



VOLUME XXXVIII, NUMBER 1 WINTER 2022

Repast

Quarterly Publication of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

A Seat at the Table

Ethnic and Immigrant Foods in North America: A Sampler



Photo: Eyrbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre (Arborg, Manitoba) via *Gastronomica*.

Above, a traditional coffee get-together in an Icelandic immigrant farmhouse in Brownbyggð, Manitoba, ca. 1900. On pages 4-7, Mary Bilyeu writes about the cake *vínarterta*, a symbol of cultural heritage in this New Iceland area of Canada.

MORSELS & TIDBITS

Ann Arbor's International Museum of Dinnerware Design (<http://dinnerwaremuseum.org>) launched two new online exhibitions in December. IMoDD director and CHAA member Dr. **Margaret Carney** reports that "Wedding China" is based on pieces that have been donated to the permanent collection, together with other wedding china submitted by the museum's friends and supporters. The museum asked people to send photographs of such china, along with photos and stories from their weddings, and these are also part of the exhibit. The second show, "Holiday Dining", displays holiday-themed dishes donated to the museum in recent years:

- 109 examples of an annually-issued line of blue and white porcelain Christmas plates from Bing & Grøndahl (Copenhagen, Denmark), the earliest Christmas plates in the world, introduced in 1895
- two 1950s Glidden Pottery (Alfred, NY) canapé plates with a Christmas tree motif, individually hand-painted
- a variety of 1950s-1960s dinnerware with Christmas Eve patterns designed by Viktor Schreckengost, who was associated with Salem China (Salem, OH) and other firms
- a set of fine bone china dishes bordered with holly sprigs and platinum banding, from Lenox China (Trenton, NJ)

- a 14-inch Christmas tree-shaped cookie platter (2021) from Spode pottery (Stoke-on-Trent, England)
- a 13-piece set of the Kroger Co.'s "Doubly Special Dinnerware" (2021), designed by ceramicist David Kim, pairs of which can be joined together to become double-sized.

Opening in February 2022, "African/American: Making the Nation's Table" was guest-curated by food historian Dr. **Jessica B. Harris** and organized by the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) in New York at its Harlem facility, The Africa Center at Aliko Dangote Hall. The exhibit tells the story of how African American people working in fields, kitchens, taverns, and businesses have shaped American foodways through their skill, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Features include the rescued 1970s test kitchen of *Ebony* magazine; a display uncovering the effects of migrations and other population movements on African American food; a "Shoebox Lunch" tasting of recipes from top African American chefs; and an immersive film in the Virtual Reality Theater. The film profiles Matthew Raiford and Jovan Sage, partners at The Farmer and The Larder restaurants in Brunswick, GA, and the nearby Gullah-Geechee ancestral farm, Gilliard Farms; and Debra "Shorty" Jones and Mary "Little" Jones, pit-masters at the intergenerationally-owned Jones Bar-B-Q in Kansas City, KS.

"Considering Culture: Music and Food in Interwar America" is a three-hour online adult-education seminar (\$85) offered on Saturday afternoon, Apr. 30 by the Newberry Library in Chicago (<https://www.newberry.org/adult-education-seminars>). The class is led by culinary historian Dr. **Sarah Peters Kernan** (who wrote about medieval and early-modern English recipes in our Spring 2021 issue) and **Elizabeth Newkirk**, a classical pianist and writer. Conducted as a musical performance, cooking demonstration, lecture, and discussion, it offers a new way to consider American culture between the two World Wars by weaving together musical and culinary examples of technology, popular and high culture, and foreign influences.

Ginkgo Press, Inc., which publishes the award-winning EAT SMART culinary travel guidebooks and has led culinary tours to many different countries, is offering its Culinary and Cultural Tour to Poland on Aug. 6-17, 2022, limited to 12 participants. Join culinary experts Dr. **Joan B. Peterson** and **Susan Chwae** of the Culinary Historians of Wisconsin for an adventure featuring the artistry of food, friendly hospitality, and major tourist sites in and around Warsaw, Krakow, and Zakopane. Tours to several other countries are also offered this year (<https://www.eatsmartguides.com/ourtours.html>).

The Sophie Coe Prize (<https://sophiecoepize.wordpress.com>) is a prestigious international prize awarded each year to an engaging, original piece of writing that delivers new research and/or new insights into any aspect of food history. Sophie Coe Memorial Fund trustee Dr. **Kaori O'Connor** announces that the Prize this year is £1,500 for the winning essay, article, or book chapter (10,000 words or less), with submission deadline Apr. 22, 2022.

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FALL PROGRAMS HIGHLIGHTED MEXICAN, GERMAN-AMERICAN, AND PROHIBITION FARE

The Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor closed out 2021 with three successful online presentations. The Caribbean theme meal, however, was postponed again by the pandemic.

The Sunday afternoon talks are organized by our Program Chair, **Glenda Bullock**, in collaboration with our hosting partner, the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL). Recordings of many of them, and details about forthcoming ones, are available on the “Program Schedule” page of the CHAA website (<https://culinaryhistoriansannarbor.org>).

Old and New Worlds in Mexico

Moles, the thick sauces and marinades from regions such as Puebla and Oaxaca, are an example of major Mexican foods that are still little appreciated in the U.S. despite their rich culture, taste, and variety. But **Maite Gómez-Rejón**, who was born near the U.S.-Mexico border and has ancestors from Oaxaca, told us that Americans are starting to learn about authentic Mexican dishes. Maite, who spoke on “Mexico’s Early Cookbooks” last Sep. 19 during Hispanic Heritage Month, is based in Los Angeles where she teaches culinary history and fine art via lectures, cooking classes, tastings, and YouTube videos on her channel, ArtBites: Cooking Art History.

In colonial Mexican society, native foodstuffs such as corn, prickly pears, avocados, and bell peppers were mostly relegated to the periphery. But one early cookbook, written from the San Jerónimo convent in Mexico City by Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695), presented local versions of dishes such as *moles*—hand-ground on a *metate* from fruits, nuts, seeds, roasted chilies, and other ingredients—as well as sweets such as the *buñuelo*, a sort of fried doughnut or fritter. Convents, Maite told us, were fertile birthplaces for such post-Columbian foods, since preparing those required access to key Old World ingredients (sugar, citrus fruits, etc., secured via the Manila-Acapulco trade) and, often, massive amounts of time and labor. But even a decade after independence, the country’s first printed cookbook—the anonymous *El Cocinero Mexicano* (Mexico City, 1831)—failed to mention *tortillas*, and used native ingredients only in service to European dishes such as *empanadas*. The rule of Austrian archduke Maximilian I (1864-1867) brought native ingredients such as *agave* and *pulque* into the royal household, but Porfirio Díaz (ruling off and on during 1876-1911) was a Francophile who criticized traditional society’s reliance on corn.

The nation’s first regional cookbook, *Cocina Michoacana* (Zamora, 1896), was compiled by Vicenta Torres de Rubio and featured recipes sent to her by her radio-show listeners. Inspired by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the subsequent *indigenismo* movement, *Como Mejorar la Alimentación del Obrero y Campesino* [How to Improve the Nutrition of the Worker and Peasant] (Chihuahua, 1934), by Ana María Hernán-

dez, championed native foods and even showed how to hand-grind and nixtamalize corn. The bilingual *Mexican Cook Book Devoted to American Homes* (Mexico City, 1946), by Josefina Velázquez de León, director of the Culinary Arts Institute in the capital, was the first introduction of real Mexican cuisine to a U.S. audience.

German Settlers in the Heartland

Bibles and cookbooks were the books that German immigrants most commonly brought with them to the U.S., related Antje Petty at the start of “German-American Foodways” (Oct. 31), her Oktoberfest-season talk to an audience of over 100. Dr. Petty is Associate Director of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, where her research focuses on the experiences of German-speaking immigrants and their descendants. Successive waves of such immigration peaked in the 1850s, 1870s, and 1880s, arriving from southwestern, northwestern, and northeastern Germany, respectively. The first two waves were mostly families, many of whom bought farmsteads in rural America, while the third and largest wave was mostly single men who became urban U.S. laborers.

German immigrant homemakers faced not only strange ingredients (dry baking soda instead of liquid yeast leaveners; corn starch instead of potato starch; local fish and game; etc.) but also, often, unfamiliar living arrangements. In the cities they had to make lunch a small, quick meal instead of the biggest meal of the day. In rural areas they lived without the communal ovens and community support they’d been used to; they baked their bread in a homestead fireplace using a cast-iron “Dutch oven”. Preserved foods gave German immigrant fare a reputation as “heavy”, but in the U.S., where the growing season tended to be longer, preservation was less important. During the second half of the 1800s, German cookbooks were reprinted in America with adjustments for U.S. ingredients and measurements and with explanations of English words; an example is *Praktisches Kochbuch für die Deutschen in Amerika* (Milwaukee, 1879) by Henriette Davidis, the century’s leading cookbook author in Germany. Dr. Petty discussed the typical sections of such cookbooks: general cooking advice, recipes, preservation methods, foods for the ill or elderly, the use of leftovers, and how to organize a *kaffeeklatsch*, or afternoon gathering with coffee, tea, and cake.

German Americans steadily acculturated; for example, by 1915 they preferred light, sweet, highly-refined wheaten bread to the traditional heavy, sour loaves made with rye, millet, buckwheat, sourdough, etc. Such shifts were partly the result of new cookbooks for Germans that were filled with American recipes; in some cases, popular U.S. cookbooks were simply translated into German or bilingual editions. Most German foods that went mainstream in the U.S., such as sauerkraut, frankfurters, bratwursts, and pretzels, are southwestern German fare from the earliest immigrants. On the opposite extreme, cow udder is no longer cooked in Germany or the U.S.; nor is *Muß von schwarzem Brot* (black-bread porridge), a food for the ill; nor is roasted badger, a specialty dish of German pioneers in Wisconsin. *Kirschengrütze* (cherry pudding) is still popular in its homeland, northern Germany, but has almost disappeared stateside.

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VÍNARTERTA: THE ICELANDIC-CANADIAN CAKE WITH VIENNESE ORIGINS

by Mary Bilyeu

CHAA member Mary Bilyeu has been the Food Editor at The Blade in Toledo since 2014, and is a former contributor to The Ann Arbor News and The Washtenaw Jewish News. Her most recent previous article for Repast was “Historical Baking Re-Enactment: A Fort Meigs Feast” (Summer 2021).

New York, New Jersey, New England, New Zealand... Those are a few of the hundreds of locales around the world that were named as “new” versions of old places from which settlers had arrived.

There’s even a New Iceland, an area on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. The region, situated about 50 miles north of the provincial capital, Winnipeg, boasts the world’s largest concentration of people of Icelandic heritage outside of Iceland itself.

New Iceland has a distinctive cultural and culinary identity that shines especially at Christmas time. Traditionally, that is when the cake *vínarterta* and other holiday treats are prepared and consumed. In its current form, this cake is usually made from sugar cookies that are baked and allowed to cool, then spread with a cardamom-spiced prune filling and stacked on top of each other. The cylindrical stack is then slathered on top with an almond-scented icing made of powdered sugar. For serving, the cake is first cut in half, then cut into thin slices perpendicular to that cut, which affords a handsome view of the contrasting layers of cookie and fruit filling.

I have found that preparing *vínarterta*, although time-consuming, is not otherwise difficult, and it’s *so* worth it! Once, I brought leftovers to work after making it at home, and it was a huge hit—a prune cake, of all things. That tells you how good it is. I’ve also “gone rogue” and put a touch of brandy in the frosting, too, which makes it swoon-worthy.

The Settlement of New Iceland

Vínarterta comes with a back-story that’s perhaps not quite as dramatic as the Old Norse legends of Edda but is definitely worth learning about.

In 1872, Sigtryggur Jónasson, considered the father of New Iceland, emigrated to Ontario first. As Kristin Olafson-Jenkyns recounted in her 2001 cookbook *The Culinary Saga of New Iceland: Recipes from the Shores of Lake Winnipeg*, Mr. Jónasson was part of a mass exodus from Iceland during the last few decades of the 19th Century, in which an estimated one-quarter of the country’s population fled multiple traumas at home: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, unusually severe weather that impacted farming and the food supply, a degree of religious persecution, and conflicts with the sovereign power, Denmark. The political conflicts and the struggle for independence continued even after Iceland was granted nominal home rule in 1874.

From Ontario, detachments of the Icelandic émigrés ventured further west in 1875 to the newly-established prairie province of Manitoba, and others to the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Some of the settlers stayed that Winter in the established riverside outpost of Winnipeg, while others continued on to the unsettled lakeside territory designated for New Iceland. Mr. Jónasson had returned to his homeland to assist with organizing the so-called Large Group of over 1,000 Icelanders who would relocate to Canada in the Summer of 1876.

Despite harsh conditions, illness, infighting, flooding in 1880, and the eventual departure of many settlers, New Iceland had been established and slowly began to flourish as a fishing and farming community, with Gimli as its leading town. In 1893, further devastation back in Iceland prompted continued immigration to the territory and helped to enlarge the community of Icelandic settlers there, who were on their way to becoming Canadians.

Origins of *Vínarterta*

Now, nearly 150 years after the founding of New Iceland, the *vínarterta* is one its most celebrated surviving heritage dishes. It was originally called *Wienertarte*, which translates to “Vienna torte”. How a cake brought to Canada from Iceland had been named after Vienna, Austria, has presented something of a puzzle.

Ms. Olafson-Jenkyns quoted from *Cooking for Today*, a community cookbook published around 1970 by the Ladies Aid of the Unitarian Church of Winnipeg, which claimed: “The recipe for this torte is one of the recipes brought to Iceland by Icelandic members of the Constantinople Guard who passed through Vienna as they crossed Europe going between Iceland and Constantinople.” The Constantinople Guard, today more often known as the Varangian Guard, was an elite mercenary unit of the Byzantine Army during the late Middle Ages. Its fighters were drawn mostly from Northern Europe, including Scandinavia.

Karen Burshtein locates the Icelandic origins of *vínarterta*, perhaps more plausibly, in the 18th Century. Writing for the Atlas Obscura website, she explains: “In the late 1700s, layered cakes made with almond flour and dried fruit were highly popular in Austria. In the 1790s, an Austrian recipe for the cake



Photo: Jeremy Wadsworth, *The [Toledo] Blade*.

Slices of Mary Bilyeu's homemade *vinarterta*, a specialty of the New Iceland region in Manitoba, Canada.

was translated into Danish." As it made its way to northern Europe, *vinarterta* became popular with the upper classes—merchants and various power-brokers—because of its association with continental glamor. "The recipe became the height of culinary chic in Copenhagen," Ms. Burshtein continues, "and in the elite circles in Iceland (which, at the time, also meant Danes, as Iceland was then ruled by Denmark)."

Laurie K. Bertram, a Canadian historian and a descendant of the original Icelandic settlers in Manitoba, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation at the Univ. of Toronto on the history of *vinarterta*. In her article about the cake's heritage status in the Winter 2019 issue of *Gastronomica*, she explained: "Coffee served with fashionable confections was a sign of status in Copenhagen social circles at a time when the popularity of Viennese-style sweets production and baking was growing in Europe Although its larger origins are unclear, recipes for Vienna Torte increasingly reached a wider European audience in the late eighteenth century."

As often happens with fashionable trends, *vinarterta* gradually became more accessible to the masses. Early versions had offered instructions for a layered cake that was prepared with ground nuts (presumably hazelnuts or almonds), filled with apricot jam, and likely covered in a chocolate glaze. By the late 1800s, however, prunes—once a luxury in Iceland—were accessible enough to so many households that they were adopted for the cake's filling in preference to apricots.

The Old Ways Were Best-Preserved in the New World

While *vinarterta* in Iceland was "the height of fashion in 1875", according to the recently-published *Gastro Obscura: A Food Adventurer's Guide*, it had faded to near oblivion there by the mid-20th Century. Ms. Olafson-Jenkyns noted that the surviving version in Iceland—now known as *randalín* ("something that is striped")—has layers that are more like cake than cookie, and that it sometimes features a chocolate buttercream frosting on top. Having gone even further afield, regional variations might be filled with a purée of rhubarb rather than stone fruit.

At the same time, Olafson-Jenkyns continued, *vinarterta* remains such a fixture in New Iceland, Canada, that "bakeries, gift shops, and most every amma (grandma) bakes the old-style treat." Any deviations—altering the number of cake layers from the standard seven, for example, or using berry jam instead of the now-classic prune purée—inspire passionate debates among the Canadian descendants of the original Icelandic immigrants. They are purists.

How could this inverse situation arise—the farther the *vinarterta* traveled, the more standardized and popular it became, even as it morphed and nearly disappeared at home?

In Iceland, dietary habits were necessarily modified as food supplies suffered from the tragedies that had prompted the mass

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A Recipe for *Vínarterta* (Icelandic-Canadian Prune-Filled Cake)

Cookies:	Filling:
1 cup butter, softened	1 lb. pitted prunes
1½ cups sugar	1 tsp. ground cardamom
2 eggs	1 tsp. vanilla extract
3 Tbsp. cream	
1 tsp. vanilla extract	Icing:
1 tsp. almond extract	¼ cup butter, soft
4 cups flour	2 cups sifted powdered sugar
1 tsp. baking powder	2 Tbsp. cream
	½ tsp. vanilla extract
	¼ tsp. almond extract

Make the cookie layers: Cream butter. Add sugar gradually, then eggs one at a time, beating well. Add cream and flavorings. Add some of the flour mixed with the baking powder. Knead in the remaining flour. Divide the dough into 7 parts; wrap and chill for one hour. Using an 8-inch cake pan or a plate as a template, cut out a parchment-paper round to use as a template.

Preheat oven to 350° F. Roll out one piece of the dough on a lightly-floured surface into a thin circle; use the paper template to cut to size. Place the dough round on a parchment-lined baking sheet and bake for 10 minutes, until barely golden at the edges. Repeat with the 6 remaining cookie layers. Cool completely.

Make the filling: Place the prunes in a saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring just to a boil and cook until soft. Cool. Purée the prunes until a smooth paste is formed, then add the cardamom and vanilla. Cool.

Assemble the cake: Divide filling into 7 portions (about ¼ cup each). Spread filling onto each cookie. Place one cookie onto a plate and then stack the layers, prune-side up. When the layers are evenly stacked, wrap the cake and store in a cool place overnight or up to two days to allow the layers to absorb the filling and to moisten.

Make the icing: Blend together the ingredients and spread on the top layer of cake.

Keep the cake refrigerated, but serve at room temperature. To serve, cut cake in half, then cut into thin slices perpendicular to that cut. The cake keeps well for 2-3 weeks in refrigerator or 3 months in freezer.

Yield: One 8-inch cake.

Source: Adapted by Mary Bilyeu from a heritage recipe of Arden Jackson that was posted in 2015 by the CTV Television Network in Toronto (<https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/recipes/recipe-for-vinarterra-traditional-icelandic-cake-since-1875-1.2320542>). Ms. Jackson, a member of the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto and a descendant of some of the original 1875 settlers of New Iceland, has a website that offers *vínarterta* and related products (<https://www.vinarterra.ca>).

Other Foods of New Iceland

As in many other immigrant communities, the people of New Iceland were determined to preserve key food customs from their home country, while also being innovative in adapting to new conditions. What follows are examples of traditional foods from the region.

- Cows' and ewes' milk are turned into butter and other important dairy products. The protein-rich *skyr*, a creamy curdled milk with a texture similar to yogurt, is often eaten topped with cream and sugar or fresh fruit. The whey removed from the curds is used as a drink, or boiled down to make *mysuostur* (a caramel-colored type of cream cheese), or else fermented for use as a preservative.
- The classic Icelandic brown bread has a rich molasses flavor. In the Old Country it was made with rye flour, but in Canada, where wheat grows easily, bread bakers began to use more wheat flour than rye.
- Smoked fish and other fish preparations are central to the diet. The New Iceland communities creatively adapted to the varieties of fish found in Manitoba lakes and rivers, which differ from those in Icelandic waters. In her award-winning New Iceland cookbook, Gimli native Kristin Olafson-Jenkyns included some of the resulting recipes, such as Smoked Goldeye Pâté, and Garden Medley Pickerel with Dill *Pönnukökur* (thin pancakes).
- Interesting meat dishes include smoked lamb, prairie chicken, saddle of venison, *lifrarpylsa* (liver sausage), *rúllupylsa* (meat roll), and *svið* (sheep's head, which is singed to remove the wool, cut in half and the brain removed, then boiled). The revised 1953 edition of the very popular work by Nellie Lyle Pattison, *The Canadian Cookbook*, included a *rúllupylsa* recipe from New Iceland in its chapter on Regional Dishes. A boned lamb flank is rolled around a filling of chopped onion and such spices as black pepper, cinnamon, allspice, and cloves, then sewn tightly and refrigerated for five days before being simmered in boiling water for two hours. Pattison noted that this roll makes a good dish for a buffet table, and that leftovers are sliced and eaten on brown bread as an open-face sandwich.
- In addition to *vínarterta*, there are many other sweet treats such as *hrísgrjónagrautur* ("rice porridge") and *gyðingakökur* ("Jewish cookie"). The rice porridge, which likely traces back to Danish *risengrød*, is made by simmering short-grain white rice in milk until it is a creamy pudding; it is often eaten warm, topped with a tart berry sauce or else with cold milk, sugar, and cinnamon. The Jewish cookies are made with a dough rich with butter and egg, and flavored with cardamom. In the Olafson-Jenkyns recipe (reproduced at <https://www.jewishtimes.com/icelandic-jewish-cookies-a-dessert-with-a-fascinating-story-to-tell>), before they are baked the cookies are brushed with cold, strong coffee and sprinkled with coarsely-chopped blanched almonds and coarse bits of sugar. There was no real Jewish presence in 19th-Century Iceland or New Iceland; Gil Marks, in her *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, explains that this cookie traces back to the *Joodse boterkoeke* ("Jewish butter cookie") being made by Jews in Holland, a recipe that spread to Denmark and thence to Iceland and New Iceland.

—RKS

VÍNARTERTA

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exodus in the 1800s. Culinary traditions were further altered in the mid-20th Century, especially after World War 2 and as a result of the country's alliance with NATO at its founding. Less isolation led to the introduction of international foodstuffs and the assimilation of less distinctly Nordic eating habits.

But in New Iceland, the *vínarterta* custom became a means to keep tradition and memories alive, and to pass them on in order to connect children and grandchildren with their ancestors and with their cultural heritage. Put simply, the cake is a taste of the homeland at home in Canada.

After its circuitous historical journey through Europe, across the Atlantic Ocean, and westward through the Canadian provinces, *vínarterta* remains a beloved tradition in New Iceland. While it is served at celebratory occasions throughout the year, at Christmastime this specialty dessert is practically mandated. Ms. Bertram calls it “an enduring symbol of Icelandic North American identity, [which] has come to act as an unaltered, accessible, virtually sacred bond across generations.” Ms. Olafson-Jenkyns wrote that it receives “a rather reverential treatment”, and she cited a passage from *Where the Winds Dwell* (1995), an immigration novel by Icelandic writer Böðvar Guðmundsson, which sums up the special place that *vínarterta* has in New Iceland's culture. It is “the cake which for a hundred and twenty years has done the most to unite the hearts of all those people in Canada ... with Icelandic blood in their veins. Even though this cake is held in anything but high regard in Iceland, where it is usually called a striped tart, it has warmed the cockles of so many North American Icelandic hearts that it deserves to be placed with a crown atop it on the Icelandic coat of arms”

Perhaps it will now become a fixture on your own tables, as well, either next Christmas or for any special occasion before that... even the receipt of this latest issue of *Repast*, which is a worthy reason to celebrate with a legendary cake, to be sure! ■

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MORSELS & TIDBITS

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Food history conferences this year in Europe include:

- Feb. 11-12, 2022: Seventh annual **Amsterdam** Symposium on the History of Food, with theme “Food and the Environment: The Dynamic Relationship Between Food Practices and Nature”. Held at the Aula of the Univ. of Amsterdam, Netherlands. <http://bijzonderecollectiesuva.nl/foodhistory/amsterdam-symposium-on-the-history-of-food>.
- May 14, 2022: 36th annual **Leeds** Symposium on Food History and Traditions, with theme “Fish”. Held at Friends’ Meeting House, Friargate, York, England. <http://www.leedsfoods Symposium.org.uk>.
- May 30-Jun. 1, 2022: Sixth biennial **Dublin** Gastronomy Symposium, with theme “Food and Movement”. Held at the School of Culinary Arts & Food Technology, Dublin Inst. of Technology, Ireland. <http://arrow.dit.ie/dgs>.
- Jul. 8-10, 2022: Annual **Oxford** Symposium on Food and Cookery, with theme “Portable Food: Food Away From the Table”. Held at St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, England. <http://oxfordsymposium.org.uk>. ■

C.H.A.A. PROGRAMS

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Flouting Prohibition

The Golden Age of Cocktails in the U.S. lasted from 1860 to 1919, but as Tammy Coxen reminded us in “Prohibition and Repeal” (Nov. 21), even when the federal Volstead Act made most alcohol sales illegal after 1919, there was still enough booze for drinking to continue in new forms. Ms. Coxen, who owns Tammy’s Tastings in Ann Arbor, recently teamed up with her Michigan Radio co-host Lester Graham to write *Cheers to Michigan: A Celebration of Cocktail Culture and Craft Distillers* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019).

Prohibition resulted from widespread sentiment against immigrants, immigrant saloons, and public drunkenness, from women’s outrage at their abuse from drunken men, and from business owners’ concerns about absenteeism and delinquency. But the legislation had loopholes for medicinal, religious, and non-intoxicating alcoholic beverages. Even more, there was smuggling, especially from Ontario to Michigan. In fact, prohibition led to a surge in organized crime and violence—the main reason for the measure’s eventual repeal in 1933, with Michigan the first state to ratify.

Until repeal, there was illicit alcohol. With its adulterant off-tastes, it was best mixed with sweet or tart flavors to create cocktails, sours, bitters, slings, and the like (only later did the term “cocktail” become generic for all mixed drinks). Ms. Coxen showed how to mix a classic sour called Bee’s Knees: she combined gin, honey syrup (hence the name), and fresh-squeezed lemon juice in a shaker with ice, shook it well, strained it into a glass, and “finished it” with an orange wedge. A bitters called The Boulevardier (bourbon, vermouth, and Campari liqueur) and a cocktail called The Mary Pickford (white rum sweetened with syrups of cherry, pineapple, and pomegranate) reflect the influence of bartenders who left Dry America for Europe or Cuba, respectively. ■

THE SOUPS THAT MAKE US: AN ODE TO ARMENIANNES

text and photos by Julién Godman

Julién Godman (www.juliengodman.com) is a Detroit-area chef, traveler, instructor, writer, storyteller, and creative. He has worked in a wide variety of fields, from local journalism to community-centered public art, and has been involved in fiction writing, stewardship of nonprofit organizations, organizing culinary events, and teaching a food-blogging workshop to teens in Yerevan, Armenia. As an Armenian-American (on his mother's side) who identifies as queer and alternative, his perspective on custom and culture is unique and often not mainstream. He is currently finishing up two undergraduate degrees in Linguistics and Africana Studies at Wayne State Univ., and he plans to open a vegetarian, Armenian-inspired café and supper club in Hamtramck, MI, in 2022.

The richness of Armenian soups is both a fleeting memory from my immigrant-heritage childhood in Detroit, and a constantly evolving memory as I grow older. Having spent the last 10 years intensely exploring Armenian cuisine, these are some of the most vivid memories that I have today.

Armenian cuisine today is best represented through soup, because it is in preparing such soups where the greatest freedom to explore oneself often lies. A recipe that we are guided by is also an opportunity to introduce our own local flavors: a pinch of this, a substitution for that.

Strands of History

There truly is no way to tell the story of Armenian food without engaging with the historical threads that comprise what 'Armenianness' is today.

Over a hundred years ago, the monumental tragedy of the Armenian Genocide splintered a bustling and vibrant Armenian culture into a dispersed, global diaspora. Today, countries such as Russia, Georgia, Lebanon, and Syria have huge Armenian populations, but so do many Western hemisphere cities, from Montreal to Buenos Aires, where thousands of survivors and orphans found refuge. And Detroit was one such place.

Armenian food, in general, is marked by the heavy use of dairy products, wheat, meat, fresh vegetables, and the freshest herbs. Some recipes are quite extensive and might even involve

days of preparation, but are incredibly simple: potatoes that are cut and cooked in foil on a fire; wine that is pressed in giant clay pots; fruit that is stuffed with nuts and coated in grape molasses (or other fruit molasses); river trout that is grilled with lemon and salt; and ground meats that have been heavily seasoned.

But Armenian food is not just one thing. First, there are regional differences within Armenia; in fact, there are even two Armenian languages, Western and Eastern Armenian— a difference mostly embodied by phonology rather than vocabulary. Second, there are huge influences from neighboring cultural regions. A hundred years ago, Armenian food looked a lot like Lebanese and Syrian food, and today in Armenia one can see Russian threads running through the cuisine. Third, there are the effects of the diaspora. During the Genocide, many recipes, among other things, were brought by survivors to their countries of migration, creating something like an archive or carbon copy of culinary history. Thus, a varied series of events have caused Armenianness, and its food, to spread and diversify over time and space—the word *traditional* is problematic and, in my opinion, political.

A Couple Classic Soups

When I think of Armenian soups I think of diversity and tranquility. I think of the grandmothers over vats of steam, slowly churning bone marrow. I think of meatballs, miniature dumplings, lots of spices, fresh herbs, yogurt and butter, lentils and barley. I think of the long process it takes, and the commonplace spot on the table where a soup like *Spas* usually resides.

Spas is essentially a warm yogurt soup, which is assembled through staggered mixing of chicken or vegetable broth, egg, yogurt, lots of lemon (juice and peel), olive oil, sometimes fresh dill, garlic, and barley. It is comfort food from the old country, but also comfort food in the here and now. *Spas* is a heavy soup, absolutely heartwarming in the cold or in mountainous regions, and is virtually a signature of the Armenian Highlands. I remember eating versions of it in the Summer, too: omitting the egg, adding more fresh herbs, and chilling the soup easily transforms it into a hot-weather dish. Fresh black pepper on top pulls it all together.

One of my favorites, although less "traditional", is Red Lentil and Apricot soup. To achieve it, I think, requires the right mindset: throw away the notion that lentil soup must use green lentils and some random vegetables, or any other mixture one might see marketed in cans. The best version of this soup relies on getting the stock right. One can use a meat stock, like lamb or chicken, or a hearty vegetable broth that has been simmered down for a couple of hours. Since I often cook this dish alone on a weekday night, a preference of mine is to dance, such as during the simmering time— but that one is up to you. Another perspective to consider is to think of the soup in multi-dimensional terms. Make sure it gets a little bit of salt, fat, acid, heat— but also character.

After creating my vegetable broth using sweet onion, carrots, celery, bay leaf, a few dried cloves, and one cinnamon stick, I add my washed red lentils. I am fine with using subpar



Spas, left, a warm yogurt soup of Armenia, and below, Red Lentil and Apricot soup.



quality in some of the ingredients: a few whatever carrots, an onion that needs to have some pieces cut off and discarded. The character of the soup comes from the care taken in preparing it and from the few key ingredients that simply cannot be compromised. One such ingredient is the dried apricots. Don't buy those standard, dusty, heavily-preserved light-orange apricots, sold just about everywhere. To give my soup its heritage, quality apricots are a must. Armenian culture is intrinsically bound to fresh and dried fruits, especially grapes, apricots, plums, peaches, and pomegranates— which all hold currency and are symbolic of many trials and rebirths through history.

Good dried apricots have a rich color to them. They may be pinkish, reddish, yellowish, but in the Detroit area the best available are a burnt orange with a higher moisture content than those dusty light-orange ones. Places like Papaya and Super Greenland in Dearborn usually will have good bulk or boxed apricots with such a deep color, usually imported from Tajikistan.

The general rule of thumb in Armenian heritage cooking is to give oneself license outside of following a strict recipe. But with Red Lentil and Apricot soup, I usually stick to the same ingredients. After my lentils have softened slightly from boiling, I add a spoonful of wildflower honey, a bunch of minced garlic, loosely chopped or diced sweet onion, carrot, the apricots, and spices such as coriander, Aleppo red pepper flakes, turmeric, and paprika. If feeling adventurous, one can add a pinch of *mahlab* (a spice ground from seed

kernels that have been extracted from the stone or pit of Cornelian or St Lucy's cherries), although many Armenians would say that it doesn't belong in this soup. After taking the soup off the heat, I swirl in some sharp olive oil and garnish the surface with flat parsley and a dollop of *labna*, a yogurt-like cheese.

When I think about this soup, I think about what life might have been like had the Armenian narrative not been so tragically altered. I think of my long-passed relatives and the journey that they labored to carry out across deserts, on ships, and despite heavy losses in order to find themselves in The States. I think of culture and the constant reclamation and evolution of what culture means to a community and to self. Armenian soup is something more than flavor, or process, or strict adherence to any given practice: it is the people and stories behind it. ■

WHAT MORE DID MRS. ABBY FISHER KNOW? NEW INSIGHTS ABOUT THE LIFE HISTORY OF A CULINARY ENTREPRENEUR

by Evelyn Rose

Dr. Evelyn Rose lives in San Francisco, CA, where she works as a medical communications professional and volunteers as a community historian. She is the founder and director of the Glen Park Neighborhoods History Project (www.GlenParkHistory.org) and has authored numerous articles in local San Francisco media highlighting the forgotten histories of her district, including Abby Fisher. Dr. Rose received her B.A. degree in Anthropology at the Univ. of South Florida, Tampa, and her Doctor of Pharmacy degree at the Univ. of California, San Francisco.

When a copy of *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking, Soups, Pickles, Preserves, Etc.* appeared in the Crahan gastronomic collection at a Sotheby's auction in New York in 1984, the author was described as "an illiterate ex-slave who dictated her recipes." Marcus Crahan recognized it as an "important California cookbook... the first cookbook printed in San Francisco." In the Afterword to her 1995 facsimile edition, culinary historian Karen Hess noted that the book was "exceedingly rare." Published in 1881 by the Women's Co-operative Printing Office, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* was later accepted as the first cookbook by an African American. The subsequent discovery of Malinda Russell's cookbook, published in Michigan in 1866, shifted Mrs. Fisher's work to a chronological second place but certainly did not downgrade its importance.

In her book, Mrs. Fisher shared that she was "late of Mobile, Ala.", could neither read nor write, nor did her husband have a formal education. She had "upwards of thirty-five years" of kitchen experience, had been awarded a diploma at the 1879 Sacramento State Fair, and two medals at the 1880 San Francisco Mechanics' Institute Fair. While traditional plantation cooking was done in a hearth or brick oven, Hess observed that by the time Fisher wrote the book, she had clearly mastered baking on a range stove ("iron monster"), including the use of baking powder. As her final testimonial, Fisher wrote that she had "given birth to eleven children and raised them all".

Hess discovered that Mrs. Fisher was mulatto (i.e., mixed race), with her father being from France and her mother from South Carolina. Hess assumed that she had been enslaved. In a 2001 article, Rafia Zafar surmised that because of her ancestry and as a "loving and proud mother," Mrs. Fisher had been a favored slave. Robert Brower later found that she had been born in South Carolina in June 1831, that her maiden name was Abbie Clifton (exactly matching the name of her mother), and that the planter James J. Andrews of Orangeburg, SC, was possibly her biological father. The 1831 birthdate implies that the future Mrs. Fisher was about 15 years old when she began working in the kitchen, and about 50 when she published her cookbook.

Jennifer Jensen Wallach recently observed that Mrs. Fisher's "definition of what constitutes southern food is elastic and expansive, transcending the corn and pork tropes commonly used", and that she included recipes representing New England and Europe, some of them for more "delicate and refined" palates.

There might be good reasons that Mrs. Fisher's culinary repertoire displayed such a broad range. Recent discoveries are rendering new insights about her. What follows are some emerging perspectives regarding Mrs. Fisher's life history.

What is the New Evidence?

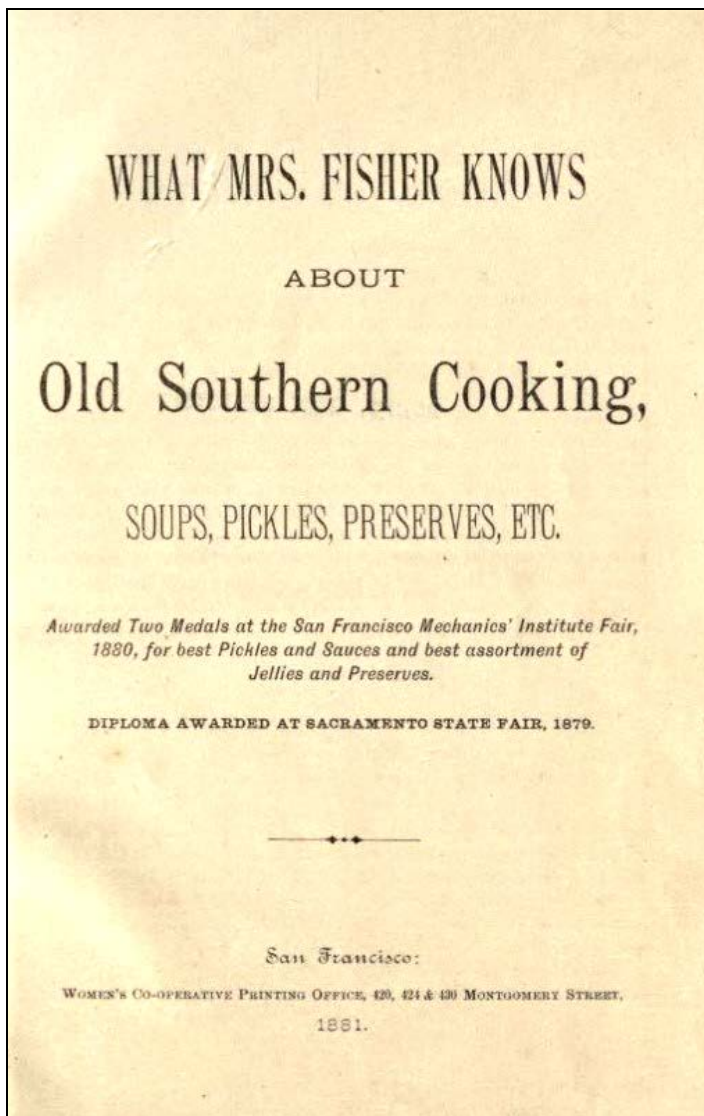
A brief notice that I found in the *San Francisco Examiner* (Jul. 11, 1881) announced the availability of "an excellent cookery-book" selling for \$1.50, the equivalent of about \$40 today (using <https://westegg.com/inflation>). "Mrs. Abby Fisher, a colored cook from the South, and raised in the family of the late Newton St. John of Mobile, Alabama, has just published a neat cookery-book.... The book reflects credit upon Mrs. Fisher, the publisher, and shows what our Southern colored people can and will do."

But who was Newton St. John, and what exactly did "raised" mean? This previously overlooked article was a key for me that opened up new lines of research.

Who Was Newton St. John of Mobile, Alabama?

A New Yorker, Newton St. John had established the "popular" banking house of St. John, Powers & Co. in Mobile by the 1840s. The company stored and shipped cotton by rail, river, and sea to textile manufacturers in Northern states, and for the European trade it was the agent for the renowned Baring Bros. & Co. of London. St. John was also president of the board of directors of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad (M&O RR), organized in 1848 by Illinois politician Stephen A. Douglas and others.

In 1860, St. John's total assets were \$490,000— about \$14.3 million today. In 1861, his residence was located at 46 Church Street, near the Mobile city center. When he died in New York City in 1876, the *Baltimore Sun* reported, "In politeness Lord Chesterfield could hardly have excelled this deceased Mobile banker, and in every sense of the word he was a true representative of all that was noble, gentle, and good in Southern character."



An Excellent Cookery-Book.

Mrs. Abby Fisher, a colored cook from the South, and raised in the family of the late Newton St. John of Mobile, Alabama, has just published a neat cookery-book on all kinds of soups, terrapin stews, corn bread, pastry, sweet and plain pickles, mangoes and in fact everything in the cooking, jelly, preserve and pickle line calculated to make a family happy. Every family ought to have one. It is simple and plain, easy to be understood and can be had at Mrs. Fisher's, No. 202 Dupont street, this city, at \$1 50 per copy. The book reflects credit upon Mrs. Fisher, the publisher, and shows what our Southern colored people can and will do. Let housekeepers from every part of the country send for a copy of this book. Mrs. Fisher has three prizes from as many different fairs for her pickles, sauces, blackberry brandy, preserves, etc.

At left, the title page of Abby Fisher's 72-page cookbook, published in San Francisco in 1881. Available at <https://archive.org/details/whatmrsfisherkno00fishrich/mode/2up>.

Above, the announcement of the availability of Mrs. Fisher's book, and first mention of Newton St. John, in *San Francisco Examiner*, Jul. 11, 1881. Available at www.Newspapers.com.

In 1835, St. John had married Maria Jane Pope, daughter of Alexander Pope and Dorothea Bibb of Petersburg, Wilkes County, Georgia. This extended family provides tantalizing clues about Mrs. Fisher's possible life history.

Who Were the Popes of Petersburg, Georgia?

Maria St. John's father, Alexander Pope, was born in 1777 at the Mt. Pleasant plantation in Wilkes County, one of two sites associated with Eli Whitney's work on the cotton gin. Located in the Southern Piedmont region, the fertile lands of Wilkes County had attracted many prominent families, including the Popes of Delaware and the Bibbs of Virginia. Residents of Petersburg, which was situated where the Broad River joins the Savannah River, frequently crossed to South Carolina by river ferry. With the very early introduction of the mechanical cotton gin to plantations in this county in 1793, cotton became the new cash crop there. Prompted by the growing shortage of free labor, a slave market was established in Petersburg. By the early 1800s, it was the third-largest city in the state (today, it lies 50 feet under J. Strom Thurmond Lake).

Wilkes County was a political powerhouse, producing 12 antebellum governors. A stage line from Milledgeville, the state capital, ran through Petersburg directly to Washington, DC. According to E. M. Coulter, "There was a great deal of intermarrying among these families, which set up power units in trade and politics not only in Petersburg and Georgia but also in Alabama whither so many Petersburgers went to run that Territory."

In 1804, Alexander Pope married Dorothea Bibb, whose brothers (the uncles of Maria St. John), William Wyatt Bibb and Thomas Bibb of Petersburg, were the first and second governors of Alabama. [During this research, I made the unexpected discovery that I am distantly related to the Wyatts, Bibbs, Popes, and St. Johns through my maternal Wyatt ancestry.] By the late 1830s, Pope owned "three widely separated plantations" in Wilkes County, GA. When President John Quincy Adams appointed him as Register of the Land Office for Alabama, he was able to acquire patent on thousands of additional acres of land. His company, A. Pope & Son of Mobile and Liverpool, England, sold materials for bundling cotton into bales, sold Alabama state bonds abroad, and superintended the sale of cotton in Europe.

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The “Son” in A. Pope & Son, Charles Milton Pope, was Maria St. John’s brother. Also born in Petersburg, he received a law degree at Yale and in 1828 married Magaretta Howell of Philadelphia. In 1837, his residence was located “between Royal and St. Emanuel on Church,” confirmed as the same location as the St. John residence at 46 Church Street in Mobile [based on a personal communication with Jeffrey A. Morrow, Church Street East Neighborhood Assn., Mobile]. He continued to run the business after his father’s death until his own death four years later in 1849, which occurred while he and Margarett were visiting Philadelphia. It appears that Margarett never returned to Mobile, which might be how Newton and Maria St. John acquired the 46 Church Street residence there.

Might Mrs. Fisher Have Been Enslaved?

After the Civil War, the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company assisted freedpeople and African American soldiers. Mrs. Fisher’s husband, Alexander Cotchett Fisher, completed records for himself and Mrs. Fisher in 1867. Therefore, it appears that the Fishers had formerly been enslaved.

Indeed, the Popes and St. John were slave owners. In 1817, Alexander Pope listed for sale “several head of horses, merino sheep, cattle, with several likely negroes among whom is a good cook wench.” In slave manifests from the 1830s, Alexander and Charles Milton Pope transported slaves to and from New Orleans, as did St. John to and from Pensacola, Florida. Most census records identified enslaved persons only by skin color, gender, and age. Of the records that I have reviewed to date, only one listing among the three men might represent Mrs. Fisher: in 1850, the estate of Charles Milton Pope recorded one 19-year-old Black female—the same age as Mrs. Fisher that year.

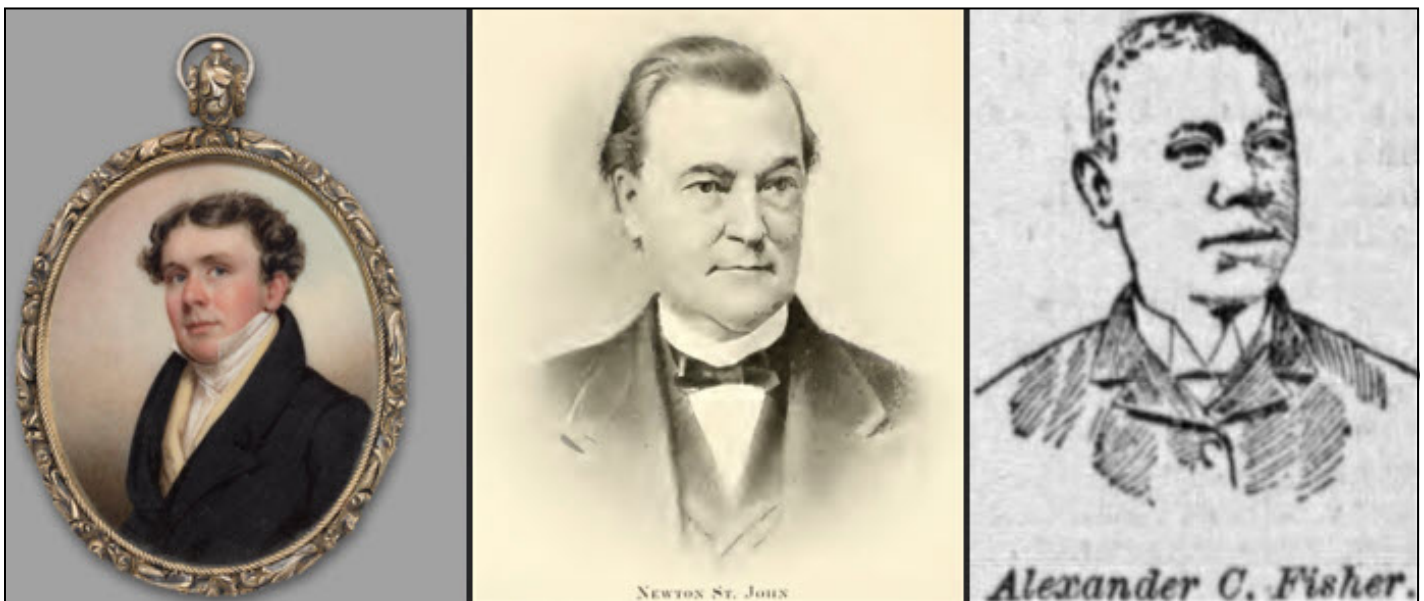
How Did Mrs. Fisher Move Westward to Alabama?

Mrs. Fisher’s statement that she was “raised in the family of Newton St. John” suggests a long-term association with his extended family, possibly through his wife, Maria Pope. The records indicating that both Charles Milton Pope and St. John resided at 46 Church Street in Mobile, coupled with the documentation of a 19-year-old Black woman in Pope’s estate in 1850, may imply that Mrs. Fisher was at that residence, perhaps for years.

Moreover, Alexander Pope’s Alabama will, of which his children and St. John were beneficiaries, directed “that such of my children as have had negroes of mine in their possession and may still have, shall retain them”. Therefore, it seems plausible that as a child or teenager, Mrs. Fisher was acquired by the expanding Pope plantation system, perhaps through Petersburg, GA, and eventually “loaned” by Alexander to his son Charles in Mobile. When the elder Pope died, she automatically became Charles’s property there at 46 Church Street. When Charles died four years later and the St. Johns acquired his residence, it is possible that they acquired Mrs. Fisher as well.

Was Mrs. Fisher Freed Before the Civil War?

In 1860, the value of cotton exported from Mobile was \$38 million (\$1.1 billion today), accounting for 99% of all Mobile exports that year. Most if not all of that supply likely passed through the hands of St. John. As members of the Whig party, he and Charles Milton Pope opposed secession and in 1852, St. John was elected delegate to the National Whig Convention, with a platform to preserve the Union and “the peculiar institutions of the South”.



(Left) Charles Milton Pope (1828), watercolor on ivory, by Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881), Yale University Art Gallery, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/229783>; (Center) Newton St. John (no date), from *St. John Genealogy*, by Orlene St. John Alexander, 1907, <https://archive.org/details/stjohngenealogyd00alex2>; (Right) Mrs. Fisher’s husband, Alexander C. Fisher (1890), from “Democracy’s Colored Army: Sketches and Portraits of Some of the Leaders”, in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Sep. 27, 1890, www.Newspapers.com. [An image of Mrs. Abby Fisher has yet to be located.]

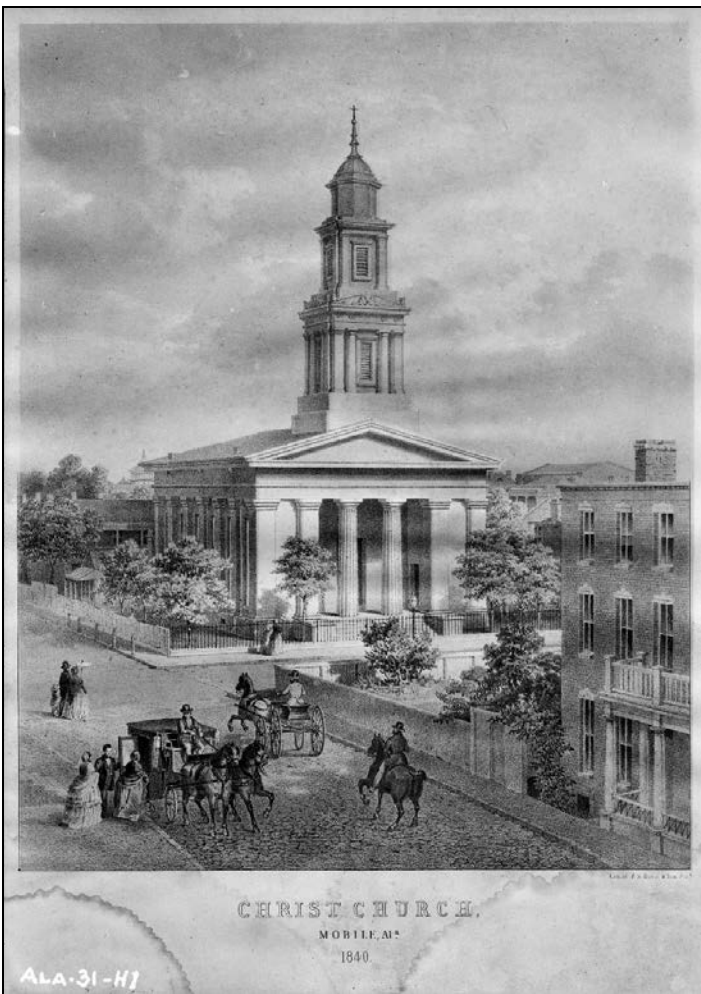


Image of Christ Church circa 1840, an Episcopal Church located at Church and St. Emanuel Streets, Mobile, AL. The colonnaded structure in the lower right is 46 Church Street, where Charles Milton Pope and then Newton St. John resided, and where Mrs. Abby Fisher appears to have worked in servitude. Lithography of P. S. Duval & Son, from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.al0423.photos/?sp=1>.

St. John claimed six slaves in his household in 1860, none of whom match Mrs. Fisher's expected description. After the Confederate takeover of Fort Sumter, SC, in April 1861, St. John relocated to New York. By July, the St. John family had boarded a Cunard mail steamer, the *Africa*, for a European tour with no servants listed on the ship's manifest, suggesting that the Fishers and other servants remained in Mobile.

According to records, the Fishers were married about 1860. Given the level of anti-secession sympathies in Mobile and St. John's growing realization that secession could not be prevented, perhaps as a favored slave Mrs. Fisher was emancipated by St. John before the war, possibly for her marriage. This could explain why she is not described in the 1860 Federal census.

How Did Mrs. Fisher Meet Her Husband?

If his middle name is any clue, Alexander Cotchett Fisher might have been enslaved by John Cotchett of Mobile, a prominent wharfinger (wharf owner) who would have had

frequent opportunity for business interactions with St. John. A native of England, Cotchett was also a slave owner. In Mobile, Cotchett attended Whig meetings with St. John, increasing the opportunities for Abby Clifton and Alexander Fisher to interact with each other.

Born in Alabama and of mixed race, Alexander's birth year is unclear: either 1830 or 1839. One of his stated occupations was practical mason. He was also "Rev. Alexander Fisher, col'd, Pastor, State Street Methodist Church", a prominent and successful African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion church in Mobile. Assisting AME Zion pioneer Wilbur Strong, Fisher helped organize churches throughout Florida.

Rev. Fisher was also a Customs Inspector in Pensacola, with an annual salary of \$1,095 (about \$24,000 today). When a state senator threatened to force out all of those who opposed him, including his supervisor Hiram Potter, Fisher personally delivered a message from a Florida state representative to President Ulysses S. Grant saying in part, "This will be handed to you by Rev. A. C. Fisher who has confidence and respect of a large majority of the Republicans of this county." Two months later, Rev. Fisher sent Grant a personal telegram to warn him of "bogus papers against Collector Potter." He eventually succeeded in reversing the appointment of a replacement collector.

How Did the Fishers Travel to California?

Wilbur Strong may have directed Reverend Fisher to California to establish more AME Zion churches. The couple might also have been escaping the rising specter of hatred and violence against Black Southerners as Reconstruction was ending. In September 1876, the Fishers sold the Mobile home they had owned for 10 years for \$500 (about \$16,000 today), and by Spring 1877 we find evidence of them in San Francisco.

St. John had been president of the board of the M&O RR, running north from Mobile to Columbus, Kentucky. From there, relatively straightforward connections could be made to points west. The Fishers' last child, Mary Matilda Fisher, was born in Missouri in 1877, so they were in the region at the time. Hess suggested that the Fishers came West by wagon train, and this cannot be completely dismissed: overland transit by prairie schooner ended in the 1880s. However, given Rev. Fisher's income, proceeds from the sale of their home, possible savings from the sale of Mrs. Fisher's pickles and other foods in Mobile's markets, and perhaps having received a railroad pass from St. John's former colleagues at the M&O RR, rail travel seems more likely.

How Did the Fishers Achieve Success So Quickly?

Given St. John's prominence in the cotton industry and finance, plus Reverend Fisher's work in the AME Zion Church and his Southern political connections, when the Fishers arrived in San Francisco in 1877 they likely carried glowing letters of introduction.

By April 1877, Rev. Fisher was a church elder of the California AME Zion Church, a short-lived role because of a

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falling out with local church leaders. By July, he was messenger for Mayor A. J. Bryant, and in 1878 was coachman for a Comstock Silver King's personal broker. In the 1880s, Rev. Fisher was again messenger for Mayor and future Governor of California, Washington Bartlett, whose father had been a newspaper publisher back in Milledgeville, GA. When Gov. Bartlett died in 1887, Rev. Fisher walked immediately behind the casket, preceding a funeral cortege of 10,000 people along the streets of San Francisco that included George Hearst and Levi Strauss.

Mrs. Fisher's "friends" listed in her book's Preface & Apology were prominent and wealthy citizens, some from the South, others in law, stocks, finance, the military, a major brewer, and at least one in the cotton industry. The support and encouragement apparently provided by these white, privileged friends enabled Mrs. Fisher to break through the barriers preventing many African Americans from becoming successful and independent.

In September 1879, "Mrs. Abbey Fisher and husband" placed their earliest known advertisement, an ad in the *Mariposa Gazette* for "The purest home-made Pickles and Preserves of all kinds, put up in the good old Southern style", available at 509 Howard Street, San Francisco. At the California State Fair in Sacramento 10 days later, her "large variety of pickles, preserves, conserves, preserved fruits, sauces, jellies and table sauces" were noted in the press. As stated in her Preface & Apology, she won the award for best display of pickles, and her assorted jellies and jams received special mention. Her display of fruit in glass did not place, but her husband received a special diploma for best blackberry wine.

In March 1880, the Fishers opened a new storefront at 207 Second Street, around the corner from their Howard Street store and residence. Rev. Fisher was recorded as the "pickle and preserve manufacturer", and Mrs. Fisher the "cook". In the Non-population Schedule of the 1880 census, Mrs. Fisher stated that she had invested \$500 (\$13,600 today) to start the manufactory and was working alone 10 hours daily. The value of her supplies was \$400 (\$10,880) and the value of products for sale was \$1,200 (\$32,640). At the San Francisco Mechanics' Fair that Summer, she won a silver medal for her jellies and preserves and a bronze medal for her pickles and sauces.

For the 1881 San Francisco Mechanics' Fair, exhibitors were asked to provide a written description:

FISHER, Mrs. Abbie - Preserves, Jams and Sauces. All made by herself. Mrs. Fisher is a colored woman from the South, who, by energy and business tact, has built up a large and remunerative business in the preparation of articles of which she alone has the receipt [recipe]. Her pickles and sauces have a piquancy and flavor seldom equalled, and, when once tasted, not soon forgotten.

She did not win any awards at the event, but her book with "all kinds of old- and new-fashion Southern cooking" was reportedly "selling like hot cakes." At the 1881 Stockton Agricultural Fair, her display of pickles won second place.



The final residence of Abby and Alexander C. Fisher on 27th Street near Church Street in the neighborhood of Noe Valley, San Francisco, ca. 1945. Image from the San Francisco Office of Assessor-Recorder Photographs, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

How Did Abby Fisher Transform Her Recipes from Memory to Print?

Illiteracy posed a formidable obstacle to Mrs. Fisher in writing her book, as she recounted in the Preface & Apology:

Not being able to read or write myself, and my husband also having been without the advantages of an education— upon whom would devolve the writing of the book at my dictation— caused me to doubt whether I would be able to present a work that would give perfect satisfaction.

However, as we have seen, Rev. Fisher had formerly been spreading the gospel of the AME Zion Church throughout the South and, for a time, had been employed as a customs agent in Pensacola; this implies at a minimum the ability to read and write. Although he might not have had formal schooling, his skills seem to have enabled him to transcribe the dictation, sometimes using phonetic spellings: e.g., "Circuit Hash" for succotash, "jumberlie" for jambalaya. The Women's Co-operative Printing Office might also have provided editorial support.

When her book was published, Mrs. Fisher's business was well situated to promote sales. At that time, her pickle manufactory was located in the elite shopping district of San Francisco, at 202 Dupont Street (today's Grant Street). One extant copy of the book has "Goldberg Bowen & Co. San Francisco" stamped in the front matter in stylish script [based on a personal communication with Celia Sack, Omnivore Books on Food, San Francisco]. Self-identified as "The Master Grocer", that store sold choice groceries, teas, and wines, and imported French, English, and German table delicacies. It was also apparently selling Mrs. Fisher's book, and possibly also her delectable foods.

Mrs. Fisher continued her pickle manufactory business until 1890. She also advertised her services as a "caterer and professional cook" with "lessons given in cookery". Meanwhile, Rev. Fisher continued working as janitor for the California Academy of Sciences. Tragically, the Fishers' 17-year-old daughter, Eliza Jane, died in 1886.

In 1889, the Fisher family was mentioned "among the prominent colored people of the city". In 1892, they purchased their final residence, a home in the Noe Valley district of San Francisco on 27th Street near Church Street, where they lived with their three surviving adult children. Abby Fisher died on January 9, 1915, at age 85; Rev. Fisher died on April 9, 1922, at about 84 to 92 years. Three unmarked graves at Cypress Lawn Cemetery in Colma, CA, are the final resting places for the Fishers and three of their children.

Conclusion

Together, the Fishers shared a remarkable life, and the wealth and prominence of the individuals in their circle of family, friends, and associates cannot be overstated. Clearly, the Fishers were well liked and highly respected leaders in Alabama and California communities.

Some details about Mrs. Fisher's life history are solidly supported with documentation, while other evidence is circumstantial. Based on my work in connecting the dots, as summarized above, it appears that Mrs. Fisher might have grown up (i.e., been "raised") as a slave in the extended family of the Popes and St. Johns in the rural vicinity of Petersburg, GA, and in the city center of Mobile, AL. That family's roots in New York, Delaware, and Philadelphia provide additional possible clues as to how New England recipes, some for a more "delicate and refined palate", crept into her book. In addition, Mrs. Fisher stated that her Southern recipes included both "old- and new-fashion southern cooking." This implies incorporation of plantation traditions, perhaps passed down by elders from South Carolina and Georgia, that she likely adapted to more modern techniques such as the use of a range stove and baking powder.

In San Francisco, Mrs. Fisher ran a successful business making and selling pickles, preserves, jams, and sauces, and providing her services as a caterer, cook, and culinary instructor. She and her husband won awards at fairs in the region, and their work, including the 1881 cookbook, found acclaim throughout California. The Fishers were certainly an entrepreneurial power couple, and there is still much left about their lives to discover. ■

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I, Too

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an African-American cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s. This poem originally appeared in his volume The Weary Blues (1926).

HIGH ON THE HOG: JESSICA HARRIS TALKS AFRICAN AMERICAN FOOD

For a Nov 3, 2021 presentation on “Legacies of American Slavery: Food”, Dr. Zella Palmer conducted an online interview of Dr. Jessica B. Harris, the world’s leading authority on the foods of the African diaspora. Harris was the inaugural chair and director of the Ray Charles Program in African-American Material Culture at Dillard University (New Orleans), and Palmer succeeds her in that post. Harris is also Prof. Emerita of English at Queen’s College (New York) and is currently leading the African Diaspora Foodways Initiative for the Culinary Institute of America. Among her 12 books are *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), which is the basis for an ongoing Netflix series.

This event was organized by the Ray Charles Program as part of Legacies of American Slavery, a multi-year project of the Council of Independent Colleges. The 87-minute interview was recorded and posted to the web (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-w81dODhSc>).

Dr. Harris emphasizes that modern American cuisine resulted from the braiding together of three strands of influence: indigenous American (including Caribbean), African, and European. Just as with American music, she said, the weightiness of the African contribution to American cuisine can be sensed by imagining what would be left with its removal. In the centuries before Columbus, many African (and Asian) ingredients had already been introduced to Europe by Moors, who lived in Iberia until their final expulsion in 1492; the travel diaries of Ibn Battuta of Morocco, she pointed out, are prime written sources for learning about pre-colonial African customs.

Harris characterized the transatlantic slave trade as a diabolical, race-based system that destabilized the whole continent, forcibly removing millions of Africans of diverse tribes, cultures, and languages. Simply in order to feed the people on the ships, the food production systems in Africa were warped to support this trade. She argues that when indigenous and African foodways first encountered each other in the Americas there was a convergence, and even certain points of prior commonality, between them: the view of land as a sacred life-force in its own right, the careful cultivation of seed crops (interval planting instead of broadcasting), the reliance on starchy stews, the use of decoys in hunting, the practice of cooking and smoking over a live fire instead of in a hearth, and methods of grilling food on stick lattices (Caribbean *barbacoa*).

The master’s kitchen at a slave plantation was the primary site where the Euro-American palate was first africanized. The high-profile kitchens at such mansions and, later on, at commercial eateries, were commanded mostly by male chefs (in contrast to domestic African American kitchens, which were the province of women). An example is Hercules Posey, an extremely talented enslaved chef who supervised cooking in the hearth-

based kitchens at George Washington’s residences at Mt. Vernon and Philadelphia, even including two white workers. Hercules, who made some money by selling leftover foodstuffs and beef tallow (for candles), could afford fine clothes and other luxuries; eventually he “slipped away”, and Washington made extraordinary but futile efforts to recover him.

Another example is James Hemings, who was Thomas Jefferson’s enslaved chef in Monticello and in Paris, where Jefferson was posted as a U.S. diplomat. In Paris, Hemings demanded a salary from his master, and he used the money to study the French language and royal cuisine. Eventually, back in the U.S., he demanded emancipation and Jefferson very reluctantly agreed, on the condition that he first spend a few years teaching his culinary skills to his successor chef at Monticello, viz., his brother Peter, whose specialty was brewing beer and ale. Harris observes that the whole Colonial and Federalist Virginia style of cooking, a French-influenced tradition, flowed out of the Hemings experience and was transmitted in cookbooks such as Mary Randolph’s *The Virginia Housewife* (1824). Examples include cooking on a stove (initially the *potager*, a French stew-holed masonry stove), which affords better heat control than a hearth; special cooking vessels of copper and other materials; multi-course dinners, each course with a number of dishes served simultaneously (*service à la française*); the careful use of olive oils, cooking wines, and kitchen-made sauces; and early forms of many popular dishes, from macaroni with cheese to iced cream.

In contrast to meals in the “big house” or at outdoor barbecue events, the African-American cooking carried out “in sorrow’s kitchen” in the domestic quarters of enslaved people and, later, sharecroppers, was much less likely to be written down since it was done mostly by illiterate women; it has to be “read between the lines”. Nevertheless, this was ingenious make-do cooking based on corn, greens, black-eyed peas, and a number of other rudimentary fresh or preserved foodstuffs. Meat was far from plentiful; e.g., at hog-butcher time, the enslaved laborers might be awarded with the extremities (head, feet, tail), while the master kept parts that were more “high on the hog” (hence the expression), such as ribs, loins, and hams.

The work done by African-American women cooks became more visible with emancipation, when some of them became entrepreneurs: street vendors such as the ladies selling *pralines*, *calas*, or *café* in New Orleans, and the gumbo and pepper-pot ladies of Philadelphia; hawkers at open-air markets such as the roasted-corn ladies in New York; and shop owners such as Malinda Russell with her baked goods in Tennessee and Abby Fisher with her pickles and preserves in San Francisco.

Between World War 1 and the 1960s, African American food customs traveled north and west, and became more urbanized, as a result of the Great Migration. Millions of sharecropping families and other poor Black people were pushed (by Jim Crow oppression, farm mechanization, and the downfall of cotton) and pulled (by the lure of better lives and better-paid factory work) out of the American South, and they brought their dietary habits with them. Dr. Harris noted that in some cases, this dispersal of regional foodways can be traced along specific railroad lines: e.g., the transplantation of barbecue from Mississippi to Chicago, of Creole cooking from Louisiana to Los Angeles, etc.

— RKS

MICHAEL TWITTY EXPLORES HIS AFRICAN “COOKING GENE”

“The Cooking Gene: Tracing My African American Story Through Food” was the title of the third annual Black History Month Lecture for the African American History program at The Library Company of Philadelphia. The talk was delivered by Michael W. Twitty via Zoom on Feb 3, 2021. Mr. Twitty is a well-known culinary historian and food writer from the Washington, DC, area. He writes a blog at <https://afroculinaria.com> and is the author of *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (HarperCollins, 2017), which traces his ancestry through food, from Africa to America and from slavery to freedom. The book won the 2018 James Beard Award for Best Writing as well as for Book of the Year.

As Mr. Twitty views things, African American food goes far beyond cookbooks and ingredients—the narrative needs to embrace people, history, culture, and innovation, he said. Food culture in the U.S. is also very political because it intertwines with the legacy of haves and have nots; “When it comes to food,” he says, “Black lives matter.” Largely self-taught, he hails earlier writings by Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Ntozake Shange, Alex Haley, Malcolm X, and many others. But he investigates more than books and cooking: he also has studied heirloom plants and ethnobotany, visited eight African countries, traced his family genealogy back eight or nine generations, and underwent genetic genealogy (DNA) testing. Some of his distant ancestors lived in lands that now lie in the West African nations of Benin, Senegal, and Ghana.

“For Black people,” Twitty says, “food is love.” By this he means that Black food traditions are an expression of loving associations—love for elders, especially, and also for the caring shop-owners, farmers, and others entrusted with food. His paternal grandfather, South Carolina farmer Gonze Lee Twitty, Sr., in 1967 co-founded the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which focused on safeguarding land ownership by poor Black farmers. The South was full of cases of foreclosure, or of outright white expropriation, of land that rightfully belonged to Black people, but also the ongoing historical appropriation of Black tilling knowledge, seeds, kitchen techniques, recipes, and other things related to cookery.

Twitty explained that he first began to study food in order to search for answers to questions such as, How did okra come from Africa, and capsicum peppers from Latin America, to arrive in the U.S. where my grandmother used them? That, he found, is the story of the African diaspora in

the Atlantic world, and it’s a very complex story because enslaved Africans were moved all over the place. Often they crisscrossed the ocean, as seen in such examples as the Hemings family. And in a process similar to the creolization of languages, they absorbed influences everywhere they went.

In West Africa, the vast majority of cooking was traditionally done by women. This continued in the slave-trading compounds there. But tribal notables who were wealthy often had male cooks. Later, among Blacks in America, domestic cookery was done by women but professional cooks were men, mostly in urban areas.

The majority of slaveholders had five or fewer slaves, but the majority of enslaved people were owned by the smaller number of large estates that had 20 or more of them each. Those who were domestic servants were entrusted with preparing food for the master’s tables— even though they could never sit there! Yet it’s important to realize, Twitty added, that enslaved Africans had a measure of agency and ownership over their cuisine and over broader facets of their culture, as seen at corn-shucking festivals. The master’s kitchen was generally in a building separate from the main house, and thus not directly under the eyes of the white mistress. “We were far from ‘farm machinery with a pulse,’” Twitty says, “we were bringers of knowledge.”

The cookery of enslaved Black people helped save and preserve African and African-American culture and heritage, partly by entering the slaveholders’ own mansions. By 1750, Twitty said, what would later be called “soul food” had coalesced as a creole amalgamation of African and other foodways. As is so often the case, the generation most inclined to carry out this fusion were the grandchildren of the first arrivals. “Southern food is African food,” he concluded, “and white Southerners are the most Africanized white people in the U.S.”

Editor’s note: Michael Twitty’s remark that white Southerners are the most Africanized white people in the U.S. found support a few months later in a comment in the *New York Times* obituary for white folk singer Patrick Sky (1940-2021). Sky had grown up in Georgia and Louisiana before moving north in his early 20s to join the emerging folk music scene in New York City. The account by Neil Genzlinger continues:

His Southern sensibilities sometimes made for an amusing fit with the Greenwich Village folkies he began socializing and playing with. His wife said he used to tell about the time the musician Dave Van Ronk and other friends offered to take him out for soul food, a term he didn’t know. At the restaurant, when the collards and fatback, cornbread, fried pork chops and such arrived, his friends asked what he thought. “Back home,” he told them, “this is what we just call ‘food’” (*New York Times*, Jun. 6, 2021).

— RKS

CHAA CALENDAR

*These programs are being held online-only via Zoom and begin at 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time.
Registration is free and open to all via the CHAA website.*

Sunday, February 20, 2022

“The Provisions of War”,
a roundtable discussion on the role
of food, deprivation, and hunger in
conflicts from the 1850s to 1990,
hosted by Dr. Justin Nordstrom,
Prof. of History, Arts and Humanities,
Pennsylvania State University Hazleton

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Dr. Judith Sumner, ethnobotanist,
garden historian, and educator,
“Victory Gardens: How a
Nation of Vegetable Gardeners
Helped to Win the War”.

On the Back Burner: We welcome ideas
and submissions from all readers of *Repast*,
including for the following planned future
theme issues. Suggestions for future themes
are also welcome.

- Spring 2022: Culinary History in
England, Part 4
- Summer and Fall 2022: Fruits of
the World and How to Use Them
- Winter 2023: Foods of the Ancient
Roman World.

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First Class