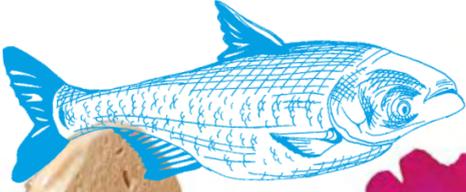


THE Chicago FOODCULTURA CLARION



CLARION



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Welcome back!

Toucan Sam

IN REPOSE

A TRIP TO M&K POULTRY KILL FARM

By Evan Williams

I recall M&K Poultry most by what my family calls “the smell of money.” Snack foods in the front, squawking in the back. The squawking went on until a customer arrived, and then it didn’t. I was there with two classmates to learn about live butchery, to speak with its practitioners, to interview its clientele, to examine, I thought, a segment of the American population free from the cognitive dissonance that afflicts many meat-consuming individuals.

Despite having grown up in a community of livestock farmers, 4H legacies, and FFA leaders, live butchery was entirely foreign to me. Like most American consumers, my meat came from the supermarket in plastic casing, backed by white or black styrofoam, pic-

ked out from a cool shelf under harsh light. The idea of the animal was detached from the sandwich. What M&K offered was the unification of the animal and the sandwich, it represented to us on that first visit an absurd proximity to death that spoiled our appetites.

Waiting to turn off the squawking with a pointed finger, we met a married couple, R&N, regular customers. We chatted, nervously, about our research and about the caged chickens. We traded stories of lived-farm experience, and asked finally if the pair would help us pick a poultry. They obliged, walking us through the traits to look for in a ripe bird. All the while, N shared stories of the fresh figs she’d eaten growing up, the fresh meat, how sentimental a meal made

from such direct ingredients can be. That’s why the couple came back, again and again, for that little taste of some other place, some other age. We selected a chicken, said goodbye to N&R, and left with the bird in a paper bag, still warm.

The most provocative part of the visit wasn’t the unusual experience of watching your dinner die, it was uncovering the distance in any two people’s food nostalgia. Food is weird. Memory is weirder.

In a series of photographs, we linked the minimally-processed and unfamiliar with the colorful, highly-processed foods of our own Gen Z nostalgia. A photo we playfully called *Toucan Sam in Repose* had our head-on, raw



Butchery process. Interior of the M&K Poultry Kill Farm.



Paige Resnick, Nora Burkhardt and Evan Williams presenting M&K Live Poultry at the Gray Center Lab.



KOSHER COOKING

EATING IN and EATING OUT

By Rachel Abrams

Why is kosher food in Chicago so bad and so limited? This is the question I began my project asking, and the truth is, that despite having multiple parts, it is not a particularly difficult question to answer. The lack of quality kosher restaurants in Chicago essentially boils down to a lack of eating out culture among Kosher keeping people, a lack of interest in “kosher cuisine” among non-kosher keepers, and the manipulation of the Chicago Rabbinical Council through their monopoly on kosher food certification in the Chicago area. Kosher restaurants have a captive audience who are essentially willing to eat and pay for whatever is available to them due to the limited options in the kosher space, but non-kosher keeping patrons, with a wide variety of high quality options at a range of prices, are not willing to pay 20 dollars for a pastrami sandwich or 17 dollars for a limp Greek salad. In communities like Skokie and West Rogers Park, where the vast majority of the religious Jews in the Chicago area reside, a fair number of kosher restaurants have been able to succeed, but each one leaves something to be desired, whether in ambiance, food, or pricing. The restaurants know the demand exists and understand that they need only do the bare minimum to have the support of these captive communities.

While kosher restaurants may often feel empty, or it may be unclear how they continue to pay their bills, one place that is never lacking are the kosher grocery stores. Chicago and its suburbs are served by two full-service kosher grocery stores, as well as two Jewel-Osco’s and a Mariano’s in which there exists full service kosher grocery stores, and of course

Chicago’s kosher food gem Romanian Kosher Butcher located in West Rogers Park. These stores are always busy and provide a fascinating insight into the kosher industry. When you walk in on a Sunday afternoon, you can see anyone from



Kosher bacon cheeseburger.

ultra-orthodox women and their ten kids stocking up on food for the coming weeks, to men who don’t even wear a yarmulke in public, filling their carts with kosher meat. Although there is less of a restaurant culture among kosher-keeping Jews in Chicago, there is certainly a definitive eating-in culture. The kosher sections and kosher grocery stores in Skokie and West Rogers Park are filled with hard to find kosher ingredients like Parmesan cheese, rice noodles, and gummy candies. If you walk through the aisles, you will also find kosher brands of products that already bear a kosher symbol in their name brand form, like ketchup, mayonnaise, and yogurt. It’s important to note that these “kosher brands” are uniformly terrible, and no one who shops at all in a conventional supermarket buys them. Sometimes the kosher brands are catering to those who adhere to an even tighter set of stringencies, consuming only milk or wheat prod-

ucts handled by Jews (Chalav Yisrael and Pas Yisrael respectively), but often these products are simply another example of how companies are able to capitalize on this captive and often quite wealthy audience. You will also find uniquely kosher products that don’t exist on any other market. Some are imported from Israel, while others are made right here in the US.

Kosher grocery stores and products provide a wonderful insight into the unique “cuisine” of kosher-keeping people, and the micro industry that is kosher food. This is why in my quest to better understand the kosher food landscape in Chicago, I chose to cook with and showcase Chicago kosher food products for my final project.

For this project I prepared two different items representing two different parts of Chicago kosher foodways. The first item is a challah stuffed with two items that I rarely see outside of the kosher food section: Silan, a date honey, and halva spread. Challah is the most recognizable Jewish food on the planet, and is likely the only thing many people know about kosher or Jewish food. By taking an ultra recognizable item and stuffing it with niche products found broadly in kosher communities, it brings to light certain questions I have been asking throughout my project; who is kosher food made for? Is kosher a cuisine? And if it is, what defines kosher cuisine?

The second item I made is a riff on kosher style. The association between kosher food and Jewish food is strong but not always correct. When people crave

matzo ball soup or a pastrami sandwich, they tend to go to a Jewish deli rather than a kosher restaurant. This leads to a lot of confusion about what is and isn’t kosher, and the differences between kosher style and kosher. Kosher style seems to represent a cuisine that tastes like home and elicits warm feelings and full bellies, while kosher certified generally implies low quality, high prices, and lack of options. I turned these notions on their head with what I call “Trefl Style”, trefl being the Yiddish word for non-kosher and the colloquial term for food that does not bear kosher certification. What I prepared was a completely kosher bacon cheeseburger, with beef bacon from Romanian, kosher ground beef, and vegan cheese. I brought in all my own cooking equipment to ensure that the food was kosher enough that I would eat it, but the goal was for the food to be the complete opposite of what is expected from kosher or even kosher style cuisine.

Food is central to Judaism and sharing home cooked meals is a huge part of the Jewish experience, and even more so the kosher keeping experience, because most things we want to eat are not easily accessible from stores and restaurants, so we have to make them ourselves. I personally have taken this on as a challenge and often try to find recipes that I can “Kosherize”. While the lack of shrimp paste may make my Thai food inauthentic, and I’ll never know what a real cheeseburger tastes like, I take these limitations as an opportunity to explore the culinary world that is accessible to me, and satisfy my cravings with home cooking when the restaurant options are limited.

EDITORIAL

Extra, extra, read all about it! Spaghetti and meatballs! Deep dish mysteries! Food for the Gods! Frankenfish! Friendship Cake! Trefl-style bacon cheese burgers! Live butchery! *The Chicago Foodcultura Clarion* rings out for a third time.

For those who happen to have encountered an issue in their local *Reader* box for the first time, let me explain: *The Chicago Foodcultura Clarion* was born out of a collaboration between the Barcelona/Miami-based multidisciplinary artist Antoni Miralda and your editor, a University of Chicago professor of anthropology. The midwife was the University of Chicago’s Gray Center for Art and Inquiry who supported our joint efforts with a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation. Its immediate outgrowth was a course on “Foodcultura: The Art and Anthropology of Food and Cuisine” that Miralda and I taught in the U of C in the fall of 2019 where we sent students out to explore the truly fantastic diversity of Chicago’s culinary worlds. Our initial goal was to showcase the results in a symposium and pop-up exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center in the spring of 2020. But then you all know what happened.

Miralda and I had always wanted our project to reach out beyond the confines of an elite institution like the University of Chicago, and so we decided to retool our project towards the venerable institution of the *Chicago Reader*. Its publisher, Tracy Baim, kindly agreed to let us run some 3000 copies of the *Clarion* as an insert every now and again, and Miralda and I found ready and enthusiastic collaborators in Peter Engler, Eric May, and Paige Resnick, and that’s why you are holding issue number three in your hand right now—if you were lucky enough to get a hold of it, that is.

The genre of the editorial generally entails a preview of coming attractions. But it can accommodate a good story or two. In our last issue, I mused about what Nelson Algren and Simone de Beauvoir might have eaten for dinner when they first met and madly fell in love with each other on Chicago’s Near West Side in 1947. This time, I’d like to step back a little further in time and ruminate about one of the less emblematically Chicagoan, but nowadays genuinely all-American dishes, mac ‘n cheese. Its origins are surprisingly uncontroversial. The first generally agreed-upon mention of something resembling the contemporary dish comes from the Reverend Mammasseh Cutler who reminisced about a dinner at Thomas Jefferson’s White House in 1802 as follows:

“Dined at the President’s — Dinner not as elegant as when we dined before. [Among other dishes] a pie called macaroni, which appeared to be a rich crust filled with the strillions of onions, or shallots, which I took it to be, tasted very strong, and not agreeable. Mr. Lewis told me there were none in it, it was an Italian dish, and what appeared like onions was made of flour and butter, with a particularly strong liquor mixed with them.”

The “strillions” and “strong liquor” that the good Reverend Cutler found so objectionable have been fairly conclusively identified as pasta and parmesan¹, which Jefferson had encountered during his diplomatic service in pre-revolutionary France and his travels in Italy, where he first seems to have tasted and came to love pasta (which he consistently refers to as “macaroni” in his writings). But the third president of the United States not only had his agent William Short ship parmesan on a regular basis, but had acquired a Neapolitan pasta machine, a diagrammatic sketch of which he committed to his writings, along with a highly improbable recipe for how to make “nouilly macaroni”². But then again, according to his slave, Isaac, Jefferson never went into the kitchen “except to wind up the clock”. Instead he would have relied upon his enslaved cook James Hemings to make his mac ‘n cheese. James Hemings was the older brother of Sally Hemings, the mother of Jefferson’s unacknowledged enslaved children³. You see, when Jefferson first went to France as minister plenipotentiary of the newly founded American Republic to the court of Louis XVI, he took his slave James Hemings along and apprenticed him to a Parisian chef. Hemings was literate, eventually spoke French better than his master, and became so skilled in the culinary arts that, in 1796, Jefferson promised him his freedom under the condition that he train another (enslaved) chef for him. It was an offer Hemings could not refuse, but in Jefferson’s mind his cooking had become indispensable. To be sure, Jefferson eventually emancipated him, and reacted with distress when he heard that James Hemings had committed suicide in 1801. But poor James, in many ways, had made a bargain with the devil: There was no place for a free Black French chef in the world that the likes of Thomas Jefferson had forged in early 19th century Virginia.

It is likely that the recipe for macaroni dressed with cheese that Jefferson’s daughter in law, Mary Randolph, published in her cookbook *The Virginia House-Wife* in 1824 was none other than James Heming’s. If so, does it mark an instance of cultural appropriation⁴? In a sense, yes, for Hemings’s culinary genius remained unacknowledged. But what is it that was being appropriated here? An African American chef de cuisine’s version of a Parisian-inflected version of an ancient Alpine or Mediterranean peasant dish mixing dairy products with starches? Nor do we really know how and through what channels of communication mac ‘n cheese entered an emerging African American culinary tradition that, by the second half of the twentieth century, came to be known as Soul Food. The proximity of pasta-consuming marginalized Italian immigrant communities to African Americans in Post-Civil War American cities such as New Orleans is often thought to have played a considerable role in this story. But it was not until 1916 when the Canadian resident of Chicago James Lewis Kraft patented the “Process of sterilizing cheese and an improved product produced by such process” that the price of pasteurized and soon



Chicago kosher food ways degustation at the Gray Center Lab.

emulsified cheese began to match the household budgets of the majority of African Americans. By 1928, Kraft Foods launched Velveeta and, in 1937, came up with the 19 cent boxed version of instant mac ‘n cheese in the midst of the Great Depression. Feeding a family of four per package, and soon to be put on the WWII rationing cards, Kraft’s mac ‘n cheese began its meteoric commercial ascent, coupled with a race towards the culinary bottom. That Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society unloaded vast amounts of heavily subsidized dairy surplus in the form of processed cheese upon welfare recipients and into school lunches only accelerated the process.

The rest, we might say, is history. With Marx we could say that people make their cuisines, but not under conditions of their own choosing: The recipes once prepared by Black cooks like James Hemings and published by white housewives like Mary Randolph converged in the seeming paradox of a racially unmarked industrial comfort food that evokes childhood memories among Americans both white and Black. A “crossover” dish bridging otherwise quite distinct culinary and social formations.

Of course, the bill of fare in this issue of the *Clarion* is decidedly neither industrial nor homogenized. On the contrary, it is entirely artisanal, always unpasteurized, and deliberately diverse. In many ways, the overarching theme is immigration: whether of Afro-Cuban detelles, Asian carp, or dishes like *polpetta in umido*. You will read about the labor of love that goes into the feeding of the *oricha* on Chicago’s Southside (themselves immigrant gods, first from Africa to Cuba, and then on to the United States, large parts of Latin America, and Europe as well); the woes of kosher-keeping Jews who moved to Chicago from New York City and find their culinary choices severely restricted by the stranglehold of Chicago’s Rabbinical Council’s certification policies; a chef’s heroic struggle to establish “Shanghai bass” on the menu of the Palmer House Hilton; the nostalgia evoked among immigrants by Chicago’s live butchery venues; and then some: an interview with Bridgeport activist and culinary pioneer Ed Markowski, the mysterious origins of deep dish Pizza, and art work by Eric May and Hyun Jung Jun. ¡Que aproveche! Enjoy!

By Stephan Palmié

1. “American Cheese Products” were then still more than a century in the future (currently defined by the FDA as containing at least 51% of cheese).
2. See Thomas Jefferson’s macaroni machine sketch at <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/macaroni>
3. That James was also the son of Jefferson’s father in law with an enslaved woman, and so not only the half-brother of Jefferson’s wife Martha, but also the uncle of Jefferson’s children with Sally Hemings throws a glaring light on the kitchen at Monticello, and the gastro-sexual worlds of late 18th century Virginia more generally.
4. Martha Washington’s heirloom manuscript *Book of Cookery* is largely based on 16th and 17th century English foodways, but she, too, may well have cribbed some recipes from her enslaved cook Hercules Posey.