



OKLAHOMA

# HUMANITIES

SPRING | SUMMER 2023

CELEBRATING 15 AWARD-WINNING YEARS

CULTURE | ISSUES | IDEAS

# FOOD

A READABLE FEAST



## CAROLINE LOWERY

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## PERSPECTIVE

### FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In keeping with this issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine and its multiple explorations of food through history and culture, we are reminded that spring is an occasion for new crops *and* new ideas. Oklahoma Humanities (OH) is excited to announce our latest partnerships and initiatives—a banquet of what we hope will be “food for thought” across our state.

First, we invite young people to the table with National History Day, a research and presentation program that encourages middle and high school students to think critically about historical topics. Each year, more than 750,000 students participate nationally, presenting history projects, exhibitions, performances, and essays based on their research. OH is partnering with local affiliates to ensure rural and underserved students have equal access to National History Day programming and educational opportunities.

In 2024 we'll welcome the celebrity chef of American museums—the Smithsonian—when the traveling exhibition “Voices and Votes: Democracy in America” tours Oklahoma as part of the *Museum on Main Street* program. This partnership with the Smithsonian Institution brings a world-class exhibit to six rural Oklahoma locations. OH support will award a \$2,500 capacity-building grant to each host site, providing opportunities for staff training and audience engagement. The exhibit will be on display for six weeks at each stop along the tour and host sites will augment experiences in their communities with complementary festivals, programming, and events.

For those who love to dine in, a special edition of our e-news with further temptations from “A Readable Feast” will hit inboxes in early May. The tasting menu is full of treats, including: recipes from our magazine authors; foodie poetry; a list of Oklahoma food festivals; and links to food-related exhibitions, articles, books, and more. If you don't receive our monthly e-news, subscribe on our website or email us. There's a smorgasbord of events on our calendar, too, so check it often to find a little “food for thought” near you.

E-news: [okhumanities.org/about#sign-up](https://okhumanities.org/about#sign-up)

Events: [okhumanities.org/events](https://okhumanities.org/events)

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# OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas



COVER: Alexandra Kikot, unsplash.com RIGHT: Alex Kondratiev, unsplash.com

# FOOD

## A READABLE FEAST

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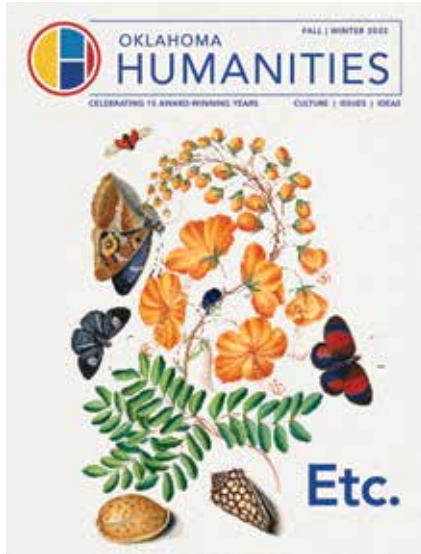
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Reader Feedback



I enjoyed Terry Phelps’s piece on Paul Harvey in the Fall/Winter 2022 issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. As a young Marine stationed on the East Coast in the early 1990s, I tuned in to Mr. Harvey’s noon broadcasts nearly every day. I have fond memories of listening to him.

—John Gifford, Oklahoma City

I always loved listening to [Paul Harvey] radio programs. He had a commonsense perspective on current events.

—Paul Williams, Fresno, CA

Outstanding article about Paul Harvey. Thank you for giving readers “the rest of the story.”

—Vivian Finley Nida, Oklahoma City

Great article. Paul Harvey was a class act in my opinion.

—Freedra Richardson, Norman

Enjoyed [Kimberly Roblin’s] article on Jefferson and the Declaration. Always wondered why the signers wrote names abbreviated on such an important document.

—George Eisiminger, Wathena, KS



Eleanor Roosevelt, far left



Alberta Woodard, far left

I just love your magazine. This issue promises to be an all-time favorite. As I thumbed through my copy of ETC., one connection was so obvious that I just had to write immediately. The above photos were taken in Pawhuska, March 16, 1937, during Eleanor Roosevelt’s visit to Oklahoma. Riding in the car with Mrs. Roosevelt is the Osage Nation Chief, Fred Lookout. The other car is filled with ladies employed by Phillips Petroleum Company and representing the Jane Phillips Sorority. The young woman on the far left is my mother, Alberta. Several of Mrs. Roosevelt’s “My Day” columns covering her trip to Oklahoma can be found at: [erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu](http://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu)

—Bill Woodard, Bartlesville

Just received the new magazine. Love the cover! Can’t wait to dig in.

—Mike Klemme, Enid

I’m writing to say how much I enjoyed the most recent *Oklahoma Humanities* publication. [The Editor’s] reflection on 15 years of excellent contributions by writers, scholars, artists, etc., was nicely done. Thanks for the good work you do to educate broadly and elevate the humanities in Oklahoma.

—Dr. Charles Kimball  
Presidential Professor Emeritus  
University of Oklahoma

It takes me a long time to read each issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* since I read it from cover to cover. I just read the article on Thomas Jefferson. You have articulated an important dilemma for western thinkers. As I tell my students, switch your thinking to both/and rather than either/or. And understand that roads are for journeys not destinations. I read only three magazines: *The New Yorker*, and I am 16 months behind; *The Smithsonian*, and I am four issues behind; *Oklahoma Humanities*, and now I’m ready for the next one!

—Ms. Haven Tobias, Norman

Congratulations on the incredible achievement of reaching the milestone of your 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I send best wishes for many more years of success to come.

—Daniel Simon  
Assistant Director & Editor in Chief  
*World Literature Today*

Thank you for the *always* stunning issues.

—Paul Bowers, Ringwood



OH WELCOMES RAYNE MCKINNEY

Oklahoma Humanities is proud to announce that Rayne McKinney has joined our team as Program Officer in charge of *Let’s Talk About It* and *Museum on Main Street* programs. Rayne is an experienced professional with 30+ years of

experience in customer service and administration, and more than six years in program management. She holds a BA in Administrative Leadership with a minor in English Literature from the University of Oklahoma. Welcome Rayne!



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*Oklahoma Humanities* awards include 52 Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists awards, including multiple first place honors for Best Writing, Best Cover, Best Feature Photo, and Best PR Publication; 23 Great Plains Journalism awards, including firsts for best Magazine Feature Writing and best Magazine Page Design, and as a finalist for the Great Plains Magazine of the Year; three Central Oklahoma IABC Bronze Quill Awards; the State Historic Preservation Officer's Citation of Merit; and an Oklahoma Heritage Distinguished Editorial Award.

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Left to right: OH Board Members Elizabeth Bass, Don Holladay, Quraysh Ali Lansana, former OH Board Member Dewayne Dickens, OH Executive Director Caroline Lowery, former OH Board Member Scott LaMascus, and OH Board Member Anne Holt

## OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES RECOGNIZED WITH NATIONAL AWARD

It is my pleasure to congratulate Oklahoma Humanities as recipient of a 40<sup>th</sup> annual Schwartz Prize, presented in November 2022. Established in 1982 by former Federation board member Martin Schwartz and his wife Helen to recognize outstanding work in the public humanities, the Schwartz Prize is the highest honor awarded to councils by the humanities council community.

Throughout its history, the prize has showcased and celebrated the most innovative work state and territorial councils implement in their communities each year. Last year, nominees were considered for one of two winning categories—council-conducted projects and grant-funded projects. Qualifying program criteria included capacity-building efforts, unique or far-reaching collaborations, and involvement of new audiences, among others.

My colleagues and I were proud to present the 2022 Schwartz Prize in the grant-funded category to Oklahoma Humanities for its groundbreaking work on the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commemoration Initiative. This multi-year, multi-faceted combination of grants, programs, and partnerships—which focused on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst acts of racial violence in America—resulted in a deep exploration of long-hidden Oklahoma and U.S. history.

Schwartz Prize judges were impressed with how the project drew on a remarkable array of organizational collaborations. “This project will surely define this council for a generation,” remarked one of the judges, “and will inspire other councils to do deep, collaborative work like this.”

The Federation congratulates the hard work and dedication that went into the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commemoration Initiative, a truly outstanding humanities project that has touched the lives of millions of Americans.



Federation of  
State Humanities  
Councils

Phoebe Stein, President  
Federation of State  
Humanities Councils



Explore the grants, programs, and partnerships behind the award-winning initiative: [bit.ly/3LAMwta](https://bit.ly/3LAMwta)

## THE EDITOR'S DESK

CARLA WALKER

carla@okhumanities.org



Still life, 1920-1929, William Lönnberg

If there is a universal language, surely it is food. When we can't speak each other's language, literally or figuratively, and we've exhausted all the safe, politically correct topics of conversation, we can always talk about food. Who's the chef in your family? Where's the best restaurant in the neighborhood? What's that spice in your secret recipe? When did you discover your favorite dish? Why is it so hard to find a fresh loaf of bread?

Sharing a meal is one of the most convivial exchanges of human experience, and sharing the elements of that meal—food—is at once intimate and instructive. There is so much to discover by observing the rituals and preparations of someone else's repast. How is it that the same ingredients, assembled in multiple ways, can result in dishes and diversity that are expressive of one's family, region, and nationality?

And we humans gather to share food in seemingly infinite ways: picnics, tailgating, progressive dinners, wedding receptions, prayer breakfasts, award banquets, holiday feasts, weekend brunch, church potlucks, neighborhood cookouts, high tea.

Even our political endeavors and diplomatic relations are marked by occasions of state—at dinner.

The tools we use reveal the utility and ceremony in what we partake: dinner plates, rice bowls, coffee cups, salad tongs, bread boards, chopping blocks, paring knives, grapefruit spoons, gravy ladles, meat forks, tea trolleys, dessert carts—and let's not forget the *good* silver we reserve for who and what we deem “special.”

Our access to food reveals our place in society (royal or peasant, chef or waiter); our resourcefulness (gatherer or gardener, shopper or baker); and what we value (beef or beans, paté or potatoes). For all the traditions, hospitality, and culture food has to reveal, there are ominous, opportunistic portents, too. When used as a weapon, food withheld or deliberately destroyed by acts of war reveals the darkest depths to which we can sink. Feeding one another demonstrates who we are: that we are just and equitable—or that we are utterly intolerant.

Food is so much more than what we put into our bodies. Food equates to ideas and meaning, a different kind of nourishment that brings perspective and wisdom. Food for thought is good for the soul. For the universal language of food, there is no better benediction than this excerpt from one of my favorite poems, “Table of Continents,” by Ibtisam Barakat, poet and friend:

I dream of having all people on the planet  
help me embrace the globe from all sides  
and push the world back together

as one table – of continents . . .  
and we sit around it and eat . . .

break bread, chains, barriers, and silences

A table of continents is a worthy aspiration. It requires us to gather. To cooperate. To be open. To try something new.

Read the full text of Ibtisam's poem in our INTERNATIONALISM issue: [okhumanities.org/programs/magazine](http://okhumanities.org/programs/magazine)



A solitary gỏi cuốn meal.  
Photos by Julianne Tran

# Gỏi Cuốn: A Family Tradition

*Honoring family through food*

JULIANNE TRAN

**WHEN I MOVED INTO MY FIRST COLLEGE APARTMENT**, I came armed with a list of my favorite meals that I was determined to cook on my own. Gỏi cuốn—Vietnamese spring rolls filled with vermicelli noodles, some kind of protein, fresh vegetables, and herbs wrapped in bánh tráng, or rice paper—sat at the very top of this list. One assignment-less night, I followed my mom’s salmon recipe via text message, “If I were to guess it would be ½ cup soy sauce, 2-3 tablespoons oyster sauce” along with a few “dashes” of spices and olive oil. Of course, her measurements were for a fish big enough to feed six hungry mouths, a long filet cooked on a well-loved baking sheet that’d go straight from oven to table. I was cooking for one with my mini spotless 9x6-inch baking dish.



At the Tran family table, a full gỏi cuốn meal is an occasion to slow down at the end of a busy week and gather for conversation.

After roasting my salmon in the oven, I boiled my rice noodles, growing impatient as I waited for the noodles to lose their stubborn stiffness and become soft and wriggly. At home, I paid little attention to the preparation of these noodles. They just always appeared bouncy and sticky at the table in tall, mountainous piles.

Rinsing the vegetables was a more familiar task: fan-like leaves of lettuce, fresh mint, basil, and cilantro from my mom's backyard garden, fuzzy *tía tô* leaves, and striped cucumber. This was my task at home, while my mom boiled water for the noodles on the stove. With my back to her as I faced the sink, we'd share little stories about our week—the student in her class who made a sweet comment, how my long-time friend was doing. After shaking off fistfuls of vegetables, I'd methodically assemble them into two pans with the leaves hugging the curved edges flanked by slim cucumber spears and finished with a good stack of herbs. We made two separate portions because no one at our six-person table wanted to reach more than an arm's length to get what they needed.

Now, in my empty apartment, I placed four lonesome lettuce leaves on a plate with a small handful of herbs and a quarter of a cucumber.

I brought my dinner plate, a bowl of slightly undercooked noodles, rice paper, a limited portion of salmon, and my pitiful little plate of vegetables to my empty bistro table. I snapped a picture of my table setting and sent it in my family group chat with the text "Cuốn for one!" Despite this exclamation, as I sat down to roll my cuốn, I was filled with a growing sense of loneliness. I don't eat this meal solely for the taste of it. Eating gỏi cuốn is more than a meal that satisfies your need to eat; it is a sustained conversation, a still moment in time, a family tradition.

Growing up, my three brothers and I were consumed by the busyness of extracurricular activities. My parents juggled our endless practices, my mom writing lesson plans in the front seat as the sun set over a soccer practice and my dad on the opposite side of town dropping someone off at the dance studio. We rarely had sit-down meals, our dinner table used more as a large desk with eraser shavings in the crevices and papers splayed across the surface. We'd heat ourselves dinner from large Tupperware containers that dominated our refrigerator shelves—pastas, *đồ xào*, or soups—that my mom had prepared in bulk at the beginning of the week. Standing at the counter or spooning portions from our laps in the car, we'd have dinner as we needed it, when we needed it.





Just one of countless dinners together, a Tran family tradition.

## By merely being at the same table together, we silently expressed our appreciation for each other.

But when it came to *gỏi cuốn*, we always sat down together at the table to eat. It is the singular meal that we never ate alone. In my family, we eat *gỏi cuốn* slowly and lazily. Unlike the many meals I had at odd hours of the weekday, this meal was one for the weekends, whenever the busyness subsided and we had the space in the day to gather together.

We each had a role in the preparation of this meal. My brothers set the table while my mom and I prepared food from pan to serving dish. My dad sat at the head of the table with a pie pan filled with water at his side and dipped *bánh tráng* into the perfectly shallow dish for us.

Having done our part, we sat down at the table, the smell of ginger and soy sauce wafting through the house. Surrounded by mountains of vegetables and noodles, we assembled our rolls with perfected ratios of fish to noodles to herbs. Silence lapsed as we chewed our carefully (or not-so-thoughtfully) constructed rolls until someone proclaimed a random thought and question. Conversation ebbed and flowed throughout the meal.

*Gỏi cuốn* accommodates these family conversations and my family dynamic. The chewiness of each *gỏi cuốn* roll allows for lulls in conversation and the assembly of the rolls draws out the time for us to simply be together. We are not the family that endlessly chatters over the personal details of our lives. We share our lives with each other as the details meander into our minds and on occasion, fervently relay stories when they were worth the theatrics. Intermittent conversations would drift off as we rolled another *gỏi cuốn* roll or passed noodles across the table. By merely being at the same table together, we silently expressed our appreciation for each other.

Back in my apartment, I glanced around my empty table and breathed in the stillness of the early evening. The quiet did not come with the warmth of sitting at a full table. Instead, this quietness was hollow. I imagined my family at home readying the table twice as wide as my own, my mom calling my brothers to come eat. Maybe they talked about the picture I sent them. Maybe my brothers told a story worth telling.

Meanwhile, I rolled myself a *gỏi cuốn* roll, draping a slim row of noodles atop a lettuce leaf and stacking the rest of the fillings. After tightly rolling it up, I took my first bite. Not too bad, I thought, as my chewing grew loud amidst the silence of my apartment. Next time, I'll need to add more soy sauce to the fish. And maybe gather some friends around the table, too.

JULIANNE TRAN is a recent graduate from the University of Tulsa where she studied Political Science and minored in Spanish and Media Studies. This essay is part of a food memoir collection in which she explores the connections between food, culture, and family. She works for Public Radio Tulsa and contributes stories to *TulsaPeople* magazine, while trying to perfect her mother's Vietnamese cooking at home. [juliannetran.com](http://juliannetran.com)



Merry Company, Isack Elyas, 1629.  
Read the catalogue entry to meet the  
dinner guests: rijksmuseum.nl/en



# EAT LIKE AN EARL

## COOKBOOKS *of* MEDIEVAL & EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Prized and practical instruction for meals and manners

SARAH PETERS KERNAN

**F**or several years now, my mom has slowly given me parts of her recipe and cookbook collection. Sometimes the cookbooks are filled with her handwritten notes; other times the books look like new. She also passes along the occasional photocopy from a magazine, typically marked with her comments. I think the ones I treasure most are her handwritten recipe cards, usually the preparations she has prized the longest. She has even gifted me recipe cards with my great-grandma's Cream Puffs (marked "Good") and my grandma's Chocolate Caramel Candy (labeled as her mom's). I love this variety of cookbooks and recipes, added to my own eclectic

collection from antique shops and those with broken bindings and stained pages indicating their status as workhorses of my busy family kitchen.

I start here because most household recipe collections today are like this, a medley of handwritten and printed forms, coexisting in a family for decades. The same is true for people and food traditions of the past. Recipe collections have been around since Antiquity, but the genre really gained a foothold in Western culture by 1300.

### FASHIONABLE FEASTS

Cookbooks emerged at a time when royal households hosted feasts featuring gilded boars' heads, peacocks restuffed in their own skin and feathers, elaborate sugar sculptures, and pies filled with live birds (just like the nursery rhyme). Giant spits turned perfectly roasted meats, an English specialty, while coastal waters and stock ponds provided ample marine life to consume. Gold, ambergris, and saffron could be found on the wealthiest tables. It was a creative, colorful, imaginative time for dining, and cookbooks emerged to document the culinary traditions.

Early generations of English cookbooks were filled with experimentation. From inexpensive pocket texts to luxurious tomes, authors, scribes, and printers produced a wonderful array of books. Some medieval cookbooks were written in forms now seen as archaic and confusing; for instance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rolled texts were a flexible

and fluid form. With no pages to turn, a reader simply rolled and unrolled to the portion of text needed. It was lightweight and could be flexed into useful positions—on a table, a wall, or held in one's hand. Without the cost of additional labor or materials (lacking a binding and typically undecorated), the roll was an economical choice perfectly suited for a cookbook.

Most manuscript cookbooks, however, were codices copied by hand in the familiar book form used today with pages and bindings. Many of the earliest English cookbooks were closely associated with aristocratic circles, frequently exhibiting relationships to Continental (particularly French) culinary recipes. Throughout England and Europe, court cuisine, fashion, entertainment, and traditions remained fairly standardized, with some regional variations. Feasting was an example of these practices, reflected in medieval cookbooks. Whether used in the kitchen for culinary instruction, by the household steward for planning menus, or as a historical record of the types of dishes a particular household or chef could produce, the circulation of the finest recipes reinforced court culture and cuisine that persisted for centuries.

Fourteenth-century cookbooks catered to the aristocracy in several ways. Some are explicit, as in the *Forme of Cury* which trumpets authorship within King Richard II's household in coordination with its cooks, physicians, and scribes. In



Fourteenth-century scroll copy of the *Viandier*, a French cookbook collection of 133 recipes. Médiathèque Valais, Ms. S 108 recto.



Banquet Still Life, Adriaen van Utrecht, 1644. rijksmuseum.nl/en

manuscripts like *Utilis coquinairo*, lavish ingredients and preparations suggest a high-ranking audience. Birds like peacock and swan, game meats, and varieties of fish like lamprey, were accessible only to the wealthiest households. Large quantities of spices also suggest authorship and readership within illustrious circles. At a time of uncertainty, when the entire population grappled with disasters like the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death, and a series of major famines, the exchange of recipes among households of status reinforced strict social ties and conventions that set the upper classes apart.

### EDIBLE ASPIRATIONS

By the fifteenth century, noble households were not the only recipe collectors in England. Professionals of all kinds were part of a rapidly rising social class. Owning a cookbook of courtly cuisine was a handy way to learn how and what to eat, particularly if one was born into a lower social class. While physicians and surgeons regularly turned to food and diet as a way of preventing ills and easing symptoms, they probably turned to their cookbooks for distinctly non-medical advice, too: that is, how to eat like an earl. Entire cookbooks were sometimes tucked alongside urinalysis charts, bloodletting manuals, and details on the medicinal uses of plants. Like medical professionals, lawyers and merchants included cookery instructions in their manuscripts.

A new technology emerged in the mid-fifteenth century, which would forever change the cookbook genre: the printing press. Cookbooks were printed by the 1480s elsewhere in Europe, but in England it was 1500 before the first printed cookbook hit the market.

The English gentry was especially ready for this development, a group of readers that avidly collected and read household and husbandry texts. Cookbooks and recipe books were an important component of libraries, serving as guides to living according to one's status. Much like medieval predecessors, the first English cookbook, Richard Pynson's *Book of Cookery* (published as *Boke of Cokery* in 1500), featured menus of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century feasts and 275 late medieval recipes like bucknade, leche lombarde, eles in bruet, and sauce camelyne. The *Book of Cookery* extended knowledge to more people, appealing to elite households as a tool for planning meals, as well as aspiring to be more like their social superiors.

English readers waited until 1545 for the next cookbook, though it was aimed at the gentry in every way. *A Proper New Book of Cookery* was popular enough to warrant seven editions from 1545 to the 1570s and showcased a recent innovation, a title page to advertise to non-noble readers. Rather than printing menus of actual feasts, the anonymous author recommended meal courses and recipes for distinctly early modern dishes



Still Life with a Turkey Pie, Pieter Claesz, 1627. rijksmuseum.nl/en

like stewed tripe, tarts, and mutton. The detailed recipe instructions aided gentry kitchens, which lacked the more knowledgeable, experienced cooks of noble ones.

### DELIGHTFUL DOMESTICITY

Women certainly owned cookbooks long before they were specifically targeted as consumers. Margaret Parker, wife of Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker, owned a copy of *A Proper New Book of Cookery* printed around 1558. After a century of print, English printers began producing cookbooks for women. John Partridge's *The Treasure of Commodious Conceits: The Huswivies Closet, of healthfull prouision* (1573) was the first of these. In all, twenty-three editions of six women's cookbooks were printed from 1573 to 1600; thirty-four editions of eight different books were printed from 1573 to 1609. Authors, printers, and booksellers viewed gentlewomen, particularly those emulating aristocratic dining and home-keeping, as the most likely consumers of this exploding genre.

Sixteenth-century cookbooks for women contained not only culinary recipes and menus but also medical and domestic advice, projecting an ideal image: a domestic goddess capable of sustaining her family with delicious meals; preparing delights of sweetmeats and preserves; curing medical ailments; furnishing the

household with inks, perfumes, and powders; all while acting as the consummate hostess for gentle guests. The texts are a window into general expectations of the Tudor period—arts well within the purview of wealthier gentlewomen, as they required expensive ingredients, particularly sugar. Except for confectionary and medical preparations, women of this stature were not typically involved in the physical act of cooking, and then only with assistance from household servants.

### CARE-FILLED COLLECTIONS

Much like trends today, tomes by celebrity chefs were a seventeenth-century sensation. Chefs of noble and royal households shaped their legacies and entrenched culinary ideas across Europe. Robert May was the first English chef to create such a cookbook with *The Accomplisht Cook* (1660), quickly followed by William Rabisha's *The whole body of cookery dissected, taught, and fully manifested, methodically, artificially, and according to the best tradition of the English, French, Italian, Dutch, &c.* (1661). These volumes, often peppered with patterns and small illustrations, were larger and more expensive than those targeting housewives.

Printed cookbooks were obviously popular—across social groups—purchased, read, and used by the nobility, gentry, and middling

classes. At the same time, personally assembled manuscript collections, called recipe books or receipt books, remained treasured texts. Collectors included an abundance of personal information, as well as evidence of their social networks and communities. It is not uncommon to find remarks about the people who gifted recipes, and details about when or where a recipe was collected or prepared. Compilers created systems of symbols to note the efficacy of recipes, writing comments in the margins about the culinary process and final results. They sometimes practiced their handwriting and arithmetic alongside the recipes. Collections contained recipes not only from printed sources but also a wide range of culinary, medical, and household advice, collected and gifted from family, friends, and neighbors—even incorporating family documents like wills—often compiled over the course of generations, with multiple owners recorded in the book.

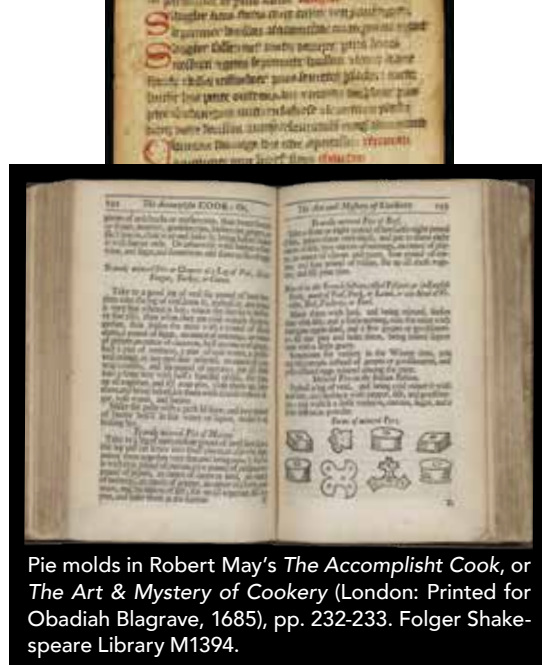
As the British Empire expanded throughout the following centuries, this manuscript tradition spread around the globe. Sometimes recipe books were started in one part of the Empire and completed in another, while other books were amassed in one colonial location. No matter where they were written, colonial recipe books were just as likely to be passed down through generations of a single family.

The cookbook genre was remarkably flexible during the Middle Ages and early period, adapting and incorporating new features and innovations. Cookbooks then, as now, served as reminders of culinary and familial roots, drawing readers to the people and places they hold dear.

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**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “How to Cook a Medieval Feast: 11 Recipes from the Middle Ages,” Dec. 16, 2020, The British Museum Blog. Steak, cabbage, lamb, mushrooms—it’s all on the menu. [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)



Pie molds in Robert May’s *The Accomplish Cook, or The Art & Mystery of Cookery* (London: Printed for Obadiah Blagrove, 1685), pp. 232-233. Folger Shakespeare Library M1394.



LEFT: *A Closet for Ladies and Gentlewomen* (London: A. Johnson, 1611), p. 30. Wellcome Library EPB/A/5099.2. RIGHT: *A Proper New Book of Cookery* (London: William How for A. Veale, 1575). British Library C.31.a.14.



Pages from Jane Dawson’s seventeenth-century recipe book, pp. 6-7. Folger Shakespeare Library Ms. V.b.14.



# CORN AND CACAO

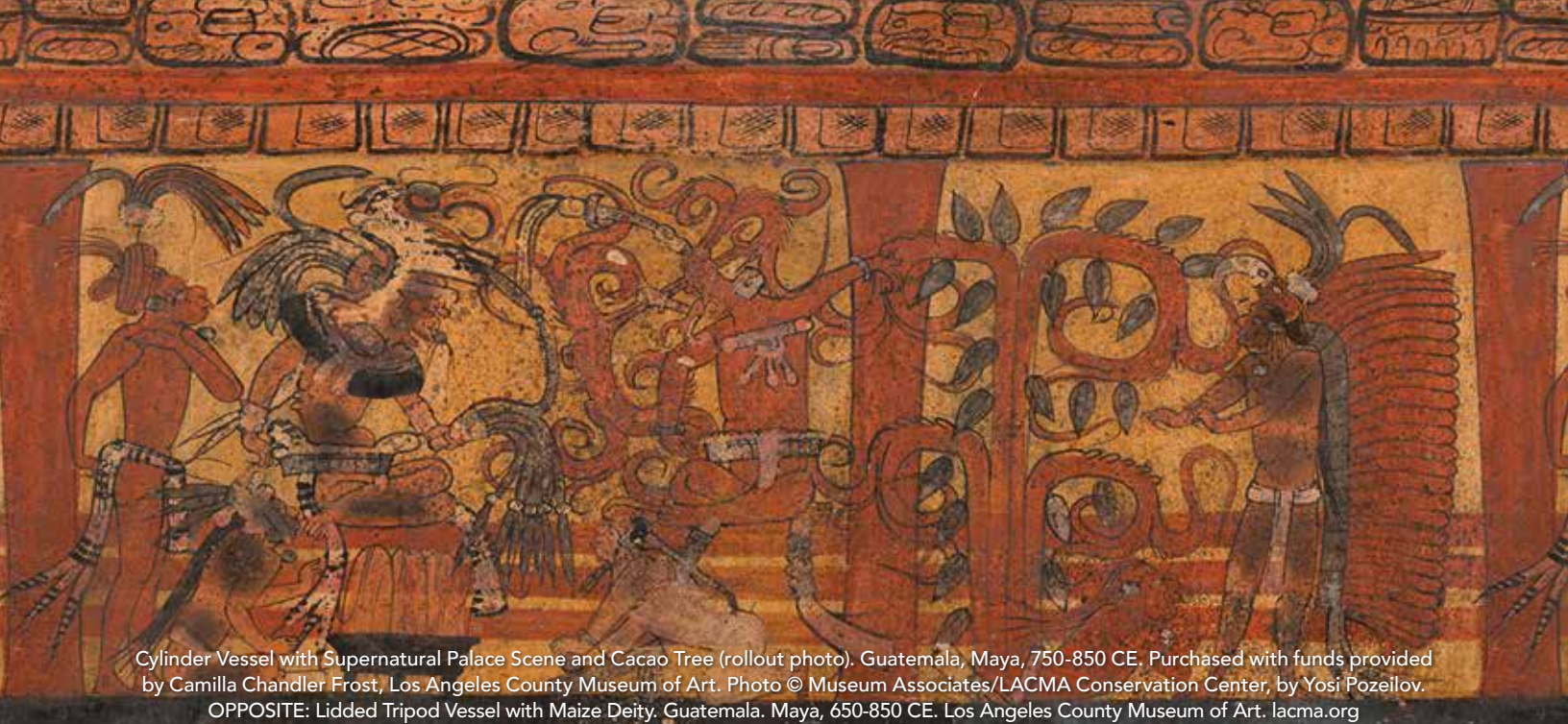
## Twins of Sun and Shadow

BRUCE DEAN WILLIS

Maya thought on reverence and sustenance

**H**ere in the Heartland, the moniker “corn-fed” is a point of pride. A road trip through Oklahoma and surrounding states is sure to feature row after row of corn growing “as high as an elephant’s eye.” Our temperate region has a great climate for it.

Corn was originally hybridized in the tropics from a native grass familiar to the peoples of southern Mexico. By the time Europeans arrived in the Americas, corn (or maize) had already become the main staple of the Western Hemisphere. Cultivation of various kinds spread from Canada to Argentina and to the Caribbean islands.



Cylinder Vessel with Supernatural Palace Scene and Cacao Tree (rollout photo). Guatemala, Maya, 750-850 CE. Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA Conservation Center, by Yosi Pozeilov. OPPOSITE: Lidded Tripod Vessel with Maize Deity. Guatemala. Maya, 650-850 CE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. lacma.org

### Corn as Kin

The Maya are one of the great early peoples of the Americas whose civilization thrived thanks to the widespread cultivation of corn. It is a debt they recognized and celebrated, perhaps most by the K'iche' Maya in their story of the creation of the world known as the *Popol Vuh*.

As the story goes, it took three tries for the gods to create people, failing first using mud and then wood. When the animals—coyotes, foxes, ravens, and parrots—brought them ears of yellow corn and white corn, the gods ground the kernels into cornmeal and made a dough. From that dough (or *masa*) they created the Maya ancestors. This is why corn is considered sacred, revered as the most important crop. It is the source of cornmeal used to make tortillas, tamales, and many other dishes—and is thus the literal sustenance of life. Even today some Maya believe that corn can be shared but should never be sold, for who would sell their own family?

Corn as kin is a common theme in Maya culture. Together with beans and squash, corn forms the core of the Three Sisters or *milpa* agricultural method developed by the Maya and adapted as it spread north and south. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes

in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the Three Sisters help each other grow through “layers of reciprocity,” ranging from physical support (the cornstalk supports the climbing bean vine) to mutually beneficial chemical and nutritional interactions. The vast cornfields of the Heartland today show a very different monoculture system in which corn is the only crop. Yet the polyculture practice of planting the Three Sisters together still thrives, especially among Indigenous populations in the Heartland region.

### Cacao as Rebirth

Another “family” relationship has recently come to light, thanks to new research by chocolatologist Valentine Tibère. Corn has not only two sisters (squash and beans) and many descendants (humanity) but also a twin: cacao. How could maize, a type of grass needing full sun, be the twin of cacao, a shade-loving tree? In a botanical sense, corn is no more the twin of cacao than it is the sister of beans and squash. But the Maya observed the visual similarity between rows of kernels on a corncob and the rows of beans inside the cacao pod and saw a twinship—a fascinating insight into the ways the Maya thought, and still think, about the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.



Originally from northern South America, cacao thrives exclusively in the tropics and requires substantial shade and humidity. Cacao pods grow directly from the tree trunk and contain beans that are the source of chocolate. Long before modern science identified the presence of caffeine in cacao and the plant's signature stimulant theobromine, the Maya considered chocolate to be regenerative and energizing. Corn may be the sunny, sacred sustenance of life, but cacao is the shadowy source of restoration and rebirth.

### From Fish to Stars

This pairing of opposites gave rise to the main part of the *Popol Vuh* creation story: a tale of hero twins who die, are reborn, and ascend to the sky. On a quest to the underworld, the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque are drawn by the lords of the underground who challenge them to a ball game. The twins endure many trials and are ultimately killed, but they trick the lords of the underworld into resurrecting them. Following the twins' instructions, the lords grind a paste from their bones and from that paste are born two fish.

Valentine Tibère suggests the possible connection between these fish and the Mayan glyph for chocolate: a fish with two dots and an appendage. In their book *True History of Chocolate*, Sophie and Michael Coe relate how the glyph was one of the first examples of Mayan writing to be

understood. Tibère further links the fish glyph to a particular native species known locally as the walking catfish. These fish can survive for long periods buried in the mud, re-emerging when the rains come, looking like they are coated in chocolate as they crawl back to water. In the *Popol Vuh*, the hero twins transform into these proto-human catfish, then become humans again before a final metamorphosis when they transcend to the sky as the morning star and evening star (the orbital positions of the planet Venus).

The entire saga represents a cycle: The gods in the sky create the first humans by grinding corn for their flesh; similarly, the lords of the underworld grind the bones of the hero twins, through which they are resurrected and return to the sky. Cacao goes unnamed in this process, yet its fish glyph seemingly encapsulates the twins' story.

The culinary symbolism reflects the grinding of cacao beans, as well as corn kernels, on the volcanic grinding stone (*metate*), transforming those ingredients, which then transcend, into food.

### Parallels of Reverence and Sustenance

In traditional Maya and Mesoamerican understandings of the universe, the world is sustained by four (sometimes five) giant trees.

The designation of specific trees varies, but many include the cacao tree and maize plant. Corn and cacao are recognized symbolically as plants that sustain humanity and hold the sky in place.



To honor the link with corn and its use to form humans at the beginning of time, some scholars suggest that Maya nobility habitually “formed” the skulls of their infants, binding small boards to the head to elongate them. The result was a distinctly corncob-shaped profile, physically marking the debt to corn, further accentuated by hair limited to a single ponytail resembling a corn tassel.

Cacao, too, was revered. In *Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods*, Meredith L. Dreiss and Sharon Edgar Greenhill note that the cacao tree was often depicted in Mayan iconography as a crocodile with an upended tail sprouting cacao pods. Crocodiles of the region are known to back into a riverbank, tails lifted, to scoop out a nest to lay their eggs. Maya observers, who honored crocodiles as ancient animals and began their calendar count with the day called *imix* (crocodile), had perhaps seen cacao trees growing from the abandoned nests. Cacao was thus connected to rebirth, intrinsically as crocodile hatchlings and metaphorically with a new calendar count. Humans with heads shaped like corncobs and crocodiles depicted with cacao pods blooming from

their tails underlie the Maya transformational understanding of humans and their environment.

Corn and cacao can mirror each other in cultivation methods, too. Ethnographers Mario Aliphath Fernández and Laura Caso Barrera documented a “chocolate *milpa*” among the Q’eqchi’ Maya. Like the more widespread *milpa* of corn, beans, and squash, the chocolate *milpa* integrates plant species to form a cohesive, sustainable agricultural system. Instead of bean vines curling around cornstalks, the vanilla vine—native to Mexico—loops around the cacao tree. The third species, *madre de cacao* (mother of cacao), are tall trees that provide necessary shade for shorter cacao trees and drop debris to enrich the soil. Protection from insects is provided by the fourth species planted around the perimeter: the achiote bush or “lipstick tree.” The achiote’s spiky pods produce annatto, a common food colorant. The reddish paste was traditionally mixed into chocolate to give it the color of blood. Just as red wine symbolizes the blood of Christ in the Christian communion ceremony, the red-tinged chocolate commemorated divine sacrifices. Several Mesoamerican peoples associated the cacao pod with the human heart and the pods were used at times in sacrifices in place of hearts.

The chocolate *milpa* thus provides several key ingredients for preparing a range of Mesoamerican chocolate drinks: cacao, vanilla for flavor, and annatto for color. Other ingredients could include honey, chilies, herbs, flowers, hallucinogenic substances such as mushrooms or morning glory seeds, and ground corn for flavor and texture. Historically, these beverages were almost always reserved for special occasions and in many communities could only be consumed by merchants, priests, and nobles.

RIGHT: Vessel with Palace Scene. Guatemala. Maya, 600-900 CE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. lacma.org. To the right of this seated figure is a foamy, chocolate drink and beneath him is a plate of tamales covered in mole. OPPOSITE: Cacao Pod Vessel. Guatemala. Maya, 300-600 CE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. lacma.org



## TASCALATE

### Ingredientes:

Tortillas de maíz (10-12)  
Chocolate de mesa (2 barras, o 1 rueda de una marca mexicana como Abuelita)  
Piñones (2 cucharadas)  
Pasta de achiote (2 cucharaditas)  
Agua (½ galón / 2 litros)  
Hielo (1 taza)  
Azúcar, canela al gusto

### Preparación:

En un sartén grande, tueste las tortillas unos 10 minutos a fuego lento hasta que estén duras. Sáquelas del fuego y despedácelas. En el mismo sartén, tueste los piñones. Con una licuadora, mezcle las tortillas despedazadas y los piñones con el chocolate, el achiote, el azúcar y la canela hasta que estén completamente revueltos. Agregue el agua y el hielo, y mezcle de nuevo. Sirva en vasos o tazas y disfrute.

## TASCALATE

### Ingredients:

Corn tortillas (10-12)  
Chocolate de mesa table chocolate (2 sticks or 1 wheel of a Mexican brand such as Abuelita)  
Pine nuts (2 tbsp.)  
Achiote paste or annatto (2 tsp.)  
Water (½ gallon)  
Ice (1 cup)  
Sugar and cinnamon to taste

### Preparation:

In a large frying pan, toast the tortillas for 10 minutes on low heat until they are hard. Remove from heat and break into pieces. In the same pan, toast the pine nuts. Use a blender to mix the tortilla pieces and pine nuts with the chocolate, achiote paste, sugar, and cinnamon until thoroughly mixed. Add the water and ice and blend again. Serve in glasses or cups and enjoy.



## A Toast to Corn and Cacao

Fortunately, cacao can be enjoyed by all—in chocolate candies, pastries, or hot chocolate. In Mexico and Central America, uses are more varied, from complex savory *mole* sauces to lip balm made from cocoa butter. In addition to traditional hot chocolate, cacao is used in a variety of corn-thickened beverages such as the hearty *champurrado*, a chocolate corn gruel.

For a taste of the corn and cacao twins, try the recipe for *tascalate*, a bright-orange, nutty-flavored drink from Chiapas state in southern Mexico. Served warm or iced, it's perfect for sun and shadow.

BRUCE DEAN WILLIS, PhD, is Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at the University of Tulsa. He teaches courses in advanced Spanish and is a specialist in Latin American literatures and cultures. His publications include the monographs *Aesthetics of Equilibrium: The Vanguard Poetics of Vicente Huidobro and Mário de Andrade* and *Corporeality in Early Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature: Body Articulations*. His chapter on cacao will appear in *Understories: Plants and Culture in the American Tropics*, forthcoming from Liverpool University Press.

### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Living Maya Time," Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian website. Explore Maya culture, cosmology, and the infamous doomsday myth. [maya.nmai.si.edu](http://maya.nmai.si.edu)
- "Ancient Maya 101," *National Geographic* video. A snapshot of the Maya civilization: temples, war, writing, and more. [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

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Rainbow Room kitchen staff, 1994. Chef Claire Stewart is standing, middle row, third from right. Renowned for fine dining, the Rainbow Room was declared a New York City Landmark in 2012.

# Dishin' Confidential

*Secrets from a female chef on breaking into the male-dominated kitchens of the past*

CLAIRE STEWART

***A housewife? You think I want to be a housewife?!***

My third-grade teacher had asked the class to draw pictures performing our dream careers. I drew a picture of myself baking—with cookie sheets, wearing an apron, surrounded by pots and pans. Mrs. Steinle went around the classroom commenting on the various sketches of cowboys, ballerinas, and astronauts. When she got to mine, she exclaimed, “How cute! Claire wants to be a housewife.” The treachery of her words cut deeply.

I had no word for “chef” in my vocabulary, as 1972 Sacramento was not a place of haute cuisine. I knew I wanted to cook. I also knew I expected to be *paid* for it. Mrs. Steinle had no knowledge of Stewart’s Place, my

efficient side hustle operated in our palatial ranch house kitchen. My brothers and neighbors were subject to my rotating menu of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with carrot sticks, accented by a full bar. I do not remember actually mixing drinks, but my familiarity with liquor says something about an era with no seatbelts or bike helmets.

Soon I would taste sweet victory when my oatmeal cookies won a Girl Scout baking contest. I was, however, a bit disappointed by the quality of my competition, considering my recipe was the one printed inside the lid of the oatmeal container. When I graduated from chef school years later, my mother presented me with my Girl Scout sash. I had earned exactly one badge: the cooking badge.

Work in local restaurants followed, where I found my people, those whom Anthony Bourdain called “vampires”—culinary creatures of the night, misfits and outcasts made normal in the confines of dirty hot kitchens. At the time, there were females in the kitchens of casual California-style health restaurants, but we certainly weren’t prevalent in the classical continental-style establishments of interest to me.

I had a rebuttal for every obstacle thrown in my path. Was I afraid of being the only female in the kitchen? (No. I had three older brothers. Sporty brothers. Brothers who determined it was more fun to beat me up if I had some training, so they held wrestling and boxing sessions to prepare me for battle. They never really hurt me, and heaven help the neighborhood boy who did hurt me.) Kitchens are noisy and violent? (See above.) The kitchen is hot as a sauna? (Have you *been* to Sacramento?)

I moved across the country from Sacramento in 1989 to study at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York. I lived in a triple dorm room with Stacey and Betsy—and unfortunately with Fred, Betsy’s hairy boyfriend whose presence was not welcome but too often a feature in the bunkbed I shared with Betsy. A year into the program, CIA students were unleashed to do a six-month externship before returning for another year, hardened by the “real world,” which was presumably even more demanding than the school world that threatened to chew up the mild-mannered. We may have been served lobster thermidor and wine in the middle of the day, but intimidation and humiliation were

considered teaching techniques. I was told by one teacher that the reason I was stupid was because I was “in the bathroom fixing my hair when God gave out brains,” to which I was required to reply, “Yes, Chef.”

Instructors weren’t the only challenging personalities. During my practical exam, a fellow student turned up the flame on my consommé which, had I not noticed, would have caused it to boil and become cloudy. When the instructor graded me, he said he was giving me a high pass because he saw what the student did and I had not “whined about it.” He winked and said he knew I would find a way to repay my classmate soon.

Divisiveness was indeed encouraged. I got in a wee fight and was brought to one of the deans to explain myself. I told the truth, that the student was talking trash about me loudly in the bookstore and she needed to stop it and never do it again. I got in no trouble, didn’t even receive a demerit. Students were sent home due to demerits, as big a disgrace as not passing your practical exam. As students we squabbled and fought, name-called, and then drank together at Augie’s, the campus bar named after Auguste Escoffier.

Man, I loved that school.

My introduction to high-profile kitchens could only be described as “rough and rumble.” To catch a train to Grand Central Station for an externship interview at Windows on the World, I took a cab and saw my precious \$20 tick by in rush hour traffic. I breathlessly rushed between two elevators to get to the kitchen on the 107<sup>th</sup> floor. The elevator slid open to total pandemonium. I stood dumb. When a young man in chef’s uniform walked by, I smiled and asked

politely if he could tell me where the Head Chef’s office was. He stared at me coldly and said, “No.”

The kitchen manager kept his back to me throughout the entire interview, only spinning his chair around when I started to leave. It had been so long since he had spoken, I figured the interview was over. He did ask me when I could start. I had no money to return to Grand Central via cab, so I navigated, terrified, the subway to Rockefeller Center where I next had an interview at Rainbow Room. It, too, was pandemonium, but it was a beautifully controlled chaos held together by the best in the business. I gladly worked like an animal throughout my externship there and was offered a job once I graduated the following year.

I started my full-time job at Rainbow the Monday after graduation, earning enough money to afford a dingy studio in Chelsea. Living alone in Manhattan is a luxury few young people know today. We could serve an excess of one thousand covers a night, with evening service beginning at 5:00 to get patrons out in time to attend Broadway shows. Next came dinner service, and finally supper, designed for post-theater customers. We joked that management would next add twilight and dawn services.

For reasons unknown, the chefs called one another by their mother’s names (Mary Lou, Dot, Marion), particularly amusing since there is nowhere with as much testosterone surging as a hot line in a restaurant kitchen. When tensions between the tuxedo-clad wait staff and the chefs were particularly palpable, a kitchen rumble would be called. Someone would yell, “Rumble!” and fists would fly, waiters running back down the

kitchen-to-dining room escalator, ready to defend their brethren. Small amounts of blood would spill, there were some scratches and torn clothes, but everyone had to get back to work, so it never lasted long. I suspect they all held back. It was against honor code to introduce the knives just within reach. I was not expected to participate of course—these were *gentlemen* who would never hit a woman. Soon the chef would yell, “Ice ‘em down!” and the Commis (the most junior chef) knew he was to pile ice on the enormous rolling cooler of beers that signaled a return to service.

**N**ext, I briefly worked in Oxford, England, where I came to appreciate the privileges of American citizenship. I was surprised when asked on job interviews how old I was and whether I was married. I quickly found a job at a well-known restaurant as a Chef de Partie, a chef who rotates working a dedicated station for the day, such as the Saucier or Grillardine. I didn’t have the proper working papers, so the Head Chef reported that my “special skills” were needed. I was a pancake expert, you see, and was needed to fill a void in this area of American expertise. On my first day of work, the self-proclaimed leader of the cooks announced that he did not like me, did not like women in the kitchen, and did not like Americans. I told him he would need to pack a lunch. He especially did not like my American accent, which was incessantly mocked with singsong voices and snickers.

My tongs disappeared constantly, my ingredients tipped over, my oven turned off. They really had nothing new. One cook (to be fair, he was not

English) had given me enough grief and I knew that it was time for me to engage. It is an old trick to take someone’s tongs and put them in the flame until just before white hot. He should have known this. The howl that he gave when he picked up his tongs moments later was quite loud and the names he called me were at least original.

The kitchen crew soon deemed more force was needed to put me in my place. Cooks were required to shout, “Sauté off the line,” or “Tournant back on the line,” to allow the Head Chef to track when someone was out of earshot, thus unable to hear an incoming order or pickup. In the middle of a busy service, I scampered into the restroom and, after quickly doing my business, found I could not get the door open to exit. They had locked me in. I had orders to be picked up and could hear more coming. Imagine their surprise when I soon arrived back at my station. Climbing up on a milk crate, shimmying through a window, and coming in the kitchen’s back door had not been that hard. “Saucier back on the line,” I called. The Head Chef, finally angered by his staff’s poor behavior, announced he was giving me the Fourth of July off, paid, the following week. He wrote me a generous letter of reference and sheepishly admitted he perhaps could have reined in his “boys” earlier. No #metoo back then.

**M**y first professional kitchen title was as a Banquet Chef, responsible for multiple simultaneous events, at an enormously profitable restaurant in New Jersey. I worked ceaselessly and was never paid overtime, the other side of a management title. I found myself

surrounded by drunks. The leader, whose name I do not think I ever knew, was called Captain Morgan. He looked exactly like the man on the bottle, and it was clear he was familiar with the product. It was there I got third-degree burns when a pan of bubbling hot duck à l’orange cascaded down my forearms, its hot goo sticking to, then removing my skin. More collateral added to the burns, cuts, and scars that laced my arms.

Hazards extended beyond the kitchen in this so-called glamorous profession. I worked for New York City’s first family, cooking weekends at Gracie Mansion. One late night I returned to my car parked in a commercial garage on the Upper East Side. Snow was starting to fall and I was nervous about my drive home. My Honda Civic was idling nearby while the attendant was unable to process my bank card. He yelled at me to walk to an ATM and get cash. I insisted it was too late to go to an ATM by myself in the middle of the night and it was his issue with the card system anyway. He continued to berate me (inexplicably calling me an expletive I cannot repeat here) and turned to the warmth of his little parking-man hut to make a phone call. I leapt into my car and peeled off. He was welcome to call the police, whom I was sure would at least get me home safely. He ran up the driveway behind me, screaming insults and shaking his fist. It was not until blocks away that I stopped shaking. I would like to say that I mailed money the next day, but I’m sure I didn’t. It was the expletive that got to me.

Any port in a storm, they say. I once rented a room in a wonderful apartment overlooking Riverside



LEFT: During a year-long tour celebrating her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1993, famed chef Julia Child visited the Rainbow Room, where Claire Stewart was one of only three female kitchen staff. As Stewart recalls, “She came into the kitchen to meet the chefs and made a beeline to me, asked my name, and spoke with me and the two other women. She asked the chef why she didn’t see more women in the kitchen. I had worked briefly for her before at the Aspen Food and Wine Festival. She said she remembered me, which probably wasn’t true, but her graciousness was unbelievable. A year later she came back to Rainbow, headed into the kitchen, and asked to see the girls. I happened to be the only one that night and she spent time with me asking about my job and what I wanted to do in the future.” BELOW: Stewart’s childhood menu (1972) announces grand ambitions: “Welcome to the luxury of Stewart’s Place food.”



Park. The owner was an opera singer. It turned out that she was an *insane* opera singer, who rented hourly use of her grand piano to random musicians who felt free to wander into my bedroom, use the shared bathroom, and eat any food in the kitchen. When she initially interviewed me, I mentioned that I would be keeping late hours due to my job. The very first night I came home and headed for the shower, she stood in the doorway and slyly declared that she knew what I was doing “out catting around late in the evening.” She left for a European tour, leaving her multitude of cats with no food and no litter, trusting that the unemployed actor in the other room and I would care for them. We did. We both moved out as soon as she returned. She kept our deposits.

**I**t all seems so long ago. I worked in professional kitchens for over thirty years. Stacey and I remain best friends, the type of friends who once served in combat together. The profession has evolved, though. Executive chefs can no longer

announce they are eager to see who they can get to cry first.

There is one constant I carry with me always: The great Chef Charles Koegler told his students repeatedly, “Let your work speak for you.” Late into my forties, I returned to school to complete my bachelor’s degree in English and later a master’s degree in Liberal Studies. I was a wife and mother and had a new full-time job teaching culinary arts. I found myself in classes with PhD candidates half my age. The first day of each semester at least one hipster would smirk as we did introductions, sometimes openly asking what I was doing there. I asked them how it was living in their parents’ basement. Professors were usually more circumspect, but I could tell they were wondering if I could keep up. Invariably, midway through the semester the professor would take a shine to me, maddening the pedigreed others. I always did the reading. I was never late. I never missed class. I followed instructions. I listened.

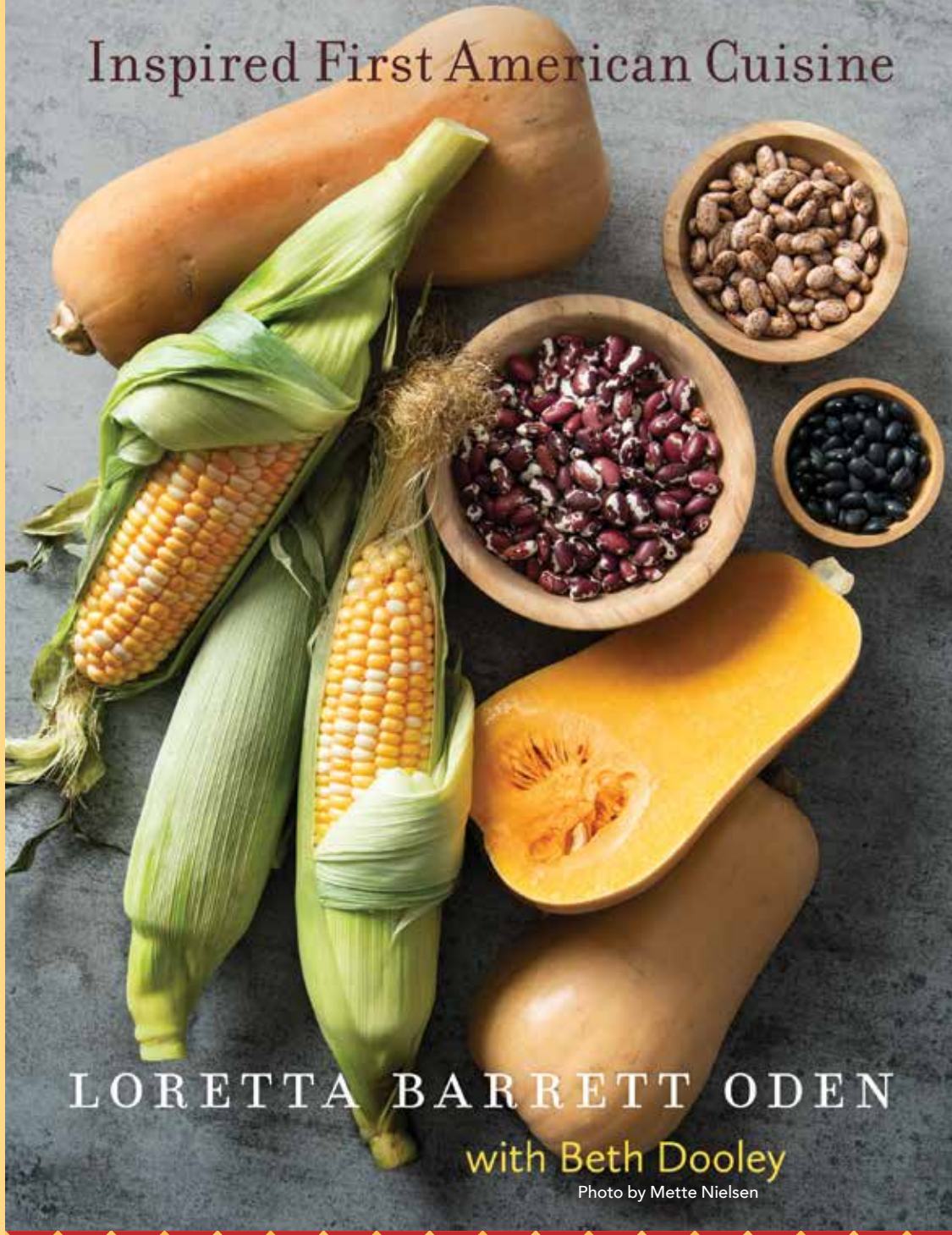
I was not and am not an intellectual. But I know how to work. I just

put my head down and work. That ethic earned me a master’s degree in a top graduate program. And tenure. And a great job. Today I teach restaurant management at the City University of New York, enjoying a different and far more sedate life. I can still throw down if I need to—and I always let my work speak for itself.

CLAIRE STEWART is author of *As Long as We Both Shall Eat: A History of Wedding Food and Feasts* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). She is a contributor to *Savoring Gotham: A Food Lover’s Companion to New York City* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015) and *We Eat What? A Cultural Encyclopedia of Unusual Foods in the United States* (ABC-CLIO, 2018). Stewart’s chapter on controversial 1950s food personality Poppy Cannon was included in *Consumption and the Literary Cookbook* (Routledge, 2021).

# CORN DANCE

Inspired First American Cuisine



LORETTA BARRETT ODEN

with Beth Dooley

Photo by Mette Nielsen

I was born in Shawnee, Oklahoma, blessed with amazing Grandmothers, Great Grandmothers, Aunties, Great Aunties, and a beautiful Mother who taught me to garden and cook. I am proud of my origins as a member of the Potawatomi people. My relatives were relocated from the Great Lakes region to Mayetta, Kansas, with the Prairie Band Potawatomi. My tribe split from the Prairie Band and moved to Indian Territory, known today as Oklahoma. In later years, our tribal chairman, my brother Rocky Barrett, changed the name to Citizen Potawatomi Nation.





Oklahoma, home to thirty-nine tribes, is truly the “Melting Pot of Indian Country.” My Potawatomi Grandmother Peltier, my Mom’s Mom, had a profound influence on my life. She took my hand from babyhood forward, and her teachings are woven into my psyche and spirit. We sang as we planted beans, corn, and squash (the Three Sisters); we sang as our crops grew and we touched them tenderly, praying for rain and sun; and at harvest, we gave thanks to Mother Earth for her bounty.

In the spring, we gathered young poke, lambsquarters, dandelion, and other wild greens, then the wild blackberries and strawberries and those luscious first tomatoes. We fished and giggered frogs, a must in the hot summers, and we devoured huge watermelons and sweet cantaloupes, their sticky juices running down our arms. Later in the summer and into the fall, we collected wild possum grapes, sand plums, pecans, and walnuts, as well as the native persimmons, but only after the first frost: Take a bite of one before that and you’d really pucker up, a mistake you’d make only once! But, when ripe, oh, how rich and luscious the delicious persimmon pudding and bread! The “men folk,” as Grandma Peltier called them, went hunting for deer, squirrel, possum, raccoon, and wild fowl—turkey, duck, goose, quail, prairie chicken, pheasant, and dove. In earlier times, the buffalo roamed.

My Mother, Annetta, was a gorgeous woman (and I was her 18th birthday gift). She could make anything grow and had the voice of an angel. She and her four sisters, my beautiful Aunties, guided me as I grew. What one did not know, the other could always answer, no matter how many questions I asked. Mom handled a mule and

plow with the best of them. Everything that I know today I owe to them. My childhood kitchens were the warm and happy gathering places that I remember with much joy. But no doubt, those were hard times too.

Grandma’s tiny house was insulated with flour paste and newspaper. When there was enough money, she’d put up pretty flowered wallpaper. She rolled and baked feather-light biscuits and delicate, flaky, perfectly crimped pie crust. She taught me to crack eggs and mix cornmeal for the cornbread that we’d bake in a skillet seasoned with the bacon fat she kept in the red Folgers can by the stove. I’d stand on a chair turned backward to reach her counter, the apron she’d made for me out of a flour sack tied snugly around my waist.

As a kid, I’d go with Grandma, Mom, and Grandpa to “the Agency” to pick up the “food products” from our reservation’s Food Distribution. These commodities, “the commods”—white flour, powdered milk, lard, bricks of orange cheese product, pinto beans, and Spam—were our pantry staples. As I stood in line, I could hear women gossip and share recipes for plum jam, cornbread, corn dumplings, hominy stew, and the latest hamburger and macaroni casserole. The men stood under the shade trees, smoking their hand-rolled cigarettes and talking. At the time, I was too young to realize that I was hearing so many different Native languages. My Grandma, Mom, and Aunts spoke our Native tongue—Potawatomi—but they never spoke it in front of the kids for fear we’d become “too Indian.” We spoke only English in our home; yet the languages of gardening, cooking, hospitality, and generosity are encoded in my bones.

I grew up in two very different worlds divided by class and culture. My Mom's Potawatomi family lived apart from my Dad's family, whose ancestors had crossed on the Mayflower. (My Dad's Mom, Grandma Deenie, was a card-carrying member of DAR, Daughters of the American Revolution). They lived in a beautiful sprawling ranch home, where I learned table manners and social etiquette and took piano, ballet, and tap lessons.

Dad taught me to ride horseback and to hunt. We'd head out to the duck blind on cold, misty mornings, sip black coffee, and use his specially carved duck calls. Surprisingly, my very genteel Grandma Deenie was an avid fisherwoman. She and I would fish until late in the evening; she was quite adept at gutting, scaling, and frying our catch in a pan.

Our two families did not mingle, so as I grew, I learned to walk in two worlds and be as independent and fearless as the women who raised me. My very happiest years were spent raising two sons, Clay and Craig, on our beautiful ranch land just north of Oklahoma City, not far from both of my families' homes. When they left for college, and my nest was empty, I knew then it was time to spread my wings.

At age 48, I yearned to learn about this world. I needed to travel, to grow, to research my ancestral lineage to understand myself and my life's purpose. I moved to LA to start fresh, and it was there, as I began to meet other members of my extended Potawatomi family and explore my heritage, that a lightbulb went off in my head. I could get Italian food, French food, this food, that food, from chefs who could trace their culinary roots. But what, I wanted to know, did my ancestors eat? It couldn't have been fry bread and Indian tacos. So I reached out to my relations in other regions—elders, wise men and women—and began tracking down traditional cooks who practiced the “old ways.” Just about every person I met sent me off to meet another cook or elder they thought I should talk to. Then that person would send me off to someone else.

As I traveled among the Northern Woodlands and the Great Lakes, I harvested wild rice in canoes and tapped maple trees and boiled sap into syrup and sugar.

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I believe we are connected to life when we sit down together over a good meal.

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Along the East Coast, I cooked lobsters, crabs, and fish on the beaches and learned to make authentic Iroquois white cornbread. All through the Gulf Coast's bayous and marshlands, I cooked crawfish and alligator with the elders and learned gumbo from the Houma, the Chitimacha, and the Choctaw. I witnessed firsthand how our mountains, rivers, lakes, and oceans have defined how we live, and I came to understand that our Native cuisine is as rich and varied as that of France, Italy, or any other country.

I knew, of course, the hard, devastating history of Native Americans, of the impact of colonization on our traditions, language, culture, and health, especially our health.



Before European contact, diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and tooth decay—all chronic health issues linked to diet—did not exist in our tribes. Today, because of the Native American diet based on commodity foods, many of our people are suffering terribly: among the Tohono O’odham (Pima) of southern Arizona, seventy percent of the population has diabetes. Oklahoma itself is the fourth most obese state in the country.

As Dr. John Mohawk, the revered Seneca scholar whom I met on my journey, has said, our health, our environment, our climate, and our future depend on maintaining an intimate relationship with the natural world. I saw my purpose as working with food to forge those connections and thus heal our bodies, nature, and communities.

Thanks to my Grandmothers, Mom, and Aunties, I knew how to cook. And I’d had some restaurant experience working in the oldest barbecue joint in Oklahoma, Van’s Pig Stand, owned by my first husband’s family. After crisscrossing the continent—from the shores of the Pacific Northwest to the southeast tip of Florida—visiting reservations, cooking with the elders, diligently recording recipes. It was time for me to act. As far as I knew, very few restaurants served tribal specialties—Puget Sound oysters, Shawnee wild elk, Navajo squash soup, Minnesota wild rice, and Houma shrimp.

In 1993, my son Clay and I opened Corn Dance Café, the first restaurant to truly showcase the vast variety and diversity of Indigenous foods of the Americas. We chose Santa Fe for its bounty of local ingredients and took over Maria Ysabelle’s New Mexican Food at the end of a dead-end street. We rolled up our sleeves and got to work, fixing the rotted floor, replacing antiquated equipment, and sanding and painting rickety chairs and old tables in brilliant crayon colors. We engaged local craftspeople and artists who traded their time and talent for our dishes—a metalsmith created a gorgeous iron gate for the courtyard, and local photographers, weavers, and painters hung their art on our walls. Our quirky, casual southwestern vibe drew members of AIM (American Indian Movement), along with a roster of celebrities—Graham Greene, Joy Harjo, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Sherman Alexie, N. Scott Momaday, Ali McGraw, Wes Studi, Gene Hackman, and Marsha Mason, to name just a few.

Our dishes of pre-European-contact ingredients—bison, rabbit, elk, wild rice, quinoa, and the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash)—combined classic culinary,



Photo by Mette Nielsen

### Easy Tomatillo Guacamole

- ½ pound tomatillos, husks removed
- 1 jalapeño
- 3 avocados, peeled, pitted, and coarsely chopped
- ½ cup chopped cilantro
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice, or more to taste
- ½ teaspoon salt, or to taste

On a hot grill or under a broiler, char the tomatillos and the jalapeño. Using a damp paper towel, rub any of the charred peel off the jalapeño and remove the seeds. Chop the jalapeño and the tomatillos and transfer them to a medium bowl. Add the avocados. With the back of a fork, mash the avocado with the tomatillos and jalapeño, and then mash in the lime juice and salt. Taste and adjust the seasonings. Makes about 2½ cups.



Photos by Mette Nielsen

home cooking, and ancient practices, such as smoking and salting. Our menu reflected dishes from Nunavut to Tierra del Fuego.

The theme that was established at Corn Dance, and that I hope resonates through all my work, is that food is sacred. When I cook and present at conferences or am simply serving those who now dine at Thirty Nine Restaurant at First Americans Museum, I am intent that this beautiful, healing food be prepared, served, and enjoyed with respect.

Corn Dance Café drew national attention in travel magazines and on the food pages of major newspapers. I was invited to cook on *Good Morning America*, *Today*, and the Food Network, and these appearances were always scheduled at Thanksgiving. Anytime the media wanted an Indian, they called me. I realized that we were considered an extinct species, though we are everywhere. I seized these media opportunities to share our history and culture through food and created the TV series I hosted for PBS—*Seasoned with Spirit*. It earned an Emmy award.

I moved back to Oklahoma because I had grandkids sprouting up. Clay died, suddenly and devastatingly, and my life has never been the same. I took the heartbreak and focused on healing myself, and our people. Food is medicine! Healthy, natural food is a powerful tool

in addressing the issues related to the American diet. So for the past thirty years, I've served as a mentor, teacher, and food justice advocate, sharing my knowledge and passion.

I've helped forge an intertribal network of ranchers, farmers, and fishermen, creating jobs as well as nurturing young people. Nothing gives me more pleasure than sharing my experiences with cooks of all ages—from working with our Native kids in summer gardening and cooking programs to work with elders on health issues. I've created programs and classes for college students, community leaders, nutritionists, and health professionals.

I'm a founding council member of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance, working shoulder to shoulder, spatula to spatula, to connect tribal citizens across the country to our traditional growing and cooking practices. I have had to navigate the complicated politics of this region, indeed our country, to try to create culturally relevant dishes to make our people proud.

My work is more than just creating dishes and talking about them. I believe we are connected to life when we sit down together over a good meal. Psychologists posit that each of us has one or two primary means by which we communicate (and receive) love, but they don't typically include food as a love language. I use food as the forum



to speak to my own community, the broader Native community, and to non-Native people. If we can come together at the table, we will come together in peace.

For as long as I can, I will cook for events and educate the next generation. My most recent endeavor is as the Indigenous food consultant to Thirty Nine Restaurant at First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City. This is how I share my knowledge, and this is what truly sustains me.

For me, the kitchen is a special space of cultural geography that connects me back to my female relatives and ancestors who nurtured each successive generation to make my presence here possible. The kitchen is where I pay this legacy forward to the current and future generations across Turtle Island and beyond. As a woman chef, I'm so proud of our rising Native female chefs. It's a tough profession that requires stamina, commitment, and often courage to change the way we all think about food.

The recipes you'll find here are created with respect and gratitude for all our relations. So please, let's cook together and come to the table. Migwech! Let's eat!

LORETTA BARRETT ODEN is a Potawatomi chef and food historian, originally from Shawnee, Oklahoma. She owned the successful restaurant Corn Dance Café in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and hosted the PBS miniseries *Seasoned with Spirit: A Native Cook's Journey*. She is the Indigenous food consultant to Thirty Nine Restaurant at First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City.

BETH DOOLEY is a James Beard Award-winning food writer who has authored and co-authored over a dozen books celebrating the bounty of America's Northern Heartland. She writes for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, appears regularly on local TV and radio, and helps people connect more deeply with food through Bare Bones Cooking classes with her middle son Kip.

The excerpt and recipes here are from the forthcoming cookbook *Corn Dance: Inspired First American Cuisine* by Loretta Barrett Oden with Beth Dooley (expected publication October 2023, University of Oklahoma Press). Shared with permission from the University of Oklahoma Press.

### Loretta's Fierce Tomato Jam

- 1½ pounds ripe tomatoes, seeded and chopped
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 small jalapeño or serrano pepper, seeded and minced

Put all of the ingredients into a heavy medium saucepan and set it over medium heat. Bring to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture reaches a thick, jammy consistency, about 45 minutes to 1 hour. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Cool the jam before transferring it to containers and covering. Store the jam in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. Makes about 2 half-pints. You can use any tomatoes you have on hand, though I've found the oblong Roma tomatoes work best.

### Braised Bison Short Ribs

- 8 bone-in bison short ribs, 1½ inches each
- Salt, to taste
- 2 cups stock
- 2 cups red wine
- 1 tablespoon chopped sage
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest
- ¼ cup Loretta's Fierce Tomato Jam  
or your favorite barbecue sauce

Preheat the oven to 275 degrees. Salt the short ribs on both sides, then lay them bone-side down in a baking dish, snuggling the ribs close together. Pour in the stock and wine. Sprinkle the sage and lemon zest on top and cover the pan tightly with two sheets of aluminum foil. Cook the ribs for at least 4 hours or until the meat begins to separate from the bone and is extremely tender. Drain off any liquid or excess fat. Coat the ribs with the tomato jam and return them to the oven to glaze, about 5 to 8 minutes. Serves 4. Tender to the bone, these short ribs are finger-licking fabulous. If you can't find bison short ribs, beef ribs will work here too. This recipe is easily doubled or tripled; allow two short ribs per serving.



Natura Morta, Harry Chew

## Mélange de Poésie

### FRENCH CUISINE ROMANTIQUE

Filet mignon, rare and tender,  
is my love.

A Brittany scallop, fresh from the bay  
reclining on her bed of roasted potatoes.

Her beauty is foie gras,  
best when consumed  
without utensils  
a la the manner  
of Bonaparte and his Josephine.

She is my entrée,  
my plat principal,  
my fromage  
my strawberries et crème brûlée,  
my butter,  
my lemon juice and herbs.

She is the crème de la crème  
in my café.

A mélange of  
tansy  
rue  
pennyroyal  
hyssop and parsley.

She is a spiced lump  
of hardened honey,  
She is my crème fraîche.

For even the tiny bits of eggshell  
found in the quiche Lorraine  
(on rare occasions only)  
cannot spoil my appetite for her.  
She is my haute cuisine.

She does not grow old  
but like fine wine and Camembert  
improves with age  
still kindling a flambé in my heart.  
~ Dorothy Alexander

### MY MOTHER'S RELISH PLATE

It was the family joke,  
for she fretted about it  
happily, called me again  
and again before each feast,  
staccato ritual to my preparations.  
Should the olives be jumbo  
or medium-sized, green or black,  
cucumber or sweet pickles,  
cheddar cheese sticks  
or honey-glazed pecans?  
Now a heavy silence  
invades my kitchen  
as I stuff the turkey  
or glaze the ham,  
for the children say  
well in advance  
that they will bring  
homemade rolls or sugary yams  
or Kosher spears, and no  
uncertainty, perhaps no  
anxious joy, invades these  
discussions. The phone  
sits silent; we add new babies  
to our festivities.

I make her orange jello recipe.  
We always raved over it,  
and now I learn  
no one liked it after all.  
I gave each daughter  
and daughter-in-law  
relish trays, and the orange jello  
will probably keep  
sneaking onto the menu,  
for some dishes,  
even uneaten ones,  
like my grandmother's  
bacon-drenched turnips,  
fill hungers we cannot  
even name.

~ Carol Hamilton  
Published in *Chiron Review*

### PANCAKE NIGHTS

Shadows fall unnoticed outside.  
We try to contain our home-made joy  
without disturbing mom  
who lies trapped in her bedroom shadows.

At the kitchen stove dad sings,  
mixing batter, refereeing an eating contest.  
We are too poor to eat better,  
too hungry to know the difference.

We top some with margarine  
and cheap syrup, some with plum  
or blackberry jelly, some  
with generic brand peanut butter.

Our stomachs fill. Dad's singing lulls  
as he washes dishes alone  
looking out the kitchen window  
into those long evening shadows.

~ Ken Hada  
From *Spare Parts*  
(Mongrel Empire Press, 2010)

### SPAM®

O mystery meat—  
mostly pork shoulder  
with nitrates n' nitrites.

O 48 grams of total fat,  
skillet-fried with apples,  
onion and pineapple bits.

And I do not know why,  
but here, on a Tuesday,  
listening to Starland

Vocal Band singing  
"Afternoon Delight,"  
I now vaguely recall

cutting you into cubes  
and stuffing you into  
a hollowed pineapple

to bake in the coals  
of a dying campfire  
in my mopey youth.

Was it Cub Scouts,  
or church camp, or  
some other torture?

The things we called  
food back in the 1970s,  
confound the imagination,

back when the petroleum  
and the food industries  
were indistinguishable.  
~ Nathan Brown  
From *An Honest Day's Ode*  
(Mezcalita Press, 2017)

## FEEDING MY MOTHER AN ENCHILADA

When she was on her fifth and final  
confinement at the hospital  
and my father had fallen asleep  
in a corner chair  
a nurse came with a tray of lunch  
under what looked like an orange hubcap.  
I lifted the lid, and my mother  
who couldn't remember my name  
said, "Enchiladas."

I unwrapped the fork and knife  
tucked a paper napkin  
into the neck of her gown  
poured Sprite into a cup of ice.

What strange egg hatched  
this flightless adult?  
What addled neurons  
tipped and fractured  
so she couldn't lift her arms  
or remember her children's faces?

While my father rested  
distant in his slumber  
I rolled my sleeves above the elbows  
carved an inch of enchilada  
raised the morsel with a fork  
and asked her to "Open up"

just as she had prodded  
me more than 50 years earlier  
a fledgling flapping in a high chair  
her sitting at the kitchen table  
holding a fork, saying  
"One more bite. Just one last bite."  
~ Paul Bowers

## PEACE, LOVE, AND FRIED GIZZARDS

At Sam's Southern Eatery  
I get my fill of everything grease  
fried green tomatoes  
fried pickles  
fried gizzards  
but mostly it's the table  
round and big  
full of munching-chattering poets  
how it makes me believe  
bite after bite  
we might save the planet  
I am talking  
peace, love, and fried gizzards  
the world's largest ever  
expanding table  
a place where chairs  
magically hatch  
pull themselves up  
and make a seat for everyone  
~ Maryann Hurtt

## THE WAITER HAIKU

A fragile bent frame  
Scurries quickly to arrange  
Tabletop settings.

Thirty-five long years  
Of precise service  
To loyal clients.

This symbiotic  
Relationship provided  
A lifetime career.

Countless memories.  
Orders taken, secrets kept.  
Decades of footsteps.  
~ Pamela Chew

## ODE TO A FIG to Ross Gay

this too is an ode to a fig,  
not the plump & sweet sag  
of the inverted flower that  
nurtures other creatures' eggs,  
not the sacred tree that gives  
a prophet's jubilation of rest,  
but a hankering for touch,  
the kind that poetry, like an old  
grandmother taking her teeth out  
to make more mouth for praise,  
knows how to do and undo.  
~ Roxana Cazan

## DINNER IN TOKYO

Presented as a flower, *fugu* arrives  
at table as our smiling host explains  
the ritual of blowfish, its relevance  
to diplomacy among old enemies.  
(Scraps of poison perhaps clinging  
to bone or nostril?)  
A meal so dangerous the chef  
must be licensed to prepare it,  
his gentle task a stroking of risk  
like all things sensual.  
The faintly sweet taste of puffer fish  
hovers as a remembered wedding  
or funeral, either feast will do.  
I forget to ask if peril is washed  
away in a baptismal font, whether  
the chef-priest blesses the excision.  
Can you recognize death-by-fish, Sir?  
Do you smell it, translucent as love  
on your fingers?  
Think of marriage, that other sacrament,  
the most trusting of acts and possibilities.  
But this! Even God must be impressed.  
~ Sandra Soli  
Published in *Ellipsis Zine*, Vol. 43



The Waiter, Harry Chew

## SAYING GRACE

Recipes might be  
poems or prayers,  
incantations  
of ingredients,  
litanies of steps  
to gain our daily bread.  
Mix, add, stir, spread,  
bake and pray  
that the cake will rise  
in the warm dark  
of the preheated oven.  
Dice the trinity,  
onion, bell pepper, celery;  
saute, sprinkle in the flour  
and paddle the roux  
until it's gilded and thickened.  
Add tomatoes, okra, chicken  
and simmer, simmer  
until it's time to dive  
into the holy mumbo-jumbo  
of Creole gumbo.  
We reverently request  
that this meal may be blessed  
as we have faithfully  
followed the recipe.  
~ Jennifer Kidney



# Food Lessons from the Dust Bowl

Finding care, comfort, and connection around the table

MARY LARSON



Resources were in short supply during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, especially in the hard-hit farming and rural communities of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, and Colorado. Under the sharp



realities of this scarcity, food was more than just fuel for bodies; it signified comfort and community, as reflected in oral histories, journals, diaries, letters, and newspapers of the period.

The memories of almost 150 women who lived through the Dust Bowl are chronicled in interviews collected by the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, housed at the Oklahoma State University Library. A common topic was Black Sunday, April 14, 1935, when a particularly vicious dust storm rolled across the Plains. No one knew what was happening. The storm was much bigger than usual, and many reported feeling that it might be the end of the world.

In the midst of this chaos, as people gathered children and pets and headed to storm cellars to ride out what might be coming, women made sure to take things like lemonade and treats that would calm the children. Lonetta McQuigg recalled:

That cloud was coming in, just rolling like a big black roll of smoke, coming from the north, I think. . . . The horses . . . and the cattle were . . . acting like they were scared, and the chickens started going to roost. Started going to the chicken house—it got that dark and I remember seeing the last old hen go in the chicken house. (Laughs.) And so we all got talking, we said well I think we better go to the cellar we don't know what's behind that. . . . I went in and got some wet towels, and several wet things you know to take down to the cellar, and some cookies and some water to take down for the kids. We went on down to the cellar and we stayed down there a long time.

Despite the uncertainty of the moment, these women still had the presence of mind to pack comfort foods as they rushed to shelters, a detail significant enough that many remembered it when discussing the event *almost seven decades later*. Food was meant to soothe and reassure.

## AN EGG-CELLENT ECONOMY

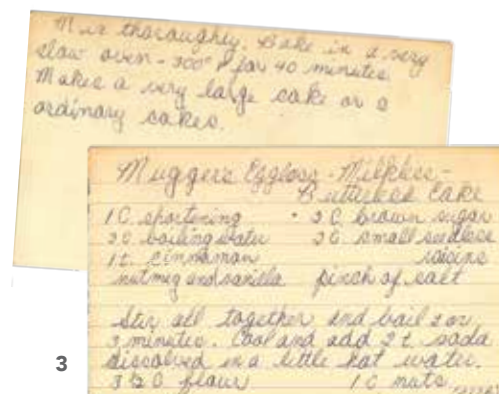
Beyond short-term comfort, food was used to build and maintain relationships in a range of contexts, the most common of which were dishes prepared for special occasions, served in honor of individuals or to

reinforce family bonds. Having scarce or rare resources used for their benefit, family members were made to feel important and celebrated. One obvious example was birthdays. While we might now consider cake and ice cream as a given, they were not during the Dust Bowl.

The determination of which foodstuffs were considered scarce is interesting, especially for rural households. One might assume that sugar was a rare commodity, since it required a trip to town, but the rarer commodities were eggs and ice—eggs for economic reasons and ice for the sheer logistics of acquiring it.

Surprisingly, eggs were more valuable in trade than for home use. As Dolores Piepho noted, a case of eggs delivered to the store each week would usually pay for a case of groceries. Caroline Henderson made the same equivalency in a letter to a friend: “[We are] trying to keep our grocery bills within the limits of our weekly case of eggs at 7 or 8 cents a dozen; buying nothing that we can do without and still maintain any sort of standard of health and decency.” Eggs and cream or butter, when available, were the coin of the realm.

Many archival sources point to how women skimped on egg use at home, through “single-egg cakes” or by using broken eggs for family meals so they could trade good eggs for other items. A prime example of the inventiveness required of cooks is the eggless, milkless, butterless cake recipe of Lucille Morrow’s grandmother.



1. Helms family at dinner, Coffee County, AL; photo by Marion Post Wolcott, March 1939; courtesy Library of Congress. 2. Approaching Dust Storm, April 14th, 1935, on Oklahoma-Texas line south of Guymon, OK; courtesy Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society. 3. Grace Warren’s Eggless, Milkless, Butterless Cake recipe, ca. 1930s; courtesy Kathleen Morrow family archives.

One feels quite helpless in the face of such misery. <sup>1</sup>

(Lucille authored the newspaper column “Just Thoughts of a Plain Country Woman.”) Making cakes outside of a family celebration was infrequent enough that it might occasion comment from other members of the family, as Mary Dyck of southwestern Kansas wrote in her journal: “I baked a Cake at P.M. Po [Pa] wanted to know if it was a birthday Cake ha.” (September 1938)

Ice as an ingredient was problematic for other reasons. Very few people in the region had refrigerators; even ice boxes were relatively rare, as people cooled food using spring houses or cold water piped from windmills. If a house had an ice box, any ice was used to keep food from spoiling, not for chilling something frivolous like dessert. Besides being difficult to store, ice was not easy to get or transport. Lelah Cully described her father traveling twenty-two miles roundtrip to buy a 100-pound block of ice in town, a trip which took all day.

Other oral histories talk about how carefully ice needed to be packed and how little might be left by the time they got home. The expense and time away from farm chores, with minimal return for the effort, made ice a rare purchase. Hazel Allen commented, “The only time you ever had ice much around your place was if somebody had a birthday and you had homemade ice cream and cake.” Under these circumstances, making cake or ice cream was indeed something to celebrate and reinforced care for the family member who received such a gift.

#### A FEAST OF FAMILY

For rural residents, most food was produced at home on the farm, so a special treat made for fond memories: store-bought candy. It was handed out to children at community celebrations at Christmas time, and candy was also something that parents might occasionally bring back from town or that children could purchase with a penny on rare trips off the farm. Many interviewees were children when the Dust Bowl occurred, so they likely remembered these confections through the eyes of a young person; although, according to other archives, candy and sweets were highly prized by adults as well. For Geneva Harryman Williams, treats also had sadder connotations, symbolizing a change in status. “I think the first that I realized that we was maybe hard up

was when Daddy quit bringing candy bars home from town and brought us all these suckers. I guess that’s a funny idea, but that’s when it struck me.”

Special dinners within family contexts were another important way to maintain and strengthen relationships, as when people traveled to see relatives on a weekend or returned home after being away for work. Descriptions of holiday or birthday visits include lavish spreads with rare delicacies—favorite pies, cookies, cakes, fudge, divinity, fruit, roasts, or fried chicken. And while fried chicken was special for some people, it was more monotonous for others who complained about a steady diet of nothing but fried chicken. Much depended on the status of a family and on what survived under drought conditions on any given farm.

Chroniclers mentioned the importance of sharing food from their farms with relatives who lived in town, taking them butter, eggs, milk, or chicken and fresh vegetables that would otherwise be hard to procure. Sometimes, relatives would come out to the farm to eat, as Opal Blancett remarked: “Family, more family. Everybody coming out of town on Sunday to eat dinner. [Laughs.] Used to, all of the relatives would come out to the ranch on Sunday. Mama would make cherry pie and fried chicken.” This town-farm exchange reflects a larger circle of reciprocity between families, replicated over time in a wide range of circumstances.

Reinforcement of family bonds through food was commonly cited as a celebratory gift in the guise of chickens for wedding presents, with newlyweds receiving hens from aunts, uncles, in-laws, or parents. New brides like Mildred Stringfellow were grateful for this bestowal of modest abundance:

I do remember that in the thirties, my mother-in-law, I don’t know how she managed, but she had a bunch of little chickens. When we were married, she gave us a dozen pullets out of them chickens. Them pullets, I would use all the eggs I wanted for home use and bring twelve dozen to the store. I got ten cents a dozen for them to buy groceries with.

You might say chickens were gifts that *really did* keep on giving.





1. Quote detail from Caroline Henderson letter to her friend Rose, Dec. 1932; Courtesy Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections. 2. Chickens from illustrated trade card for Geo. Zehler Provision Co.; courtesy Miami University Libraries Digital Collection. 3. Grandma Taylor blows out candles on her eighty-third birthday cake while her daughter, Mrs. McCarl, and grandson look on, Greenbelt, MD; photo by Marjory Collins, May-June 1942. 4. Putting whipped cream on cake for refreshments at home demonstration club meeting, McIntosh County, OK; photo by Russell Lee, Feb. 1940. 5. Family of Pomp Hall eating breakfast, Creek County, OK; photo by Russell Lee, Feb. 1940. 6. The Gaynor family at dinner, Fairfield, VT; photo by Jack Delano, Sept. 1941. 7. Family at dinner, Fairfield Bench Farms, MT; photo by Arthur Rothstein, May 1939. 8. Feggen Jones and family at dinner, Zebulon, NC; photo by Arthur Rothstein, March 1942. 9. Pullets on the Clark Farm, Coffee County, AL; photo by John Collier, Aug. 1941. 10. Arranging food at buffet supper of the Jaycees, Eufaula, OK; photo by Russell Lee, Feb. 1940. Except where noted, images courtesy Library of Congress.



1. Putting out food for dinner at community sing, Pie Town, NM; photo by Russell Lee, June 1940. 2. Helping plates at dinner for community sing, Pie Town, NM; photo by Russell Lee, June 1940. Images courtesy Library of Congress.

### A COMMUNITY OF SHARING

Ties in the community were reinforced on a larger scale through gatherings to share food—from covered-dish church dinners to bridge suppers with friends. Political gatherings, cakewalks, box suppers, and pie sales raised funds for local initiatives.

Outside of organized events, Sunday afternoon was a standard time for neighborhood visiting. People recalled two to three families coming home with them for dinner after church, beyond visiting among relatives. With rations low, the hosts for these meals would rotate, of necessity, as a considerable number of people would need to be fed. As Marcia Rice noted, “We’d usually try to go to church on Sunday, and then most of the time we’d all go to one place on one Sunday and another neighbor’s on another Sunday. You’d have a good time together.” These local community gatherings were particularly important for rural women who might not get into town-proper often or get away from the farm much at all. Events gave them a way to reconnect with neighbors as well as contribute to the community network with their own donations of food.

Similar values held when neighbors required assistance. While many people did not accept government commodities during the Depression (due to pride or geographical circumstance, where getting to town might cost more in time and gasoline or animal feed than the worth of goods received), there were strong community- and church-based relief efforts. Groups would organize food and clothing drives, businesses like bakeries would give away leftover bread and other items past their prime, or, more informally,

neighbors would band together to take extra canned food or a hen to a family that was “bad off.” Neighbors contributed what they could, when they could, with the understanding that similar support would be there if they needed it—another demonstration of reciprocity through the exchange of food.

For those who lived through the Dust Bowl, the circumstances of scarcity intertwined with the commonalities of food, adding meaning to the contexts within which these experiences were shared. While it could be used to reinforce existing bonds within a family, food could also nurture friendships, build community, and ensure networks of care and assistance. The importance of sharing what we eat, as both a physical and social necessity, is evident in the historical record. Food for thought as we negotiate the intersections of our lives today.

MARY LARSON is the Associate Dean for Distinctive Collections and the Puterbaugh Professor of Library Services at Oklahoma State University. She holds an undergraduate degree in anthropology from Harvard and master’s and doctorate degrees from Brown. Larson served two terms as president of the national Oral History Association. She is co-editor with Douglas Boyd of *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement*.

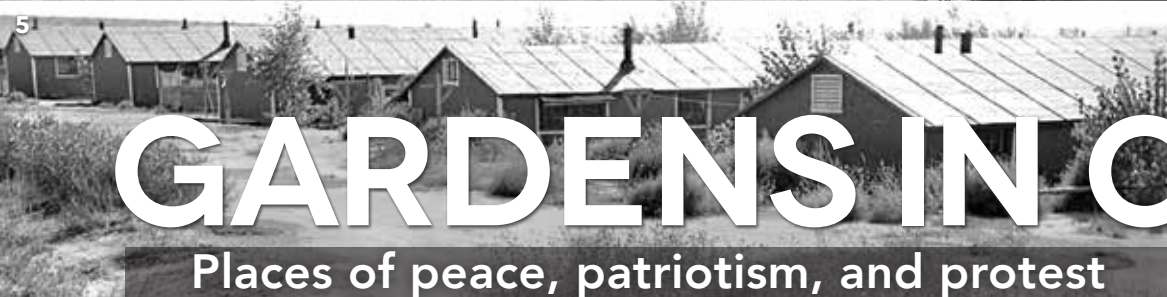
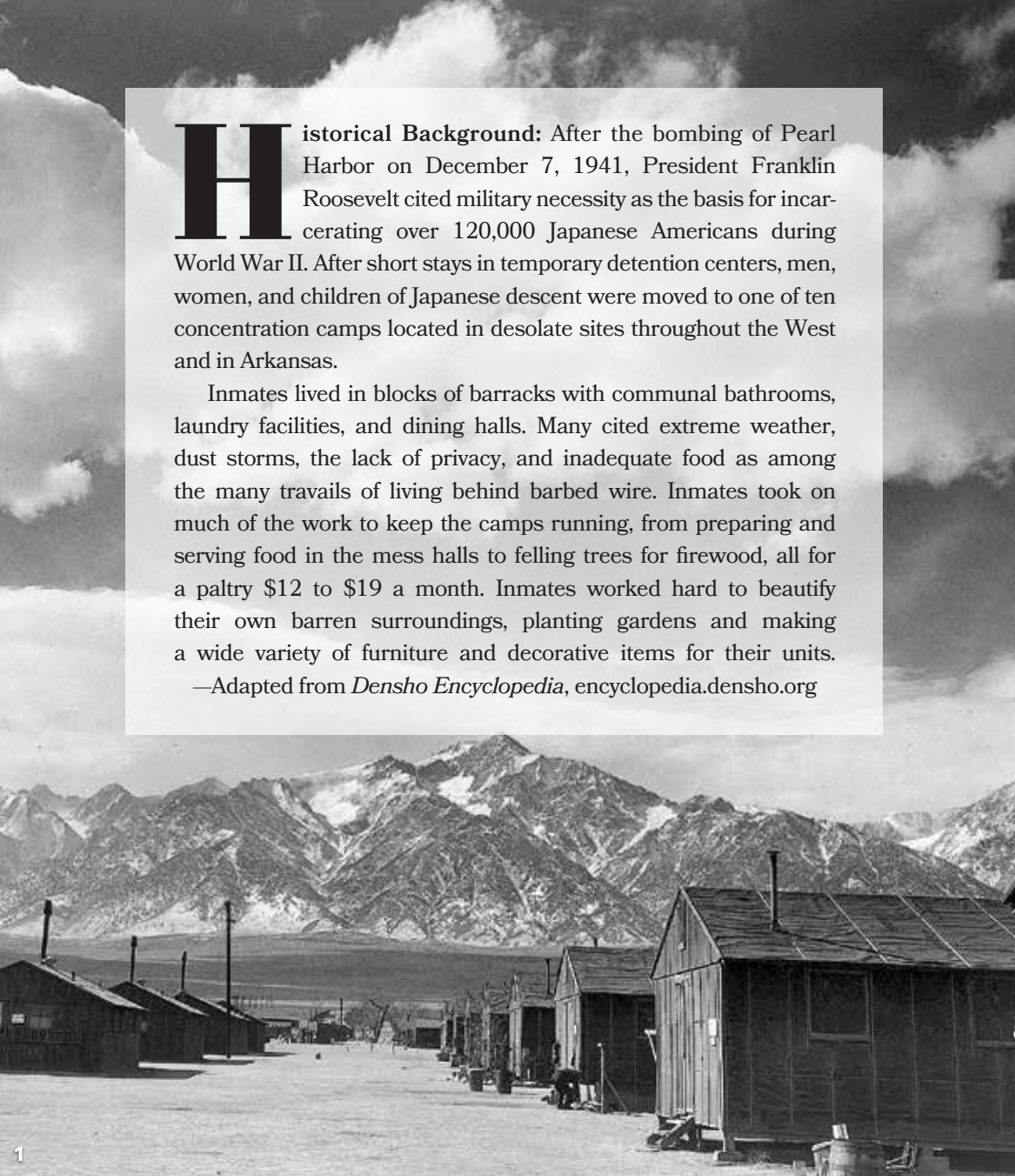
#### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “Dust, Drought, and Dreams Gone Dry: Oklahoma Women in the Dust Bowl Oral History Project,” Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, Oklahoma State University Library. Firsthand accounts from Oklahoma women who survived the challenges of life during the Dust Bowl. Includes a video lecture by Jennifer Paustenbaugh, one of the lead investigators who collected the interviews. [bit.ly/3JLsctx](https://bit.ly/3JLsctx)

**H**istorical Background: After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt cited military necessity as the basis for incarcerating over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. After short stays in temporary detention centers, men, women, and children of Japanese descent were moved to one of ten concentration camps located in desolate sites throughout the West and in Arkansas.

Inmates lived in blocks of barracks with communal bathrooms, laundry facilities, and dining halls. Many cited extreme weather, dust storms, the lack of privacy, and inadequate food as among the many travails of living behind barbed wire. Inmates took on much of the work to keep the camps running, from preparing and serving food in the mess halls to felling trees for firewood, all for a paltry \$12 to \$19 a month. Inmates worked hard to beautify their own barren surroundings, planting gardens and making a wide variety of furniture and decorative items for their units.

—Adapted from *Densho Encyclopedia*, encyclopedia.densho.org



# GARDENS IN CAMP

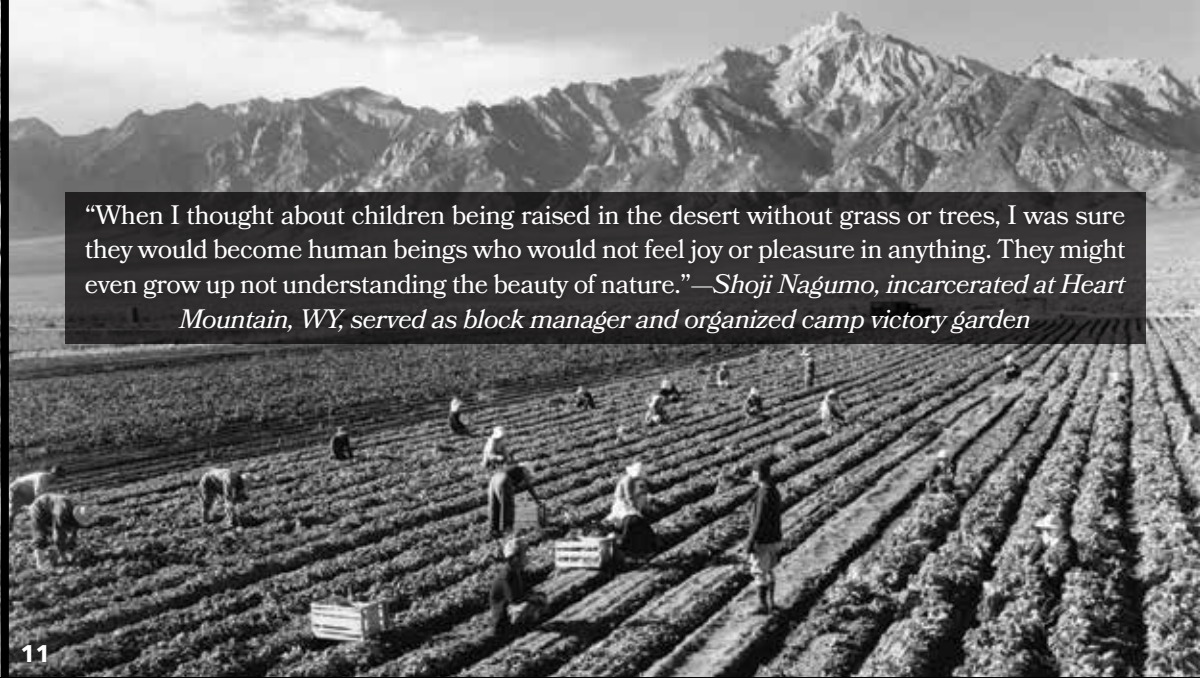
Places of peace, patriotism, and protest

ANNA TAMURA





10



11

“When I thought about children being raised in the desert without grass or trees, I was sure they would become human beings who would not feel joy or pleasure in anything. They might even grow up not understanding the beauty of nature.”—*Shoji Nagumo, incarcerated at Heart Mountain, WY, served as block manager and organized camp victory garden*



12



13



14

1. Street scene, Manzanar Relocation Center, CA; photo by Ansel Adams, 1943; all Adams photos courtesy Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar Collection, Library of Congress (LOC). 2. Awaiting buses for Manzanar, Lone Pine, CA; photo by Clem Albers, April 1, 1942; Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information (FSA/OWI) Collection, LOC. 3. Military police posting Civilian Exclusion Order announcing the forced removal of persons of Japanese ancestry; photo by U.S. Army Signal Corps, Bainbridge Island, WA, 1942; LOC. 4. Exclusion Order, San Francisco, CA; photo by Dorothea Lange, April 11, 1942; War Relocation Authority (WRA) Collection, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). 5. Granada Relocation Center, Amache, CO; photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, Oct. 1945; WRA, NARA. Nearly 15,000 people passed through Granada on the way to camps; 412 births and 107 deaths were recorded. 6. Gerald (5), David (6), and Chester Sakura, Jr., on arrival at the Minidoka camp, Eden, ID; photo by Francis Leroy Stewart, Aug. 17, 1942; WRA, NARA. 7. Families arrive at assembly center at Tanforan Race Track, San Bruno, CA; photo by Dorothea Lange, April 29, 1942; WRA, NARA. 8. Mochida family, Hayward, CA, wearing identification tags used by relocation authorities to keep families together through the removal process. Mochida operated a two-acre nursery; photo by Dorothea Lange, May 8, 1942; WRA, NARA. 9. Japanese Americans boarding train; attributed to NARA via Densho Digital Repository (DDR). 10. Mrs. Kimoto holding Fumio Kimoto in the Hayashi greenhouse, Oakland, CA, ca. 1922; courtesy Hirokichi "Harry" Hayashi Family Collection, DDR. 11. Farm workers with Mt. Williamson in background, Manzanar Relocation Center, CA; photo by Ansel Adams, 1943; LOC. 12. Japanese-American farmers, like this man in his onion field in Los Angeles County, CA, sold their unharvested crops before forced relocation; photo by Russell Lee, April 1942. FSA/OWI, LOC. 13. Richard Kobayashi with cabbages, Manzanar Relocation Center, CA; photo by Ansel Adams, 1943; LOC. 14. Nursery greenhouse owner, San Leandro, CA, before forced removal; photo by Dorothea Lange, April 5, 1942; WRA, NARA. 15. Children landscaping outside their barracks school, Granada Relocation Center, Amache, CO; photo by Joe McClelland, April 24, 1943. WRA, NARA.



15

**G**ardening, both ornamental and agricultural, was a common activity for Japanese American inmates in the temporary “assembly centers,” incarceration camps, and Justice Department camps. Camp gardens were continuations of prewar garden-building traditions, human and cultural responses to imprisonment and camp landscapes, and restorative activities that fostered communal healing and cultural cohesion. Vegetable gardens, also known as victory gardens during wartime, provided familiar edibles and contributed to sustainability efforts promoted by the federal government. While some of the gardens exhibited levels of resistance against confinement and the War Relocation Authority (WRA), others represented political symbols of loyalty and patriotism.

### GARDENING FOUNDATIONS

Japanese Americans who practiced landscaping and gardening in the camps were predominantly Issei [first-generation immigrants to the U.S.] with professional experience in farming, landscape maintenance, and horticulture. In 1940, 43% of all Nikkei [Japanese emigrants and descendants] living on the West Coast were employed in agriculture, and an additional 26% were employed in agriculture-related activities such as produce businesses. In the Los Angeles area, Japanese Americans had a near “ethnic monopoly” in the landscape business in the prewar period, with one third of the Japanese labor force consisting of gardeners in 1934.

For some Nikkei, thoughts of gardening in the camps began even before they were excluded from their home communities. The mass roundups occurred in the spring of 1942, just as the planting season was beginning. Some Nikkei transported pots and tins of tree saplings and ornamental and edible plants.

Nikkei began gardening almost immediately upon arrival at the temporary assembly centers and incarceration camps to improve the conditions and to provide familiar vegetables for their families and communities. At the Tanforan Assembly Center, women started vegetable gardens outside the livestock stalls that were their temporary homes. By June and July of 1942 at Manzanar, Nikkei had already begun to develop ornamental gardens with ponds, foraged boulders, transplanted Joshua trees, and constructed landscape features.

### TYPES OF CAMP GARDENS

In total, Nikkei constructed thousands of individual gardens in the spaces adjacent to residential barracks and in communal areas. Parks were the largest type of ornamental gardens, attracting residents throughout the camp. Block or mess hall gardens were created by and for the individuals of a respective block. Smaller personal gardens were individually inspired and reminiscent of front and back yards. Among the types of gardens were vegetable gardens, raked gravel dry gardens, cactus gardens, showy flower gardens, and ornate rock gardens with stepping stones, fountains, waterfalls, ponds, and structures.

Large scale gardens and parks were built at some of the camps, including Manzanar and Minidoka. Merritt Park (named after Manzanar WRA Director Ralph Merritt) was the largest and most sophisticated. The park was constructed under the leadership of Kuichiro Nishi, a rose nursery owner from the San Fernando Valley. Merritt Park had an enormous waterfall, ponds, boulders, a tea house, and elaborate plantings. In *Farewell to Manzanar*, author Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston wrote about Merritt Park, “You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids toward the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all. You could hang suspended in some odd, almost lovely land you could not escape from yet almost didn’t want to leave.” Another large-scale garden was located at the entrance to Minidoka. Designed by Fujitaro Kubota, nursery owner in Seattle, the garden was constructed around the Honor Roll which featured the names of nearly 1,000 individuals serving in the military with connections to Minidoka.

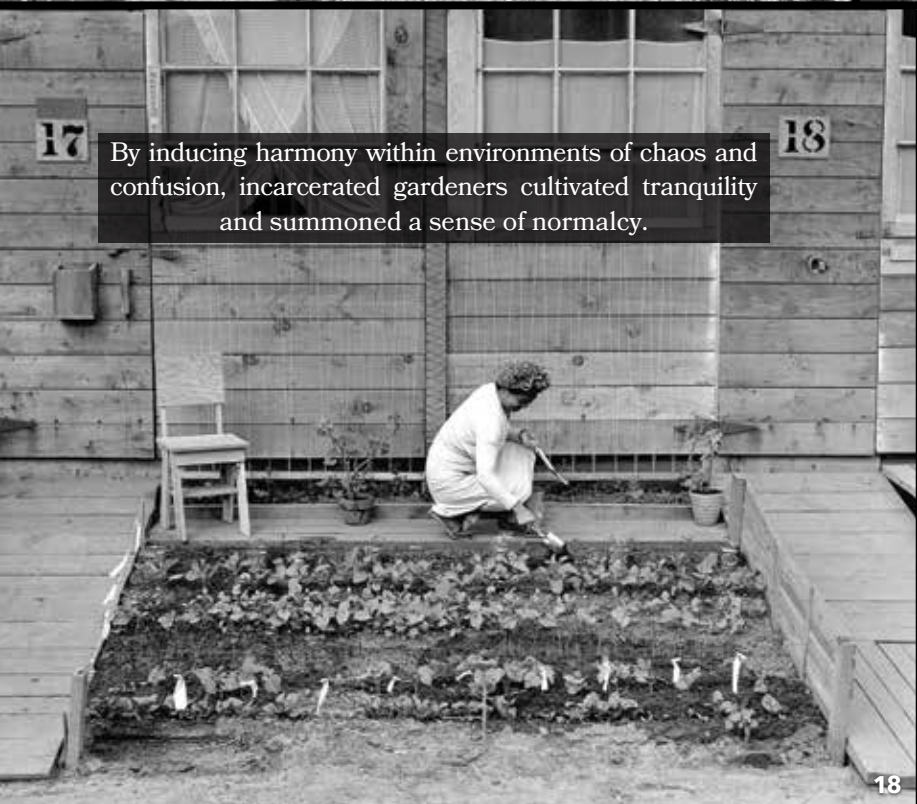
At Manzanar, Nikkei transformed the rectangular plots of land adjacent to mess halls into designed gardens so block residents could sit and enjoy the beauty of a garden and pond while waiting to be fed. The *Manzanar Free Press* held a contest for the best garden and the Block 34 garden (*San-shi-en*) won first prize, an example of Japanese garden art fashioned from local materials of southeastern California. *San-shi-en* was constructed with jagged red-hued stones, likely sourced from the nearby Alabama Hills. The stones were arranged to imitate the mood of the mountains and became smoother as water descended to the pond. The large concrete lined pond was built in a traditional Japanese gourd shape, and the base formed a traditional mortar elevation. Stones symbolic



16



17



By inducing harmony within environments of chaos and confusion, incarcerated gardeners cultivated tranquility and summoned a sense of normalcy.

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21



of the *tsuru-kame* (crane and tortoise), representing long life, rose from the pond's surface. Block 22's garden won second prize; it later played a pivotal role in the Manzanar Riot as the staging ground for some 2,000 protesters on December 6, 1942.

There were many ingenious garden designs that creatively used foraged materials, designed water features, and cultivated plants in ways that beautified the camps and provided enjoyment to the gardeners. One of the more notable gardens was Yasusuke Kogita's garden in Block 5 at Minidoka. Featured in Allen Eaton's *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*, the garden had a one-ton lava tube, named "Stove-pipe Rock," carted by Mr. Kogita and his sons, Ted and Paul, from the sagelands behind the camp.

In addition to the ornamental gardens, victory gardening was a common pastime. Victory gardens were generally located within the residential camp areas and were initiated and maintained by individuals, schools, and community groups. The victory gardens supplemented the government-issued diet with fresh and traditional Japanese vegetables.

Even after the camps closed, gardening proved an important pastime in the resettlement process. For those who could not find housing in crowded West Coast cities, the War Relocation Authority provided temporary housing. At places like the Winona Housing Project in Burbank, California, Nikkei created gardens outside their temporary government-issued mobile homes.

### LEGACIES OF TRANQUILITY

The gardens themselves have persevered; remnants of hundreds of these gardens remain in situ since the camps were dismantled. The camp gardens are testaments to Nikkei values during World War II, including abhorrence of idleness, a cultural affinity with nature and aesthetics, and the practice of cooperative action for betterment of the community. The camp gardeners achieved a sense of pride in their work, while contributing to the well-being of their block. Gardening was akin to horticultural therapy, forging people-plant relationships that induced a sense of connectedness to the earth and its seasonal cycles. By inducing harmony within environments of chaos and confusion, incarcerated gardeners cultivated tranquility and summoned a sense of normalcy. Visiting the gardens and parks, seeing them in the distance, or glimpsing them through a window were small measures of comfort, oftentimes the only greenery visible from inside the barbed wire fence.

Camp gardens were an antithesis to the incarceration experience and military ordered setting; they were places of adoration, symbols of strength and capacity, and testaments to a human connection to place forged out of prison-like landscapes.

**16.** Residents at the Rohwer Relocation Center, McGehee, AR, built walkways and bridges and planted gardens outside their tar paper barracks; photo by Charles E. Mace, June 16, 1944; WRA, NARA. **17.** Mrs. Yaeko Nakamura and her daughters Joyce Yuki and Louise Tami in the park at Manzanar Relocation Center, CA; photo by Ansel Adams, 1943, LOC. **18.** Mrs. Fujita working in the vegetable garden she planted at her barrack home, San Bruno, CA; photo by Dorothea Lange, June 16, 1942; WRA, NARA. **19.** Personal garden, San Bruno, CA; photo by Dorothea Lange, June 16, 1942; WRA, NARA. **20.** Garden and pond fashioned by residents of Block 26, Minidoka Relocation Center, Eden, ID; photo by Joe Tanaka, ca.1944; courtesy Bain Collection, DDR. **21.** Volunteers transplanting a tree to the hospital grounds to create a calming atmosphere, Topaz, Utah; photo by Tom Parker, Oct. 16, 1942; WRA, NARA. **22.** Girls with barrack garden, Tule Lake Relocation Center, Newell, CA; photo by John Cook, ca. 1942-1945; WRA, NARA.



ANNA TAMURA is a planning manager for the National Park Service's (NPS) Pacific West Region in Seattle, WA. She has led NPS design projects and studies related to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, including projects at Minidoka National Historic Site, Manzanar National Historic Site, Tule Lake Unit, and others. Tamura's family members were incarcerated at Minidoka and Tule Lake. The ideas and opinions here are entirely Tamura's and do not necessarily reflect those of the NPS. This text is edited under a Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0), © Anna Tamura, "Gardens in Camp," *Densho Encyclopedia*, 2023. [encyclopedia.densho.org/Gardens\\_in\\_camp/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Gardens_in_camp/)

### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project. Read how Japanese incarceration during WWII relates to current controversies of individual rights in a democracy. [densho.org](https://densho.org) (search: Why Does this Matter Now?)
- *Fujitaro Kubota and His Garden*, Densho Digital Repository. Film about Kubota's gardening aesthetic and how he built a thriving business as a landscape designer following incarceration at Minikoka. [ddr.densho.org](https://ddr.densho.org) (search: Fujitaro Kubota and his garden)
- Short video interview with Yasusuke Kogita's sons on how he collected specimens and constructed a rock garden while incarcerated at Minidoka. [youtube.com](https://youtube.com) (search: kogita rock garden, janmdotorg)

# UKRAINE'S FARMED FORCES

*Defending against  
ill-gotten grains of war*

ZENIA KISH



Anastasia Bondarets's illustration of a Ukrainian tractor pulling a Russian tank won a design contest sponsored by Ukrposhta, Ukraine's National Post service. The design portrays real events, when Ukrainian farmers helped Armed Forces by removing Russian war equipment without using weapons. The postage stamp, shown opposite, was issued on the Day of Ukrainian Statehood, July 28, 2022, and mirrors the country's national colors, blue and yellow.

Shortly after Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a video clip went viral on social media showing a Ukrainian tractor pulling a military tank through empty fields, chased by a man attempting to recover it. “Ukrainian farmer steals Russian tank from right under the nose of the Russians who occupied it,” the YouTube subtitle read. Similar videos quickly proliferated. Tractors were recorded pulling heavy war machinery through snow, muddy fields, and frontline towns.



Some of these Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers were abandoned by fleeing soldiers or damaged in combat; others were reportedly snatched by wily farmers as military crews took bathroom breaks or searched for fuel. The widely shared videos suggested that Ukrainian farmers were joining the national defense by clearing hot spots of the mechanical carcasses of combat and stocking the Ukrainian military with equipment that could be repaired and redeployed.

When the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s flagship Moskva was improbably sunk by Ukrainian missiles in April 2022, digital videos and art depicted tractors pulling it from the sea, celebrating Ukraine’s unexpected show of force. Social media users quickly dubbed frontline farmers as “Ukraine’s 1<sup>st</sup> Tractor Armor Division” and the “Ukrainian Farmed Forces” through images and videos that were shared, edited, and reshared with mass audiences.

Much like anti-war protest songs of the past, these bits of cultural communication can give voice to citizens, serving as tools for making sense of complex collective experiences. The plucky farmer using his tractor to outmaneuver an aggressive invading force seems an unlikely character in war narratives—but he soon became a folk hero registering an opportunistic pragmatism and rural defiance.

Ukrainian tractor images appeared hauling rockets and submarines. T-shirts, flags, and Christmas ornaments were emblazoned with the vehicle. It got its own video game, *Ukrainian Farmy*, in which, developers note, “You can experience being one of the scariest combatants on the Ukrainian battlefield—the Ukrainian tractor driver,” with proceeds donated to support Ukrainian self-defense.



A dekulakized family near their home in Udachne village, Donetsk region, on the way to exile. Photo: Marko Zaluzniak, ca. 1930s, courtesy National Museum of the Holodomor Genocide via Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (mfa.gov.ua). Dekulakization was a Soviet campaign of repression, arrests, deportations, and executions, victimizing millions of kulaks (so-called prosperous farming peasants) labeled as enemies. Appropriation and collectivization of farmland, in the years 1917 through 1933, was the milder of extremes used by the Soviet government to “liquidate” an entire class of farmers and laborers. The resulting manmade famine caused starvation and death for millions of Ukrainians. Source: Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine

## Attacking agriculture in Ukraine is an old tactic with new iterations.

Indeed, farmers and their tractors became so popular that they were consecrated in an official postage stamp released on the Day of Ukrainian Statehood, July 28, 2022. The stamp depicts a golden sunset with a tractor flying the national flag, towing a Russian tank with crumpled artillery armament. The postal service’s press release noted that the stamp depicts “real events that took place in the Mykolaiv and other regions, when Ukrainian peasants took away Russian equipment without using any weapons, helping the Armed Forces to win.”

The visibility of farmers and tractors across social media and pop culture offers a distinctly Ukrainian frame for expressing public resistance, symbolizing the mobilization

of the whole society in defense of the country while affirming the inextricable ties between Ukrainian identity and the nation’s cultivators. Beyond this symbolic function as national protectors in the popular imagination, the idea of farmers and tractors on the frontlines expands the boundaries of the so-called theater of war.

How we narrate conflict, through our political discourse and popular media, shapes our understanding of the frontlines: Where is war located? What counts as “fighting”? Reframing Russia’s invasion as, in part, an agricultural war reveals not only the geography and economic scope of the violence, it also evokes longer histories of weaponizing Ukraine’s agriculture through successive foreign occupations.

Feudal serfdom was imposed on Ukrainians by Polish and Russian rulers from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, extracting value from the land’s rich black soil and the labor of its farmers. After a brief independence from imperial rule, the unstable young state founded as the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1917, fell to the Bolsheviks and was absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1920. Soviet industrialization was pegged to, among other policies, the forced conversion of independent landholders into collective farms through the early 1930s. Peasants and small, independent farmers fiercely resisted collectivization, overlapping with other nationalist and freedom movements fighting for Ukrainian self-determination.

Under the direction of Stalin and other Kremlin leaders, repressive measures were instituted to accelerate collectivization and punish the resistance. Party officials were ordered to requisition unsustainable quantities of grain from farmers, despite precipitous declines in harvests due to natural forces and political dictates. Villagers were searched to remove any hidden supplies, and travel restrictions prevented them from reaching cities to procure food. Transgressions were met with steep fines, even capital punishment. Millions perished of famine. Ukrainians recognize this human-made famine as a genocide they call the Holodomor or “death by hunger.”

Attacking agriculture in Ukraine is an old tactic with new iterations. Long described as Europe’s breadbasket, Ukraine is the world’s fifth-largest source of grain. Agricultural production is a substantial pillar of Ukraine’s economy comprising roughly 11% of the GDP and approximately 40% of total exports. Wartime interruptions to production and exports have exacerbated the country’s drastic economic retraction. And the breakdown of this essential industry is *not* the incidental collateral damage of unrelated military goals. It is an integral component of Russia’s hybrid approach to waging war, which includes deliberate targeting of the agricultural supply chain.

The most visible component of this strategy was the months-long Black Sea Blockade of Ukraine’s ports, particularly Odesa, the departure point of the majority of agricultural exports. Although an internationally brokered ceasefire was reached in the fall of 2022, the Black Sea Grain Initiative has been precarious and the export backlog substantial. Combined with sanctions on Russia’s food and fertilizer exports, the disruptions have increased food insecurity around the world. At least 50 countries depend on Ukrainian and Russian grain.

Predictably, the most food insecure are disproportionately impacted. Nowhere is this more apparent than Ukraine’s role in supplying the World Food Program (WFP), which before the war purchased almost half of its wheat from Ukraine to distribute as food aid. Overnight, Ukraine transformed from one of the WFP’s most important suppliers to a major recipient of aid.

Beyond the blockade, food has been leveraged as a weapon of war in numerous ways that receive little international media coverage. Vast swathes of farmers’ fields are converted to battlefields, destroying crops and preventing sowing, cultivating, and harvesting. Valuable farm equipment has been stolen. Farmers sustain serious injuries or death from land mine ordnance hidden in their fields. Grain silos and other storage sites have been deliberately bombed

to destroy harvests. Together, these modes of distributing violence across the food supply chain punish civilians far beyond the battlefield and multiply pressure points internationally.

Tracking satellite images, cargo ships, and other records, investigative journalists have revealed that Russia has been laundering millions of tons of ill-gotten grains on black markets. Still, agriculture-focused agencies refer to Russia’s invasion in strikingly *depoliticized* terms—framing Ukraine as a “breadbasket” or a “risk” to global food security—narratives that typically leave the war unmentioned or under-examined as a significant contributor to the global food crisis. The prominence of farmers in Ukrainian cultural media offers a retort to these narrow framings of the war that are divorced from longer histories of colonialism.

The centrality of agriculture as a key site of historical violence resonates with Ukrainians today. Popularization of the farmer provides an unexpected but vital lens through which we can observe the everyday crises of the war, the intimacy of loss, and seedlings of hope.

ZENIA KISH, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tulsa, where she teaches digital and global media. She co-edited *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence and Negotiation* (University of Illinois Press, 2022) and is currently writing a book on media and philanthropy. Her Ukrainian grandparents immigrated to Canada, where she grew up. She has many relatives enduring the war in Ukraine.



# NOTEWORTHY



## FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES



**SUZETTE V. CHANG**  
CHAIR

The new year brings new members to the Oklahoma Humanities Council Board of Trustees, a governing and working body composed of private citizens, industry leaders, scholars, and governor's appointees—an amazing team with a passion for ensuring educational and cultural opportunities for all. Please help me welcome Quraysh Ali Lansana aka Q, Francine Parchcorn, Dr. Amanda Smith, and Jennifer Stevenson. Informed by their unique experiences and backgrounds, each brings diverse perspectives and ideas that will help cultivate an engaging and dynamic Board.

I know our mission “to strengthen communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives and participate knowledgeably in civic life” will guide their Board service. I thank them for their time, energy, and commitment as we continue our work to move the Council and our communities forward with intent and ingenuity.



**QURAYSH ALI LANSANA** is author of twenty books in poetry, nonfiction, and children's literature. Currently a Tulsa Artist Fellow and a Lecturer in Africana Studies and English at the University of Tulsa and Oklahoma State University-Tulsa, he is Executive Producer of KOSU/NPR's *Focus: Black Oklahoma*, a national award-winning monthly radio program. “The humanities, in my opinion, are among the most effective ways to learn of other peoples and cultures and find commonalities and respect.”



**FRANCINE PARHCORN**, Executive Officer at the Chickasaw Cultural Center, is from Stonewall, Oklahoma, and received a BS in Mass Communications from East Central University. She has served Chickasaw citizens through thirty years of employment with the Chickasaw Nation. “My professional and personal goals go hand in hand, and that's to be able to make positive lasting impacts to help preserve the cultural wellness of our Native American people everywhere.”



**DR. AMANDA SMITH** is Associate Professor in the Department of Language and Literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She teaches Composition, Editing, Intro to Literature, and British Literature, while also serving as co-editor of *Westview*, a semiannual literary journal; co-editor of *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*; and copy-editor of the *Administrative Issues Journal*. She holds an MA in English from the University of Colorado and PhD in English from the University of Connecticut.



**JENNIFER STEVENSON**, born and raised in Oklahoma, has worked in the banking industry since 2003, after having studied Musical Theatre at the University of Central Oklahoma. She has over twenty years of sales and service experience, and currently is a lending officer with NBC Oklahoma. “I have a deep passion for the arts and humanities. There is so much to do and learn and see in Oklahoma, so many enclaves that support and lift up our communities.”

## ABOUT OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) strengthens communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life. As the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, OH provides and supports programming for the general public that uses humanities disciplines (such as history, literature, ethics, and philosophy) to deeply explore what it means to be human. OH accepts grant applications from nonprofits across the state for programs that may take the form of museum exhibits, film festivals, teacher institutes, oral history projects, or other formats that best

serve local communities. OH also administers programs that provide free access to cultural humanities content, including: *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine; *Let's Talk About It*, a reading and discussion series; the *BrainBox* podcast; and *Museum on Main Street*, a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution to provide traveling exhibits to small rural communities. Visit our website to find an event near you, read magazine archives, listen to the *BrainBox* podcast, or explore OH programs and grant opportunities. We look forward to hearing from you.

(405) 235-0280 | okhumanities.org | ohc@okhumanities.org

## 2022 MAGAZINE AWARDS

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) is proud to announce the magazine's recent success. At the 2022 Great Plains Journalism Awards, OH staff members and contributors were honored across five categories in magazine writing and page design for a total of five awards. Hosted and sponsored by the Tulsa Press Club, the awards are a regional competition among eight states that recognizes excellence in writing, design, and photography among newspaper, magazine, web, and TV journalism. Placing first was OH magazine contributor, Mike Klemme for Best Feature Photo. OH magazine contributors placing among finalists were: *Oklahoma Humanities* editor Carla Walker for Column Writing, "The Editor's Desk"; Tonia Anderson

for Magazine Feature Writing, "Reflections on a Beleaguered Symbol"; Anne Richardson for Reader Service Page Design, "Crossroads: Change in Rural America"; and Oklahoma Humanities staff for Magazine of the Year.

At the 2022 Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists Pro Chapter Awards, OH staff members and contributors won two awards. David Levy, First Place, for General Writing: "Breaking Down Barriers" and OH staff and Anne Richardson, Second Place, for Best PR Publication Cover: Spring/Summer HOPE.

See these award-winning entries from the HOPE (Spring/Summer 2021) and CROSSROADS (Fall/Winter 2021) issues online at: [okhumanities.org/archives](http://okhumanities.org/archives)



**THANK YOU!**

The work of Oklahoma Humanities is funded in part thanks to the generous grants, awards, and partnerships provided by these organizations. We are grateful for their ongoing investment and engagement!

 **KIRKPATRICK FAMILY FUND**  
\$30,000 for *Let's Talk About It*

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**THE PAULINE DWYER MACKLANBURG AND ROBERT A. MACKLANBURG, JR. FOUNDATION**  
\$10,000 for general operating support

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**THE GERALD H. WESTBY, JR. FOUNDATION**  
\$2,500 for *Museum on Main Street*

## LTAI NEWS

*Let's Talk About It* is excited to announce "Problems with Progress: The Human Place in Ecosystems," a new theme available for Fall 2023 programs. Progress is often assumed to be inherently positive, but this theme will explore the various challenges and negative effects progress can produce.

Books in the series will include: *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean; *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard; *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold; *Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark*

by Paul Bogard; and *Goodbye to a River* by John Graves.

The theme was developed in 2022 by Dr. Ken Hada, a professor and poet at East Central University. In addition to his work in Literary Ecology, Ecocriticism, and Regional writing, he is the author of ten collections of poetry and the winner of the 2022 Oklahoma Book Award, the 2017 South Central Modern Language Association Prize for poetry, and the 2011 Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.



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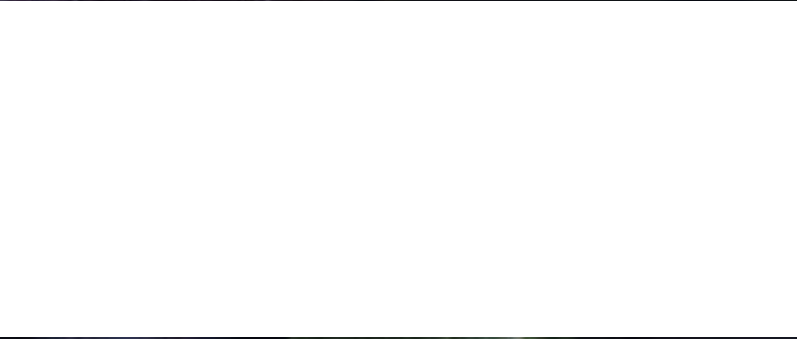


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