

# Preserving Traditions

by Thomas Fox Averill

My mother cooked excellent caramels, from the recipe in *Joy of Cooking*, 1947 edition. We, as her children, wrapped the cooled candies in wax paper to send to relatives and friends at Christmas. My wife's mother did the same, only she made chocolate bonbons. Our friend, from a rural family in Iowa, sends us tins of cookies at Christmas, Easter, sometimes Halloween.

How many of us have gifts of food in our cabinets or refrigerators? Homemade jams or jellies? Pickles and relishes? Salsa? Soup or cocoa mixes? Or, God forbid—fruitcake?

The giving of food is a tradition in Kansas, and for many reasons. We have a rural past. Food preservation was common. William Stafford begins his poem "One Home" with the line: "Mine was a Midwestern home--you can keep your world." As he creates that Midwestern home for the reader, he writes: "The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light,/ but we could read by it the names of preserves--"

Canning was as important to a gardener at one time as a checkbook and a freezer might be today's consumer. Whole days were spent putting up beans, or peaches. And "putting up" is also what was done when the canner was finished. We put them up on shelves in the pantry, or in the basement, or in the homesteader's cave, dug into the side of a hill, where the air remained dark and cool, but would not freeze.

One of my short stories, "Topeka Underground," is about a suburban boy growing up in the land of freezers and TV dinners and bomb shelters – the 1950s. The boy visits the kitchen of some neighbors with a decidedly rural past. He sees, ". . . shelf after shelf of food in jars—the glowing red of tomatoes, the dull green of cooked beans and dill pickles, the deep purple of beets, the yellow of summer squash and corn, the white of pearl onions, the orange of pumpkins, the colors as patterned and lovely as ... quilts."

I grew up reading the Little House books, as they were reprinted and illustrated by Garth Williams in 1953 (the 31<sup>st</sup> edition!). In *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura Ingalls Wilder describes a pioneer house in autumn: "The little house was fairly bursting with good food stored away for the long winter. The pantry and the shed and the cellar were full, and so was the attic, ... a lovely place to play. The large round, colored pumpkins made beautiful chairs and tables. The red peppers and the onions dangled overhead. The hams and the venison hung in their paper wrappings, and all the bunches of dried herbs, the spicy herbs for cooking and the bitter herbs for medicine, gave the place a dusty-spicy smell." The illustration by Williams shows the girls surrounded by everything that would sustain them through the long winter, which is a perfect metaphor for a book about a childhood surrounded by all that sustains us as

people: family, music, love, hard work, community and, of course, food.

With food preservation came convenient sharing. Everyone might can or preserve fruits and vegetables and meats, but an exchange might allow for more variety across the community – your apple butter for my piccalilli. Iowan Mary Swander, in her memoir *Out of This World, A Woman's Life Among the Amish* (1995), writes about the variety in the Amish Christmas Eve neighborly gift exchange; someone showed up on her doorstep with a pint-sized mason jar with “a handwritten label neatly affixed to the lid that read, ‘Sorghum Molasses.’” And, for even more variety, once her neighbors find out that a medical condition has made her “intolerant of most normal American fare,” they give her a freezer packet of ground bear.

Beyond being an expression of community, such exchanges are personal. The seal on a jar of grape jelly might seal a friendship. And the same grape jelly might just seal someone's reputation for making grape jelly. Exchange brings comparison, and bragging rights.

The tradition of food competition continues today, especially at Kansas fairs. The most recent Shawnee County Fair had 4-H competitions in Food Preservation – for Sweet Spreads, for Fruit Juice, Ale or Soda, for Pickle or Relish, even for Food Gift Package (Grand Champion Melissa Ebert of Rossville—I wish she was my friend!). The State Fair adds food competitions in Tomato Products, Canned Vegetables, Jams and Butters, Preserves, even Dried Foods. The tradition of gift giving shows itself in the competitions for Governor's Cookie Jar and First Gentleman Gift Basket.

The Smithsonian **Key Ingredients** exhibit is all about our food traditions, those that stay the same, and those that change. In that sense, it preserves, it continues, and it helps us understand our complicated relationships with food. It expands, like a gift of food, our sense of community. Lin Yutang wrote, “Patriotism is the memory of food eaten in childhood.” In Kansas, we learn about and exchange food from many cultures and communities. We eat fry bread at pow-wows, lutefisk in Lindsborg, bratwurst in Hays and Schoenchen, salamis and summer sausage from the groceries in Wilson and Lucas, tamales in Garden City and Chanute, ravioli in Frontenac, soul food in Nicodemus, Thai food in Topeka and Dodge City, fried chicken in Kansas City and Olpe. In Kansas, we have much to be patriotic about, and much to learn about the cultures that make us who we are. Our own memories of food, and preservation, define us as Kansans, they connect us with our own ethnic heritage, and they help us understand the traditions and cultures of the many people who make up our state. As such, **Key Ingredients**, available to all Kansans at six locations over a fourteen-month period, is yet another gift of food, another exchange.

Finally, the gifting of food is another way to express thanks – as in the truly American food holiday, Thanksgiving. When we give food, and give thanks for food, we somehow know that food is more than a reflection of hard work, industry, human ingenuity. Food is our lives.

And like our lives, food is a gift.

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