

J.C. Forkner, the Smyrna Fig, and His Fig Gardens

By Georganne Brennan

J.C. FORKNER was a visionary developer in the early part of the 20th century who created a yeoman farmer's paradise out of twelve thousand acres of scrubby, hardpan, country in Central California between the young town of Fresno and the Sierra Foothills. Experienced in developing similar land elsewhere in the United States, he came West, looking for opportunity and discovered it. He could buy thousands of acres of parched land, subdivide them into 40 to 100 acre parcels, bring in water from the Sierras and market the parcels as the American dream of the era—that of owning a small farm. And to make his offer more enticing, he added another component, a farming company that would plant figs, cultivate, and market them for the owners. His project manifested the curious mix of capitalism, boosterism, and genuine enthusiasm for community that distinguished much of California's early land development

Forkner had a bent for taking land which had been used for grazing, and turning it into farmland by bringing in irrigation systems. He had honed his skills in the Midwest, Texas, and Southern California. He was not dismayed by the deserted block of ground near Fresno that was called "hog wallow" and "outlaw country." Rather, he was actually enticed by the uneven, rock-solid hardpan, desert land where



J.C. Forkner, second from left, and one of his many fig trees, 1917.

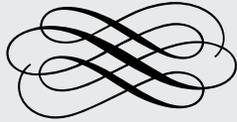
only spindly weeds and tumbleweed could grow. In 1910 Forkner took an option on 6,000 acres of the land, and spent the next year researching the land and its potential. Through drilling he discovered that trapped beneath the hardpan, which varied from several inches to several feet in thickness, was rich, loamy soil. He realized that if a plant's roots could reach through the thin upper layer of soil and through the hardpan to the rich, sandy soil below, and be irrigated, almost anything would grow there.

He proved to be right. Today, the San Joaquin Valley, of which Fresno is part, is one of California's richest agricultural areas. Heavily irrigated, it is planted with tens of thousands of acres of orchards, processing tomatoes, cotton, and wheat.

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FROM THE CHAIR

THOSE of you who use either our e-mail notices or our website, www.culinaryhistoriansny.org, to keep track of the dates and places of upcoming CHNY events undoubtedly have noticed a recent innovation: you can now purchase tickets on-line. CHNY has started using Brown Paper Tickets as a quick, nearly effortless way to sign up for all our events. In addition to being good for the environment and saving on postage, Brown Paper Tickets is the best way to guarantee seating at some of our most popular events, when attendance is limited because of the size of the host venue.

If you haven't already tried purchasing on-line, I urge you to check out www.brownpapertickets.com for our next event. And don't worry, if your plans change and you cannot make an event after registering, simply let us know before the event, so that we may open up your spot to last-minute requests; your ticket purchase can be applied to a future CHNY event simply by contacting the programming committee about the event you would like to attend. Please note that you must contact Carolyn Vaughan during normal

business hours in advance of the missed program at (212) 996-0644 or TFOX2@nyc.rr.com; we regret that we cannot issue credits after the program.

Our website remains unchanged, at least on the surface. But many changes lurk beneath, as this fall, a group of our more techno-savvy members headed by Holley Atkinson, with the help of Ken Ovitz, Kara Newman, and Carolyn Vaughan, worked furiously to find a host that now allows us to more easily update the website. We will continue to make the website more productive and flexible over the coming months, but here is a hearty thanks and deep debt of gratitude to all, especially Holley, for the tremendous effort.

Finally, the application period for the fourth annual \$1,000 Amelia Scholar's Grant to support research in culinary history is now open. We are looking forward to another strong group of proposals, which are due May 31. Further information and application forms can be accessed at <http://www.culinaryhistoriansny.org/amelia.html>.

2007 Amelia Scholar's Grant Proposal

CHNY's Amelia Scholar's Grant is a \$1,000 stipend that supports research in the field of culinary history. It is open to anyone, whether student or established scholar, and comes with only one string attached: the recipient must present the results of his or her research in a CHNY session during the academic year following the award of the grant. Membership in CHNY is not a prerequisite for application.

In June (date and location to be announced), Elizabeth Simms will present her findings into the culinary aspects of George Washington Carver's papers at Tuskegee University. To whet your appetite for this concluding session of the 2007–08 CHNY season, we thought we'd reproduce Simms's winning proposal and to share our enthusiasm for the high level of scholarship that applicants for the Amelia Scholar's Grant have demonstrated.

Applications for the 2008 Amelia Scholar's Grant are due May 31; please spread the word to anyone who might be interested. For further information, visit <http://www.culinaryhistoriansny.org/amelia.html>. —CK

FOR 45 years, until his death in 1943, George Washington Carver's Experiment Station at Tuskegee University issued 44 bulletins. At their core, these bulletins were concerned with agricultural matters of interests, but for the publications that dealt specifically with fruits and vegetables, Carver recognized the importance in presenting these products not just as food staples, but as culinary staples as well. These dual purposes can be immediately observed in such bulletin titles as *How to Grow the Cowpea and 40 Ways of Preparing it as a Table Delicacy* and

How to Grow the Tomato and 115 Ways to Prepare it for the Table.

His target audience was the Alabama rural black farming community in the counties surrounding the school. The bulletins were written in simple language in order to reach a largely uneducated population. Carver did much for agriculture, but I am particularly interested in his selection of recipes for the black home cook. Ingredients and preparation were simple but the dishes sound tempting: *Tomato Bisque*, *Tomatoes as Olives*,



They [Tomatoes] can be prepared in so many delicious ways that one can eat them every day of the week and not get tired of them.

—from *How to Grow the Tomato and 115 Ways to prepare it for the Table*



Sweet Potato Nuts, and *Sweet Potato Doughnuts*. It stands to reason that the recipes were specifically chosen to highlight the food that was being grown in the field, to offer tasteful cooking ideas, to make it more worthwhile to grow the sweet potato or the plum if there was a demand for them at the dinner table.

Carver's recipes were not entirely innovative (he does acknowledge the Department of Agriculture as a source), however because we know that the Experiment Station targeted a particular group of people, his culinary choices are that much more

interesting. Dishes are described as “delicious” and “quite fine.” Some, like *Tomato Chowder*, have many ingredients (tomatoes, sugar, peppers, spices, onion, vinegar, horseradish) while others, like the *Peanut Salad with Bananas*, have just a few (lettuce, bananas, peanuts, mayonnaise or salad dressing). I don't imagine that many of us would eat this particular peanut salad today, but for the poor black woman of the 1920s, the ingredients for this salad were on hand from the field, the farm, and the house garden. Before seeing this bulletin would she have made a salad composed of these ingredients? Maybe the salad served as a springboard for a more complex recipe—next time she could add chicken and other vegetables, or even more fruit, to make a heartier salad.

Could George Washington Carver's bulletins have been the first “cookbooks” for the black rural community? What was his selection process? Were the recipes used? Were they popular? Did they become integrated into the culinary tradition of these part? Carver is a part of culinary history, namely for his work on sweet potatoes, soybeans, and peanuts, but I would like to incorporate him into culinary history as a cookbook writer (of sorts) as well. Examining the bulletins and researching this time in history will lead me to better understand Carver's involvement with food. As I have not come across any specific material on the recipes contained within the bulletins, nor could the archivist of his papers as Tuskegee refer me to any secondary sources on this subject, I believe that this project will be innovative. Eventually I would like to publish my findings as an article that would potentially evolve into an introduction to a compilation of his recipes. —ELIZABETH SIMMS

Fig Garden

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J.C. Forkner had as his vision of a farming community, not diversified crops, or small truck farms, but rather one with a monoculture in which his farming company could make the most profit for the owners of the land and for the company. He visited with the preeminent agriculturist of his day, Professor E. J. Wickson at the University of California at Berkeley, who had worked extensively with Luther Burbank as well as many farmers up and down the state. Wickson had recently published a book on California agriculture which included a chapter on figs. Forkner read the book and had begun to think figs might be the answer for his proposed small farm colony. He learned that the sturdy fig trees thrived in hot dry climates like Fresno and that there was a growing market for figs since the mystery of how to grow the Smyrna fig, the fig of commerce, had been recently unraveled.

The Smyrna fig had been a challenge for California fig farmers for nearly thirty years. Figs had played a major role in the early development

of agriculture in California, driven by the idea that California, with its similar climate, could take over the lucrative Smyrna dried fig market centered in the Fertile Crescent. However, there was a problem with Smyrna fig production in California that that wouldn't be resolved until the beginning of the 20th century, just in time to become a major crop for Forkner's farmers.

Mission figs had been brought to California from Mexico, via the early Spanish missionaries in the late 1700s. Figs had quickly established themselves in the mission communities, and, after falling into decline during the 1830s and 1840s, had been successfully revitalized when the crops were sold to feed the gold seekers who flooded the state after the discovery of gold in 1848. This success led leading agricultural promoters and ranchers to believe that the fig industry could thrive and develop in California. Orchards were planted up and down the state during the last half of the nineteenth century with cuttings of European fig varieties imported by pioneer nurserymen such as Felix Gillet of Barren Hill Nursery in Nevada City and George

Roeding of Fancher Nursery near Fresno, and the market for figs, both fresh and dried, developed rapidly. Later nurseries sent agents to Syria and Turkey to bring back cuttings of the Smyrna fig as well, but surreptitiously, because it was feared the Syrians and Turks would dupe them if they knew that the Californians wanted to take away their business.

California's early fig farmers were primarily of Italian, French, and later Armenian descent and were familiar with the varieties and the horticultural practices of their homeland. The Mission fig and the other European varieties were common figs and did not need pollination to bear fruit. They also did not have the size, flavor, or drying quality of the Smyrna figs, which dominated the world market. However, the California farmers were not able to get a crop from their Smyrna figs. While the trees grew well, they did not carry their fruit to maturity, but dropped them while still green. The Smyrna fig and others of its type required pollination, a process of which the fig growers had no knowledge or experience. Finally, in 1890, a number of fig growers, George Roeding among



Leveling the land with "motorized" tractors.



Dynamiting hardpan.

Photo courtesy: Pop Laval Educational Foundation.

Photo courtesy: Pop Laval Educational Foundation.

them, realized that the Smyrna fig needed pollinating. They successfully proved this by hand-pollination, using the pollen from Capri figs, a pollinator type, to pollinate the fruit of the Smyrna. In nature, this is accomplished by the *Blastophaga* wasp. In 1899, Walter Swingle, an agricultural explorer for the United States Department of Agriculture, sent six boxes laden with wasps from the Botanical Gardens in Algiers to George Roeding, who placed them throughout his orchards. The crop was a huge success and the Smyrna, with the marriage of California and Smyrna, was renamed Calimyrna, for its new homeland. Figs rapidly became a significant crop in California, including the variety that Forkner had planted in what would be called Forkner's Fig Gardens.

Forkner, at Wickson's suggestion, went to see George Roeding to talk to him about figs. After Roeding confirmed that figs were an extremely suitable crop for the land under consideration, Forkner exercised his option to buy the six thousand acres and eventually bought six thousand more.

By 1915 when the Fig Gardens officially opened, his company, the J.C. Forkner Fig Gardens, had leveled the land using 100 new "motorized" tractors with specially designed scrapers (Henry Ford even came to observe), and dynamited 660,000 holes in the hardpan, so that the roots of the fig trees he had purchased could reach the sandy soil below. Forkner's Fig Gardens were now the largest fig orchard in the world. The company had also built an irrigation system which drew water from the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, twenty-five miles away, and supplied water to all the 12,000 acres that eventually comprised The Fig Gardens. The land itself was sub-



Young women packing figs, 1921.

divided into plots ranging primarily from sites of 10 to 40 acres and a grand avenue, Van Ness Avenue, was laid down the middle. On either side, reaching as far as the eye could see were fig trees, laid out so spaciouly that "You could drive a greyhound bus between them," as Bud Buck, a former employee of Forkner's farming division, tells it.

Land was marketed to all and any, no need to be a farmer because the farming division of the company could take care of the trees. The Farming Division was headed by W. M. Bacon, the general manager, who oversaw 16 superintendents who, in turn, oversaw as many as 200 employees. As the concept was explained in one of the brochures, the Farming Division was staffed with experts in various aspects of fig cultivation, harvesting, and marketing.

In the Farm and Marketing Agreement offered by Forkner, the buyers of the fig garden land could sign over the land for farming purposes to Fig Gardens, Inc. The figs would, according to the agreement, be properly cultivated, pruned, kept free of noxious weeds, irrigated, harvested, and marketed. The owner

would be kept apprised of expenses incurred, and the company would keep "true and accurate" books which would be open to all owners at any time for inspection. After harvesting season, defined in the Agreement as June 1 to January 1, the owners would receive a detailed statement of receipts and disbursements, as well as a check for 10 percent of the net profit. The agreement could be terminated in writing with 60 days notice.

Most of the buyers of the Fig Garden properties appear to have been of northern European descent. Bud Buck called them mostly blue-collar types who had left poor farms, seeing the Fig Gardens as an opportunity. Forkner marketed his property as the American Dream of owning a small farm, making it possible for purchasers to pay for the land over time, and having the farming taken over by his corporation if need be. Eventually there were about 800 owners. Some of the homes built on the land were large and elegant, while others were stucco bungalows, or even tank houses with wooden shacks built underneath. Later the

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Fig Garden

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popular low-slung ranch houses were built, and even some adobes.

The Fig Gardens had a sense of community. In 1921, residents of the Fig Garden District formed the “Improvement and Boosters Club of Fig Garden” and in 1923 a Fig Garden Chamber of Commerce was established as well. The Fig Garden Bulletin was published monthly with a letter from W.M. Bacon, the Vice President of J. C. Forkner Fig Gardens, Inc., that discussed such topics as winter irrigation, price of dried figs, and the importance of cover crops.

Though J.C. Forkner eventually lost his company in bankruptcy during the Depression, the farmers of Fig Gardens continued to produce and market their figs individually and through farming co-operatives. Eventually, with Fresno’s increasing urbanization, The Fig Garden District became more valuable as residential and commercial land than as farm land, and the acreages were subdivided again, and sold, and commercial fig farming moved further east, to Madera. Today, the Fig Garden District, which remains distinct from Fresno, with its own police and fire department, is considered one of Fresno’s most desirable areas. The area has great character as a neighborhood because the houses were independently built. The streets are lined with the ornamental trees Forkner planted, the houses are on spacious lots, and many have the accouterments of the era in which they were built, such as cellars and libraries. Fig trees are scattered throughout the backyards, a reminder of the area’s origins.

Georgianne Brennan, *with a master’s degree in history from the University of*

California, San Diego, is the author and co-author of numerous books. Her most recent is a food memoir titled A Pig in Provence (Harcourt 2008). She writes regular features for the San Francisco Chronicle and is a contributor to Fine Cooking, Bon Appetit, and Cooking Pleasure magazines. Active in the

Slow Food movement for many years, she has served as a jury member for the Slow Food International Award and is a member of the organization’s American Ark Selection Committee. Married with four children, she spends her time between her small farms in northern California and France.

The Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery

NEWER members of Culinary Historians of New York may not be aware of one of the leading conclaves of culinary historians, which occurs every late summer in Oxford, England. It is the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery, founded in 1981 by the late Alan Davidson, the driving force behind *The Oxford Companion to Food* (1999), and Dr. Theodore Zeldin, an intellectual powerhouse who specializes in French social history.

The original 1981 Symposium grew out of a series of seminars on the historical relationship between science and cookery conducted in 1979 by Davidson at St Antony’s College, Oxford. Zeldin, a fellow of St Antony’s, had sponsored Davidson for a fellowship to study cookery from an academic perspective, an iconoclastic idea in Anglo-American circles in the late 1970s. Greeted with skepticism by certain members of academia, the popularity of the seminars with such influential culinarians as Elizabeth David, Sri and Roger Owen, Richard Olney, Jane Grigson, and Elizabeth Lambert Ortiz, encouraged Davidson and Zeldin to repeat the gathering of scholars, writers, and others with a serious interest in the history and cultural implications of food and cookery. Within a few years, the symposium morphed into an annual event and

quickly became the pre-eminent Anglophone venue for culinary history. The Oxford Symposium is now a registered trust under British law and is administered by Claudia Roden, Paul Levy, and CHNY alumna Carolin Young.

By the turn of the millennium, the symposium’s success meant that it had outgrown its cozy quarters at St Antony’s. In 2006, it moved to spacious accommodations at St Catherine’s College, an architecturally distinguished campus designed by Arne Jacobsen circa 1960. Affectionately known as St. Catz, its bold gardens and furnishings meld modernism with the vocabulary of a traditional college quadrangle, in many ways evoking the spirit of the symposium.

Each symposium is organized around a theme, selected several years in advance by what can only be described as a chaotic vote at the closing plenary session (not dissimilar to the televised sessions of the Prime Minister addressing the House of Commons): this coming 12–14 September, the theme will be “vegetables.” Simon Schama has provisionally agreed to speak and biodiversity expert James Godfrey, Chairman of the International Potato Centre, will also deliver a plenary address.

The 2009 Oxford’s Symposium’s dates are 11–13 September, with the

topic of “Food and Language.”

In 2010 the Oxford Symposium will change to a July date. The 2010 Oxford Symposium’s dates are 9–11 July. The topic will be “Cured, Smoked, and Fermented Foods.”

A much-anticipated part of the opening session of each symposium is the announcement of the winner of the Sophie Coe Prize in Food History. The prize, the most prestigious award in the field of culinary history, was endowed in memory of Sophie Coe (coincidentally, an early member of CHNY) and author of several books and articles on culinary history, including *America’s First Cuisines* (1994) and, with her husband, Michael Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (1993). First awarded in 1995, over the years the purse has grown to a plump £1500 for first prize, with a number of smaller awards given for other notable essays in food history.

Long-time CHNY member Anne Mendelson was the winner of the 2007 Sophie Coe Prize for her ground-breaking essay “The Lenapes: In Search of Pre-European Foodways in the Greater New York Area.” CHNY members will recall Mendelson’s fascinating program on



Anne Mendelson, winner of the 2007 Sophie Coe Prize.

this topic in November 2003, and the sage judges at the Oxford Symposium were equally impressed, complimenting both Mendelson’s elegant prose and scholar’s insights into a largely undocumented cuisine.

In addition to the Sophie Coe Prize, this year will mark the first time that the Symposium will be able to offer a research stipend and underwrite attendance at the symposium for a young scholar. Made possible by a very generous grant from an anonymous American donor, the trust has just awarded the “Cherwell Studentship” (Cherwell is the small river abutting St Catz, so there is no ill-hidden clue to the donor’s identity) to Allyson Sgro, a doctoral student in chemistry and neuroscience at the University of Washington.

Sgro will be presenting a paper at this year’s symposium entitled “Who Put the Leeks in the Cock-a-Leekie Soup?” If this sounds far afield from neuroscience, well, it is. Sgro has been researching late medieval Scottish cuisine as a labor of love for the past three years and, the paper is, in her words: “part of a larger project to characterize the transition from late medieval to early modern cuisine in Scotland. The sources I am using span this time, with dates ranging from 1598 to 1712. With this work I hope to illuminate how long the Auld Alliance with France influenced Scotland’s cuisine after the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and how traditional Scottish ingredients such as kail and bere were incorporated into this new culinary era.”

If this sort of brilliantly eclectic presentation excites you, then consider crossing the pond to attend the symposium. You do not need to present a paper (indeed, space and time constraints limit the number of papers that can be presented),

but you will meet smart people and get to chat informally with some of today’s leading food historians, chefs, sociologists, writers, philosophers, students, in short, the gamut of the wonderfully interdisciplinary world of culinary history. For further information, visit <http://www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk>.

—CATHY KAUFMAN



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If you want to receive organization news, spam blockers must accept CHNY program announcements from Carolyn Vaughan (TFOX2@nyc.rr.com) and CHNY newsletter announcements from Helen Brody (helen@helenbrody.com).

CORRECT E-MAIL ADDRESS?

CHNY members receive numerous announcements by e-mail, not only about our own programs, but also about other events of culinary interest, including talks, tours, and tastings. Please send new address changes to www.culinaryhistoriansny.org/contact.

PROGRAM REGISTRATION NEWS

You can now register for CHNY programs online, through Brown Paper Tickets (www.brownpapertickets.com). Brown Paper Tickets accepts MasterCard, Visa, and Discover. No more scrambling for a stamp and an envelope! Of course, we will continue to accept registrations through the mail for those who prefer it.

Member News

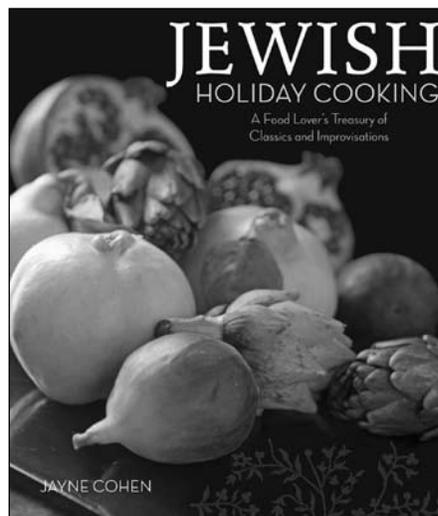
Jean Anderson, a member of the James Beard Cookbook Hall of Fame, was a featured author at the Alabama Book Festival in Old Town Montgomery. Recipes from her book *A Love Affair with Southern Cooking* were served at the opening reception. Half a dozen appetizer recipes from *Love Affair* were also served at *Gourmet* magazine's Culinary Weekend at Kiawah Island, South Carolina, where Jean was a featured speaker.

Rynn Berry, advisor to the North American Vegetarian Society, has recently published *The Vegan Guide to New York City, 2008*. Now in its 15th year, the guide is the only exclusively vegetarian restaurant guidebook. Rynn spoke on "Vegetarianism and Non-violence in the World's Religions" at the first animal rights conference in Sao Paulo and will be the featured speaker in the centennial International Vegetarian Union's World Vegetarian Congress in Dresden, Germany.

Jesse Browner has made an agreement with Oxford University Press (OUP) to sponsor his "Podcast History of Cooking." The series, to be comprised of approximately sixteen episodes of 20 to 25 minutes each, and covering the history of cooking in the western world from the Stone Age to Stone Barns, will ultimately be posted on the OUP Culinary Studies website, which is still in development. Browner is the author of *The Duchess Who Wouldn't Sit Down: An Informal History of Hospitality* (Bloomsbury, 2003) and *The Uncertain Hour* (Bloomsbury, 2007), and has written for *Food & Wine* magazine, *Gastronomica*, and Bookforum.com, among others.

Carolina Capehart will be preparing early American recipes during June, July, and August and conducting 18th and 19th century cooking workshops, "Fireside Feasts," at Brooklyn's Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum. Specific dates are to be announced. Previous participants have prepared dishes ranging from spinach tarts to pound cake to *switchel* (a type of punch). Admission is free.

Jayne Cohen's recently published-book *Jewish Holiday Cooking: A Food Lover's Treasury of Classics and Improvisations* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008) includes Eastern European favorites plus dishes from communities throughout the Diaspora including Classic Hummus with Toasted Sesame-Cumin Matzohs, Moroccan Fish with Chickpeas and Saffron-Lime Aioli, and Iranian Grilled Chicken Thighs with Sumac. In addition there are dozens of new takes and re-interpretations of traditional dishes for today's palates. She is also the author of *The Gefilte Variations* (Scribner, 2000). Her website highlights upcoming holidays with a recipe contest. For details, visit <http://jewishholidaycooking.com>.



Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture by **Megan Elias** is to be published in May by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Founded in 1979 by **Gary A. Goldberg** and Martin Johner, The Culinary Center of New York is one of the first large culinary arts programs established in New York City. From 1987-2007, the company was an independent contractor to The New School, and ran The New School Culinary Arts program. The Culinary Center separated itself from the New School this spring, and continues to offer over 100 courses for recreational cooks and hopeful professionals under its own name only. Contact Culinary Center of New York: 212-255-4141 www.culinarycenterny.com.

Zilkia Janer's new book, *Latino Food Culture* (Greenwood Press, 2008) is a volume in the *Food Cultures in America Series*. It provides cultural insight into Latinos from all backgrounds. Readers learn about the diverse elements of an evolving pan-Latino food culture including the history of the various groups, their foodstuffs, cooking, diet, and eating habits. Representative recipes and photos are interspersed in the essays. A chronology, glossary, resource guide, and bibliography make this a one-stop resource for students and food writers. Zilkia teaches Latin American and Latino literature and culture at Hofstra University.

Cathy Kaufman presented a lecture, cooking demonstration, and tasting of ancient Roman food titled "When in Rome, Eat as the Ancient Romans Did" at *The New York Times* Travel Show in March. Included was information on restaurants in Italy that specialize in historical cookery for the adventurous tourist. Cathy will be presenting a history of Mardi

Gras foods, specifically beignets, at the IACP conference in New Orleans this April, sharing the stage with Ken Albala and a monumental *olla podrida*.

Author and tea sommelier **Elizabeth Knight** (www.teawithfriends.com) conducts private seminars and guided walking tours of New York's unique tea emporiums. Learn about Asian and European tea traditions, shop for tea and wares, enjoy dim sum, wagashi, and afternoon tea. A certified English tea master, Knight served as the tea sommelier at the St. Regis Hotel. Her new book, *Celtic Teas With Friends—Teatime Traditions from Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland and Wales* will be published in June 2008. *Tea in the City: New York* was published by the Benjamin Press in 2006.

Judith Krall-Russo, tea specialist, is curator for a juried art exhibit titled "The Elegant Eccentric Teapot" with the teapot as the theme. The exhibit at the Barron Arts Center, Woodbridge, New Jersey, is open to all 2D and 3D media. Exhibition dates are from June 13–July 3, 2008. Please contact Nancy Casteras at Nancy.Casteras@twp.woodbridge.nj.us or phone (732) 634-0413 for more information, entry fees, or a prospectus.

Michael Krondl is currently working on a series of on-line cooking videos spotlighting medieval and renaissance food for Devour.tv. The first three videos are expected to air in May. They feature *Ambrosino*, a fourteenth century Venetian recipe for capon braised with spices from the *Anonimo Veneziano*; a fifteenth century recipe for baked sardines from the Catalan *Libre del Coch* attributed to Ruperto de Nola; and Cristoforo Messisbugo's ravioli from his 1549 masterpiece *Banchetti, composizioni di vivande et apparecchio generale*.

Nora Maynard has wrapped up her weekly column "The Celluloid Pantry" on food and drink in film after an enjoyable two-year run, and has launched a new series, "Straight Up," on the art of the cocktail for Apartment Therapy Media's "The Kitchen." See <http://www.apartmenttherapy.com>.

Since the beginning of the year, **Marion Nestle** has given lectures on issues related to her books, *Food Politics*, *Safe Food*, and *What to Eat* at the Society of Fellows at Princeton, the California Endowment in Los Angeles, the Orfalea Foundation in Santa Barbara, the program in ethics and society at Stanford University, and pediatric grand rounds at the University of Rochester, among others. Her article with Dr. Steven Woolf, "Do dietary guidelines explain the obesity epidemic?" appeared in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in March. She now co-authors a regular column on pet food for *The Bark*, a quarterly magazine about life with dogs.

Jacqueline M. Newman gave a keynote address in December at the 2007 China Sauce Culture International Forum in Shaoxing, China. It was part of the inauguration of the two story state-of-the art Shaoxing National Sauce Culture Museum in that city. Jacqueline's latest book is *Cooking from China's Fujian Province* (Hippocrene Books, 2007).

Kara Newman has signed a contract with Chronicle Books to write *Spice and Ice: The Art of Spicy Cocktails*. The book is slated for publication in 2009, and will include an overview on the historic use of spices in cuisine and cocktails. Kara also will be leading a mixologist panel on spicy drinks at "The Tales of the Cocktail" conference in New Orleans in July 2008 which features five days of cocktail

events including demos, tastings, and seminars for professionals. Measuring some of their success in garnishes, the 2007 event used 7250 mint leaves, 3580 lime wedges, 800 watermelon cubes, 560 gin-soaked dried cherries, 1390 orange slices, 2 tons of ice, and more for thousands of sippers.

Susan McLellan Plaisted, proprietress of Heart to Hearth Cookery in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, will be featured in a "Fire and Ice" program theme at Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Massachusetts, on July 19. Susan will be providing the "Ice" component of the program by preparing 18th-century ice cream receipts in her sabotiere, a hand-cranked reproduction 19th-century ice cream maker.

Ammini Ramachandran's book *Grains, Greens, and Grated Coconut* was one of four self-published cookbooks ranked as #76 in the February issue of *Saveur* magazine's top 100. Last November she gave a presentation titled "The Rise of Asia: Culinary Traditions of the East and Flavor Discovery in 21st-Century America" at the Worlds of Flavor International Conference & Festival at The Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley. Her book was reviewed in *The New York Times* in July and won the 2007 self-published cookbook award presented by the Cordon d'Or International Cookbooks & Culinary Arts Awards. The book was also picked as the overall winner.

Toni Silber-Delerive's paintings make you see our world from above. Her aerial landscapes offer an unusual perspective; by flattening the picture plane they reduce details to strong graphic images. Her work was recently displayed at the Interchurch Center. Her website is www.tonisart.com.

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Member News

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Andrew F. Smith will be moderating a symposium, “Julia Child: Culinary Revolutionary,” on June 12 at the New School. Scheduled speakers include Joan Reardon, author of *M. F. K. Fisher, Julia Child, and Alice Waters: Celebrating the Pleasures of the Table*; Judith Jones, author of *The Tenth Muse*; Molly O’Neill, author of *American Food Writing*; and Laura Shapiro, author of *Julia Child*. See <http://www.newschool.edu/> for more information.

Lyn Stallworth toured Bangkok, Vietnam, and Cambodia in February. Best meals: vegan lunch at a female Buddhist monastery, and a 12-course lunch with beer at a non-English-speaking restaurant in Danang.

Ogden Publications (<http://www.ogdenpubs.com/>), the parent company of *Mother Earth News*, *The Herb Companion*, and other environmentally focused magazines, has re-published **William Woys Weaver’s** award-winning *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening* in CD. Will has recently written an extensive monograph on the medieval origins of the wines of Cyprus, with particular attention to the famous dessert wine known as *Commandaria*. This monograph is being published in Cyprus in both English and Greek and will be available for purchase in May.

Laura Weiss (www.lauraweissauthor.com) has been named managing editor of *Edible East End* (www.edibleeastend.com), a magazine which covers local and sustainable food issues on Long Island. Look for *Edible Manhattan* to launch this September. To subscribe, visit <http://www.ediblemanhattan.com/>.

A Kosher Fish Tastes Like Pork

By Kenneth Ovitz

MIDDLE Eastern cookery is some of the oldest documented cuisine in the world, stretching from Babylonian recipes dated ca. 1700 BCE through biblical texts recorded in the 5th and 6th centuries, to the great Islamo-Persian cookery books in the 9th and 10th centuries and beyond. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all can look to the ancient Near East for some of their culinary traditions, and one of the joys of culinary history is the exploration of the common roots and differing evolutions of foodways. All of this was brought home by a bit of detective work sparked by a 2003 lecture presented to the CHNY by Nawal Nasrallah, an Iraqi scholar and author of *Delights from the Garden of Eden* (Authorhouse, 2003).

As part of her lecture on ancient Mesopotamian cuisine and its edible legacies in contemporary Iraqi cuisine, Nasrallah showed pictures of a large fish known as the *el shabut*, which is indigenous to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and is nowadays popularly used to prepare a dish known as *masgouf*. To make *masgouf*, the *el shabut* is split open down the back, butterflied, and suspended on two stakes in front of a fire. Once almost cooked, it is roasted, skin side down, directly over the embers of pomegranate wood. A classic *masgouf* is enticing, garnished with sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and pickled mango and served with warm bread from the tannour. Many Baghdad restaurants lay claim to “the best *masgouf* in town,” and Iraqis preparing *masgouf* over a campfire have traditionally lined the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. *Masgouf* recently reached American shores: Manhattan’s only Iraqi restaurant, *Le*

Kabbr, located on Ninth Avenue between 47th and 48th Streets, serves *masgouf* as one of its specialties.

Shortly after Nasrallah’s presentation, two Israeli scholars, Rabbi Ari Zivitofsky and Dr. Ari Greenspan, presented a talk at the Orthodox Union in Queens on “Rare Kosher Animals.” This led to lively debate on esoterica such as how to properly slaughter a giraffe, the location of a giraffe’s jugular, and which species of grasshopper are considered kosher and which aren’t. Amidst these debates came the topic of a fish known in both the Jerusalem (aka Palestinian) and Babylonian Talmud as the *shabuta*. No one could identify with certainty the precise species, but the fish was intriguing for its seemingly illicit flavor.

The Babylonian Talmud claimed that *shabuta* was a kosher fish with brains that taste like pork, at least if one credited the palates of the non-Jewish servants of the rabbis who worked on the Talmud and compared the taste of the *shabuta* to the forbidden *treyf*. Rabbis suggested eating the *shabuta*’s brains when one craved pork, but wanted to adhere to the Jewish dietary laws of Kashrut.

The Jerusalem Talmud identified seven hundred different types of kosher fish that accompanied the Jews when they were exiled to Babylon (about 50 miles south of modern-day Baghdad) in 586 BCE. It also stated that all of the species of fish except for one returned to the land of Israel with the Jews in 522 BCE. The *shabuta*, of course, was the one species of fish that remained in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Thereafter the *shabuta* was mentioned in the Midrashic texts; however its species could no longer be properly identified by the commentators because they lived in Palestine

and had no first-hand knowledge of the fish. The true identity of *shabuta* was lost to Jewish history in around 600 CE.

Intrigued by the near-linguistic identity between *el shabut* and *shabuta*, as well as the fact that they were both found in Babylonia, but not Israel, I corresponded with Zivitofsky, Nasrallah, and Dr. Susan Weingarten, a food scholar at Tel Aviv University, to learn more. I learned that both the 13th-century *Baghdad Cookery Book* and the tenth century *Ibyn Sayyar Al Warraq* (the latter recently translated by Nasrallah) refer to *el shabut*. Moreover, during medieval times, the tongues and the head of the *el shabut* were eaten together as a delicacy; earlier, the Babylonian Talmud mentioned that the tongues of the *shabuta* were a delicacy. One possible final avenue of research is whether *shabuta* and *el shabut* are the same fish as *sirbuttu*. *Sirbuttu* appears in cuneiform tablets as a gourmet delight well before the Talmud; the pre-eminent authority on Mesopotamian cuisine, Jean Bottéro, was unable to identify the species before his death. After extensive research, Zivitofsky concluded that the fish known as *el shabut* is in fact *shabuta*, but whether they are the same as the yet-unidentified *sirbuttu* is still unknown. Nonetheless, the fish that has eluded Talmud scholars since 600 CE was finally identified.

Kenneth Ovitz, a graduate of the Professional Culinary Arts program of The Institute of Culinary Education, has written numerous articles with Jewish historical, cultural, and spiritual relevance.

SOURCES CITED:

The *Mishna* (the first set of volumes which comprise the *Talmud*) Shabbat 22:2, Machshirin 6:3.

The *Babylonian Talmud* in the *Gemara* (second set of volumes included in the *Talmud*) Chullin, Tractate 109b,

Summary of 2007–2008 Programs

SEPTEMBER: A CELEBRATION OF CHNY MEMBERS

Business meeting, member presentations on recent books, research, or projects, including Rynn Berry, “The History of Vegetarian Restaurants”; Carolina Capehart, “Fireside Feasts: Early 1800s Culinary Adventures”; Bunny Crumpacker, *The Sex Life of Food: When Body and Soul Meet*; Zilkia Janer, *Latino Food Culture*; Cathy Kaufman, “Cooking in Ancient Civilizations”; Elizabeth Knight, *Tea in the City: New York*; and Ammini Ramachandran, *Grains, Greens, and Grated Coconut*.

OCTOBER: BONES OF RETENTION

“Reconstructing Prehistoric Diets from Fossils” with **Andrew Sillen**.

Over the past decade, archaeologists have reconstructed aspects of prehistoric human diets by reading trace elements and isotopes in human and animal skeletons that shed light on the consumption of certain kinds of foods, such as meat vs. vegetable or seafood vs. terrestrial. These studies challenge popular past conceptions about key events, such as the origin of the human line in the Pleistocene (around one to three million years ago), and the origin of farming around 10,000 years ago.

Andrew Sillen was Professor of Paleoanthropology at the University

of Cape Town, South Africa, where he lived from 1985–2001. A native of New York, he is currently a vice president at Brooklyn College.

NOVEMBER: MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY AND THE ROLE OF SCIENCE IN THE KITCHEN

“The Past, Present, and Future of Scientific Cooking” with **Hervé This** and **Mitchell Davis**.

Molecular gastronomy is a general term for a style of cooking informed by science and scientific experimentation. Even chefs who don’t use the phrase have been influenced by the changes brought about by this technologically savvy approach to handling and transforming food.

Celebrated French professor of chemistry Hervé This, who coined the term “molecular gastronomy,” and Mitchell Davis, adjunct professor at NYU and vice president of the James Beard Foundation, discuss and demonstrate this unique style of cooking.

DECEMBER: THE SPECTACULAR FAILURE OF PROHIBITION IN NEW YORK CITY

With **Michael Lerner**

Drawing from his recent book, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Harvard University Press,

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Kosher Fish, continued

110b, Shabbat 119a; 110b, Kiddushin 41a, Pesachim 76b, 112b, Bab Kamma 55a, Sanhedrin 59b.

The *Palestinian Talmud* Ta’anit chapter 4 *The Midrash* in Yalqut Shimoni 69b

Jean Bottéro, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World: Cooking in Mesopotamia* (Teresa Lavender Fagan, trans.), University of Chicago, 2004.

Nawal Nasrallah, *Delights from The Garden of Eden: A Cook Book and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*, Authorhouse, 2003

Susan Weingarten, “Food in the Babylonian Talmud: Memories of Sumer Foretastes of Baghdad,” unpublished paper presented at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 2005.

Ari Zivitovsky and Zohar Amar, “A Fishy Tale: Identifying the Talmudic Shibuta.”

Program Summaries

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2007), Michael Lerner recalls “the long thirst” and its unintended consequences as he depicts a city in the throes of open rebellion against the dry laws, and explores how the effort to reform New York through Prohibition helped define the era, while creating some of the most vibrant culture in the history of the city.

Michael A. Lerner is Associate Dean of Studies at Bard High School Early College in New York.

JANUARY: REFINED CUISINE OR JUST PLAIN COOKING?

“Moralists in the Kitchen” with **Rachel Laudan**

As far back as the Ancient Greek world, philosophers and others have struggled with the question of whether refined cookery is moral. Does complicated cooking purify, refine, and perfect foods, and thus elevate and enhance the diner’s virtue? Or does such cooking falsify and corrupt that which nature made perfect, and, by extension, pollute the diner, creating unnatural appetites, illness, despotism, and war?

Rachel Laudan holds a PhD in the History and Philosophy of Science from the University of London. Among her honors are the Jane Grigson/Julia Child Award for Distinguished Food Scholarship for her book *The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawaii’s Culinary Heritage*; and the Sophie Coe Prize in Food History for her essay “A Kind of Chemistry,” exploring the dietetic underpinning of 17th-century French cookery.

FEBRUARY: THE OLYMPIA OYSTER

With **Jon Rowley**

The Pacific Northwest’s Olympia oyster is one of the rarest and

most treasured of our native oysters. Although no bigger than a 50-cent piece, the Olympia is known for its distinctive sweet taste and “coppery” finish. Seattle oyster enthusiast and historian Jon Rowley regales us with the history of the Olympia, which begins with the California Gold Rush and continues through two brushes with extinction to today’s cautious optimism for the future.

Jon Rowley is a rare combination of food scholar, writer, fisherman, and businessman. He is a contributing editor to *Gourmet* magazine, and was named to *Saveur’s* 2008 Top 100 Favorites in the food world.

MARCH: THE HISTORY OF CHOP SUEY IN AMERICA

With **Andrew Coe**

“A toothsome stew.” “The national dish of China.” “A cheap kind of Cantonese hash.” Chop suey is a remarkable success story, a dish that opened American palates to exotic cuisines and now has almost disappeared from America’s tables. Join Andrew Coe to discover the truth behind the legends.

Andrew Coe has written for *The New York Times*, *Saveur*, *Gastronomica*, and *Flavor & Fortune* and is a contributor to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. With his wife, Jane Ziegelman, he is a co-author of *Foie Gras, a Passion* (Wiley, 2000). Andrew is currently writing a history of Chinese food in the United States to be published by Oxford University Press in 2009.

APRIL: LISBON AND SPICES

“Transforming the World’s Culinary Horizons” with **Michael Krondl**

Michael Krondl explores the European taste for spices during the Renaissance, how it influenced and was affected by the trade routes created by the Portuguese, and how

the “age of exploration” changed the world’s appetite for spices.

Michael Krondl is the author of *The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice* (Ballantine, 2008). He has written for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, *The Business of Food: Encyclopedia of the Food and Drink Industries*. He is the author of *Around the American Table: Treasured Recipes and Food Traditions from the American Cookery Collections of the New York Public Library*. For more information see <http://spicehistory.net>.

MAY: DATES IN MEDIEVAL BAGHDAD

“Sweet Eats to Heady Drinks” with **Nawal Nasrallah**

Professor Nawal Nasrallah illuminates the ways in which medieval Baghdadi cooks and wine makers have exploited the humble date.

A wide variety of date palms have been cultivated in Iraq from time immemorial. Dates were prized for their versatility, from flavoring stews to preparing delectable desserts. Despite conflicting views on consuming alcoholic drinks in the Islamic world, dates were also made into heady wines and balsamic-like vinegar.

Nawal Nasrallah, a native of Iraq, was a professor at Baghdad and Mosul Universities. Of her culinary books, *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook* (Authorhouse, 2003) has received the Gourmand World Cookbook Special Jury Award, and her translation of *Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq’s Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook* (Brill, 2007) won the Best Translation award in the 2007 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

JUNE 5: AMELIA SCHOLAR’S GRANT.

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