FROM THE PAST

In researching information on Mary Lincoln, first principal of the Boston Cooking School and author of the seminal Boston Cook Book (1884), I came across the following three items in The American Kitchen Magazine of March, 1901.

How Italians Live So Cheaply

The cheap way in which Italian laborers, pushcart men and others of that class live, has very much impressed a resident of Brooklyn, whose fad it has been recently to poke around in odd places in this city and its vicinity, says the New York Times.

"I was in Newark a week or two ago," said he, "when a friend of mine pointed out a number of Italians who were buying small baskets of tomatoes in large quantities. They cost fifteen cents each. I expressed wonder at what they were going to do with so many, whereupon my friend replied that he would show me. He led me to the backyard of a house, where a number of Italians live, and there I found the baskets piled high. Near by was a receptacle which looked like a section of a beer vat. It had been sawed in two. The Italians who were handling the tomatoes cut them up into small pieces and threw them into the vat. Then they took crushers made from blocks of wood, with handles, and pounded those tomatoes into a pulp.

"My curiosity increased with every plunge of the crushers and the Italians looked at me with quiet amusement. Presently they stirred some cornmeal in the mass and then some flour until the stuff became a pulp. The next step was to throw this on what bakers would call a molding trough and knead it, adding enough flour to make it a stiff pulp. The less said about the state of their hands the better, but that is a trivial matter. Then the mixture was molded into little pats about the size of a fishcake. These were placed on boards and taken to various roofs to dry. In a short time they become as hard as brickbats and can be used as missiles in case of emergency.

"What do you do with those things?" I asked one of the Italians. "What-a we do?" he answered, "We mak'-a da summer food 'n da winter food."

"Each cake, I learned after much questioning, will make enough soup for six men. This, with a little black bread, constitutes a meal for many of those fellows. One can see how cheaply they can live and still eat food that is quite nutritious. These cakes are peddled to their fellow-countrymen by some of the Italians and sold at a ridiculously small price. When I had
two hours' investigation the saying came to me with greater force than ever that 'one-half the world does not know how the other half lives.'"

Note: This seemed particularly timely because of Andy Smith's talk about tomatoes at the CHAA meeting in September.

Anecdote on Vegetarianism

Debates on the value of a vegetarian diet go back a long way in American history, as illustrated by the following anecdote.

"I think," said A. Bronson Alcott, in one of his conversations, "when a man lives on beef, he becomes something like an ox. If he eats mutton, he begins to look sheepish; and, if he feeds on pork, may he not grow swinish?" "That may be," said Dr. Walker of Cambridge, who was one of the listeners. "But, when a man lives on nothing but vegetables, I think he is apt to be pretty small potatoes."

Clever, hyperbolic food advertisements are nothing new:

![Image of a humorous advertisement for cookies with animals dressed as humans]

The research on Mary Lincoln was for the introduction to a facsimile edition of the Boston Cook Book, soon to be published by Dover Press. This will be the third in a series of milestones of American culinary history to be issued by Dover. The others are The First American Cookbook, a facsimile of Amelia Simmons' American Cookery, (1796), with a fine introduction by Mary Tolfort Wilson, and The Virginia Housewife, a facsimile of the earliest southern cookbook (first published in 1824, 1860 edition), with an introduction by Jan Longone.

Jan Longone

Note: What would the 20th say to the 21st Century?
THE INQUISITIVE CULINARY HISTORIAN, CONTINUED

The subject was curry. I was with a group of people I didn't know (traveling again, but that's another story) and I heard someone say, "Zelma knows curry," and Zelma replied that she uses four pounds of curry powder a year—at least!—and that it's blended for her specially. One pays attention to such a statement. So I made sure to have time to talk to her later.

She is Zelma McPherson Dorroh, now of Colorado but raised on the Indian Ocean side of South Africa, in Durban. What I wanted to know was how Indian cooking got to be so prevalent in South Africa.

It came with a wave of immigrants in the latter half of the nineteenth century, indentured laborers working on the Natal sugar plantations, and commercial traders. Today, South Africans of Indian descent make up a large part of the population of Natal.

Zelma's father's business was in the city but the family lived on a large plot of land outside of town, with a kitchen garden and orchards. All vegetables and most fruits—pawpaw, avocado, mangoes, guava, grenadilla (passion fruit)—were home grown. Household help were both native and Indian and the cook was an East Indian woman whose family had been in South Africa since the last century. Rice was a staple and potatoes were rare on the table, sometimes served baked on Sundays, with chicken or lamb, but not the common starch they have been for a long time in this country. Meats were pork, beef, lamb and sausages; there was often braai-olie (broiled meat), cooked in a pit with a wood or coal fire. And curry meals were served at least once a week—a tradition Zelma continues, many years later, with the enthusiastic approval of her American husband.

Naturally I asked for recipes. Headling the list was

Curried Fruit:

Choose from fresh mango, peaches, pineapple, nectarine, dried apricots and golden raisins. Cover with water and add curry powder to taste (or 1-2 tablespoons to one pound of fruit.) Add sugar to taste and simmer for one hour or until fruit is very soft but not mushy. Use as a condiment or add rice and chopped fresh peaches and serve cold.

Cold Rice Salad:

Mix cooked rice with chopped green pepper, onion, uncooked frozen peas and curry powder to taste. Add chopped mango or peaches.

Meat Curry:

Brown 2 lb. cubed beef in butter in a heavy pot with a tight lid. Remove. Add chopped onion and brown. Return meat to pot, add salt, 4 heaping tablespoons curry powder, and beef stock to cover. Simmer at least 2 hours (or until meat is tender.) Add 1 medium-sized eggplant, unpeeled and cut into cubes, bring back to a simmer and return lid for 1 hour more. Thicken with corn starch and serve over yellow rice (turmeric added to rice water, 1 tablespoon to 1 cup rice.)

The curry Zelma uses now is supplied by the Evergreen Herb Company of Battleground, Indiana, and is the blend called "Muchi" and is very hot, she says.

Ann Woodward
MARKET SNACKS

On many corners of Rogers Park in Chicago, you'll pass handmade food stalls on wheels that serve as portable kitchens for some very interesting street foods much loved by the Hispanic population (and anyone else smart enough to be a devotee). Most of the stands sell elotes. These are warm ears of corn, stuck on a stick, drizzled with wavy lines of liquid margarine, slathered with mayonnaise and, finally, blanketed with grated parmesan cheese. Dashes of chili powder add color and the whole is topped off with squeezes of lime juice. It's scrumptious, and I didn't make this up.

The corn is kept hot in insulated plastic chests, the toppings are lined up around highly personalized work spaces on top of the carts, and each order is prepared with "in the moment" thoroughness. These stalls are usually positioned close to the apartment house of the elotes chef. However, I have seen some entrepreneurs with franchised stands who deliver hot corn to their various business partners, so that the chefs don't need to lose one single customer for lack of hot corn. Competition is so tough that on some of the side streets, vendors set up shop next to stop signs, which enables the customer to have "take-away elotes" slipped through their car window on the journey home. Some stands display Mexican candies: candied sweet potatoes, cocados (coconut candies), cajeta (sweetened caramelized goat milk), and sesame sticks, as well as modern, bizarre and colorful plastic tubes of sugared water. Bags of cotton candy and pork rinds hang from poles and swirl around when the breezes cruise the streets-very festive and eye-catching.

Artistry and individuality are important elements in the appearance of these food havens.

Other tidbits available from some of these movable carts are cucumbers-peeled, sliced lengthwise, sprinkled with chili powder, blessed with a final filip of lime juice and stood at parade rest in a styrofoam cup. Some vendors offer the whole cucumber on a stick. Not to your taste? Then you can choose cups filled with celery, carrots, and cucumbers with the proverbial chili powder and lime juice; fruit cups brimming with pineapple, grapes and peach slices; or maybe a mango on a stick, looking like an English rose. To achieve this striking edible, the whole mango is impaled and peeled with a great flourish by the master carver. Then while the mango is twirled, diagonal cuts by the artist transform this fruit into a "rose in bloom". Once you have observed the consumption of a mango on a stick, you'll see that this snack keeps the napkin industry going strong.

For those who are thirsty, big barrel-shaped jars holding tamarind water, which is similar to lemonade, are on the counters of some of the stalls. Other beverages might be orchata (sweetened rice water, with vanilla and cinnamon), atole (flavored cornstarch water) or melon water (cantaloupe seeds and pulp, ground, strained, sweetened, mixed with water and transformed into a gentle throat soother.)

These wondrous noshes are excellent for appetizers on the way home after an exhausting subway or bus trip, and many a child has been saved from starvation by a purchase from these mobile diners. How do you find these market foods? Simple. Follow the gnawed corncobs on sticks that act as an archaeological trail radiating from each miniature zocalo on wheels.

Evelyn J. Thompson Culinary Historian, Chicago Author copyright 1995
AGED GARLIC EXTRACT

The use of garlic as medicine has ancient roots in world-wide folk traditions. The old herbals of Egypt, Rome, India and China prescribe it for everything from heart problems to insect bites and it has long been thought to have beneficial properties as a preserver and restorer of health and youth. More recently, garlic has been used as a treatment for tuberculosis, and, according to a press release from Dr. Herbert Pierson, it is presently being tested as a cancer preventive, immune stimulator, detoxifier, and to help reduce cholesterol.

But the chemical constituents in raw garlic that are beneficial for health are changed or destroyed by even the very simple processes of preparing garlic as food. If you slice it, chop it or grind it there are chemical reactions within the garlic that result in completely different chemical constituents from those which were originally in the whole raw garlic cloves. Cooking it is even worse. True, ground or sliced garlic applied directly to a wound, may prevent or cure infection. But for internal use, a process of preservation is needed.

This process, currently being extensively tested in both laboratory and clinical trials, has produced Aged Garlic Extract (AGE). Fresh raw garlic is extracted with dilute alcohol and aged in the absence of oxygen for twenty months. The resulting product is odor-reduced, stable, and safe as a daily tonic. Already, clinical study had shown decided benefits when AGE is used as a supplement for reducing toxic side effects of some drugs.

All this may be bad news for those of us who are used to excusing our generous inclusion of the odoriferous bulb in every possible dish by claiming that it is good for us, by saying that if we chop it raw it is even better for us. Frankly, I’m disappointed. I was hoping for Americans so liberated, like the Europeans, that everyone could enjoy the marvellous flavor of garlic without worrying about social consequences, because everyone else would be taking it for their health.

Instead, it seems we will have a completely uninteresting but proven medicine. We will see our raffish old friend bottled, pilled and capsuled, prescribed and grimaced at, sent on its way to do us good, no longer the naughty lure to the table, the subtle complexity we dare to love, the peasant fragrance in our haute-est cuisine.

Ann Woodward

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Calendar
August - October 1996:

American Cookery: The Bicentennial 1796-1996

1996 marks the 200th birthday of the first American cookbook, Amelia Simmons’ American Cookery (1796), and the 100th birthday of the first edition of Fannie Farmer’s Boston Cooking-School Cookbook (1896). To celebrate these anniversaries, Clements Library at the University of Michigan will host an exhibition with Jan Longone serving as visiting curator.
January 21—Lucy Seligman: Cuisine of Umbria

February 18—Mila Simmons & Sherry Sundling: Chilean Food and Life

March 17—Zoe Slagle: Woman: Always a Cook, Finally a Chef

Washtenaw County Extension Service Building, 4133 Washtenaw Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan
Time 7:00 - 9:00 pm (unless otherwise noted)

CHAA Newsletter
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Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

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