Voices From the Past

So many tidbits of culinary history remain generally hidden. Most of us would not have known that a Chinese colony, engaged in shrimp drying, existed near the mouth of the Mississippi River close to New Orleans, Louisiana, shortly after the Civil War. The following article appeared in The Preservation of Fishery Products for Food, by Charles H. Stevenson (Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission 1898).

(A continuation of this article, focusing on the method of drying shrimp practiced by the Chinese at San Francisco, will appear in our next issue.)

Chinese Shrimp and Fish Drying.

In the Barataria region in Louisiana, along the shores of San Francisco Bay in California, and at other points on the Pacific coast, there are camps of Chinamen whose principal occupation is the drying of shrimp and fish, mainly for Oriental markets. Their output also includes miscellaneous varieties of fish, oysters, squid, etc., the aggregate annual product amounting to about $100,000 in value.

The drying of shrimp was begun in Louisiana in 1873 by Chin Kee, whose plant was located on the western bank of the Mississippi River opposite New Orleans. The following season he moved to Bayou Dupont, near the head of Grand Lake, about 80 miles below New Orleans. In 1880 a second establishment or “platform” was built near Bayou Cabanage. A third platform was built in 1885 at Bayou Andre. The business continued fairly prosperous until 1893, when the severe storm in October completely destroyed the Bayou Andre platform and camps and severely damaged the other two platforms. The latter, however, were immediately repaired, and in 1897 another platform was erected about a mile above Cabanage.

These shrimp-drying establishments consist of a large platform, on which shrimp are dried, the necessary furnaces and kettles for boiling, warehouses, living apartments, storehouses, wharfage, apparatus, etc. The platforms range in area from 25,000 to 80,000 square feet, and are substantially built of pine boards 1 inch thick with close joints. The number of employees at each establishment ranges from 6 to 12.

Prior to 1886 the shrimp were boiled in kettles over open fires, but since that date greater neatness and economy of fuel have been secured by the use of a grate with a chimney, somewhat similar to the old form of sugar-boiling. The kettles over the grates are 5 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 18 inches deep, with a division in the center.

The shrimp are received from the fishermen each day, thus insuring their freshness and rendering the use of ice unnecessary. Prior to 1888 the price paid was 80 cents per basket, containing about 84 pounds; but since that date the price has been uniformly 65 cents per basket.
When measured and received from the boats, the shrimp are rinsed and placed with water and the necessary quantity of salt in the kettles, each kettle holding about 5 baskets of shrimp. About 4 or 5 pounds of salt are used for boiling 100 pounds of shrimp, Liverpool salt being preferred but coarse American salt is also used.

The brackish lake water suffices for cooking, and it is used for several successive boilings, additional water and salt being added as necessary. The shrimp are boiled for five or ten minutes, when the cover is removed and the shrimp stirred thoroughly with a paddle or other appliance. The cover is then replaced for 10 or 15 minutes longer, when the shrimp are removed with perforated skimmers or shovels and spread on the platform where they are exposed to the action of the sun, being turned and separated at intervals during the day and covered, when necessary to protect them from moisture, until the drying is completed, this usually requiring two or three days. When shrimp are coming in plentifully the boiling is frequently kept up all night, the boiled shrimp being placed in heaps on the platform and covered with canvas until morning. When thoroughly dry, the Chinesis, with clean shoes or moccasins, tread them for a time to detach the shells and heads from the main part of the flesh. These shells and light particles are fanned off by throwing the shrimp upward through the air, somewhat in the same style as that practiced with wheat, rice and other similar grains. The meats of the shrimp are then placed in sacks, beaten and thoroughly shaken to complete the breaking up and removal of the shells, after which they are again winnowed or passed through hand sifters, so as to remove all dust and particles of shells adhering to them. They are next made ready for shipment by placing them in flour barrels, containing about 200 pounds each, and are sent to the various markets. In packing, the shrimp should be graded, the whole bright meats being kept separate from those broken or discolored on account of rains during the process of curing.

Each basket of green shrimp yields about 9½ pounds of dried shrimp, which sells for about 14 cents per pound. The market is among Asiatic races almost exclusively. The great bulk is sent to San Francisco, but some are shipped to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Havana. From San Francisco the shrimp are sent to China, Japan, and throughout the west coast of the United States. The quantity dried during the past four or five years in Louisiana has been much less than previous to 1893, and the profits have greatly decreased, owing to competition with Mexican ports. (Yields decreased from a high of 319,000 pounds in 1888 to a low of 83,200 pounds in 1894. In 1897, the year of this article, the yield was 151,400 pounds.)

— Jan Longone
An Early Russian Cookbook

Member Cynthia Keesan is a translator of Russian and she sends notice of acquisition by the Ann Arbor Library of a new English version of Classic Russian Cooking, Elena Molokhovets’ "A Gift to Young Housewives." The translator is Joyce Toomre. (Publishing information at the end of this article.) The book came out in many revised editions from 1861 to 1917 and seems to equate with the Fannie Farmer books or with the Joy of Cooking. It took the author/translator ten years of research through some 4000 recipes to put together this final selection. There are scholarly notes and an extensive bibliography.

Russian domestic life and cooking in an age of plenty are represented here. Research has reached into European cookbooks, and into specialized Russian-English dictionaries, encyclopedias and other sources consulted for weights and measures, mushroom species, oven construction, and like minute difficulties.

The book is a treasure house for translators, writes Cynthia, and for anyone interested in upper-class pre-Soviet Russian life. For cooks, there are recipes: black currant wine, carrot pirog, capercaillie pate, apple kissey, lettuce stalk preserves with ginger, brain sausages, raisin vinegar, salted cucumbers in a pumpkin, caviar and buckwheat recipes in many versions, marinated crayfish tails, real monastery mead, dried cherries, pheasant soup with champagne, pureed oatmeal soup, and stuffed hazel grouse in aspic (made from one calf’s head, four calf’s feet, or two ox feet).

The book is published by Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies, Indiana University Press, 1992. The cost is $39.95 and it may be ordered by phone at 812-855-4203.

Editor’s Note: We find from another source that Dr. Joyce Toomre is co-founder of the Culinary Historians of Boston and that she will speak to the Houston Culinary Historians on Russian food and cookery in February, 1998.
Henry Supernaw: 
Lake Carrier 
Cook, 
1957-1972

A round town they call him Soupy and he used to cook on ships that carried cement on the Great Lakes. The nickname comes, though, not from his profession but from his name, a very uncommon one of French origin. We talk on my neighbor’s front porch. It is summer, a hot, breezy day in Charlevoix, and we have pink grapefruit juice to drink while he reminisces.

In the beginning, the boats stopped sailing in early December and stayed in port until the worst of the winter was over, late February maybe. So he would have Christmas at home with his wife and five children. Then the Coast Guard ice-breakers started keeping the water open and he was seldom home. His wife didn’t like it much, but it was a good way to save money.

The two ships he served on were both about 480 feet in length and carried crews of 28 men. He worked up to first cook, which meant that he planned and prepared all meals and did all the ordering. Word from management was “Feed ’em well, keep ’em happy” and so he had no limit on the food budget and they ate well. After the union came in, there was no separate menu for the officers’ mess and everyone ate the same food. The second cook, in addition to helping the first cook, did all the baking and took care of the officers. Two porters served, cleaned up, and washed dishes. There were two meals at each meal, also two fruits, and the men placed their orders, which Soupy filled and passed to the porters to serve. After the last order, he was free until time to start the next meal.

It is said to be a characteristic of sailors that they like what they are used to, and Soupy found that “they didn’t want any kind of chicken that had a name to it.” If something didn’t please, he heard about it right away. Just good plain food was what he cooked: prime roast on Saturdays, steak on Sundays, baked pork chops with dressing, oven-fried chicken, maybe a couple of turkeys, ham hocks with sauerkraut (but not
pork chops with sauerkraut), Swiss steak, meat loaf. Every morning he made a kettle of soup and that soup stayed on the stove 24 hours, cleaned up by the night watchman when the night crew was finished. He made bean, pea, beef vegetable (the favorite), beef barley, even, for some who liked it, a little clam chowder or oyster stew if he could get the oysters. No casseroles! even for lunch. Also no sandwiches, unless the weather was really hot. Garlic? Seldom. Curry? Laughable. Chili was about as spicy as it would get. It was, he says, food just like you'd serve at a lumber camp.

The second cook made bread, rolls, doughnuts, banana bread, and — best of all — pie. With ice cream. A couple of gallons of ice cream would do if that was on the menu alone, and if one man didn't take a whole half-gallon for himself and sit out on the deck to eat it all. The men worked hard. One skinny fellow who was particularly energetic would eat four T-bone steaks at a meal and never gained any weight. Some, though, joined up just for the food, he thinks, and became fat on ship cooking. The men were especially unchoosy in the spring, when they were anxious to "get the wrinkles out of their stomachs."

Ordering was done by ship-to-shore telephone and supplies would be delivered to the dock by local grocery stores. They did not use wholesalers. There were always plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, even in the small ports near Duluth — and everyone knows that Duluth is about the end of the world, on the Great Lakes. Holiday meals, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, meant two turkeys, six cornish hens, four or five ducks and all the trimmings.

His day started at five A.M., but there was free time between meals. For the night crew they stocked a special refrigerator and the men prepared their own food from this, sometimes cooking eggs. And there was always the hot soup.

So from Chicago to the far reaches of Lake Superior and points in between he cooked in all weathers. Of course I asked about storms. Only twice in all those years was he unable to use the gas range. If it was rough, they wet the tablecloths to keep the dishes from sliding. You could stand up there on the stern sometimes and see the ship twist and flex, rivets popping off like gunshot. Once he woke in the night to feel water hitting his face, put his feet into water on the floor of his cabin. The waves were coursing the length of the ship and invading his door, which opened onto the deck. It was the only time he was really scared. That night the Chief Engineer, who was a part-time minister, called loudly on the name of the Lord. But at times it was just so pretty along the shore and the water of Lake Superior can be so blue.

He left the lakes and worked for a time as a meat cutter, but he had a lot of trouble with his legs, after so many years on his feet, and finally retired. When he felt a little better, he drove a school bus, for twelve years. By now, though, at age eighty-two, it is hard to get around, with one artificial ankle and a replaced knee.

He lives alone here in his home town, his wife gone but only one daughter in another city. The other three daughters and his son are still in Charlevoix. In the summers he makes freezer jam, and his bread-and-butter pickle barely stays in the house long enough to cure, it is so popular with the people who are lucky enough to receive it as a gift. For himself, he uses the microwave oven, he buys frozen dinners.

Did he enjoy those years on the lakes? I ask. "Oh, yes. I always liked to cook." How about appreciation from the crews? He is too modest to go into that. Mostly in the form of no complaints, he says. "But everything he makes is good," says the neighbor. "Soup's a good cook."

I imagine that there are a lot of grateful former and present sailors who would agree with that.

— AW
“Squeamishness depends on cultural background.” Sound like our friend and occasional program quiz master Andy Smith? Yes. He is quoted extensively in a New York Times article by Eric Asimov about queer eating world-wide. “What’s wrong with eating eyeballs?” he goes on. “In Asian societies, eyeballs are considered common foods. If I were hungry, would I eat eyeballs? You bet I would!”

It seems to be all too easy to dig up items for an article like this, which proves its point by being a trial for a member of our society to read. Another quote from Andy is “What’s a lobster other than an insect, but slightly larger?”

There are further quotes: from Calvin W. Schwabe, who has written a book called “Unmentionable Cuisine,” which takes the thesis that the irrational rejection of exotic foods may be foolish, given the possibility of dire famine some time in the future; and from Paul Rozin, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, who studies human choices. He has found that foods that disgust are almost all animal products, so why do we object to a few clean, vegetarian caterpillars?

The article ends by saying that “[p]erhaps examining the food on the plate too closely is something we should all avoid.”

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Wasabi

Consider wasabi—the knob of green paste you get beside your Japanese tempura or sashimi. We see tiny cans of it in the Asian markets. And inside those cans is a powder or a paste, from which we can mix our own hot condiment. But fresh is better. An article in the Wall Street Journal by Seattle food writer Melissa A. Trainer describes efforts to grow it in Washington state.

Wasabi is a perennial plant that requires special growing conditions. It took years of experimentation to develop just the right combination of shade and water environment for imported Japanese plants to flourish. Even in Japan, the plant grows only in certain regions.

The “pioneering American professor” who undertook this project and saw it through is Thomas Lumpkin, chairman of the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at Washington State University in Pullman. There is now a nursery of more than 20 varieties of wasabi in Puyallup. He first became interested while stationed in Japan during the Vietnam War and began his study twenty years later, after he had become an agronomist.

The advantages of fresh as opposed to dry or paste are, of course, taste and texture. Fresh wasabi is said to have nuanced and complex flavor. It is expensive, selling for up to $85 a pound, and can be a lucrative crop for small American farmers. After extensive research and tastings in Japan, and with the help of various graduate students, Mr. Lumpkin (he is not referred to as Professor) has succeeded in establishing wasabi in this country. American enterprises are now supplying fresh wasabi to the Japanese market. It is sometimes sold in West Coast specialty markets but the supply is extremely limited.

Orders can be placed by phone: International Trade and Marketing Group — (408) 626-3901 from 9 am to 4 pm PDT. The next harvest will be in January.
from Randy Schwartz

FRANCE

Musee du Vin (Paris Wine Museum)

Rue des Eaux, 5 Square Dickens, Paris
Hours daily 10am-6pm

Not far from the Eiffel Tower is a 14th century abbey whose exhibits and wax models depict the history of winemaking. The tour also includes a wine tasting.

ITALY

Museo Storico degli Spaghetti (Spaghetti History Museum)

96 Via Garibaldi
Pontedassio, Liguria
tw. 0813/21651
Admission by appointment only

This museum documents the history of pasta making by the Agnesi family from the early 800's to the industry of today. Pasta making machines, presses, and other equipment are on display.

ENGLAND

Cider Museum

Pomona Place
Hereford
Hours: daily 10am-5:30pm from April to October; Monday - Saturday 1-5pm from November to March

Set in a medieval town in the idyllic valley of the Wye River near the Welsh border, this museum offers information about traditional cider production, along with a tasting.

JAPAN

Uwa Rice Museum

Uwajima
Hours: 9am-5pm, closed Mondays and the last day of each month

On the southern island of Shikoku, this museum's five rooms depict the history and varieties of rice cultivation. The library room also offers videos on the local history of farmland arrangement. Housed inside what was the local public elementary school between 1933 and 1988, the museum is a part of the Culture Village of Uwa, which has a unified admission charge.

Julia Child and Her Influence On American Cuisine

An extensive article in U. S. News & World Report from September 22 draws many contrasts between cooking ante- and post-Julia. Karen Lehrman credits Ms. Child with making this country sufficiently food-conscious that we now eat not only more interestingly but infinitely more discriminately.

But more than improving our diets, she gave us a new perspective on the activity of cooking, changing it from chore to art or at least interesting pastime. The instant success of Mastering the Art of French Cooking is attributed, in large part, to the careful instructions and abundance of detail, introducing us to a higher level of cooking with plenty of how-to (and why-to and what-to-go-with). The author of the article compares Julia's influence to that of Elvis and Kinsey in other fields.

As a TV personality, Julia never tried to be funny, she just was funny. And that worked for her because she let her mistakes show and the audience saw her as "the supreme antisnob," even though she was teaching that revered and mysterious French cuisine. "People look at me and say, "Well, if she can do it, I can do it,"" she says.

The occasion for the article seems to be the appearance of Noel Riley Finch's biography of Julia Child, Appetite for Life, which has just come out. This article is interesting enough to justify looking it up at the library, if you missed it. The biography itself would be even more so.
January 18 — Overcoming History: The Story of Michigan Wine Making  
Speaker: David Creighton

February 15 — The History of Vinegar  
Speaker: Ari Weinzweig

March 15 — Arab-American Foodways of Southeast Michigan  
Speakers: Yvonne and Bill Lockwood

April 19 — TBA

May 17 — Food Travels Around the World  
Speakers: Ned and Joann Chalat

Unitarian Church, 1917 Washtenaw Ave, Ann Arbor, Michigan  
Time 7:00 - 9:00 pm (unless otherwise noted)