

Thinking About Food; Recipes Included

THE BEYOND MEMOS memo (March 7, 1994) "encouraged" us, by way of a long, inspiring list ("doodles . . . self-portraits . . . anecdotes . . . jokes . . .") to submit something for the next issue. Among that list was "recipes," and I'm tempted to inter-campus-mail Phil Carlsen a few of the same, using aromatically fresh goat cheese dropped, these muddy spring days, in my mailbox by a good neighbor. Goat cheese on broccoli stems; goat cheese & cherry tomatoes cooked until soft w/ white wine, then dumped on linguine; goat cheese melted, added, spread. The goats keep producing; the cheese happens; my neighbor is generous. We trade: walnuts for cheese; dried beans for cheese. A good deal.

But of course all readers don't live down the road from a goat farm, and I wasn't sure that Phil was altogether serious, either. I suspect he'd prefer Petrarchan sonnets from faculty, not salad-dressing tips. So I'm modifying his recipe a little and sending instead a few ways for thinking about food.

But why would I do even that? Surely we all own a groaning board or two of cookbooks, being, as we tend to be, so into print, so in love with black (or sepia) marks on white, cream, recycled tan. And Lord knows we exchange words all the time. We never shut up, constantly trading opinions, gripes, gossip, advice, conspiracies, suspicions, assertions, p.c. admonitions, and what have you in our various mailrooms and corridors. The faculty mouth, tireless and wonderful. But seldom do we discuss what goes *into* it.

My recipe here is for thinking about fairly awful things, declass  food groups, secret flavors, like private addictions to Twinkies or Steak-umms. I want to think about how we think about these mouthfuls. I also want to suggest that many of these—well, not exactly "foods," but close—go unexamined, unappreciated, not seen for what they are. I want to suggest a fresh reading, a revised reading. I will confine my subjects to three: canned potatoes; Miracle Whip; and extra-hard hard-boiled eggs.

In our town, when the time comes around (about 52 times a year, seems like) for the jello, bean, slaw, or pie committee to make their truculent calls for donations to the upcoming benefit

supper, the caller (and my whole heart does go out to her (always a "her") having been bullied or stared into the ranks of "casserole committee" myself) inevitably begins, "you're such a gourmet cook, we were wondering if you'd be willing to..." Our small town: cook: Big Frog; Little Pond. Of course I always say "glad to, what time should I get it there?" I bite my tongue (there's a flavor) and never take "her" to task for using "gourmet," that silliest of words, right up there with "lifestyle." I know that anyone serving on the jello committee has got to mean well, and that everyone says "gourmet" when they want to describe someone who uses fresh parsley or College Inn chicken broth, or owns a pepper or coffee grinder or a nutmeg & knuckle grater. So, like a multitude of other outrages, I just let the word boil on by.

But it certainly shouldn't be used to describe what goes on in my kitchen half the time. There are whole weeks when our best meal comes out of a box labeled "Swanson," washed down with liquid so raw and metallic that it should have been put on the table in its brown paper bag, and accompanied by a nearly dead tomato slice gasping for air beneath a final sentence of bottled sauce. For "bean suppers" I empty two large cans of, add a fist of brown sugar, some dried mustard if it's around, put some water in the dregs of a catsup squeezer, shake it hard, mix all & put in bean pot, then oven for a while, take to the supper and sit back for the raves. Or take fish sticks, for example. For all I know, my children grew up thinking everything that swam in the great sea was 3 inches long, rectangular, covered with crumbs, and was hauled on board with a packet of sweet pickle attached.

I truly love real potatoes in any form: baked, boiled, double-baked, fried, hashed, mashed. I love long dusty brown ones, small wet red ones, gnarly little yellow ones, potatoes with eyes even, and long white sprouty feelers. I love hot potatoes, cold potatoes, room-temperature potatoes dosed with anchovies, green olive oil, olives & chopped scallions. Pepper. But I also love the morsels called "potatoes" that come in cans, for cheap and fairly quick.

Canned "potatoes" have already been peeled and cooked (but not quite cooked) and come in two handy shapes: sliced and whole. Whole are better,

but I don't know why. Both come floating in a grey embryonic fluid, pellucid, nearly gluey, and almost useless. Except it keeps the "potatoes" wet en route, I guess.

You (well, I) buy these canned "potatoes" not when I'm in a hurry, exactly, because real potatoes don't take much longer, but when I want something that resembles a potato, but isn't. I mean, this is a different food, a little like hominy is to corn, or a fish stick to a fish. Now, opened can in hand, a few things are essential. First, you've got to have an appetite for exactly the chew of a canned "potato." The chew of it, the specific tooth-someness, is more enticing than the flavor of it; though the flavor, which always retains a slightly tinny edge to an otherwise cardboardy base, is also good. The chew of a canned "potato" is similar to the chew of a canned "clam," which is something like the chew of small square bits of pencil eraser. But sometimes this is just the texture you want between your teeth.

The second requirement of canned "potatoes"

is that you've got to be willing to do a little something to them. There are only two possibilities. One is to dump them, embryonic fluid included, into a pot, heat them, drain them, add a knob of something yellow, a grind of pepper, and call it supper's ready.

My other recipe is to slice up the whole ones, and fry them, fast, in some oil. Towards the end, add a lot of minced garlic. Don't let the garlic brown, *at all*. The "potatoes" get a brown side, and sometimes take on a crispy sensation; but most often, they don't. They have a tendency to sulk. Perhaps they've been soaking in their can for too long. To their ground-level taste of cardboard and tin (not earth, not sun) and to their meditative chew, fried canned "potatoes" now take on a versatility and a rakish Mediterranean hint, especially if you've used olive oil. They also "go with" nearly anything, from scrambled eggs to sausage. It just occurs to me that this isn't a very wide range. Canned "potatoes" would not go with fresh aspara-

Supping with Karina

Outside
in the rink below
the voice of children playing
trickles
up
through our open-winged kitchen window.

Now and again,
a ball is kicked.

Creamy-glazed panes
perimeter a fraction of
vertical tree
leaning before us
in late white sky.

Inside
we sip tea from polka dot cups,
savor breads
and work from cross-language dictionaries,
grasping more and more
about
past lives . . .

—ELLEN BOWMAN

gus, or with tiny but thick lamb chops. Nor would they hold up under a generous sprinkle of either fresh mint or rosemary leaves. I'll now explain why.

Canned "potatoes" are the star of the food group of canned "vegetables." All of these: peas, beans (green), okra, carrots, etc. are new and different foods. They are not vegetables. They've become something else for which, I notice, we have no name. Clearly, a canned "pea" is not a pea. A canned "pea" isn't simply an inadequate, ruined, prole, disgusting, or fake pea; it isn't a pea at all. It's something else, and only itself. Ditto canned "green beans" vs. green beans. The whole secret to eating these objects is never to add to them anything real. This is why canned "green beans" need canned "mushroom" soup, canned "onion" rings, and a last-minute topping of "bits o' bacon." Or a squeeze of "lemon juice" from a yellow plastic lemon. What's fatal is to sneakily add anything real, like real bacon. At most, real butter, real

garlic, or real salt is about as far as you can go without ruining the integrity of the dish. In short, stay with fake ingredients as far as possible. Then you end up with a homogeneous thing which stands quite alone, related to real food but not imitative of it; and you, as the cook, have not put on culinary airs. You've honestly dealt with the world of dishonest food, but real fake food. If you see what I mean.

One of the most praised, licked-clean, and begged-for recipes at our local benefit suppers is known as "7-can casserole." I'd include the recipe here, but I don't have it. I know it involves several cans of different colored "beans," "corn," and one can, at least, of "carrots." Some "soup" of some flavor, but I don't know which. Top with Cheez-Whiz.

At one point in his reckless and always exciting career through the world, my father owned a small neighborhood grocery, so small that he bought his coffee beans in bulk and packed them in bags

butter (or cholesterol 227)

the nurse said
you don't have to give it up
just cut back, use less
enough to get the flavor

what does she know?
it's not only the flavor
but the excess I love
the luxury, the extravagance

the glistening pool
in the potatoes
the golden sheen on a grilled bagel
waffle wells full
the translucence of onions
the slither of eggs
it's bread and
peas and
syrup and
grease on my chin
stains on my tablecloth

butter is more than
food
more than fat

to an Irish survivor
it's status
a sense of rightness about
it being on the table
of depravity in its absence
the insult of substitutes

I grew up on butter
view it as food as natural
and necessary as meat
and potatoes

years of poverty
improved my taste for it
resentment increased my need
now I honor a commitment to
myself to satisfy this need
grab my right to butter
now cheap & available
I always buy
two pounds at a time

—KATHLEEN McNALLY BEAUBIEN

which had my name printed on them. It's the only time any product has carried my first name. My mother (an artist) made his store signs for him, weekly posters announcing this or that on sale, and I came of age believing she had designed the original Jolly Green Giant and the moon logo for Ivory Snow. Ah, salad days.

In addition to being a most careful, knowledgeable butcher (no easy task, faced with an entire cold cow-half on a hook) my father was also a Violent Man when it Came To Food. Once he bodily tossed into the busy street, or punched out, a slimy salesman peddling "artificial cheese." It was packed in little wooden cartons just like Velveeta. The story—"artificial cheese"—and the salesman slammed flat—became a staple for years thereafter, good for an hour's verbal feast. "Artificial cheese! Artificial cheese! Can you imagine such a thing? With milk going down the drains!" At Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, Easter, birthday suppers, picnics, this story would always inspire one uncle to tell his story about Pepperidge Farm Breads, and how you could tell when they were stale. And this in turn would inspire the third time-honored food tale around the food-laden table, of how another uncle, dead now, bless him, had invited the extended family over for a chicken cook-out, but had bought only wings. This was another opportunity for my father to resemble Pavarotti hitting sustained thrill. "Airplane feast! Airplane feast!" he'd repeat, "remember when Ollie had that Airplane Feast!" Which led to the fourth saga (a little like the mead hall in *Beowulf*, my family...) about my mother's one and only attempt to bake bread. She produced a loaf, one loaf, so wizened, heavy, and hard, that my father saved it, smuggled it to a church event, and laid it on the Fellowship Hall mantle with a sign that said "I hereby contribute the cornerstone to our new addition." I don't think my mother ever forgave him, though it was always told, even by her, as a "funny" story.

About Miracle Whip, you again have only two choices. You can either make your own mayonnaise from eggs and scratch (*Joy Of Cooking*) or you can lay out 79¢ and have a little jar of Miracle Whip. Those are the only alternatives. I'd avoid anything inbetween, especially newish items labeled "Lite." Those, unlike odd-food food-groups (canned "peas") are absent-food food-groups, the essence of wishy-wash. Real mayonnaise (break an egg) is something good indeed, and Miracle Whip is something else indeed, and has the added virtue of coming in such small jars that it

gets used up at a June picnic, thus preventing botulism. Plus, its taste is childhood: strange, mixed, memorable, a little melancholy, and only itself. Furthermore, small children even today prefer it on Spam sandwiches. Once again, we have that perfect match. Spam is to animal (what animal?) what Miracle Whip is to mayonnaise.

There are other handy recipes that stretch our habits and, in fact, take them to new territory altogether: cocktail hotdogs in melted red currant jelly. 7-up, lime jello, and mini-marshmallow molded salad. Pillsbury canned biscuit "pizzas." Occasionally, in sources such as a Grange or Extension cookbook, you'll see a recipe for "My Family 1-Bowl Chocolate Surprise" calling for two cups of Miracle Whip. I've never tried one of these, but intend to do so, someday. I bet it's a cake that is melting, seductive, orgasmic, worthy of a Vienna (Austria, not Maine) coffee house. One of the blue ribbon prizes for our relaxed theories is how good a canned "bean" can be so long as it's treated like a "canned" bean. How good a cake, at least once in a lifetime, with \$1.39 of Miracle Whip whisked into the batter.

I close with my recipes for thinking about food by discussing hard-boiled eggs, a can of beets, and a casual splash of vinegar. A toss of sugar. Salt. Don't be too picky about any of this, except for the secret: you've got to boil the eggs, low but steady, for about two hours. Watch the water level. Boiled, that is, until egg becomes new thing. Transformed. Virgin into tree. Frog into prince. God into swan. Wet life into old wineskin. Egg no longer. Mouthful in beautiful shape of egg. Chewy whites, resistant as saddles. Green-stained yolks, dry as pollen. Peel the cooled eggs, dump over them a can of beets. Canned beet juice has stained the whites about an 8th of an inch inwards, a blessing of deepest red. Your dish now resembles a Russian Easter. So far, so good. Better if you let it sit at the back of the fridge about a week, thus getting harder, thus beetier, thus deeper in red, thus drier at the center. You now have an "egg" that will celebrate the first spring night. The gourmet touch is 8 or 11 caraway seeds or a stem of fresh dill. By adding either caraway or dill (I wouldn't add both) you risk, however, getting on the "benefit supper: beets" list in a permanent "gourmet" way. And really, there's nothing we want to be in a permanent way.

—ALICE BLOOM

