



VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 4 FALL 2008

Repast

Quarterly Publication of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Sweets from the Middle East (Part 1)



This decoratively carved wooden mold is used in making *ma'moul*, *kleicha*, and other famous Arab pastries, including the dill cookies shown here. Photo courtesy of Nawal Nasrallah from her book *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*. Turn to page 4 inside for Prof. Nasrallah's article about *kleicha*.

Second Helpings Allowed! Sweets from the Middle East, Part 2

Scheduled for our Winter 2009 issue—

- Joan Peterson, “Halvah in Ottoman Turkey”
- Tim Mackintosh-Smith, “A Note on the Evolution of Hindustani Sweetmeats”
- Randy Schwartz, “*Luqmat al-qādī*: The Morsel that Went to the Ends of the Earth”

Repast

ISSN 1552-8863

Published quarterly by the
Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor (CHAA)

<http://www.culinaryhistoriansannarbor.org>

An archive is available at <http://www.aadl.org/cooks/repast>

Editor.....Randy K. Schwartz
CHAA President.....Carroll Thomson
CHAA Program Chair.....Julie Lewis
CHAA Treasurer.....Dan Longone
CHAA Founder and Honorary President...Jan Longone



*The material contained in this publication is copyrighted.
Passages may be copied or quoted provided that the source is credited.*

For submissions or inquiries about *Repast*, contact:

Randy K. Schwartz
1044 Greenhills Drive
Ann Arbor, MI 48105-2722
tel. 734-662-5040
rschw45251@aol.com

Subscriptions are \$15/year. To subscribe to *Repast* or to become a CHAA member (which includes a subscription), contact:

Carroll Thomson
4600 W. Liberty
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
tel. 734-662-8661
culinaryhistory@aol.com

Editor’s Note on *Baklava*

Charles Perry, who wrote the article “Damascus Cuisine” in our last issue, was the editor of a book *Medieval Arab Cookery* (Prospect Books, 2001) that sheds further light on the origins of *baklava*, the Turkish sweet discussed by Sheilah Kaufman in this issue. A dish described in a 13th-Century Baghdad cookery manuscript appears to be an early version of *baklava*, consisting of thin sheets of bread rolled around a *marzipan*-like filling of almond, sugar, and rosewater (pp. 84-5). The name given to this sweet was *lauzinaj*, from an Aramaic root for “almond”. Perry argues (p. 210) that this word gave birth to our term *lozenge*, the diamond shape in which later versions of *baklava* were often sliced, even up to today. Interestingly, in modern Turkish the word *baklava* itself is used to refer to this geometrical shape.

Further information about the Baklava Procession mentioned by Sheilah can be found in an article by Syed Tanvir Wasti, “The Ottoman Ceremony of the Royal Purse”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 41:2 (March 2005), pp. 193–200. ■

IMMIGRANT FOODS *continued from p. 14*

- Hungarian nut torte [Pat Cornett], an elegant, flourless Passover pie made with egg yolks, sugar, and ground nuts, baked briefly and topped with icing. It is often made with toasted hazelnuts, in which case the torte is known as *piritott mogyorótorta*. Pat substituted walnuts for the hazelnuts, and added some raspberries.

Lebanese potato salad [Judy Goldwasser] helped to remind us that there were also some Asian streams feeding into the high tide of immigration that began around the turn of the century. Using a recipe from a Lebanese friend, Judy dressed the potatoes, onions, and parsley with a vinaigrette that was spiced with cinnamon, cloves, and peppermint. Habeeb Salloum devotes a whole chapter to potatoes in his *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead: Recipes and Recollections* (Regina, 2005). He recalls that when he was a little boy, his whole family would work together each year to dig up the potato patch at harvest time. “Our garden’s potato yield, which we placed in our dirt cellar covered with soil,” he writes, “would last us for almost the whole year. The dishes my mother prepared were never-ending” and, he added, they “still make my mouth water.”

The first significant numbers of Arab immigrants to North America began arriving about 1900 from the Ottoman province of Syria, which included what is now Lebanon. Their ranks were disproportionately Christian. Many set up shop here as urban grocers or, in the Plains, became farmers or travelling peddlers.

Joel Denker, in the introduction to his *The World on a Plate: A Tour Through the History of America’s Ethnic Cuisine* (Boulder, CO, 2003), quotes a modern Lebanese-American food magnate who marvels how yogurt, for example, was once a “secret” in America, its popularity limited to the Middle Eastern community. But hard work and creative promotion by some enterprising members of that community created a mass market for yogurt. “The journey of ethnic food from the alien and unusual to the familiar and commonplace is a recurrent one in America”, Denker writes. “Kebabs, spring rolls, and samosas today are following the same path that yogurt blazed many decades ago.” ■

C.H.A.A. FALL MEETINGS



GOOD FOOD, GOOD CAUSES, AND THE COOKBOOKS TO SUPPORT THEM

The Fall programs of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor examined historical charity cookbooks and a number of oldways practices in the production, preparation, and preservation of foods. Our French bistro theme meal, rescheduled to December 7 this year following its postponement from last December due to an ice storm, will be reported in a subsequent issue.

On September 21 Jan Longone, CHAA founding member and a Curator at the University of Michigan Clements Library, spoke at that library about her exhibit, “‘The Old Girl Network’: Charity Cookbooks and the Empowerment of Women”. Jan is striving to give the Clements the finest collection of community and charity cookbooks anywhere. Among those on display was the earliest American charity cookbook, *A Poetical Cookbook*, written for the 1864 Sanitary Fair to support those wounded, widowed, or orphaned by the Civil War. In the post-Civil War period, charity cookbooks were issued mostly as church fundraisers. But over time the genre became increasingly diverse, reflecting the many ways women worked together to help themselves, other women, and the outside world. Women used what they knew, and what they could do, to champion their causes. Many New Deal-era reforms had roots in these earlier social movements. The Clements exhibit displayed examples related to the woman’s suffrage movement; the Woman’s Exchange; the temperance movement; military service and patriotism; fairs, bazaars, and exhibitions; education; working women; the *Buckeye* and *Settlement* cookbooks; culinary biography; and the Tabasco Community Cookbook Awards. The exhibit received some important media attention, including in the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Petits Propos Culinaires*.

Food historian Sandra L. Oliver, founding editor of *Food History News* in Islesboro, ME, gave a talk at the Ann Arbor District Library on September 28, “The Food Historian in the Kitchen”. Ms. Oliver sees food history not just as a reconstruction of the past, but as a guide or corrective to present attitudes and practices. The foods available in a modern grocery store cloak the sources and the much greater diversity of what is available in nature, or on farms like that where Sandy and her husband reside. Those who study food history can learn how to cook with what is available seasonally and how to use heritage varieties. They become better at improvising, which explains why historical recipes didn’t need to supply complete details. They learn “head-to-toe” cookery, using parts like caul, lard, tongue, liver, and brains to make scrapple and other tasty dishes. There are fine dishes from yesteryear that are seldom made today because the recipes are forgotten or the ingredients are unavailable. In the past, methods of food preservation, and forms of exchange such as barter, bees, and festivals, ensured that not a single scrap was wasted unnecessarily. People also exchanged

know-how, freely adapting techniques learned from their neighbors or from their travels.

“Always Enough: Oral Histories and Rural Southern Recipes” was the title of an October 19 illustrated presentation about the Mattox Family Farmhouse at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, MI. The presenters were four women from the Historic Foodways and Domestic Life Programs at The Henry Ford, where this historic village is located: Cathy Cwiek, Sadie Wutka, Kathy Cichon, and Meeta Martin. The farmhouse, purchased by Henry Ford in 1943 in Bryant County, GA, had been built in 1879 by descendants of slaves who’d become land-rich during Reconstruction. The house is used today to interpret and re-enact African-American folkways of the period. Southern foodways amalgamate three main influences: Native American (seen in the use of such ingredients as corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, wild game, and seafood), European (beef, chicken, smoked or salt-cured hams, lard, wheat, baked goods, tree fruit, vines, sugar, jams, jellies), and African (okra, cowpeas, rice, greens, mace, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger). Based on their study of the house-books and other sources, the staff raises chickens, maintains an heirloom vegetable garden and grape arbor using traditional techniques, and prepares food with such equipment as an outdoor cooking kettle, wood-burning kitchen stove and oven, cast-iron skillet, and canning jars with zinc or brass lids. Presenters recount stories from the Mattox family’s written and oral history to give visitors a sense of the farming routine, plowing and other chores, hog-killing time, and the intimacy, generosity, and spirituality of African-American family life.

“Dry-brining” and “cold-smoking” both sound like oxymorons, but then again, so does “Midwestern salmon purveyor” and, for that matter, the title of T. R. Durham’s November 16 talk: “Smoking Can Be Good for You”. Mr. Durham is the proprietor of Durham’s Tracklements, a wholesale, retail, and mail-order seafood smokery in Ann Arbor. His book is just out: *The Smoked Seafood Cookbook: Easy, Innovative Recipes from America’s Best Fish Smokery* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008; 144 pp., \$26.95 cloth). Along with copies of the book for sale, there were also generous amounts of his salmon and other products for us to sample. Years ago, inspired by travel in the Scottish Highlands, Durham began smoking salmon for family and friends as a household hobby. Eventually he started a little shop in the Kerrytown market, where he remains. He flies his fresh salmon in from an ocean-based farm in the Bay of Fundy, NS. What he does next is unlike almost any other purveyor. In Durham’s view, how the fish is cured is even more crucial than how it is subsequently smoked. He dry-brines, i.e., brines with constant drainage, for 36-48 long hours to ensure that the flesh has enough salt to undergo a lengthy smoking without rotting. During the brining, he also introduces distinctive seasonings such as Scottish, Mediterranean, Thai, or teriyaki. Some of the salmon is then cold-smoked, i.e., smoked in ambient air for 16-18 hours, and this is his bestseller. But his hot-smoked salmon, a tradition that he single-handedly revived and which yields a moist and flaky product, has also proved to be quite popular. Tracklements is still a very small-scale business, but has gotten big-time attention thanks to some key endorsements in the national press. A lesson is that in today’s world, it’s not true that “if it tastes good, they will come”; also important are media exposure and connections. ■

THE IRAQI COOKIE, *KLEICHA*, AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

by Nawal Nasrallah

Nawal Nasrallah, a native of Iraq, was a professor at Baghdad and Mosul Universities teaching English literature and language. She came to the United States in 1990, and currently is an independent scholar residing in Salem, NH. She has been giving presentations and demonstrations on Iraqi cuisine— ancient, medieval, and modern— including to the Culinary Historians of Boston (of which she is a member) and the Culinary Historians of New York. Her food-related publications include Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine (Author House, 2003), and an English translation of Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's 10th-Century Baghdadi cookbook with extensive Introduction and Glossary, Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens (Brill, 2007), both recipients of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, 2007.

All Iraqis, including myself, and irrespective of region, ethnicity, or religion, look to the *kleicha* as our national cookie, and no feast, religious or otherwise, is complete without it. The name itself designates an assortment of cookies made from the same aromatic dough, filled and shaped differently to meet the demands of the individual preferences of the family members. *Kleicha* is stuffed with a fragrant nut-sugar mixture or with dates. It may be individually shaped into half moons and crescents with delicately twisted edges, or made round and decorated using carved wooden molds. Some are rolled and sliced somewhat like Fig Newtons, while others are cut out into thin discs and left unfilled. All are redolent with an enticing symphony of aromas and lingering flavors. *Kleicha* is moderately sweet and not so greasy. It is rather dry but pleasantly brittle to the bite.

Muslims make it for the two major religious feasts. *'Id al-Fitr*, a three-day feast, celebrates the end of the fasting month of *Ramadhan*. That feast begins with the appearance of the new moon. The second is *'Id al-Adhha*, which is a four-day feast celebrating the end of the pilgrimage rites in Mecca. Family members would help themselves frequently to these cookies: for breakfast, for between meals, for when the guests arrive, and so on. It is also the custom to exchange platters of *kleicha* among neighbors. Therefore, it had better be made with care, daintily shaped and generously filled.

Iraqi Christians bake *kleicha* for Christmas and Easter Sunday, which celebrate the birth and resurrection of Christ, respectively. Easter usually falls on the first Sunday after the first appearance of



A platter of kleicha cookies.

Photo from Nawal Nasrallah, *Delights from the Garden of Eden*

the full moon following March 20, the nominal date of the Spring Equinox. Iraqi Jews, up until the mid-20th Century when there was still a thriving community of them in Baghdad, baked the cookies for the joyous festival of Purim, which occurs on the 14th day of Adar, usually in March. Iraqi Jews usually call it *ba'ba' bit-tamigh* (date-filled balls)¹, which is a more descriptive name than *kleicha*. It was stuffed with dates and made into a rounded disc by pressing it into a wooden mold.

Making Traditional *Kleicha*

Kleicha is usually made at home in huge amounts— in the good old days, I should add. The cookies were baked in the domed clay wood-burning bread-oven, *tannour*, or more conveniently sent to the neighborhood bakery, and then stored in covered wicker baskets. I remember when my mother used to prepare us for the *kleicha* day— usually two or three days before the beginning of the *'Id*. “Making it earlier is risky,” so my mother used to reason with us, “by the time the *'Id* comes not enough *kleicha* would be left.” Making these cookies required everybody to pitch in. The dough was usually assembled in a huge bowl called *nijana*. The method is somewhat similar to that of pie dough, but it requires much more kneading. We youngsters would hang around mesmerized by the whole process, and intoxicated by the aromas.

The flour— usually white— was measured and mixed with the enticing blend of spices called *hawayij* (lit. ‘the required ingredients’), the most prominent of which was cardamom. Cinnamon, aniseeds, and nigella were also added but in smaller amounts, and of course a bit of salt. Fragrant melted *dihin hurr* (rendered butter of cows’ milk) was then poured while still warm, and the mixture was rubbed between the hands until it resembled breadcrumbs. Warm water was added along with a small amount of yeast, and the mixture was kneaded and kneaded until it turned into a huge smooth ball of dough. That was no easy task because the dough was supposed to be somewhat stiff.

While the dough was set aside to rise, varieties of fillings were prepared. The most popular was walnut, coarsely pounded in the large copper mortar and pestle, mixed with sugar and cardamom, and slightly moistened with rosewater. Other nuts were also used the same way, and sometimes shredded coconut and pounded toasted sesame seeds. For the date filling, the dates were stoned—

a low-skill task usually assigned to us kids, who were cautioned against sampling the dates while on the job—and then mashed on a quiet fire with *dihin hurr*, and spiced and enhanced with cinnamon, cardamom, rosewater, crushed coriander, and toasted whole sesame seeds.

The ones to be stuffed were given to grownups to make, since they required a certain level of expertise. The nut-filled ones were formed into half moons or crescents with deftly twisted edges. The ones with dates were usually formed into filled balls and then pressed into a concave wooden mold carved with beautiful geometric designs. This mold is called *qalab al-kleicha* (cookie mold). To expedite the process, some of them were made like Fig Newtons, nothing to be proud of.

The most fun was after all the fillings had been used up and the time for making the *kleicha* thins, called *khfeftiyat*, was announced. The leftover dough would be rolled out thinly and plain round cookies were cut out with the *istikan*, a small thin-glass teacup. We would also make free-form ones, the most common being daggers and dolls. These unfilled cookies would be indented in an artistic geometric manner using the blunt edge of a knife or the tip of a big key, or simply pricked with a fork.

When baking time came, huge trays were sent to the neighborhood bakery, along with several eggs for glazing before baking. There, the cookies would be baked to perfection. As soon as they cooled down, they were put in huge wicker baskets, covered with muslin cloth beautifully embroidered around the borders, and then stashed at a high place, inaccessible to children. For the following week or so, we would be gorging ourselves with these delicious cookies.

Times have changed, though. With smaller families and the availability of home gas ovens, people started making smaller quantities year-round, including, of course, for the religious feasts. The family would also make sure to send their newly wedded daughter, still a kitchen novice, to her new home with a respectable stock of *kleicha* to offer to her guests. It is also the cookie of choice for exclusively-women afternoon parties called *qabool*. Besides, it makes good provisional food for travelers and picnics because it travels very well.

Even during the embargo years, scarcity of fine flour was not a deterrent. People even used *hunta soda* (lit. ‘black wheat’, i.e., whole wheat) when white flour was dear. And even in the trying times of the present and despite the hardships and expenses, people still make sure that *kleicha* will be available for the ‘*Id*, for “‘*Id* is not ‘*Id* without *kleicha*’ they would say. Commenting on such traditions and festive rituals in Iraq, and all the ensuing expenses and troubles, an interviewed husband protests, “But can anyone of us husbands convince the wife not to make *kleicha* in these difficult times?” “I doubt it”, he says resignedly.² I doubt it, too, for we all grew up on these customs, which are so much engrained in our social and religious lives.

That is why I find it rather puzzling that people are in the dark when it comes to the origin of this cookie or how it came to be associated with religious festivals, not to mention what it means. Our elders may reminisce that their mothers, grandmothers, and even great-grandmothers used to make *kleicha*, but even the sharpest and oldest of memories cannot possibly take us beyond the 18th Century at the most.

The search for the identity of the Iraqi national cookie led me to the conviction that so many of the traditional Old World holiday pastries are indeed related in varying degrees, and ultimately share the same ancestors, the ancient Mesopotamians. Here is my argument.

A Sweet with Many Relatives

Looking for possible *kleicha* ‘relatives’ outside its indigenous region, I find that in the neighboring Arab countries, such as The Levant, somewhat similar cookies—round and stuffed with nuts or dates and pressed into similar wooden molds—are quite common. They are usually prepared for religious festivals by Muslims and Orthodox Christians alike. But the Levantines call them *ma’mool* (lit. ‘excellently made’).

In the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia, an adapted version of *kleicha* is known by the same name. In al-Qaseem, a city in central Saudi Arabia, for instance, *kleicha* is made with the rendered hump-fat of a young camel, and filled with honey. In this case, the connection is not hard to figure out. Apparently, the Iraqi pilgrims to Mecca who used to travel in the Hajj caravans that took Darb Zubayda, the road running between Basra and Mecca, spread the word about the cookie.³

A few years ago, an Iranian friend sampling my *kleicha* for the first time surprised me by saying they reminded him of the cookies his mother used to make. He said they call them *kloocheh*. I ran to Steingass’s *Persian-English Dictionary* for confirmation, and sure enough, the entry *kuleech* (*guleecha*, a variant) is said to be ‘a small round buttery cake’ and ‘disc or body of the sun or moon’. In these two definitions, the small round cakes are associated with the sun and moon, which is significant, as we have to keep in mind that *kleicha*, traditionally shaped into discs and crescents, does indeed celebrate a Muslim feast heralded by the appearance of the new moon and a Christian Easter, usually the first Sunday after the first full moon following March 20.

When my Russian friend made special sweet, yeasted pastries, tall and round, for Easter, I was puzzled by their name—*kulich*. To my ears, they surely sounded more like our *kleicha*, but to my taste buds, they were more like *churek*, slightly sweetened yeasted pastry usually shaped like a wheel with a cross-like double axis. The Iraqi *churek* is usually bought from the bakeries and enjoyed year-round. I learned later that my Russian friend’s *kulich* is one of the most traditional Easter breads baked in Eastern Europe. The Bulgarians, for instance, call it *kolach*, but they more traditionally shape it like a ring or a wheel, which is more like our *churek* without the cross. It is claimed that the name *kolach/kulich* is of Slavic origin, and that it is closely connected with the bread’s round shape—*kolo* means ‘circle’.⁴ The etymological affinity with the Persian *kloocheh/kuleech* and our *kleicha* mentioned earlier seems unmistakable.⁵

Now, the Russian *kulich* is said to be similar to the Jewish *challah* (variants *chalah*, *hallah*, *cholla*), traditionally eaten on the Sabbath and other holidays. For the Sabbath, this yeasted bread is usually made braided. For Purim, a special *challah*, oversized and elaborately braided, is baked. As for *Rosh Hashana* (Jewish New Year), *challah* is made round. The shape is said to symbolize the yearly cycle and the wheel of time, which, etymologically, is in

continued on next page

IRAQI KLEICHA

continued from page 5

perfect agreement with one of the possible meanings of *challah*—round. The Iraqi Jews, on the other hand, make date-filled *kleicha* for Purim, calling it *ba'ba' bit-tamigh*, a name descriptive of its rounded shape.

Traditional Easter braided bread similar to *challah* is made by the Greeks and Cypriots, who call it *tsourecki*, and the Armenians, who call it *choreg*. In Turkey, the bread is *paskalya çöregi*, and it is the kind of bread that is consumed year-round by Christians and Muslims alike, although its name belies its Christian origin.⁶ The etymological affinity with the Iraqi wheel-like *churek* is evident.⁷

Even as far east as China and Southeast Asia, we find that special pastries, called Moon Cookies, are consumed during the mid-Autumn festival when the moon is at its fullest and most beautiful in the sky. They are large stuffed cookies, made round, like their namesake, by pressing them into carved concave wooden molds, just like the ones used in the Middle East in making the feast *kleicha* and *ma'mool*.

Kleicha in Classical Arabic Sources

So far, the present-day threads mentioned above lead to the assumption that the unifying link may be the round shape of the cookie as well as possible affinities in nomenclature. Now, let us see if the past offers any further clues.

Looking for older citations of *kleicha* in Arabic books, I discover that Ibn Battuta, in his famous 14th-Century travel book, mentioned that he was offered *kalija* in Khuwarizm, a Persian province now in Uzbekistan. He further explained that they were pastries kneaded with *samn* (clarified butter), so it should have been some sort of rich pastry.

The earliest citations of *kleicha* I found in the extant medieval Arabic cookbooks are:

1. Two recipes in the 13th-Century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habib* attributed to the Aleppan historian Ibn al-'Adeem.⁸ In one of the recipes, the *kalija* round shape is given as a substitute for the ring shape of the dry cookie known as *ka'k*. Another recipe specifies that the cookie dough should be flattened and pressed on a mold called *qalab al-kalija*. Judging from a recipe in another 13th-Century cookbook⁹, the function of the mold is to give the cookie disc a decorative design.
2. The name also occurs in the anonymous medieval Egyptian cookbook (c. 14th Century) *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, where the cookie dough is cut out into discs with a round cutter said to be similar to that of *kaleeja*.¹⁰

As for medieval *kleicha* recipes, we do have them but under the guise of a modified Persian name *khushkananaj* (variant *khushkanan*), which literally means 'dry bread', merely descriptive of the cookie's texture. So familiar were these cookies at the time that some medieval cookbook writers opted not to include recipes for the ordinary types because no one needs them, they explain. Still, we are lucky enough to have access to some.

The most popular shape was the crescent since these cookies were especially baked for the Muslim religious feasts, the time when they were exchanged as gifts among relatives and friends. These 'crescents', in effect, mimic the new moon, which heralds the beginning of feasting. According to a recipe in Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's 10th-Century *Kitab al-Tabeeh*, a small piece of rather stiff dough is flattened and shaped like a tongue, and after some filling—similar to what we use today—is placed on it, the dough is folded lengthwise, sides well sealed, and then baked in the *tannour*.¹¹ As for the folded stuffed discs with twisted edges—much like what we do today—these were compared to half moons.¹²

There are also recipes for a variety of the cookie stuffed with nuts and sometimes with dates, formed into sealed balls, and then pressed into a decoratively carved wooden mold (*qalab al-kaleeja*). These are similar to the ones we make today. We simply call them *kleicha mhashshaya* (stuffed cookies), and the Iraqi Jews, *ba'ba' bit-tamigh* (date-stuffed rounded cookies). Al-Warraq calls them *raghuneen* (lit. 'the luxurious')¹³, an unusual name for the cookie. More unusual still is 13th-Century al-Baghdadi and Ibn al-'Adeem calling similar cookies *irmin*¹⁴, a name so obscure that it is nowhere to be found in Arabic dictionaries, medieval and modern alike. However, I discovered that *Irmini* in fact means 'sweet-smelling Lady'—an appropriate name for a fragrant cookie no doubt—but more significantly the word turns out to be one of the names of the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, as well.¹⁵

Rooted in Mesopotamian Worship

The discovery that a medieval name for *kleicha* referred to the goddess Ishtar was a "eureka moment" to me. Why of course! The threads that have hitherto seemed to be somehow connected but for no apparent reason, fall now into order. It is in Ishtar and her Spring festivities and rituals that we have our clues.

This famous Akkadian goddess was known as Inanna (Lady of Heaven) in Sumerian mythology. She was the most important goddess, daughter of the moon god Sin and sister of the sun god Shamash. She was goddess of love, war, sexuality, and fertility in humankind. Interestingly, she was also described as goddess of the grains, which explains why women knead dough to make cakes to her. Her planet was Venus, she was called the Morning and Evening star, and her name was often strongly associated with the moon. Besides, due to her journey to the underworld to bring back her shepherd-husband Dumuzi (biblical Tammuz), she was also responsible for the mysteries of death and rebirth. Her Spring festivals celebrated the return of life, announced by the first New Moon of the season, around the end of March and beginning of April.

In celebration of the goddess Ishtar and the New Year, special pastries were baked as offerings to her. Generally, making pastries and confections was a flourishing business in ancient Mesopotamia. They were made at the palace and temple kitchens, as well as in bazaars by professional confectioners. The confectioneries attached to temples were specialized in making these sacred rich pastries using the finest ingredients, such as flour, date syrup, honey, butter, sesame seeds, sesame oil, and the so much valued rosewater. These luxurious pastries were consumed in large numbers at times of such religious festivals. The worshippers

of the goddess Ishtar also crumbled some cookies and left them for her sacred doves. Extant records indicate that such fine pastries ranged in size from the very large to the tiny, and were also variously shaped, such as rings, pillars, turbans, crescents, hearts, heads, hands, ears, and even women's breasts.

Of these temple pastries, we are fortunate to have specific descriptions of a cookie mentioned by name. It is called *qullupu*, a name that suggests it was shaped round like the moon. The term was derived from the Semitic roots *kll* and *kly* meaning 'to complete', and *kull*, 'whole'.¹⁶ In light of this, the Slavic root *kolo* (circular), which we saw earlier in the names of the Russian round pastry *kulich* and the Jewish *challah*, might itself have been derived from an earlier ancient Semitic root. The same may be said regarding the Persian *kuleej* 'large cake', and *kuleecha* 'disc or the body of the sun or the moon', and the Iraqi *kleicha*.

The *qullupu* cookies were prepared by filling with raisins or dates portions of dough made with fine wheat flour and sesame oil, and then baking them in the *tannour*.¹⁷ We have good reason to believe that they were made, more or less, like the medieval *khushkananj* filled cookies, *irnin*, and the modern Iraqi *kleicha*, including the Jewish *ba'ba' bit-tamigh*. Many pottery molds were discovered in the palace at Mari (in present-day Syria near the Iraqi border) dating to around 1780 BC. They are believed to have been used for forming breads into unusual and decorative shapes, and are described as "round or rectangular plates with raised sides and a variety of designs on the internal base." In an experiment, a pastry case made from plain flour, water, and oil was filled with chopped dates and nuts, and then pressed into a reproduction of one of the molds from Mari, similar to what is done today with the *kleicha* mold.¹⁸ Now, with all this emphasis on the cookie mold in Ancient Mesopotamia and medieval and modern times, I am almost tempted to suggest that perhaps the name of the *qullupu* pastry might not have been derived merely from its round shape but also from the fact that a *qalab* (mold) is used in shaping them. However, none of the dictionaries of ancient Sumerian and Akkadian supports this interpretation, so far.

Ishtar's fame spread far and wide. She had her Phoenician, Syrian, and Canaanite counterparts, and consequently most of the rituals and ceremonies involved in worshipping her were adopted and adapted, one way or another, in most parts of the ancient Old World including northern Europe and China, where the earliest ancient harvest moon celebrations in the Fall included worship of the moon itself as a goddess, "Lady of the Moon". In the Bible, Ishtar was called *Ashtoreth*, and it is conjectured that the name of Esther, heroine of the Book of Esther, is a Hebrew rendition of a form of Ishtar. Besides, the Jewish *challah* might well have its roots in the ancient Babylonian practices of celebrating Spring and renewal of life and regeneration, which included baking *qullupu* pastries. Similarly, the elaborately braided *challah* was prepared for the celebration of Purim, commemorating the time when the Jewish Queen Esther saved her fellow Jews in Persia from extermination. This festival coincides with the beginning of Spring. Round *challah* was also baked especially for Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, a time of joy and renewal.

The Christian Easter, likewise, is steeped in ancient Babylonian myths. The name itself is ultimately associated with the goddess Ishtar. According to the Assyriologist Samuel Kramer, "the Christ

story did not originate and evolve in a cultural vacuum; it must have had its forerunners and prototypes, and one of the most influential of these was the mournful tale of the shepherd-king Dumuzi and his melancholy fate, a myth that was current throughout the near east for over two millennia."¹⁹ According to Kramer, despite the "profound disparities between the two accounts", significant similarities do exist, such as: "the resurrection of a deity after three days and three nights in the world below, ...[and] the torturing of Dumuzi...reminiscent of the agony of Christ."²⁰

Today, Easter, falling on the first Sunday after the first full moon following March 20 (the nominal date of the Spring Equinox), celebrates the resurrection of Christ, just as Ishtar's festivals, falling on the first evening of the first crescent moon following the Spring Equinox, marked the New Year by commemorating the resurrection of the god Dumuzi, Ishtar's husband. Adapted from Ishtar's New Year *qullupu* cookies, special Easter pastries have always been made: from the *bouns* (buns) of the ancient Saxon Feast of Eostre to the modern British hot cross buns, in which the crucifixion cross symbol harkens back to the ancient Mesopotamian cross, believed to symbolize the sun or the four quarters of the moon. Likewise, affinities are apparent—in etymology and shape—between the East European Easter *kulich/kolach* and its counterpart *tsoureki/choreg/çöregi*, and the Iraqi *churek* of modern times on the one hand, and the Ancient Mesopotamian *qullupu* pastries, on the other.

Unlike the Christian and Jewish feasts, however, the two major Islamic feasts do not recur in a fixed season, because the Muslim lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year. Still, the appearance of the moon is crucial in determining the beginning of each month, especially the two religious feasts. And what better way to celebrate these feasts than baking and exchanging the sweet-smelling stuffed *kleicha* cookies, whose various shapes seem to depict the changing phases of the moon—crescents, half moons, and full moons, as has always been done all the way back to the ancient times of Mesopotamia, the 'cradle' of festive cookies.²¹ ■

Endnotes

1. In today's Iraqi vernacular *ba'boo'a* still designates anything that is pressed and formed into a ball. For instance, *ba'boo'at timman* is a mother's treat to her toddler. She would press a small amount of rice into a ball and offer it lovingly to the child.
2. www.annabaa.org/nbanews/60/011.htm, accessed 12 July 2008.
3. Zubayda (d. 831), wife of 'Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, dug wells along this route to supply pilgrims with water.
4. Christine Ingram and Jennie Shapter, *The Cook's Guide to Bread* (London, 1999), pp. 92, 210.
5. I also learned that *kulcha* in India are small breads pressed into rounds and then deep-fried, and that *kulcha* in Afghanistan is a cookie. Alan Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford, UK, 2006), p. 441 s.v. *kulcha*.
6. Ayla Algar, *Classical Turkish Cooking* (New York, 1991), p. 200.

continued on page 10

BAKLAVA: A QUINTESSENTIAL SWEET FROM TURKEY

by Sheilah R. Kaufman

Sheilah Kaufman of Potomac, MD is a Repast subscriber and a member of the Culinary Historians of Washington (CHoW). She is a cookbook author, culinary instructor, food writer, and lecturer specializing in Mediterranean cooking and Jewish culinary traditions and history. Among her two dozen cookbooks are A Taste of Turkish Cuisine, co-authored with Nur Ilkin (Hippocrene Books, 2002) and Sephardic Israeli Cuisine: A Mediterranean Mosaic (Hippocrene Books, 2002). For the former, Sheilah was awarded a Daughters of Ataturk's Women of Distinction Award in 2003. Sheilah is also a food editor or contributing food writer for many periodicals, and has developed recipes for several food and diet companies. She is a founding charter member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals and an active member of Les Dames d'Escoffier, American Food Journalists, and several other organizations.

"I am not rich enough to eat *baklava* and *börek* every day."

— a popular saying in Turkey

Baklava is a sensuous, exotic dessert mainly of Turkish origin, but now loved the world over. It is a pastry made with sheets of filo dough that are brushed with melted butter and layered with chopped nuts such as pistachios, almonds, or walnuts mixed with sugar. After baking, the pastry is saturated with a syrup made of sugar in the Turkish version, or honey in the Greek version. Syrups vary: some are sharpened with a little lemon juice, and others are spiced with cinnamon and cloves. In the Middle East, cardamom and rosewater are preferred. The finished pastry is usually cut into diamond- (lozenge-) shaped pieces.

It All Starts with the Dough

The most important feature of baklava is the thin layers of dough. Charles Perry points out that while the word *phyllo* (filo) is Greek, meaning "leaf", the practice of making leaves of dough is a much older Central Asian tradition:

The dough is clearly of Turkish origin. The medieval nomad Turks had an obsessive interest in making layered bread, possibly in emulation of the thick oven

breads of city people. As early as the 11th Century, a dictionary of Turkish dialects (*Diwan Lughat al-Turk*) recorded 'pleated/folded bread' as one meaning for the word *yuvgha*, which is related to the word (*yufka*) which means a single sheet of filo in modern Turkish. This love of layering continues among the Turks of C. Asia. To the Tatars, *yoka* means 10 or 12 sheets of very thin (although not paper-thin) dough which have been fried, buttered, and stacked up. Wedges are cut out of it, pie-fashion, and served with tea.¹

Bruce Kraig, in an earlier issue of *Repast*, described how *yufka ekmeğ* (*yufka* bread) is still made in Anatolia. In the village of Bopazliyyay he watched as women formed a dough from wheat flour, salt, and water, rolled it out in round layers with a long, thin rolling pin on a floured board, and browned these on a thin iron plate set over a fire. The thin breads were dried and stored for months. Kraig also pointed out that *yufka* dough is the basis for a variety of other Turkish dishes. These include *böreks*, in which ingredients are wrapped in or layered between the thin dough sheets; *manti*, or moist, filled dumplings of various sizes; and baklava.²

Yufka dough that is actually paper-thin— now standard for baklava and similar pastries— evolved later than *yufka* itself. Perry believes that this evolution can be seen in Azerbaijan today, where one can find not only baklava in its usual form, with dozens of layers of filo, but also

a strange, archaic pastry called *Bakı pakhlavası* (Baku-style baklava) using ordinary noodle pasta instead of filo. It consists of eight layers of dough separated by seven layers of sweetened ground nuts. This may represent the earliest form of baklava, resulting from the Turkish nomads adapting their concept of layered bread— developed in the absence of ovens— to the use of the oven and combining it with the usual Persian pastry filling of nuts. If this is so, baklava actually predated filo, and the paper-thin pastry we know today was probably an innovation of the Ottoman sultan's kitchens at Topkapı palace in Istanbul.³

Sweetened pastries filled with nuts had been made in the Fertile Crescent since ancient times. Some believe that as early as the 8th Century BC, the Assyrians made such a pastry by putting together a few layers of thin, unsweetened bread dough layered with chopped nuts, baking this in primitive wood-burning ovens and topping it off with some honey. Eastward-bound Greek seafarers and traders encountered these pastries in Mesopotamia. By the 3rd Century BC, wealthy households in Greece were preparing them for special holidays and events.

Cross-cultural Influences

Many different ethnic groups in various parts of the world today, especially those with a history that goes back to the Middle East, claim to have "invented" baklava. And

many of these claims have a degree of validity. From its humble beginnings, baklava exemplified the type of culinary exchanges and adaptations that took place between the Mediterranean region and Asia, thanks to contact by sea routes and along the Silk Road.

In the 9th and 10th Centuries AD, the Turks, whose culture had arisen in Central Asia, crossed paths with the Arab and Persian cultures of Southwest Asia, especially that of the 'Abbasids, an Arab Muslim caliphate based in Baghdad. Native Turkish ingredients such as *yufka* were adapted to the 'Abbasid kitchen, which was based largely on Persian cuisine including such dishes as sugared pastries. In the 11th and 12th Centuries much of 'Abbasid power was transferred from Baghdad to the Selçuk (Seljuk) Turkish dynasty, laying a rich culinary foundation for the Ottomans to build upon.

The influences traveled in both directions. You can sense how effective the Silk Road was in transmitting culinary cultures from the fact that in 1330, a Chinese cookbook from the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty included a written recipe for a pastry, *güllach*, that is recognizably similar to baklava.

According to one theory, the name "baklava" derives from the Armenian *bakli halva*, or "Lenten sweet". In the Middle Ages, Armenian Christians prepared the pastry with 40 sheets of dough, one for each day of Lent. Even though it was considered to be sweet, it contained much less sugar than the modern version. The Armenians added cinnamon and cloves, obtained from the Silk Road trade, to the recipe. Something similar was prepared by the nearby Azerbaijanis using 50 or so layers of filo.

The Height of Ottoman Refinement

The most significant impact on Turkish cuisine and on baklava came with the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the reign of Mehmet II, who conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. At the height of its glory in the 16th Century, the empire would stretch from Baghdad to Tunis and from Budapest to Cairo.

Mediterranean and Central Asian cuisines were thoroughly fused and brought to a refined level in the imperial kitchens of the Topkapı palace in Istanbul. The palace was not only the center of the empire but also of its culinary activity, which played an important part in court life. Recipes and techniques were adapted from the Mediterranean region, the Balkans, North Africa, and much of the Arab world. Mehmet himself was a gourmet, and rich, diverse flavors are found in dishes prepared during his reign.

The Ottoman Turks regarded cooking as an art form. Palace cooks were devoted to the sensual pleasures of the

table and the quest for ever more refined dishes. They combed Istanbul's markets—especially the covered Grand Bazaar, which had 67 main streets and nearly 4,000 shops—for exotic ingredients to produce ambitious menus. By the beginning of the 1700's, the sultan's kitchen staff had grown to 1,370 people, all of them housed within the palace grounds. The preparation of each type of dish (soups, kebabs, pilafs, vegetables, fish, breads, pastries, candy, jams, etc.) was regarded as a separate skill and each required a specialist chef. Ayla Algar notes that a list in 1661 shows that 36,000 bushels of rice, 3,000 pounds of noodles, 500,000 bushels of chickpeas, and 12,000 pounds of salt were used in the palace. Records also show that in the mid-17th Century, 250 tons of bread were baked in Istanbul every day. A list of deliveries to the palace in 1660 notes the arrival of 2,000 pounds of cloves and nutmeg and 206 pounds of saffron.⁴

The Ottoman Empire was famous for its sweets, which included milked custards, fruit desserts, and baklava and other pastries. Especially during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-66), many pastries were created with whimsical names such as Lady's Navel, Beauty's Lips, and The Grand Vizier's fingers. The most renowned sweet of the Ottoman Empire was *aşüre*, a ceremonial dessert pudding with a milk base. As time passed, sugar gradually replaced honey and *pekmez* (grape molasses) in many desserts, and ingredients are sometimes fried in olive oil as an alternative to the use of melted butter.

At Topkapı and other Ottoman palaces, baklava was baked from the thinnest *yufka* sheets (50 or more), layered with varieties of nuts and cream and covered in sugar syrup or honey. Large quantities of sugar and spices were believed to enhance the aphrodisiac character of baklava (walnuts and honey were traditionally thought of in this way). For females, cinnamon was used; for males, cardamom; and cloves were added for both. There was a special "Baklava Procession" held annually on the 15th day of the holy month of Ramadan, when Janissaries (military troops stationed in Istanbul) would be given trays of baklava as a charitable gift.

Many cultures added new layers of flavor to baklava. After Arab alchemists perfected the science and art of distillation, rosewater became an important ingredient in Turkish pastries and other dishes. In the 16th Century, baklava made its way to Eastern Europe in the wake of Turkish conquests there. Strudel in Hungary, and puff pastry in France, may have developed in imitation of the layered Ottoman pastries.

When baklava is cut into squares and the corners folded up to create the shape of a dome or tulip (see photo on next page), it is referred to as *Frenk Baklavası* or *Baklava Française*. According to one popular account, this

continued on next page

TURKISH BAKLAVA *continued from page 9*



Baklava Française is cut into squares and the corners folded up to create a shape reminiscent of a dome, turban, or tulip. Photo: Randy Oostdyk/ it.wikipedia.org.

style was invented around the close of the 18th Century by one Guillaume, an exiled former pastry chef of Marie Antoinette. The story goes that he had been hired in the Topkapı kitchen by Kahyabaşı, the general manager.

The Ottoman version of baklava has not changed significantly since the 18th Century. However, in the Middle East today many different sweets made of filo, regardless of their shape or filling, are referred to as “baklava”. In addition to nuts, nowadays, milk pudding, custards, chocolate, dates, fruits, or other ingredients are often used as fillings. Common shapes include parcels, rings, coils, triangles, and squares. The baklava is presented on a tray called a *siniya* in Arabic.

According to Baklava King, a Turkish-American wholesale bakery in San Diego, “the three capitals of best baklava making in the world today” are Istanbul; Gaziantep, a city in Turkey near the Syrian border opposite Aleppo; and Damascus, Syria. They also state that these represent two distinct styles of baklava making. Turkish baklava is a rich dessert, “moist yet not dripping wet”, thick, and larger in size. Syrian baklava is more in the category of cookie or confectionery, generally very dry, and smaller in size. Both styles are delicious.⁵

In preparing Turkish-style baklava, the syrup has the proper consistency if, when a spoon is dipped in and lifted out, the drops of syrup form threads. Adding a little lemon juice to the syrup after removing it from the heat keeps it from crystallizing. Zeynel Uzun, who

owns the very well-known Washington, D.C.-area Turkish restaurant named Kazan, gives the rule of thumb that cold syrup should be poured over hot baklava, or hot syrup over cold baklava, to help retain the flakiness of the pastry and prevent it from becoming mushy. For a copy of Uzun’s recipe for *portakalli baklava* (orange baklava), contact me via my website at www.cookingwithsheilah.com. ■

Endnotes

1. Charles Perry, “Filo”, in Alan Davidson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 299.
2. Bruce Kraig, “Turkish Yufka and its Offspring”, *Repast* Winter 2005.
3. Perry, “Filo”.
4. Ayla Algar, *Classical Turkish Cooking: Traditional Turkish Food for the American Kitchen* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), Introduction, p. 11.
5. www.baklavaking.com/history.htm

IRAQI KLEICHA *continued from page 7*

7. In Persian, *charkal/charkh* is a ‘wheel’ (Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*).
8. Eds. Sulayma Mahjub and Durriyya al-Khatib (Aleppo, 1986). The two mentioned recipes appear respectively on pp. 2:658 and 2:625.
9. Recipe for a sandwich cookie (*mutbaq*) in Ibn al-Kareem al-Katib al-Baghdadi’s *Kitab al-Tabeeekh*. English translation by A. J. Arberry, “A Baghdad Cookery Book”, *Islamic Culture* 13 (1939), p. 212.
10. Eds. Manuela Marin and David Waines (Beirut, 1993), p. 105.
11. See my English translation *Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 419-420.
12. *Ibid*, pp. 420-421.
13. *Ibid*, pp. 426-427.
14. Pp. 212 and 2:651, respectively.
15. See, for instance, <http://www.ping.de/sites/systemcoder/necro/info/Sumerian.htm>, accessed 26 October 2008; www.piney.com/Lamlsh.html, accessed 12 August 2008.
16. The Aramaic is *kol*. See *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Appendix: Semitic Roots. Also available online.
17. Martin Levey, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Amsterdam, 1959), p. 49.
18. Rosemary Ellison, “Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia (c. 3000-600 BC)”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27:1 (1984), pp. 89-98. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3631938>, accessed 15 May 2008).
19. *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 324.
20. *Ibid*, p. 323.
21. For *kleicha* recipes, see my *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine* (Bloomington, IN, 2003), pp. 525-532.

C.H.A.A. JULY THEME MEAL



IMMIGRANT FOODS IN THE HEARTLAND

“Show him the spiced plums, mother. Americans don’t have those”, said one of the older boys.
“Mother uses them to make *kolaches*”, he added.

— Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

“Americans don’t have those.” It’s near the end of the novel, when Ántonia Cuzak serves traditional *Czech kolache* pastries made with spiced wild plums fetched from the “fruit cave”, the pickle cellar on her farm in the Nebraska prairie. It’s a small scene, but *that* spice represents a larger “spice”: the contributions of culture and cuisine that immigrants injected into the rather homogeneous societies that had emerged in North America. Their influence was brought to bear not only in the coastal ports where they disembarked, but in the very heartland of the continent.

It was these historical contributions of immigrants that took center stage at CHAA’s annual Summer participatory theme meal last July 27. Before us, arrayed on tables at the Earhart Village Clubhouse in Ann Arbor, were over two dozen dishes that we’d made to celebrate and probe the theme, “Immigrant Family Cooking”.

In a challenge to ourselves, we’d drawn the plurality of our recipes from the “Pioneer Families” section of the *Nebraska Centennial First Ladies’ Cookbook* (1967), compiled by Maxine Morrison and edited by Catherine J. Hillegass. This cookbook was an official publication of the Centennial that was held for the 100th anniversary of Nebraska’s statehood, with recipes submitted by women from throughout the state. The book was “dedicated to the women of Nebraska and all others everywhere who have preserved and advanced the art of fine cooking while sharing in the achievement of building a magnificent nation.” The 66-page section of pioneer recipes—a feature not uncommonly included in commemorative and community cookbooks published in the 20th Century—was reserved for the dishes closest to those of historical times, accompanied by family reminiscences of the women submitting the recipes.

Sodbusters and Other Early Settlers

Several dishes at our meal reflect the foodways of the earliest outsiders to settle in the North American heartland. Under the Homestead Act (1862), settlers who paid a small fee could claim a 160-acre plot in Nebraska or other federal territories, provided that they built a homestead and tilled the soil for five years. This bill, along with the opening of the railroads in 1866-82, proved crucial in developing the West. A surge of enthusiastic “sodbuster” families dug in, cleared the land, and began plowing the prairie expanses. They would be



A corner of the desserts table at the CHAA meal, including two types of shoo-fly pie. Photos: Randy Schwartz.

followed by others over the course of many years. Oklahoma was similarly opened to homesteaders in 1889.

The culture and cuisine of these earliest white settlers had two major components: that of Anglo-American families moving to the heartland from the east, and that of more recent arrivals from Europe and elsewhere. This dichotomy was visible in the life of writer Willa Cather (1873-1947). When she was 9, her family moved from Winchester, VA to Nebraska, first settling on a farm plot in the prairie, and a year or two later in Red Cloud, a nearby river and railroad town. Most of the families in Red Cloud were from Virginia or other states and provinces, especially Kentucky, Ohio, and Illinois. By contrast, the farmers in the surrounding prairie were predominantly more-recent immigrants from overseas. Willa loved to spend time with these immigrants because, as she expresses it in *My Ántonia*, they “had been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.”

Since firewood was scarce in the Plains, cooking and heating stoves used by the homesteaders were usually designed to be fueled not with wood but with dried hay, corncobs, or buffalo and cow “chips” (dried manure).

Information that accompanies many of the pioneer recipes in the *Nebraska Centennial Cookbook* confirms that these families lived in bitter-hard times. The recipe for savory onion pie (*NCC* p. 57), prepared for our meal by Julie and Robert Lewis, was contributed by Red Cloud resident Eleanor Wolf. She wrote that the recipe was from her grandmother, Mrs. I. W. Tulley, who came from Illinois in 1872 with her physician husband and their two teenage daughters to a homestead near Red Cloud. Their first home was a “dugout”, an underground dwelling carved out of the prairie soil. Its roof was threatened every time a herd of buffalo stampeded down to the nearby riverbank. Their crops were periodically devastated by grasshopper swarms, prairie fires, or snow blizzards. Fierce winds sometimes blew away their barn, sheds, fences, and other structures.

Mary Lou Unterburger made us currant loaf, a Scottish bread, using a recipe from one of the cookbooks written by Colorado-born Sharon Tyler Herbst (c. 1942 – 2007). Mary Lou

continued on next page

IMMIGRANT FOODS *continued from p. 11*

explained that she chose to make this recipe because of memories of her grandmother's cooking in rural Dolores County, CO. Her grandmother, who was from a Scottish background by way of Canada, called this bread "curn loaf", which was either a pronunciation of "currant" or a use of the Scottish term *curn*, which means "grain" or "hand-mill for grain" (akin to English "corn" and "quern", respectively). Mary Lou's reminiscences from Colorado can be found in her article, "Finding 'Milk and Honey' on a Dust Bowl Homestead" (*Repast* Fall 2000). Besides Colorado, currants were also available in the neighboring state of Nebraska; in certain counties during pioneer days, they were picked wild (as were plums, chokecherries, and grapes), preserved, and used for pies and fruit butters (*NCC* pp. 31, 90).

We can also imagine early families eating some of the other dishes prepared for our meal:

- "Superior Baked Beans" [Julie and Robert Lewis] (*NCC*, p. 75)
- stewed duck [Gwen and John Nystuen], adapting a recipe from Doris E. Farrington's *Fireside Cooks & Black Kettle Recipes* (Indianapolis, 1976)
- chocolate cookies [Rich Kato] (*NCC*, p. 31), made with cocoa powder, vanilla, raisins, and nuts, a recipe from the George P. Thomas family that settled in Burt County in 1856, only two years after Nebraska became a territory.

German and Scandinavian Immigrants

The early settlers of the American heartland also included immigrants from Northern and Central Europe. Perhaps the best known are the "Dutch" (i.e., *Deutsch*, meaning German) communities in Pennsylvania, Ontario, Ohio, and Indiana, and the Scandinavian ones in Minnesota. But such communities can also be found throughout the Midwestern and Plains states and provinces. In Nebraska, the largest European immigrant groups were those from Germany, the British Isles, Scandinavia, and Bohemia.

Nancy and Bob Harrington contributed *riewe schales*, a casserole of turnips, potatoes, breadcrumbs, milk, and sour cream that is served with pickled eggs and beets on the side. Nancy used an Amish recipe from far western Pennsylvania that appeared in William Woys Weaver's *Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking* (New York, 1993). The Germanic term *riewe* denotes a turnip, and *schales* (related to our words "shell", "shale", and "scale") denotes the layers that characterize this dish. Weaver has found that traditional Pennsylvania Dutch cookery is most similar to that of Alsace, a German/French region.

Molasses crumb pie [contributed by Carroll and John Thomson], now known as shoo-fly pie, is a celebrated sweet of Pennsylvania Dutch heritage. It was traditional in late Winter, a season when there were often no fresh ingredients available with which to fill a pie. Carroll was guided by a recipe (*NCC* p. 43) from a family that had immigrated to Nebraska from Pennsylvania in 1889. She made two versions, one in which the flour crumbs are reserved for the topping, and one, more common at breakfast, in which the crumbs are

layered with the rest of the filling to produce a drier, cake-like result.

German and Swiss immigrants in Nebraska made wild-plum pie and also a sort of French toast called *weinschnitte*, in which the bread slices were dipped first in wild-grape wine, then in egg batter, then browned in butter, and finally sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Other German-American food traditions are described by CHAA member Agnes Dikeman in "Depression-Era Cooking on a German-American Farm in Michigan" (*Repast* Spring 2007).

Throughout the Plains, there are towns whose very names reveal their Scandinavian heritage: Swedeboro and Dannebrog in Nebraska; Lindsborg, Kansas; Norway, Iowa; Viborg, South Dakota; and others. One Swedish dish that we sampled was *potatis korv*, a potato sausage loaf [Joanne and Art Cole]. The recipe (*NCC* p. 65) came from a granddaughter of John Erickson, an immigrant who had homesteaded near Swedeboro beginning in 1870 and had become a merchant and postmaster there. The Coles pointed out how resourceful the pioneers were to devise a dish made with ingredients available virtually year-round: preserved ground beef and pork, potatoes, and onions. In addition to salt and pepper the recipe calls for allspice, which was typically sold whole and therefore kept its flavor longer than ground spices.

Additional Scandinavian dishes at our meal:

- *leverpostei* [Harriet Larson], or Norwegian pork-liver pâté
- *flatbrød* [Harriet Larson], a very thin, crisp flatbread, the traditional staple of Norway. In the U.S. it is usually made with a mixture of wheat flour and cornmeal (instead of barley, as in the Old Country), and with buttermilk along with the shortening.
- a Norwegian salad [Nancy Sannar] of salmon, cabbage, and root vegetables with a vinegar-based dressing, reflecting a recipe in Kay Graber, *Nebraska Pioneer Cookbook* (Lincoln, NE, 1974; accessible in full text at netlibrary.com), p. 121
- a Finnish vegetable salad [Nancy Sannar]. In late Summers, Nancy's mother, who is Finnish, would often make such a salad using leftovers, sometimes adding meat.
- *limpa* [Eleanor Hoag], a Swedish cake-like bread. Eleanor went all out to faithfully follow instructions (*NCC* p. 32) calling for rye and wheat flour, sorghum, milk, lard, candied orange peel, and caraway seed.

See the Spring 2005 issue of *Repast* for Emily K. Pfothhauer's article on the *krumkake*, a Christmas pastry from her Norwegian heritage in Wisconsin.

Bohemians and the Force of Assimilation

We found Czech *zelova placka* [Randy Schwartz], or sauerkraut crisps, to be a surprisingly tasty snack. The name, which translates to "cabbage planks", reflects its simplicity: the sauerkraut is simply mixed into conventional pie dough, which is then rolled out, sliced into strips, and baked to a light tan. The recipe (*NCC* p. 62) was donated by the Chleboun family, which, the cookbook indicates, "came to this country

from Czechoslovakia in 1864 and made their home in a sod house in Saunders County.” The same family gave a recipe for *jaterni knedliky s polevkou*, a soup of beef-liver dumplings that is traditionally served by a bride to her new husband.

It was CHAA member Eleanor Hoag who reminded us at our meal about the rich depictions of Czech, Scandinavian, Russian, and other immigrant Nebraska communities that can be found in the works of Willa Cather. Her most famous novel, *My Ántonia* (1918), is based closely on Cather’s own life growing up in the state. The character Ántonia was inspired by Anna Sadilek, who for a time was a hired girl in a house next to the Cathers’. Anna and her family had immigrated in 1880 from a village in Bohemia, the westernmost Czech region, where Prague is located. Anna’s daughter Lucille Pavelka (the prototype for Ántonia’s daughter Martha in the novel) actually contributed some recipes (pp. 82-3) to the *Nebraska Centennial Cookbook*, including Czech fruit *kolache*, a sweet filled pastry. Cather once recollected, “I could name a dozen Bohemian towns in Nebraska where one used to be able to go into a bakery and buy better pastry than is to be had anywhere except in the best pastry shops of Prague or Vienna. The American lard pie never corrupted the Czech.” (*Nebraska Pioneer Cookbook*, p. 78.) See Sharon Maggard’s article in *Repast* (Winter 2008) about an annual festival in Prague, Oklahoma celebrating the *kolache*.

In addition to the use of lardless dough, there were other Bohemian foods in Cather’s novel that raised an eyebrow or two among Ántonia’s Anglo-American neighbors: “sour, ashy-grey bread”, leavened not with yeast but with fermented dough left over from the last batch; ripe yellow cucumbers cooked in milk; dried brown mushroom shavings, which were ground into powder for use in making flavorful soups.

Cather argued that such unfamiliar immigrant customs, including their languages, should be allowed to flourish on American soil. She railed against the urge for sameness: “This passion for Americanizing everything and everybody is a deadly disease with us. We do it the way we build houses. Speed, uniformity, dispatch, nothing else matters.” “The Americanization committee worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife that it is better for her to feed her family out of tin cans instead of cooking them a steaming goose for dinner is committing a crime against art.” (L. Brent Bohlke, ed., *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters* [Lincoln, NE, 1986], pp. 71-72, 147.)

Nevertheless, on a nearly daily basis immigrants and their descendants felt pressured to make decisions about whether to continue the folkways and foodways of the Old Country. By the time a new wave of immigration began at the turn of the century, many of the earlier ethnic groups had become “hyphenated Americans”, participating in some of the more mainstream customs while faithfully preserving others from overseas. As an instance of this, the German-American family of Otto Batz, a Lutheran minister who had founded congregations in two Nebraska towns at the turn of the century, enjoyed making coconut pound cake [Jan and Dan Longone] (*NCC*, p. 28). The family had adopted the recipe from an 1892 cookbook, which they still owned in the 1960’s.

Of course, not all immigrant dishes are introduced by ‘the tired, the poor, the huddled masses’. Some are brought by people of greater means, including esteemed chefs at urban restaurants or private estates. Early examples include the Swiss chefs at Delmonico’s in New York (est. 1831), the French ones at Antoine’s in New Orleans (est. 1840), Jacob Wirth’s German restaurant in Boston (est. 1868), German chef Otto Hermann at Hermann’s Café (est. 1904, renamed Ratzsch’s Restaurant) in Milwaukee, and the Swiss chef Oscar Tschirky at New York’s Waldorf Hotel (est. 1893). Pat Cornett made us an example of such refined immigrant cuisine, the classic French chilled custard called *bavarois aux framboises* (raspberry Bavarian cream). She used a recipe from *Household Guide* (1908), an Ohio government collection that was republished in 1994 as *The Cincinnati Cookbook* (Iowa Szathmáry Culinary Arts Series). Pat placed this vividly-colored dessert in individual serving cups, each with a strawberry and blackberry half-submerged on the surface.

The High Tide of Immigration

The number of immigrants accepted at Ellis Island, the processing center in New York harbor, crested on April 17, 1907, when 11,747 people were welcomed to America on a single day. These turn-of-the-century immigrants were mostly poor and oppressed people from Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe. Many of the former were fleeing conscription into the Czar’s army. Some would end up in the Midwest, whether in great cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, or in smaller towns and outlying areas.

An example of a food custom brought by such European immigrants is *holuski* [Patty Turpen and Carl Paulina], a warm Ukrainian dish of noodles mixed with minced and seasoned cabbage and onions. (Relatedly, *holishkes* is one of the names for a dish of stuffed cabbage leaves that is still popular in Polish and other communities.) Patty obtained the recipe from her friend Sandra S. Larimer, whose maternal grandparents, after arriving at Ellis Island from Ukraine, eventually settled in the coal country of eastern Pennsylvania, in an ethnic community in the town of Shamokin. Sandra wrote that her mother, Mary Ann, lovingly passed down this and other traditions:

Extremely proud of her heritage, she learned to write and speak Ukrainian fluently. The kitchen was the heart of their home, so she spent many years by her mother’s side in order to master every recipe like this one to perfection. She taught me, just as her mother did with her.

Kaiserschmarren was contributed to our meal by Bonnie and Patrick Ion, reflecting the German side of Bonnie’s family heritage. To prepare this confection, egg-rich pancakes are fried and cut up into small pieces as they solidify. These bits are served topped with powdered sugar and a fruit sauce. The word *kaiserschmarren* can be translated as “regal concoction”: *kaiser* meaning czar or emperor (with the acquired sense “splendorous”), and *schmarren*— from a root meaning slashed or cut up— meaning a kind of omelette (with the acquired sense “hash”, “mishmash”). However, Bonnie’s family called the dish “Sha Va La”. It appears under that name in a family

continued on next page

IMMIGRANT FOODS *continued from p. 13*

cookbook compiled by Bonnie's sister after an aunt passed away in the 1990's. A note on the original recipe card said, "Especially liked by children."

Jews and Arabs

A disproportionate number of the European immigrants were Jews from various lands, who tended to settle in New York and other big cities. Detroit's Jewish food stores and home cooking in the 1920's-1940's were the subject of CHAA member Ned Chalatz's reminiscences that formed cover stories for our Summer 1996 and Summer 1997 issues.

Because of kosher laws and religious customs, meals had a heightened significance in Jewish culture, and numerous immigrants became food purveyors and restaurateurs. Food was not only a source of sustenance and identity, but a means for many of them to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and participate in the American Dream. Ethnic Jewish foods have had a big impact in the U.S. Some of them have even gone mainstream: bagels and cream cheese, knishes, kosher hot dogs, and deli soups and sandwiches of various kinds.

Traditionally, in observance of rules for the Saturday Sabbath, on Friday evening a neighborhood "crier" would rush to and fro warning Jewish-owned shops to close and housewives to finish their cooking by 18 minutes before sunset. The Sabbath was required to be a day of rest, joy, and beauty, including the best meals of the week.

Many older Jews can't forget the wonderful aromas of dishes like pot-roasted chicken [Jane and Herbert Kaufer] that were served for Sabbath dinner on Friday evening. Jane uses a recipe adapted from her grandmother, a Jewish immigrant from the Odessa region of Russia. For her grandmother, this evolved from a Sabbath dish to one that she served on alternate Sundays. She would first coat the chicken pieces with seasoned flour and broil them, then place them for baking in a large Dutch-oven type roasting pan with onions, garlic, more seasonings, and water. She would serve the chicken with knishes of meat and potato to make a grand feast. As Jane notes on the recipe, "Don't lose the gravy, if necessary lower the heat... The chicken is tender and falls from the bones. It goes well with *farfel*, *kasha*, or barley." *Farfel* are tiny egg noodles, while *kasha* (buckwheat groats) and barley were the most common cereals among the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe.

Rita and Jim Goss brought us the quintessentially Jewish *lokshen kugel*, a mildly sweet dairy-based casserole. Rita used a recipe for "Noodle and Raisin Pudding" from June Roth's *How to Cook Like a Jewish Mother* (New York, 1969), which calls for noodles, raisins, butter, cottage cheese, evaporated milk, sugar, cinnamon, and lemon. The Yiddish word *lokshen*, meaning "noodles", has cognates all along the Silk Road, bespeaking the Asian origin of noodles. *Kugel*, which might originally have meant "ball", came to designate a whole range of casserole dishes, including potato, bread, matzo, and apple kugels. For Jews from Alsace, who came to America in an earlier wave and usually didn't speak Yiddish, the *lokshen* were instead *frimsele*, and *kugel* was *schalet*, the latter term apparently having the same connotation of "layers" as in the German *riewe schales* discussed earlier.



Cheese *blinchiki* (Ukrainian-style blintzes) prepared by Phil Zaret and served with sour cream.

Other immigrant Jewish dishes at our meal:

- chopped liver with rye bread [Rita and Jim Goss], also from June Roth's book. The *pâté* is made from chicken (or goose) livers and onions; these are fried (in oil or, more traditionally, in *schmaltz*, the rendered fat of the bird), and then minced along with hard-boiled eggs. Chopped liver was traditionally eaten on rye bread as a Sabbath side-dish.
- Ukrainian *blinchiki* or *bliniski* [Phil and Barbara Zaret], *crêpes* of refined wheat flour and egg, rolled up around a filling made with farmer's cheese, baked and then served with a dollop of sour cream. This dairy version is popular for the Shavuot holiday. On other occasions, they might be filled with fruit or with leftover brisket or other meat. The word derives from Russian *blini* (buckwheat pancakes), and in Yiddish it became *blintzes*. In Hungary and Romania, the term is *palacsinta* (see *Repast* Winter 2000, p. 5).
- cheese cake [Mary Lou Unterburger], another Shavuot dairy confection that arrived in the U.S. from Central and Eastern Europe. In former times a curd cheese was used rather than cream cheese, and the crust was made from crumbled *zwieback* biscuits rather than graham crackers.
- oatmeal *fluden* [Lisa and Tony Putman], an Eastern European shortbread-type pastry topped with fruit preserves. Lisa, whose parents came from Ukraine and Lithuania, grew up eating this sweet, and she took the recipe from a 1950 charity cookbook compiled by her aunt. *Fluden* is traditional at Jewish holidays in the Fall, where it symbolizes an abundant harvest. The custom originated in Germany, where the word *fladen* means "flat cake". Among the Jews of Hungary and Transylvania, the pastry is made in a multilayered form and is called *flódni*.

continued on page 2

MORSELS & TIDBITS

A roundup of recent news from CHAA members ...

- **George Estabrook** has been supervising a publication from the Society for Economic Botany that will review what is known about the evolution, cultivation, and dispersal of the banana. He will speak to our group about this topic in January.
- **Pat Cornett** gave a two-hour, how-to presentation on "Cooking Up a Family Cookbook" at the Ypsilanti District Library on the evening of November 6.
- **Jan Longone** and **Bonnie and Patrick Ion** were on the panel of judges for the second annual "Pie Lovers Unite!" event, held July 19 at the Ladies Literary Club in Ypsilanti. Sponsored by Slow Food Huron Valley, the contest honors pie-making traditions in Michigan and encourages residents to work together to reinvigorate a local, sustainable food system.
- In early November, **Jan Longone** spoke to the Michigan chapter of the American Culinary Federation about the Clements Library Menu Collection. The program, held in Palmer Commons at the University of Michigan, also featured Lee "Farmer" Jones of The Chef's Garden (Huron, OH), which is known for its sustainable methods of growing produce.
- On September 23-25, **Sherry Sundling** was a participant in a workshop, "The Joy of Recipe Research: Discovering a Recipe's Past", led by food historian Sandra L. Oliver at Historic Sauder Village (Archbold, OH).

When the renowned culinary memoirist and gastronome **M. F. K. Fisher** died on June 22, 1992, **Molly O'Neill** in the *New York Times* hailed her as a woman possessed by an "ornery passion" for both food and writing, an "impetuous urge to soothe her readers while shaking their souls." Now, to mark the 100th anniversary of Fisher's birth (she was born in Albion, MI on July 3, 1908 and raised in Whittier, CA), her biographer **Joan Reardon** has completed *M. F. K. Fisher among the Pots and Pans: Celebrating Her Kitchens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; 182 pp., \$24.95 cloth). The book follows Fisher's life by focusing on her own cooking in successive homes in California, Dijon, and Provence. Reardon, who lives in Chicago, has previously written the biography *Poet of the Appetites: The Lives and Loves of M. F. K. Fisher* (North Point Press, 2004) and edited the collection *A Stew or a Story: An Assortment of Short Works by M. F. K. Fisher* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006). Also this Fall, a short course on M. F. K. Fisher has been ongoing at the New School University in Manhattan.

Who knows, maybe it was because of the 40th anniversary of the Big Mac, but the year 2008 brought a spate of writing on the history of burgers and beef. New School University food historian **Andrew F. Smith**, in his chapbook *Hamburger: A Global History* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Edible Series, 2008; 128 pp., \$15.95 cloth), shows that this sandwich played a major role in modernization and globalization (no surprise there), and that there's no evidence that it originated in Hamburg, Germany (big surprise). **Josh Ozersky**, online food editor for *New York* magazine, wrote *The Hamburger: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press "Icons of America" Series, 2008; 160 pp., \$22 cloth). He treads some of the same

ground as Smith but discusses more of the pop-culture context, and also delves into the corporate culture within the fast-food empires. White Castle (Wichita, KS, 1921) and McDonald's (Pasadena, CA, 1940) were the pioneers that helped to transform the hamburger from working-class street fare into middle-class restaurant fare, and to elevate it to iconic status. **Andrew Rimas**, a journalist in Boston, and Dr. **Evan D. G. Fraser**, a social scientist at the Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds, have written *Beef: The Untold Story of How Milk, Meat, and Muscle Shaped the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008; 256 pp., \$25.95 cloth). They cover the entire global history of cow and steer husbandry and its significance in both the human diet and other spheres of culture, and conclude that the planet cannot sustain the modern, industrialized system of dairy and beef production. **Bill Kurtis**, the well-known Chicago TV journalist and documentarian, would probably agree with that assessment. A conservationist, he uses classic grass-fed and grass-finished practices at Tallgrass Beef, his three-year-old, 10,000-acre cattle ranch in his native Kansas. Mr. Kurtis spoke to the Culinary Historians of Chicago on July 19 about "Grain-fed vs. Grass-fed: What's the Beef?" His recent book, *The Prairie Table Cookbook* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., Dec. 2007; 160 pp., \$29.95 cloth), includes both historical and modern recipes—many of the latter furnished by Charlie Trotter, Rick Bayless, and other celebrity chefs—along with anecdotes, letters, and photographs from pioneer and cowboy days, and thoughts about today's grass-fed beef movement.

"In any culture where a proportion of people can obtain protein from animal sources, beans will be reviled as food fit only for peasants", writes **Ken Albala**, a history professor at the University of the Pacific (Stockton, CA). This association between bean-eating and poverty is one of the main ideas documented in his work *Beans: A History* (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2007; 256 pp., \$24.95 cloth), co-winner of the IACP's Jane Grigson Award for 2008. The book is a scholarly and entertaining narrative about all of the world's various beans, treating their history, science, and culture, including folklore, literature, philosophical and political dimensions, and methods of preparation, with nearly 60 historical recipes. For a more focused study, turn to *The World of Soy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press Food Series, 2008; 320 pp., \$40.00 cloth), a collection of essays edited by **Christine M. Du Bois**, **Sidney W. Mintz**, and **Chee-Beng Tan**. The various contributors detail how soybean processing has evolved through history, and why this bean is now the most important agricultural commodity in the global food system. While the culinary and economic importance of soy products has expanded in the U.S. and many other countries, the authors also point out some obstacles to their further adoption as nutritious foods in certain regions of the world. Mintz and Tan are anthropologists at Johns Hopkins University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, respectively, while Du Bois is a researcher with the Johns Hopkins Project on Soybeans.

On the Back Burner: We invite ideas and submissions for these planned future theme-issues of *Repast*: Episodes in the History of Breakfast Cereals (Spring 2009); Scandinavian-American Food Traditions (Summer 2009). Suggestions for future themes are also welcome. ■

CHAA CALENDAR

(Unless otherwise noted, programs are scheduled for 4-6 p.m. at Ann Arbor Senior Center, 1320 Baldwin Ave.)

Sunday, December 7, 2008
CHAA annual participatory theme dinner
“A French Bistro Evening”
4-7 p.m., Earhart Village Clubhouse
(835 Greenhills Drive, Ann Arbor)

Sunday, February 15, 2009
To be announced.

Sunday, January 18, 2009
“The Domestication and Spread of Bananas”
George F. Estabrook, Professor of Botany,
Univ. of Michigan Dept. of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology

Sunday, March 15, 2009
“Chocolate: Food of the Gods”
Nancy Biehn, owner,
Sweet Gem Confections, Ann Arbor

REPAST
1044 GREENHILLS DRIVE
ANN ARBOR, MI 48105-2722



Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

Volume XXIV Number 4, Fall 2008

First Class