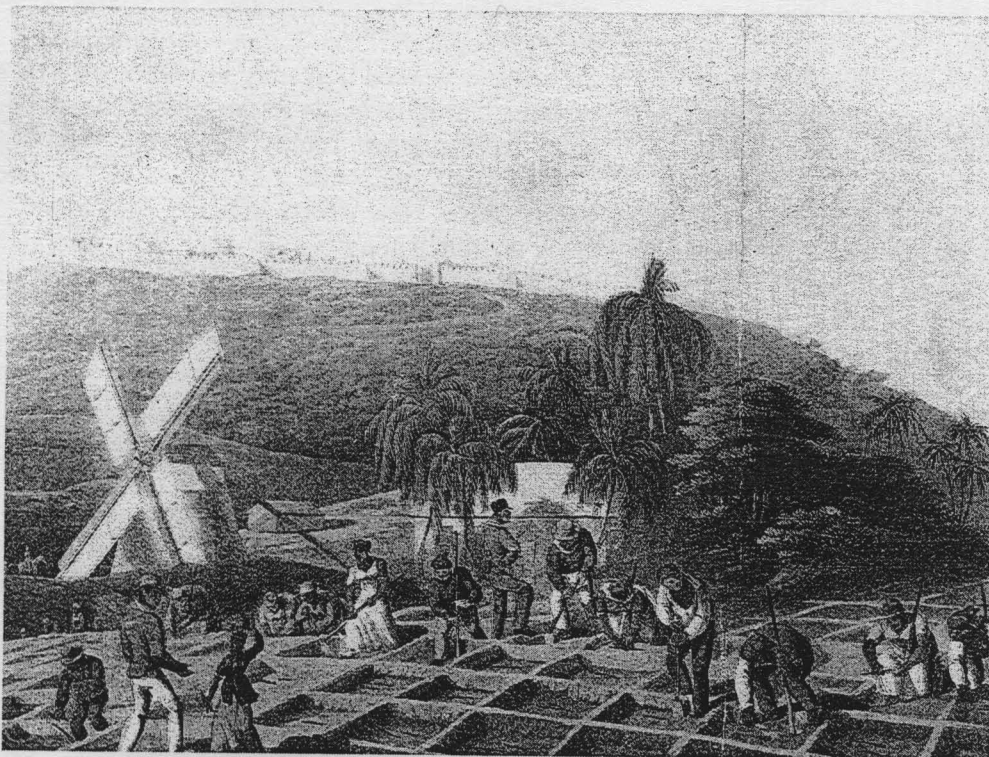
Of the nine to eleven million Africans forcibly relocated to the New World between 1492 and 1850, those who disembarked in the West Indies during the 17th and 18th Centuries entered what was arguably the most oppressive slave system in existence. The relentless drive to exploit the region's natural capacity to produce sugar was only exceeded by the drive to exploit the labor necessary for its mass production. As a crop that offered no seasonal respite, sugar shaped the culture, social system, and economic structure of the Caribbean Islands as it became a common consumer item for families throughout Europe. Here, on the distant periphery of the English empire, men accumulated an unprecedented level of wealth on the straining backs of African slaves while

even the poorest of Europeans enjoyed the delightfully new taste of sweetened tea, coffee, cookies and cakes.¹

Needless to say, opportunities for slaves to preserve their cultural heritage were few and far between in this oppressive context. Among other dislocations, the slave trade cleanly severed familial ties, muted spiritual expressions, and radically re-oriented the material world of transplanted Africans. Nevertheless, in spite of (or perhaps because of) these new limits on their freedom, West Indian slaves developed unique strategies to resist a complete deculturation by negotiating the conditions determining their oppression as they quickly became and remained the numerical majority throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries. In so doing, they forged a collective identity that integrated aspects of their varied African pasts into their new American environment. Precise evidence of this delicate and gradual process remains vague, but especially compelling hints of cultural dissemination and integration are particularly evident in the cultivating and processing of food on slave plantations, an activity that offered African slaves a rare opportunity to retain a taste of freedom in a world of unrelenting oppression.²

Slaves encountered abrupt dietary changes during the brutal Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean.

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African slaves planting sugar cane in Barbados. (Engraving courtesy of William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.)

for the best food imports available in the trans-Atlantic marketplace. As the cost of slaves increased throughout the 18th Century, the decision to allow them to provision themselves became increasingly established and, as a result, the physical health of slaves improved substantially in this otherwise dreadful environment.⁴

Any attempt to assess the discrete culinary innovations which emerged from this unlikely arrangement will unfortunately be met with frustration. Evidence of exactly how slaves utilized these land grants remains elusive, and the little that we do know about the topic comes almost completely from inevitably slanted European accounts. Nevertheless, some elements of slaves' culinary adjustment to the New World seem fairly clear. For one, we know that West Indian slaves adapted their inherited agricultural customs to trends previously established by the Arawak Indian cultivators who occupied the land prior to Spanish arrival in the 16th Century. The Arawaks had extensively grown manioc (cassava), a soft type of maize, sweet potatoes, beans, and capsicum, and they complemented these cultivated crops with periodic gatherings of shellfish and uncultivated roots and berries. Slaves continued these traditions, but combined them with the curing of pork and bacon, and the raising of livestock and poultry, in addition to incorporating the Spanish-introduced banana, citrus fruits, and arrowroot, and English-introduced Oceanic foods such as the mango, dasheem, cocoyam, coconuts, and breadfruit. As for the direct transfer of crops, slaves brought over the Guinea pea (gundul) and okra. Slaves also worked diligently to cultivate a vast array of yams, a product native to the Pacific Islands but one with deep African roots. They grew the "yellow Guinea yam," cultivated the "cush-cush," or yampee, which was a New World creation, and mixed these yams in with as many as six other older yam varieties which had come to the New World from Oceania via West Africa. With so many food traditions at their disposal, West Indian slaves certainly benefited from a wide array of crop possibilities. We can only imagine the myriad culinary combinations that went from their polinks into their worn, earthenware bowls.⁵

Gardens of "very husbandlike appearance"

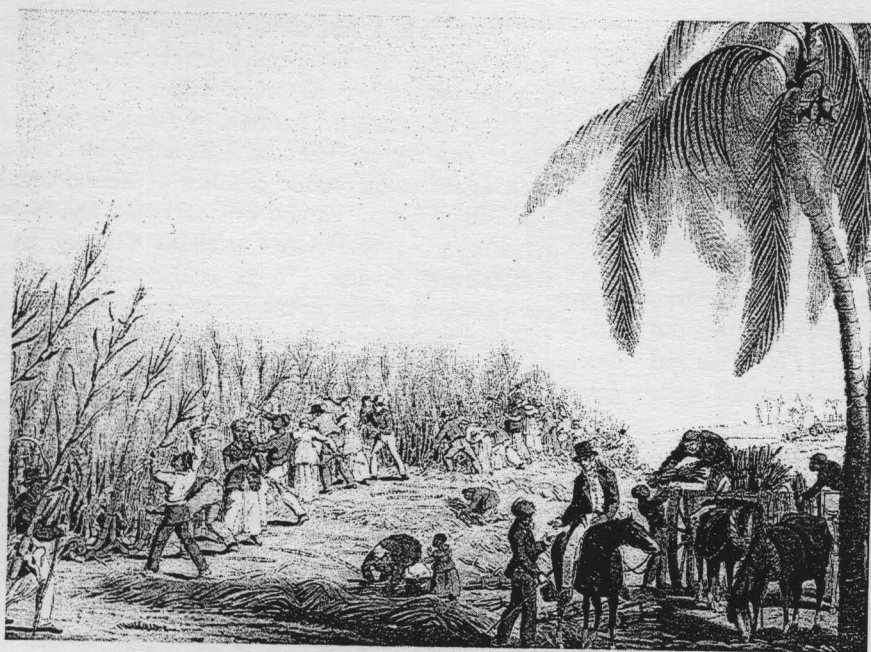
A couple of surviving sources are especially helpful in aiding our imagination. The late 18th-Century accounts of the English merchant William Beckford offer fascinating glimpses into the nature, organization, and operation of the polinks. Noting the "very husbandlike and beautiful appearance" of slave

Prior to capture and departure, African slaves were generally not a healthy, well-fed group, a condition resulting in part from tribal leaders' tendency to sell African slaves to Europeans during times of famine in order to relieve pressure on local food supplies. Moreover, diets in the Bight of Biafra and Central Africa traditionally centered on yams and cassava, both quite low in protein, and those on the Gold Coast made the more nutritious corn their main cereal, but complemented it with meat or fish all too rarely. On board slave ships, Africans encountered some familiar foods, and experienced a few new products and mixtures, but culinary options and health conditions only became worse. At the very least, enslaved Africans would have choked down a boiled, watery mush of yams and rice. Slave traders who showed more concern for their chattels' mortality might serve the yam/rice mixture with a sauce comprised of boiled fish, shrimp, or meat. It was rare, but not unheard of, for ships to offer horsebeans, flour for thickening, palm oil, and red peppers. Slaves, at this point, had little to say about how these meals were prepared, and their "thin and weak" appearance after disembarking reflected the rapidly diminishing dietary conditions.³

Cane fields and provision plots

This situation, however, changed upon landing, as Indian plantations converged to provide slaves an unusual opportunity to control their own diets. Plantation owners calculated the cost effectiveness of both importing food for slave consumption and allowing slaves to cultivate their own crops. While most owners settled on a combination of these two options, the decision to allocate garden plots and larger planting fields to slaves turned out to be cheaper than importing the extra grain, salted cod, pork, and livestock necessary to provision their labor. Planters thus avoided these expenses and mainly imported only moderate quantities of "refuse fish" (non-merchandise, old cod that reached markets too late to sell at competitive prices). They then carefully divided their land—dedicating choice flat regions to sugar cane, and the hillier, less fertile regions to the slaves—and allowed slaves a day and a half off per week for unsupervised cultivation of what came to be called "polinks." By the early 19th Century, sugar plantations were devoting as much as two-thirds of their land to slave provisioning, so much land that the owners chose not to grow their own provisions, but instead applied just a sliver of their sugar profits to pay

SLAVE FOODWAYS (continued from previous page)



African slaves harvesting sugar cane in Barbados. (Engraving courtesy of William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.)

provision plots, Beckford proceeded to describe how "[a]ll kinds of ground provisions and corn are, as well as the plantain, successfully cultivated in the mountains; but as this is done by the negroes in their own grounds and on those days which are given to them for this particular purpose, it does not enter into the mass of plantation labor." Beckford expressed a biased but genuine interest in the connections that slaves forged between crop choices and geographic circumstances. He explained, "They generally make choice of such sorts of land for their ground as are encompassed by lofty mountains; and I think that they commonly prefer the sides of hills, which are covered with loose stones, to the bottoms upon which they are not so abundant." Some slaves, he continued, "will have a mixture of both, and will cultivate the plantain-tree upon the flat, and their provisions on the rising ground, and some will pursue a contrary method; for in the choice as well as the change of situation, they seem to be directed more by novelty and caprice, than by convenience or expediency." Weeding through Beckford's heavily editorialized descriptions of slave provisioning, one also discovers references to the slave cultivation of yams, "fruit and garden stuff," coco, corn, ginger, "and other minor productions of the country."⁶

John Stewart, an early 19th-Century observer, provides further information on how slaves worked the land to provide their own food. He paid particular attention to their "house plots," or conucos, which were the small gardens that slaves nurtured on patches of ground around their huts. Identifying the garden as the slaves' "principal means of support," Stewart noted

that the industrious slave would "not only support himself comfortably," but, with an eye on future scarcity, would oftentimes "save something." A leading 20th-Century student of these house gardens has encouraged modern observers not "to miss the merits of the system," pointing out that in these gardens "yields are much higher than [traditional] grains, production is continuous the year round, storage is hardly needed, [and] individual kinds are not grown separately in fields, but are assembled together in one planed ground." Simple, efficient, healthy, and autonomous, slave gardens stood in stark contrast to the sugar fields that absorbed the vast majority of slaves' time and toil.⁷

A barter in yams and other goods

The cultivation of polinks and garden plots, finally, came to serve more than just the slaves' subsistence needs. By the late 17th Century, West Indian slaves were consistently producing a surplus of food for trade in local markets with other slaves and local whites. This business became particularly profitable when international wars prevented white plantation owners from importing their own foodstuffs, and it was by no means unheard of for masters to find themselves bartering with their own slaves for excess corn, pork, yams, and beef in exchange for rum, manufactured goods, or even cash. The circumstances surrounding these market transactions, of course, could hardly be deemed "free," but they nevertheless spoke powerfully to the role of the slave provisioning system in helping the unfree to negotiate the terms of their bondage. As

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A SURVEY OF RECENT WRITINGS

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SOUTHERN BLACK AND WHITE

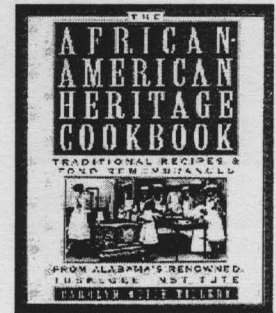
Along with music, language, and many other aspects of our American culture, Southern food history is indelibly stamped by "race." What were the true origins of African-American foodways? To what extent did they interact with and help reshape the customs of white and other ethnic groups? A host of recent publications have grappled with these interesting questions.

For one thing, critics have sometimes doubted the existence of a traditional "cuisine" in Africa. Against the notion that African cooking—from which evolved that of slaves in the diaspora—was "primitive," Diane M. Spivey, a history researcher at the University of Miami, gives us *The Peppers, Cracklings, and Knots of Wool Cookbook: The Global Migration of African Cuisine*.¹ Her book focuses on the survival of native African customs in such regions as the U.S., the Caribbean, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, India, and Southeast Asia, treating the migration of foods as an aspect of cultural diffusion. She also explores the relationship of African and African-American cooking with other facets of society such as music, literature and advertising.

In his presentation at our Feb. 1988 meeting, local food historian Howard Paige explained why the label "soul food" is too narrow and at the same time too abstract to encompass the rich heritage of Black family cookery and foodways. When we examine geographical and cultural roots, we find that African-American culinary history did not originate in the U.S., any more than did Irish- or Italian-American cookery. In his *Aspects of African-American Foodways*,² Paige describes food and its preparation in West Africa in the 16th through 18th Centuries, then traces the evolution of recipes in the West Indies following the importation of West African slaves and their enculturation with other peoples there. He goes on to explore the role of such slaves and their descendants in U.S. culinary history, including a discussion of important cookbooks by freemen Robert Roberts (1827) and Tunis Campbell (1847).

The gulf that separated the foods of the slaveholding class from those of other groups is reflected in *The Robert E. Lee Family Cooking and Housekeeping Book*³ by Anne Carter Zimmer, great-granddaughter of the Confederate commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. From Sally Lunn (a light, cake-like white bread) and Charlotte Russe (a sweet pudding lined with ladyfingers), to an oyster dish in which a first batch of the bivalves merely lends its savor to the pot before being discarded and replaced with a second batch, the book affords a glimpse of an elegant antebellum diet that was based on wealth and privilege. Alongside the 70 modernized recipes are other insights into family and social history gleaned from the notebook of Lee's wife, Mary Custis.

While Black and white cookery had very distinct roots under slavery, by 1900 they were becoming intertwined as integral parts of an American culinary tradition. We get a sense of this from the memoir by Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook/ You Know God Can*.⁴ Included are ruminations on such topics as the ethnic customs of Texas, Oklahoma and the Cotton South; gumbo in Charleston and New Orleans; Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean cookery; and African and Islamic cuisine. Shange is the well-known author of such creative works as the recipe-studded novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* and the choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf.



When the first generation of professional Black cooks prepared dishes to the tastes of their wealthiest clients, they called the style "à la bourgeoisie." We notice this in the very first cookbook written by an African-American. Rufus Estes, a former slave from Tennessee, cooked on Pullman and other railcars between 1883 and 1907—preparing meals for two U.S. presidents and countless other celebrities—before becoming a chef at U.S. Steel in Chicago. Edited by D. J. Friez of Tulsa, a near-facsimile of Estes' 1911 volume *Good Things to Eat as Suggested by Rufus*⁵ includes such entries as cress sandwiches, Trianon salad, fried parsley, gingered green tomatoes, oyster fricasee, chicken gumbo, suckling pig, broiled pig's feet, sardine rarebit, Virginia stew, Brunswick stew, squash pudding, and Baltimore ice cream.

That disparate traditions in Southern cookery came to mutually influence one another does not mean, of course, that racial and class distinctions evaporated. When Henretta, the African-American maid at a grand house in Greensboro, GA in the years before WW2, served vegetables in heavy cream, we can be fairly sure that the same dish would not have graced her own dinner table, nor would she likely have consumed roquefort cheese, preserved chestnuts, crystallized ginger, sherry, Grand Marnier and several other cooking ingredients frequently cited in Luann Landon's culinary memoir *Dinner at Miss Lady's: Memories and Recipes from a Southern Childhood*.⁶ Landon recounts youthful summers spent at her grandmother's Victorian mansion, including time spent with Henretta, the genius at work in the wood-stove kitchen. Among the few dozen recipes—some gleaned from the family and others from heirloom cookbooks, with one menu's worth per chapter—are roast turkey with pecan dressing, Cousin Catherine's chicken vermouth with walnuts and green grapes, and peaches with Sabayon sauce.

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Most of us have heard the story of George Washington Carver, the Alabamian who rose from slavery to become Director of Agricultural Research at the Tuskegee Institute. But how many of us have been able to see the cooking recipes that Carver devised, among hundreds of other uses that he identified for peanuts and sweet potatoes? Some of these recipes can be found in a book by Carolyn Quick Tillery of Montgomery, *The African-American Heritage Cookbook: Traditional Recipes and Fond Remembrances from Alabama's Renowned Tuskegee Institute*.⁷ Carver's reports and farm bulletins give us Alfalfa Salad, Sorrel Soup, Sweet Potatoes Baked in Ashes, Oatmeal Peanut Bread, and other items. The book's 200+ recipes range far beyond Carver's time to cover the entire 20th Century as well. Literary passages and photos from the archives at Tuskegee and the Library of Congress help round out a picture of African-American life in the South.

When masses of African-Americans moved from the South to northern urban areas during the Great Migration, their traditions were not readily accepted by other city dwellers, not even by those of the same skin color. The newcomers set up sidewalk cafés, barbecue pits and "chicken shacks" serving such foods as grits, collards, chitterlings, pigs' feet, souse, maws, fatback, gumbo and cush-cush. Tracy N. Poe, a Ph.D. candidate in history at Harvard University, found that in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities, middle-class Black and white residents initially viewed these food habits as dirty and backward, a contempt that was only gradually dispelled in the period between the world wars. Poe's article "The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947"⁸ explains how the consumption of such foods eventually came to be seen by Black folks in various classes as a celebration of their common heritage.

Echoing this pre-war social friction over the transplanted Southern diet was a post-war debate of a more explicitly political character, erupting among the advocates of Black Liberation in the 1960s: is "soul food" an authentic way to celebrate Black national identity, or should it be eschewed as a remnant of slave culture? Doris Witt, English professor at the University of Iowa, wades directly into this swirling controversy in *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*.⁹ Her study shows how the question of soul food became intertwined with broader controversies over racism and sexism.

1. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999; 384 pp., \$29.50 cloth.
2. Vol. 1. Southfield, MI: Aspects Publishing Co., 1999; 220 pp., \$27.95 cloth. Paige hopes to arrange for distribution through Barnes and Noble outlets, but copies of his book can also be ordered directly from him (include \$2.10 for shipping and handling): 23905 Plumbrooke Drive, Southfield, MI 48075.
3. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1997; 296 pp., \$24.95 cloth.
4. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998; 113pp., \$12 paper.
5. Jenks, OK: Howling at the Moon Press, 1999; 142 pp. plus 56 pp. of contemporary illustrations, \$19.95 paper.
6. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1999; 227pp., \$19.95 cloth.
7. Secaucus, NJ: Birch Lane Press, 1996; 210 pp.; \$19.95 cloth.
8. *American Studies International* (George Washington Univ.), Feb. 1999
9. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999; 304 pp., \$45.00 cloth.

SLAVE FOODWAYS (continued from page 5)

the Sunday market became a significant weekly activity for both masters and slaves, it increasingly took on a carnivalesque tone as slaves directly shaped the event's social and economic significance, while masters played by rather than dictated its increasingly esoteric rules.⁸

In gradually progressing from subsistence to market production of food, West Indian slaves carved out pockets of opportunity in an environment defined by strict limits. This process, most importantly, was not a development unique to West Indian islands. When land-hungry Barbadian planters migrated to the new colony of Carolina in the early 18th Century, they not only brought an eager desire to exploit a cash crop, but they brought its necessary counterpart: slave labor. The specific demands of rice cultivation and the comparative geographic expansiveness of the Carolina Lowcountry led to a system of labor organization that enabled imported West Indian slaves to continue the African-American traditions that they were simultaneously forging in the Caribbean. The development of provision grounds, garden plots, and market days thrived as masters created a system of incentives whereby slaves who completed an assigned task were allowed to use the remaining time to their own advantage.⁹ As anyone who has enjoyed the "Southern" cooking in a town like Charleston or Savannah can attest, these rich customs continue to exist as a paradoxical source of culinary pleasure.

NOTES

1. Two influential works on the sugar industry in the Caribbean are Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York, 1985), and Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves* (Chapel Hill, 1973).
2. Recent scholarship on slavery has focused on the topic of slave "agency." This emphasis reflects an interpretive turn away from the older conception that slaves had little or no role in shaping their lives in the colonial world. Examples of this newer line of reasoning include Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint* (Chapel Hill, 1998), and Mechel Sobel, *The World They Made Together* (Charlottesville, 1987).
3. Kenneth Kiple, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 58-67.
4. Kiple, p. 67; Sidney W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago, 1974), pp. 181-188.
5. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, p. 181; Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* (Bloomington, 1990), pp. 60-65.
6. William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, Vol. 2. (London, 1790), pp. 129-130, 151, 187.
7. John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1823), p. 267; Carl O. Sauer, "Economic Prospects of the Caribbean," in *The Caribbean: Its Economy*, A. C. Wilgus (ed.) (Gainesville, 1954), p. 21.
8. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, pp. 183-187; Bush, p. 65.
9. Morgan, pp. 134-144.

OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER & THE AMERICAN CENTURY

by Randy K. Schwartz

“I don’t think so much of these Oysters Rockefeller. I don’t see why we didn’t order tomato soup instead.”

“Well, about a million other people like them, even if you don’t. Presidents and folks like that too! I give up, trying to suit you. Tomato soup, my eye! Who wants to eat tomato soup in New Orleans?”

This is the opening scene of *Dinner at Antoine’s*, a 1948 novel by Frances Parkinson Keyes. The words have seemingly been snatched at random from the hubbub of restaurant banter. Yet they are not as haphazard as they at first appear. Out of a whole menu of possibilities, Keyes has zeroed in on the dish that conveys a tone of swanky sophistication. Indeed, in the century since its creation at Antoine’s, Oysters Rockefeller has been perhaps the leading symbol of opulence in American gastronomy.

By 1899, chef Jules Alciatore of New Orleans had come to own the famous eatery founded by his father Antoine. That was the year in which he took three dozen raw oysters still in their half-shells, lined them up on a bed of rock salt in a large pan, and baked them at 450° F. just until their edges began to curl, about five minutes. After pulling them from the oven, he used a pastry bag to squeeze onto each oyster some green sauce that he had fashioned from finely diced parsley, green onions, raw spinach (some say the original used watercress instead of spinach), plenty of butter and finely ground breadcrumbs, and a few drops each of absinthe and Tabasco® sauce. A scant five more minutes in the oven and he was done. The result seemed so rich that Alciatore whimsically dubbed it *huitres en coquille à la Rockefeller*, after the richest man in America.

In thinking about Oysters Rockefeller and the circumstances of its invention, I have been struck by three great ironies. The first is that John D. Rockefeller, after whom the zestful appetizer is named, was in fact a fellow of rather dull tastes. Conservative in instinct and hostile to alcohol, there is little doubt that the man who built the Standard Oil Trust by ruthlessly devouring his rivals would not have so much as nibbled at this colorful dish. Whatever else one might say about the appetites of this Cleveland resident, his bland preferences in food and other

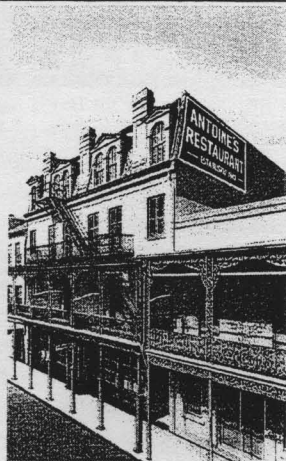
matters have, alas, typified some of the cultural history of our American heartland.

There is every indication that in creating Oysters Rockefeller, chef Alciatore was inspired less by Rockefeller himself than by another celebrity of the time: Theodore Roosevelt, the very man who—and here is the second irony—later broke up the Rockefeller conglomerate. As an Asst. Secretary of the Navy he had hungered for Spanish and other colonial possessions, and in 1898 became an instant national hero with his victorious charge up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. New Orleans had been the last stop before his Rough Rider cavalry of over 900 volunteer cowboys and ranchers invaded the island, launching the war that made the U.S. a world power. With its hero associated in the public mind with Oyster Bay (the oyster-fishing cove on Long Island where T.R.’s famed Sagamore Hill estate was situated), Oysters Rockefeller was the perfect dish to usher in the American Century.

In its conquering war hero the nation had found a man of real appetites, imperial and otherwise. We learn, for example, that Teddy enjoyed grits and other Southern fare at Sagamore Hill, which served as his “summer White House” during a presidency of big-stick diplomacy and trust-busting (1901-09). I have no evidence that T.R. ever sampled Oysters Rockefeller at Antoine’s, although his distant relative F.D.R. famously did so during his own presidency years later. When T.R. revisited the Crescent City in 1905—the cheering outside City Hall so deafening that all of the speeches had to be scrapped—he stayed at the St. Charles Hotel, and across town the Grunewald (owned by Cajun gentleman Seymour Weiss, its restaurant would later invent the Sazerac Cocktail) was renamed The Roosevelt Hotel in Teddy’s honor. In 1907, the President returned as a guest of pepper king John McIlhenny and his friends, stalking black bear in the canebrakes of northern Louisiana; their party killed and devoured three bears, six deer, a turkey, a possum and a dozen squirrels.

Clearly a special bond had developed between Roosevelt, the dyed-in-the-wool Yankee, and New Orleans, “the only foreign city in America.” Which brings us to the third irony, the most delicious one of all: where the dish launching the American Century could just as easily have been some dull Anglo-Saxon classic—corned beef and cabbage, perhaps—it turned out to be a delicately spicy appetizer from the Deep South. I submit that Oysters Rockefeller exemplifies the creolization (or to be provocative, *mongrelization*)

Antoine's Restaurant in the French Quarter of New Orleans, where Oysters Rockefeller was first created in 1899. Founded as a boarding house in 1840 by an immigrant French chef, the restaurant moved in 1876 to its current location at 713 St. Louis Street.



that has shaped American cuisine at its finest.

The ingredients selected by chef Alciatore are a study in the varied influences that make up Creole (here we need a capital "C") cookery. The sauce base, for instance, with its butter and breadcrumbs, greens and onions, reflects the classical French training of the Alciatore family. Jules' father Antoine was an immigrant chef from Marseilles who had started a boarding house in the French Quarter in 1840, catering to traveling artists and opera singers. Using French coal-fired ranges (still the cooking medium today), he had created such dishes as Beef Robespierre and Chicken Rochambeau, and reproduced the fried potato puffs invented for King Louis XVI in the years before the French Revolution. Eventually he relocated his popular establishment to larger premises down the street. His son Jules was dispatched to Paris, Strasbourg and Marseilles to study cooking before taking the reins of the restaurant himself.

Turning to other ingredients, Tabasco® sauce had been marketed since 1868 to "selected wholesalers" in the South by the McIlhenny-Avery family, mostly for use on shellfish and other seafood. It was made from chilies harvested by Black laborers on a plantation in Bayou Petite Anse, now Avery Island; the first peppers had been transported there by a U.S. soldier returning from the war against Mexico in 1848. Absinthe, the bitter green French liqueur distilled from wormwood, was also immensely popular in New Orleans; Cayetano Ferrer, barkeep in a Spanish-owned pub on Bourbon Street, had invented the Absinthe Frappe in 1874, and the dangerous spirit would not be outlawed until 1912. As for rock salt, the first mined in the U.S. came from Avery Island, itself a giant salt dome. Finally, Louisiana oysters were an original product of the Indians of the region, who had also learned how to smoke them for trade purposes. By the Civil War, de-

scendants of Acadian and Croatian immigrants were harvesting the oysters from marshes using special tongs; their catches swelled with the artificial introduction of oyster beds in the 1880s.

With Jules in charge of the restaurant, Antoine's grew less stuffy and began to cater to Mardi Gras carnival krewes, the exclusive social clubs of this colorful city. His rich oyster appetizer of 1899 also allowed the chef to make an emphatic contrast with the hoi-polloi popularity of Po' Boy and muffuletta sandwiches. The former had been invented just a few years earlier (1895) to satisfy hungry Black beggars at coffee stalls in the French Market, where Mme. Bégué cut several slits in a loaf of bread and stuffed them with fried oysters and whatever other scraps were at hand—French sausage, bacon, tomato, fried eggs with chili sauce. The muffuletta, a big round sandwich of sliced meats and cheeses dressed with a salad of olives or other pickled vegetables, is said to have been invented a few blocks away at the Central Grocery, near the waterfront. It reflects the influence of Italian immigrants—arriving in New Orleans following the Civil War—as does the use of tomato sauces, pastas, and other cooking ingredients now considered staples in the Creole mix.

In the decades following his invention of Oysters Rockefeller, Jules Alciatore created many more signature dishes at Antoine's. On a 1998 visit I selected his exquisite lamb dish *Noisettes d'agneau Alciatore* from a menu that had not been changed in more than 50 years. Also listed were such house specialties as *Filet de pompano en papillotte*, created circa 1910 for a banquet honoring French hot-air balloonist Joseph Montgolfier, in which the fish is cooked in a paper bag that inflates as it is heated; and *Huîtres Foch*, another patriotic French creation from 1921 honoring guest Ferdinand Foch—the general whose victories against Germany had returned Strasbourg and other parts of Alsace and Lorraine to France after WW1—in which toast is spread with Alsatian *foie gras* (as Jules had once served to German emperor Bismarck during the apprenticeship in Strasbourg), heaped with fried oysters, and symbolically smothered with Madeira sauce.

There is something in America that wants to grind up all of these diverse peoples and cultures, hurl them into one big melting pot, and reduce them to a homogeneous mass. Horrified by immigration levels in 1907, President Roosevelt thundered: "There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American

continued on page 11

MORSELS & TIDBITS

Clearly, word must have leaked out about our successful Shakespeare Holiday Feast last December: the **Detroit Institute of Arts** scheduled a series of Elizabethan England Wassail Feasts as fundraisers this December. In recreating the Royal Winter Court, a sumptuous fare (with vegetarian option) will be served to prepaid guests in the Great Hall, decked out with winter finery, dancers, jugglers, acrobats and musicians.

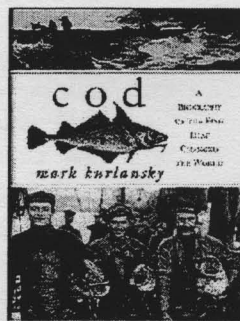
On Nov. 4, our founding members **Jan and Dan Longone** lectured on the evolution of American food and drink to participants at a "Meal of the Centuries," held inside A Taste of History Restaurant at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, MI. Their talks accompanied a family-style historical dinner, including a Southern Maryland Stuffed Ham prepared from a 300-year-old recipe. Earlier in the clear, moonlit evening, the 100 guests (including 11 CHAA members) were conveyed by horse-drawn carriages to the festively decorated Susquehanna Plantation, Thomas Edison Homestead and other old Village homes, where docents in period costumes prepared full meals on original equipment.

The Williamsburg Institute, part of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, will be sponsoring a symposium "The Art of 18th-Century Cooking: From Farm to Hearth to Table" on Jan. 20-22, 2000. Lectures, demonstrations, and behind-the-scenes tours of historic kitchens and dining rooms are included. For information, contact the Institute at P. O. Box 1776, Williamsburg VA 23187, or 757-220-7182 or tengle@cwf.org

CHAA member **Lisa Gaynier** and her mother **Shirley Tong Parola** have written a cookbook memoir, *Remembering Diamond Head, Remembering Hawai'i* (Ann Arbor: Diamond Hawai'i Press, 1999; \$15.95 paper). In its 250 recipes—from Pineapple Macadamia Nut Waffles to Mu Shu Pork and Mochi Chicken—readers can trace the melding of diverse immigrant traditions into what has been dubbed "east-west fusion cuisine." Much of the material is drawn from their former Diamond Head Café, a popular Pacific Rim-style eatery in Kerrytown. Extensive commentaries provide advice on selecting and preserving ingredients, as well as stories from the café and other reminiscences of this Islands family.

Proving that books on coffee can be more than mere coffee-table books, three serious histories of the brew were published in 1999. Vermont business writer **Mark Pendergrast** has followed up his *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola* (1993) with *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999; \$27.50 cloth, 520 pp.). The volume, which garnered him an interview on the Aug. 29 edition of C-SPAN's "Booknotes," covers such topics as the origins of coffee in Ethiopia and Yemen; the introduction of the beverage to Europe; how the Arab monopoly was broken; slave cultivation of the beans on tropical plantations in Central and South America, the East and West Indies, and Africa; the battles of the great coffee-roasting barons for

market share; the turn-of-the-century inventions of instant coffee (Guatemala) and decaffeinated coffee (Germany); the impact of coffee prices on U.S. relations in Latin America; the changing image of coffee in 20th Century America; and the rise of specialty shops like Peet's and Starbucks. Of particular interest to Michigan readers is the discussion of Battle Creek cereal pioneer C. W. Post, whose vilification campaign against coffee and promotion of Postum as an alternative first propelled him to fame. Also published this year were *The Coffee Book: Anatomy of an Industry from Crop to the Last Drop* (New Press; 196 pages, \$14.95 paper) by **Gregory Dicum** and **Nina Luttinger**, and *Coffee: The Epic of a Commodity* (Burford Books; 320 pp., \$18.95 paper) by **Heinrich Eduard Jacob**, co-author with **Lynn Alley** of the earlier *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* (1997).



Mark Kurlansky has written a charming world history of cod fishing and cod's role in the human diet. His *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (London: Penguin Books, 1997; 294 pp., \$11.95 paper) was named one of the 25 Best Books of the Year by the New York Public

Library. It discusses salting and other preservation techniques among the ancient Basques and Vikings; the impetus of cod fishing in the European exploration of North America; the *morue* and *scrod* of New France and New England; the introduction of new technologies for netting, filleting and freezing the fish; and the "Cod Wars" of the 1970s pitting the commercial fleets of England and Iceland against each other. Dozens of historical recipes are included. Kurlansky, himself once a fishing fleet worker, writes a column for *Food and Wine* magazine.

Speaking of *Food and Wine*, **Sally Schneider's** article "Balsamic and Beyond" in the Nov. 1999 issue pays tribute to one of our members. "When it comes to deciphering the arcana of vinegar," she begins her column, "I can think of no one I trust more than **Ari Weinzwieg**." Schneider cites Ari's book *Zingerman's Guide to Good Vinegar* (1996) as "one of the best expositions I've read on the subject." In 1998, Ari and his crew aboard ZingTrain—the deli's annual autumn small-group food tour of a selected corner of Europe—were able to examine balsamic vinegar production at an *acetaia* in Scandiano, outside Modena, Italy. Ari's 1999 ZingTrain recently returned from Ireland.

Junk-meat junkies have had several morsels to chew on recently. **Donald Dale Jackson's** article "Hot Dogs Are Us" (*Smithsonian* June 1999, pp. 104-112) is a brief history with some nice photos—from the Nathan's stand on Coney Island to a uniformed Fidel Castro chomping on a red hot. **Rick Sebak's** documentary "A Hot Dog Program," produced for WQED/Pittsburgh, was broadcast by PBS in late June just in

time for Independence Day. In his profile of hot dog eateries, from The Varsity in Atlanta to M. A.'s Gourmet Dogs in Anchorage, perhaps most striking was the contrast between the craving for simplicity (emblematic of New York dog purists) and the super-loaded ethos (reaching its apogee in Chicago). In *Selling 'em by the Sack: White Castle and the Creation of American Food* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997; 199 pp., \$24.95 cloth), author **David Gerard Hogan** carefully traces the evolution of a corporate empire from its birth one day in March 1921, when real es-



tate agent Billy Ingram and chef Walter Anderson began serving spatula-flattened burgers to customers at five counter stools in a small cement-block building in Wichita, KS—this at a time when ground meat was still widely held in ill repute. In Hogan's view, White Castle

played a dual historic role: "As the first purveyor of the hamburger in a systematic or concerted manner and as the originator of the modern fast-food 'carryout' concept, Ingram created the national institutions of both the fast-food industry and the first really distinctive American cuisine."

Carolyn Wyman's new *SPAM: A Biography* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1999, 135 pp., \$15 paper) tells us just about all that we might care to know regarding this amalgam of pork shoulder, ham, salt and other ingredients. As the cover blurb of this illustration-packed book puts it, "SPAM has led a long and successful (shelf) life..." and indeed, we learn inside about its introduction back in 1937 by Hormel of Austin, Minn., about its promotion as a health food, its important role in WW2, its immense popularity in Hawai'i, and a trove of other facts, recipes and memorabilia. Wyman, a staff writer with the *New Haven Register*, was earlier the author of *The Kitchen Sink Cookbook*.

OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER (continued from page 9)

at all. We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house. We must have but one flag. We must also have but one language. That must be the language of the Declaration of Independence, of Washington's Farewell address, of Lincoln's Gettysburg speech and second inaugural."

Dreams of forced assimilation have been painted in strokes less crude than these but, blessedly, most such dreams have failed to be realized. The French-speaking Cajuns, for example, are described by ethnohistorian James H. Dormon as a people who are indelibly American despite—perhaps *because* of—the fact that their experience has rendered them unique. Our lives and our palates today owe so much to these distinctive "foreigners" and their "polyglot boarding houses." Without them, it is certain that America's tastes would be purer—the sort of bland purity that appealed to John D. Rockefeller.

HOSPITALITY ABOUNDS AT CHAA SOUTHERN PICNIC



Some two dozen members and friends of the Culinary Historians participated in the 13th annual Summer Picnic on Sunday, July 25, which focused on a Southern Country theme this year. To help us plan the event, member Jan Longone compiled a bibliography, and also distributed copies of a detailed description of victuals at a traditional "bran dance," taken from Martha McCulloch-Williams' *Dishes and Beverages of the Old South* (1913). Guests prepared and ate foods that might have been served at such a gathering—and prepared their minds for the written exam (euphemistically a "quiz") that closed the event. We thank members Marion and Nick Holt for their Southern-style hospitality in hosting the picnic in and around their countrified home.

Members Julie and Robert Lewis brought the central dish, a cured country ham from Versailles, Kentucky, which they accompanied with beaten biscuits and a bluegrass-style tomato aspic. Among the other foods served were pickles of oysters, beets, okra, and peaches; apple chutney; corn pudding; buttermilk corn muffins; peanut soup; hoppin' john; baked chicken; a vegetarian version of Brunswick stew; Mississippi Mud cake; peach-pecan pie; and homemade vanilla and lemon ice creams.

A Southern country picnic can be a culture shock and a learning experience for those of us from the urban Midwest. Member Margot Michael, who baked a delicious hominy and chicken cheese casserole from *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking* (1987), commented later: "That casserole was my first experience with hominy! When I opened the can I was expecting to see something like polenta, and was very surprised to see kernels of corn. I must say, the aroma reminded me very much of a fresh corn tortilla."

It was the American Indians who first taught Southern colonists not only how to grow native corn but how to use ashes and lime to hull and whiten the kernels, producing "hominy." Tim Warren, in his recent article "True Grits" (*Smithsonian* Oct. 1999), writes that the word itself might derive from the Algonquian *ustatahamen*, while others have suggested *appuminneonash* or *rockahominie*. Eventually, the newcomers substituted diluted lye for the lime. Captain John Smith in Virginia described the settlers pounding hominy with a wooden mortar to make grits, writing that "their servants commonly feed upon Milke Homini, which is bruized Indian come pounded, and boiled thicke, and milke for the sauce" (1629). Emeritus Prof. Sam Bowers Hilliard of Louisiana State University has found that hominy grits were not a widespread staple in the South until Civil War days, when they began to rival cornbread in popularity.

CHAA CALENDAR

December 5 - American Food in the
Twentieth Century: Decade by Decade
Holiday Participatory Dinner

January 16 - Moroccan Foodways
Speaker: Fran Lyman, Peace Corps
Volunteer

February 20 - Tour of Katherine's Catering
Speaker: Katherine Farrell, Owner

March 19 - American Spoon Foods®
Speaker: Justin Rashid, Owner

April 16 - *Seasoning Savvy*
Speaker: Alice Arndt, author

May 21 - Title to be announced
Speaker: Ari Weinzwieg, co-owner,
Zingerman's Delicatessen

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Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

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First Class