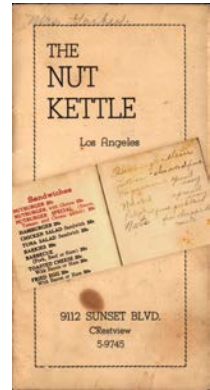


# Sometimes You Feel Like a Nutburger

By Tiffney Sanford

Today when we hear about nutburgers we typically assume it's a vegetarian patty that features nuts in its mixture, but when nutburgers were introduced in Southern California in the 1930s they were something completely different. They were beef hamburgers topped with chopped nuts and served on a toasted bun.

During the 1930s and 1940s, newspaper columnists that covered Hollywood reported on the celebrities who went in big for the nutburger including George Raft, Clark Gable, Groucho Marx, Mary Pickford, and James Cagney. Advertisements at the time called nutburgers "Hollywood's



Menu from The Nut Kettle with inset of menu contents and handwritten note with nutburger ingredients (circa 1937). Tiffney Sanford Collection.

Most Famous Sandwich." Notable Hollywood novels, including Aldous Huxley's *Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, and Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, mention the nutburger and/or the nutburger stand. This indicates the trendiness of nutburgers at the time, but also perhaps the eccentricity of Hollywood to outside observers.

Gates Nut Kettle, which was on Sunset Blvd near Doheny, was the popular purveyor of nutburgers. According to a 1935 *Los Angeles Times* article about (what we now call) the Sunset Strip, Frank W. Gates opened the Nut Kettle in 1928. He later added a Palm Springs location. When he passed away in 1937, his oldest son Frank Jr. was in charge of the Los Angeles location, while his son John ran Palm Springs. Thankfully at least one customer swiped a menu from the Los Angeles location and wrote down the ingredients on a Nut Kettle nutburger. The hamburger was thin, the lettuce was shredded fine, the mayonnaise was spread easy, the mustard was spread easy, the relish was "fine pickle," and the nuts were chopped fine.

But what type of nuts were used? While I wasn't able to find a reference to the kinds of nuts used at the Nut Kettle, recipes in newspapers and cookbooks that I found were varied—peanuts, walnuts, or pecans were used to top a hamburger patty. I wanted to make the Nut Kettle nutburger at home and decided to use peanuts. One burger was made just as handwritten on the menu (with separate ingredients) and one burger was made with the toppings combined (which was described in a 1940 fan magazine). The burger with separate ingredients definitely won out. You could actually taste each addition, whereas the burger with the ingredients combined was not as memorable. In addition to the original, the Nut Kettle also sold the nutburger with cheese, and with cheese, tomato, and bacon.



Nut Kettle advertisement, October 1937, Playgoer for "Miss Quis" at the Mayan Theatre. Library of Congress, Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection

Hankering for a more contemporary nutburger? Your Los Angeles Public Library card gives you access to the *Los Angeles Times* archive where I found the August 15, 1991 Culinary SOS column, written by Rose Dosti, that offered a recipe for a nutburger from the Follow Your Heart restaurant. Their vegetable and bulgur burger features raw almonds, raw cashews, and raw walnuts, as well as sunflower seeds. I haven't tried it yet but I am still thinking about that Nut Kettle nutburger....



Tiffney Sanford joined the Culinary Historians in 2007 and enjoys browsing the large culinary collection at Central Library. She maintains (to varying degrees of regularity) the blogs *Hollywood Gastronomical Haunts* and *Los Angeles Library Tour*, and contributes to the *Los Angeles Public Library* blog.



## Upcoming Programs at the Central Library's Mark Taper Auditorium

**February 10, 2024**  
**Natalia Molina**  
 "Placemakers"  
 Interviewed by Nancy Zaslavsky

**March 9, 2024**  
**Ken Albala**  
 "A Deep Dive into the Global History of Noodle Soup"

**April 20, 2024 (note date change)**  
**Joan Nathan**  
 "Trends in Cookbook Writing, 1970s to Now"  
 Interviewed by Barbara Fairchild

**May 11, 2024**  
**Richard Foss**  
 "Imbibing LA: Boozing It Up In The City of Angels"

**June 1 (note date change)**  
 TBA

### WE HAVE AN OFFICIAL STATE MUSHROOM NOW!

The golden chanterelle, also known as *Cantharellus californicus*, has become the official state mushroom. State Rep. Ash Kalra (D-San Jose), championed the idea to showcase the breadth of California's rich, natural biodiversity.

This yellowish "monster chanterelle" is the largest in the world and has a light, fruity smell reminiscent of apricots, which makes it amongst the most sought-after edible mushroom for foodies. But every rose has its thorn, as they say, and every mushroom has its poisonous doppelganger: The Jack O' Lantern mushroom. Foragers beware!

Why do we need a state mushroom? According to the bill's text, we have a state flower and tree, so it's time to recognize a fungus. The 4,000 fungiphiles who voted to choose this one seemed to agree.

# THE FOOD JOURNAL

Winter 2024  
 Vol. 22 • No. 2

Dedicated to pursuing food history and supporting culinary collections at the Los Angeles Public Library



Charles Perry  
 CHSC President

## Hot Sauce, Wherefrom Art Thou?

**Me:** Wise One, I have a bunch of basically similar hot sauces from Louisiana, Mexico, Thailand and Mozambique, sold in similar tiny bottles. How did that happen?

**Wise One:** Interesting question. In the 17th century the English encountered soy sauce in Indonesia, where it is called kecap. They were thrilled by the idea of a ready-made sauce you could keep in your cupboard, but actual imported soy was expensive, so in their usual penny-pinching way the English started devising imitation ketchups using the local ingredients they liked to doctor gravy with. Umami-type stuff: mushrooms, anchovies, pickled walnuts and such. There ended up being a lot of commercial ketchups on the market, the main survivor being Worcestershire. In the 19th century people here as well as in England tried all sorts of flavorings for these ketchups, even blueberries.

**Me:** Did they make tomato ketchup?

**Wise One:** Sorta. The first tomato ketchups were the same sort of gravy-doctoring stuff, flavored with tomato juice, until the American sweet tooth had its way.

**Me:** So did they make pepper sauces?

**Wise One:** They tried. The problem was that capsaicin, the hot ingredient in chili pepper, is

*Continued on page 6*



Nancy Zaslavsky  
 CHSC Vice President, Programs

## Program Notes

Welcome to our new Board members Darien Morea, V.P. Membership, Joan Reiss, Treasurer, and librarian Megan Katz joining LAPL liaisons Ani Boyadjian and Stella Mittelbach. Also, a big welcome to Emily Baker, Special Events chair. CHSC is looking forward to an exciting year of stellar speakers at monthly programs as well as revitalizing member events, the used cookbook sale, and yearly party. Please contact an officer or committee chair (see directory) to join a committee as your input is greatly valued—we need your support!

Speaking of support, our dedicated Hospitality Committee is in need of new faces. Some old members are now also on the Board busy overseeing other projects. Please volunteer to lend a hand with reception planning, preparing food relating to the speaker's topic, plating snacks, beverage set-up, and patio set-up or clean-up. See Chair, Sandeep and offer your help, if only a few times a year.

Membership dues are due every January. Pay at the February program or send payment via chsocal.org on the website's Membership page ASAP to be included in the March directory. Please consider upping your status to Angel, Benefactor, or Patron level to help fund member services and increase our support of the culinary collections of the Central Library.

**Please note: Due to large events at the Central Library, two 2024 dates are changed. CHSC switches from our usual second Saturday of the month to April 20th and June 1st.**

Here's a rundown of programs during the second half of 2023 if you missed any at the Central Library or on Zoom. Catch them 24/7 on chsocal.org September welcomed George Geary who introduced us to his latest book, *L.A.'s Landmark Restaurants*:

*Continued on page 6*

Just for fun: Find out what was happening in food history from the year you were born!  
<https://stacker.com/retrospective/food-history-year-you-were-born>

The California Bear-Chef first appeared in the *Pan-Pacific Cook Book*, 1915.



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at the  
**LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY**

The Culinary Historians of Southern California

# Rotten Ratings: Why Were Tomatoes Thrown At Bad Actors?

By Shireen Jamooji

Tomatoes have become symbolic of displeasure, even spawning the popular film review site, Rotten Tomatoes, but it wasn't always tomatoes being thrown. This habit of pelting unworthy actors with fruit and vegetables is most often associated with Shakespeare's Globe Theater in Elizabethan London (late 1500s to 1600s), but the practice predates the cultivation of tomatoes which weren't even mentioned in English cookbooks until 1752.



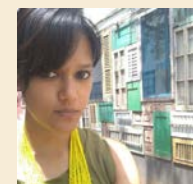
While the audiences at Shakespeare's plays definitely ejected their kitchen waste onto the stage and the suffering players, it was more likely to be rotting peels and eggs. The practice can even be traced back to 63 AD when Emperor Vespasian was hit with turnips by an angry mob during his speeches.

Though it might seem cruel or rude by today's standards, in Shakespeare's day, it was a normal and even welcome occurrence. This was a time when the theatre was for everyone, not just the elite and people were actively encouraged to participate in the show. Today the 'cheap seats' are the ones further from the stage, but back then they were right up front of the stage. The aristocracy would sit back and watch the going-ons of the rabble as they interacted with actors. It was as much a part of the experience as the show itself. Playwrights would often make edits to the script based on the reactions they got the night before.

To find the first recorded incident of actual tomatoes being used for this purpose you have to travel to 19th-century America. Audiences had a reputation for being the rowdiest of them all and would frequently tear apart the chairs they were sitting on and hurl them at the offending act. They would show up with rotten eggs and tomatoes by the armful – or purchase some from obliging vendors who snapped up this new market – and would lie in wait until the performer slipped up.

In 1883, actor John Ritchie made his debut at Washington Hall and within minutes of starting found himself being showered in tomatoes. He threatened to end the performance right there and then, but the audience cajoled him to go on. With reluctance, he continued but when hit square between the eyes while he navigated the trapeze, it was too much for his artistic sentiments and he fled the theatre.

And so began a long association between tomatoes and subpar entertainment that has lasted until today. Though we believe we have a much more sophisticated way of showing our disapproval: we just turn off the TV or leave the theatre, the practice may not be all that extinct. All you have to do is tot up the number of trolls in social media comment sections and you'll see that although the critics have switched to words, the voices of the people are still going strong even though the tomato has been taken out of the spotlight.



Shireen Jamooji is a food and culture writer and experienced editor in the film and media industry. Her work has appeared in *Homegrown*, HTDS Content Services, *Slurrrp* and *MyNews 24x7*. She lives in Mumbai, India.

And speaking of throwing tomatoes, we have the glorious, historical (and hilarious) "La Tomatina Festival" in Buñol, Spain today where a sanctioned food fight is enjoyed by the town and you can be hit to your heart's content with tomatoes along with other enthusiastic participants. Learn when to get tickets, what to wear, and how tomatoes aren't cultivated locally for their flavor.

<https://www.afar.com/magazine/what-to-know-about-spains-la-tomatina-festival>



Photo credit: flydime

## A Letter from the Editor

I just read that the software company Intuit donated two new commercial food trucks to LAUSD for students at Maywood High School to gain food service, entrepreneurial, and finance skills (using Intuit products) within a real-world setting. Chef Roy Choi, a pioneer of the modern food truck movement, extended his support and shared his experience at the event.



I might feel some trepidation at the prospect of young adults preparing my meal if movie portrayals regarding apathetic carelessness or obscene pranks are accurate, but from a larger picture perspective, this is a great opportunity for young people to grow a career, develop a talent, and connect with their community through the wonder and rewards of food. I wish them the best and hope to see them about town. Go out, be a success, and make food history!

Sharon



## The Sailor Who Invented The Doughnut Hole

As with many world-changing events, the truth behind the invention of the doughnut hole has been obscured by the goey, uneven frosting of history. But a tale that survives is of a 15-year-old sailor named Hanson Crockett Gregory, born in Rockport, Maine. As a cook's assistant, often ate blobs of ship-cooked lard-fried dough, called "dough-nuts." The centers of these blobs were often raw and indigestible, so on June 22, 1847, Hanson had the idea to cut a hole in the middle. Eureka!



Another version of the story says he simply didn't have a place to put his doughnut while steering the ship in the middle of the storm, so he stuck it on the spoke of the ship's helm.

When he pulled it off – a hole! This handy hole proved to be so popular that Hanson's mom started selling them around town.

In 1947, the 100th anniversary of his discovery, a small monument was erected (spelling it as "donut") by the Lutheran Church who currently occupies the spot of his birthplace. Hanson died in 1921, and the National Bakers Association officially recognized him as the inventor of the doughnut hole in 1948. By pure coincidence the town in which Hanson was buried, Quincy, Massachusetts, was also where the first Dunkin' Donuts opened, and when its owners learned in 1982 that Hanson lacked a tombstone, they paid for one themselves.

\*Thank you to Auria Zahed for her contribution to this article.

Source: Roadside America.com. (n.d). Birthplace of the Inventor of the Doughnut Hole. <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/22891>

## The Culinary Historians of Southern California

[www.chsocal.org](http://www.chsocal.org)



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Many of the foods we enjoy today were named for their creator or the inspiration of the recipe. So many foods and recipes we take for granted and don't even realize have a namesake. Here are twelve delicious food recipes that owe their name and fame to some of the most renowned musicians, opera singers, and composers from the past.



**Caruso Sauce** or Salsa Caruso is a warm sauce made of cream, sliced onions, ham, cheese, nuts, and mushrooms, usually served with pasta. Named in honor of the famous Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso who was a popular figure in South America in the early 1900s.

The **Jenny Lind Melon** is an heirloom cantaloupe first introduced in the 1840s. Unlike most other types of cantaloupe, its flesh is light green, rather than orange. It is commonly believed to have been named for Jenny Lind, the popular "Swedish Nightingale" singer, who was a sensation in Europe and the United States.



Mary Garden was an opera singer at the start of the 20th century. Born in Scotland, she emigrated to the U.S. as a child, then moved to Paris in 1897 for training and was sought-after by composers for their operas. Escoffier, the great French chef, made **Poires Mary Garden** in her honor, and told others that all his best dishes had been created "for the ladies."



The **Mozartkugeln** or the Mozart ball, originally known as the "Mozartbonbon," was first created by the Salzburg confectioner, Paul Fürst, in 1890 and named after Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The confectionery Fürst still produces the original Salzburg Mozartkugeln by hand according to the original recipe and only sells them in its shops or over its website. As the Fürst confectionery does

## Delicious Food Named After Famous Musicians

**Tournedos Rossini** is a French steak dish, purportedly created for the composer Gioachino Rossini by French master chef Marie-Antoine Carême. The dish comprises beef tournedos, pan-fried in butter, served on a crouton, and topped with a hot slice of fresh whole foie gras. The dish is garnished with slices of black truffle and finished with a Madeira demi-glace sauce.



not own a trademark for it, there are numerous imitation products, most of which are produced using industrial techniques.



**Rigó Jancsi** is a traditional Hungarian and Viennese cube-shaped chocolate sponge cake and delicious chocolate cream-pastry. It gained popularity in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and is named after Rigó Jancsi, a famous Hungarian Gypsy violinist.



Paganini was a great epicurean and one of the first advocates for utilizing tomatoes in Italian cooking. His "**Genovese Ravioli with Beef Ragout**" recipe was so well respected that the original manuscript eventually made its way to the Library of Congress.

Hector Berlioz, the notable French composer, has his name on **Eggs Berlioz**: a dish of soft-boiled eggs, elevated by the addition of croustades, Duchesse potatoes, and truffles and mushrooms in a Madeira sauce.



**Tetrazzini** is an American dish often made with diced fowl or seafood, mushrooms, and almonds in a butter and parmesan sauce flavored with wine or sherry and stock vegetables such as onions, celery, and carrots. It is often served hot over spaghetti or some similarly thin pasta, garnished with lemon or parsley, and topped with additional almonds or Parmesan cheese. The dish is named after Italian opera star, Luisa Tetrazzini.



The **Peach Melba** is one of the most famous and beloved desserts in the world. It's a dessert of peaches and raspberry sauce with a vanilla ice cream named after Australian soprano Nellie Melba. In 1892, Nellie Melba was performing in Wagner's opera "Lohengrin" at Covent Garden. The Duke of Orléans gave a dinner party to celebrate her triumph. For the occasion, Chef Escoffier created a new dessert, and to display it, he used an ice sculpture of a swan, which is featured in the opera.



Georges Bizet, the French composer of "Carmen" and other renowned operas has a consommé named after him as well as a marvelously light **Bizek Cake** with delicately flavored buttercream filling spread between the layers.



**Jansson's Temptation** or Janssons frestelse is a traditional Swedish casserole made of potatoes, onions, pickled sprats, bread crumbs, and cream. It has often been claimed that the name originated with the opera singer Pelle Jansson, remembered as a gourmand.

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**Charles Perry,  
Hot Sauce, Wherefrom Art Thou?  
Continued from Page 1**

insoluble in cold water and only slightly soluble in hot water. There were ads for hot sauces in the 1840s and 1850s, but they were sold in bottles the size of a wine bottle, so they can't have very hot. After the Civil War, the McIlhenny family of Louisiana came up with a method of extracting flavor from mashed chilis by aging them with salt and then adding vinegar to the extract. When they sold their first Tabasco sauce in 1868, they happened to use a supply of tiny French perfume bottles, which made it clear that you only needed a tiny bit of this sauce. In just a few years the McIlhennys were selling it in Europe and eventually around the world. Others started making the same sort of sauce – there are still scores of local Tabasco-type brands on the market in Louisiana. Some modern hot sauces, though, like Sriracha and piri-piri, are basically a chili puree with added flavorings.

**Me:** Far out.

**Wise One:** I know.

**Me:** Can you tell me anything else that would blow my mind?

**Wise One:** Columbus was hoping to find spices, but there are only three spices native to the New World: allspice, vanilla and chili pepper. And though chilis are related to the eggplant and vanilla comes from an orchid, their flavoring elements are related – capsaicin is a salt of vanillin. When you break capsaicin down in a lab, sooner or later you detect that sweet smell. Also, chemists have synthesized half a dozen weird chemicals related to capsaicin. None of them is hotter than natural capsaicin. One of them doesn't even taste hot, but a couple of minutes later you start sneezing.

**Me:** Wow!

**Wise One:** I know.

**Nancy Zaslavsky,  
Program Notes  
Continued from Page 1**

*Celebrating the Legendary Locations Where Angelenos Have Dined for Generations* with a foreword by Charles Perry. Another well-known historian of L.A. restaurants, Pat Saperstein spoke in October on lunching at studio commissaries alongside stars and moguls. November's Zoom program with Kitty Morse brought us to tears with her emotional story about her family's Alsatian wartime journal including deeply personal photos and recipes. Alex Prud'homme spoke in December on "Eureka: How California Shaped the Diet of Three Presidents" based on his latest book, *Dinner with the President*.

## Wacky Assessories for Dinner Parties

There's no shortage of weird and entertaining food-themed products to enhance your dinner party. Here's some of the best things we discovered recently on Amazon.com:

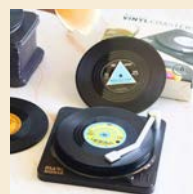


**Mappers Greatest 100 Foods of the World Scratch Off Poster**

Take your tastebuds on a world tour. Try out at restaurants, or maybe cook at home, 100 popular dishes from different countries and track your progress with this scratch off poster. But wait, shouldn't this be a scratch 'n' sniff poster?!

**DuoMuo Retro Vinyl Coasters**

Load the turntable with 6 records and offer everyone these retro coasters for their drinks. A rubber disc on the bottom helps protect furniture surfaces. If you're really clever, label them with hits that match the era of your dinner party food.



**What on Earth Shark Attack Sushi Plate**

It's Shark Week every week when you have this hand-painted serving platter! Your guests will get a kick out of dipping food in the shark's jaws and resting their chopsticks on the tail. Elevate your seafood cravings and be the host with the most.

**FUSMYE Avocado Coin Purse**

Holy guacamole! Stash your cash in this cute coin purse. The texture and color looks realistic and the only giveaway is the zipper on the side. Bonus points if you can hide it among real avocados for extra protection of your cash or just to fool your guests.



**Schuvubenz Bicycle Pizza Cutter**

Celebrate Tour de Pizza with your athletic friends and wheel in some laughs if the gathering feels flat. You'll have to read reviews to see if it's sharp enough or easy to clean, but it's a portable size for putting it in your backpack and providing everyone with a fresh slice while on the road.

**Much Comfort 3D Flaky Croissant Throw Pillow**

After a hearty meal, let your guests rest on a tasty buttery croissant and dream of French baked goods. These pillows are also available in pickle, cinnamon roll, hot dog, and bread loaf shapes. Buy them all, throw them around the room, and horrify the refined tastes of your interior decorator!



**Dome-Space Tortilla/Lavash Kitchen Towels**

Can there be anything more relevant to Southern California cuisine than dish towels that look like tortillas or lavash bread? Get a pack of 2 and use them as hostess gifts or just have them around the house to amuse your friends. Kids will probably love to roll up plastic toy food in them!

**Aliotech Set of 4 Dessert Spoons**

These are cute and super cheap for under \$10 to decorate your table in preparation for the dessert course. But we have to ask: under what circumstances would shovel spoons be appropriate? Kids party serving chocolate "Dirt Cake"? Maybe a garden party? For a Funeral?



## Laura Scudder didn't invent potato chips but she did invent a way to keep them crispy!

By Ellen Sandler



Laura Scudder in one of her trademark hats from her favorite designer, the very famous and very chic Lilly Daché.

In 1926 she created the first sealed bag of chips and thus made it possible to store and sell many bags to many people whenever they wanted them, and that turned out to be a lot of people, a lot of the time.

(Full disclosure: I'm one of them! I once bought a warehouse carton of 50 individual serving bags of potato chips for a recent car trip to Seattle. Not a bag was left when I got to Washington State. I bought a dozen party size bags for the trip back to Los Angeles. All gone.)

Born Laura Emma Clough, July 19, 1881, in Philadelphia; an only child, her mother died when she was two and she was raised by her father who worked as both a baker and butcher. Perhaps it was his influence that set her on a path in the food business.

She married Charles Scudder in 1908. Two years later, age 29, ambitious and gutsy, she packed a trunk and told her husband, "I'm going West. Are you coming with me?" He was; and the couple moved to Ukiah, California, where Laura opened The Little Davenport Café. Located across the street from the Mendocino County Courthouse, her restaurant attracted a lunchtime crowd of lawyers. Feed a lawyer; get advice – many of them, impressed with her business acumen, encouraged her to study law. She did; and passed



the California bar while four months pregnant.

In 1920 the Café was destroyed by fire and the Scudders moved South to Monterey Park, where Charles ran a gas station and garage. One day when he hand-cranked an old Model T, it launched into gear and ran over him. He recovered, but his strength was diminished and he died soon after. Laura, a widow with four children to support, took over and in addition to pumping gas (while wearing her Lilly Daché hats!), she figured she could realize more profit by renting out the empty building on her property next to the filling station. Her tenant was a barber, who happened to also be a thriving bootlegger. Being an upstanding citizen, she kicked him out and turned the place into a potato chip factory. Snack food being more wholesome, and more legal (she did have a law degree to protect) than prohibition alcohol.

Why potato chips? Laura had always made them for friends and family—she had learned how when running that restaurant in Ukiah. She hired local housewives, and cooked her first batch—200 lbs. of potatoes, washed and sliced by hand (!), in a deep fat iron kettle and started selling them in a rack next to the cash register at the gas station.

In those days chips were sold in barrels and lots of chips wound up as damp crumbles at the bottom. Laura thought she could do better than "the bottom of the barrel" and made bags out of wax paper. For extra pay the housewife/employees took them home and sealed them by hand with hot irons. Those bags worked, and Laura Scudder was in business—the crispy, crunchy potato chip business! Orders began to come in and hundreds of bags were being delivered fresh daily to local stores, albeit in the family car.

Optimistic about the future, Laura wanted to buy a delivery truck, but could not get insurance for it. She was told, "you're a woman; you won't be in business more than three months." She did manage to get insurance through a female insurance agent in Los Angeles, and the wax paper turned into cellophane,<sup>1</sup> the delivery truck turned into a fleet, and Laura Scudder's Potato Chips stayed in business for a lot longer than three months. By 1957 she had 1,000 employees (almost all women), a more than 50% share of the California market, and the product line had expanded to include peanut butter and mayonnaise.

Some years after Charles Scudder's death, his son by an earlier marriage, also named Charles Scudder, came to help with the business. Things must have gone pretty well because, Reader, she married him. No need to re-monogram the towels; she was once again Mrs. Charles Scudder! It might have seemed weird to many, but really, why not? They were about the same age and not related at all. (The first Charles had been quite a bit older than Laura and his first marriage was over well before he met her.)

In the 30's and 40's potato chips were considered picnic food and people bought them mostly in the summer. Wanting to keep the up-to-date, and by now, large plant busy all year, Laura felt chips could become more than a seasonal snack. Savvy to the ways of food influencers way before Instagram or Julia Child, Laura took to the airwaves with a cooking show on radio station KFI. She talked recipes and kitchen tips and, yes, of course, how potato chips fit into those recipes any time of year.

This personal approach was reflected in her other advertising too; her confident likeness appearing on billboards with a promise of "not the cheapest, but the best" ingredients and in her *LA Times* newspaper ads taking the form of short letters written to her constituents with a sweet thought about nature or a thoughtful answer to a reader's question and ending with a gentle pitch for her products. In one she wrote, "...a good many people ask who writes these letters. I must confess that I do. No doubt someone else could do the job better but, after all, it is my personal message to you." The authentic, personal, woman-to-woman touch had a strong effect and her business boomed.<sup>2</sup>



Laura Scudder Potato Chip Plant. Garvey Avenue East of Atlantic Blvd. Monterey Park, CA

In the early 50's a buyer offered Laura \$9 million (about \$115 million today) for the company but that buyer would not guarantee her employees' jobs and she turned the offer down. A few years later Laura was offered less (\$6 million; about \$65 million today) from a buyer who did guarantee to keep the entire workforce and she sold, but she remained to run the company from her modest 10' by 10' office until her death at age 77 on March 13, 1959.

Laura Scudder is buried in San Gabriel Cemetery, San Gabriel, California.

<sup>1</sup> Cellophane became available in the US in 1927 from DuPont.  
<sup>2</sup> This same personal style approach was used to great success by General Mills with the creation of Betty Crocker. The difference, of course, was that Laura was a real person who wrote her own ads while Betty was a fictional corporate marketing icon whose promotional copy was written by advertising agencies.



Ellen Sandler, is a former television writer (*Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Coach*), and the author of *The TV Writers Workbook*. She cooks every day and recently made latkes with caramelized leeks using Paula Wolfert's much loved recipe. While in the kitchen she likes to listen to an audiobook, usually about food and cooking. Currently: *The Way We Eat Now* by Bee Wilson.

THANK YOU to the Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library Local History Room and to Senior Librarian, Leonie Jordan and Assistant Librarian, Samantha Schwartz for historical information and photos.

# The DIRTY SECRET

of "Secret Family Recipes"

By Alex Mayyasi

When Danny Meyer was gearing up to open his barbecue restaurant, Blue Smoke, there was one recipe he knew he had to have on the menu: his grandmother's secret potato salad recipe.

"I told the chef, 'My very favorite potato salad in the world was the one my grandmother made,'" Meyer recalls.

That's a big statement coming from Meyer, a successful restaurateur who has earned Michelin Stars and founded the fast-casual chain Shake Shack. At the time, his grandmother had already passed away, but Meyer remembered that she kept recipes on 3 x 5" index cards. After a search, he found the right card and handed it to the restaurant's chef, who invited Meyer to try it in the Blue Smoke kitchen.

When Meyer arrived, the sous chefs had a big bowl of potato salad that brought back memories of his grandmother. He tried it, smiled, and told the chefs, "That's exactly right." They grinned back at him mischievously. Eventually, Meyer broke and asked, "What's so funny?" A chef pulled out a jar of Hellman's mayonnaise and placed it on the table. Meyer looked at it, then realized that the secret recipe his grandmother had hoarded for years was on the jar. It was the official Hellman's recipe for potato salad. This actually seems to be a common phenomenon. The television show Friends even features a similar discovery, when one character, Phoebe, realizes that her grandmother's "famous" chocolate chip cookie recipe came from a bag of Nestle Toll House chocolate chips.

Two months ago, we asked Gastro Obscura readers to send in accounts of their own discoveries. We promised a (loving) investigation of grandparents lying about family recipes. But instead we got a delightful look at the power of imagination, the limitations of originality, and the halo effect of eating a dish or dessert made by family.

## Examples from Readers

In response to our call, 174 readers wrote in with stories of plagiarized family recipes. Hailing from New York to Nicaragua, from Auckland, New Zealand, to Baghpat, India, they prove that this is a global phenomenon. The majority of readers described devastating discoveries: They found supposedly secret recipes in the pages of famous cookbooks, and heard confessions from parents whose legendary dessert recipes came from the side of Karo Syrup bottles.

*Fittingly, one of the most extraordinary examples also echoed the cookie plotline from Friends: Once I was the judge of a chocolate chip cookie recipe contest. We stipulated that all cookies had to be homemade, no mixes or frozen dough. The top three cookies were chosen, photographed, and presented in a local newspaper along with the recipes for them. Calls and letters poured in pointing out that the first place cookie was the Nestle Toll House recipe and the second place recipe was the Toll House recipe doubled.*

—Jeff Miller, Fort Collins, Colorado

Several readers joked about family members threatening to take a secret recipe to the grave. To our surprise, we also received a story of a late-in-life confession:

*My uncle was known around town as the "fudge man." Every year, he would make pounds of it for Christmas parties, bake sales, and gifts. It was legendary—people would beg him for the recipe. When he was ill in the hospital, before he passed, his wife begged him for the recipe so she could keep his memory going. He replied, "It's on the side of the marshmallow fluff container."*

—Jess Heller, Minnesota

Not every story featured a deceptive elder, however. A number of readers found that they'd assumed a secret family recipe where there was only a well-loved cake mix:

*My husband's Russian grandmother made the world's best Lemon Cake—according to my husband. Now, I consider myself a pretty good baker. I only use European butter, fresh ingredients, everything from scratch. It's my hobby, my passion. When my husband and I first got together, he talked wistfully of his grandmother's cake. She was 90+ and living on the other side of the country, so on my urging, he would ask her to send him the recipe. She never got around to it. Over the years, I tried dozens of recipes—using fresh Meyer Lemons that we grew ourselves! He would try them and say, "Well, it's delicious, but not what I remember from my childhood."*

*Finally, we happened to visit the East Coast in the final year of Grandma's long life. We went to visit her at her home. Joe brought up the cake. She whacked her knee and exclaimed in her thick Jersey-and-cigarettes*

*voice: "Oh Joey! That WAS a great cake! I got it off the box of Betty Crocker. Lemon Poke Cake. I'll find it for you."*

—Suzy Scuderi, Olympia, Washington

You may be noticing a trend: Most of the stories concerned sweets. While we heard about stolen stuffings and copied casseroles, the vast majority of revelations centered around cookies, cakes, and, in one case, purple jello.

If you swear by your father's chocolate cake or your grandmother's famous cookies, you may want to check the recipes on Betty Crocker cake boxes and Hershey's chocolate chip bags. To be safe, though, you have to investigate uncommon recipes too, as shown by this story about a mulled cider drink called wassail:

As with any fake news, family legends about supposedly secret recipes seem to germinate because they feel true. And they're enabled by the surprising uncertainty we often have about our own history.

*I grew up in California, and every Christmas Day for as long as I can remember, my grandmother and then my mother would make wassail in the slow cooker. It simply was not Christmas until the kitchen smelled like wassail, and the simple recipe (apple cider, pineapple juice, honey, sliced citrus, and spices) seemed to differ from any other wassail recipe. So the assumption was always that it had been created by someone far back in the family tree and handed down.*

*Recently, in a fit of nostalgia, I asked my mom for the recipe, and she dug out a printed recipe card and ... it was a mass-produced recipe card from Macy's department store. It turns out the wassail we enjoyed so much was a "freebie" recipe given away in the Macy's kitchenware department during one holiday season back in the '70s to help sell Crock-Pots! It was a bit of a let down to learn it wasn't really some secret family recipe, but I have since introduced my in-laws to it, and they insist I make it every Christmas.*

—Stephanie Baldwin, Montréal, Canada

While secret recipe stories tend to have punchlines, many are profound reminders of the link between food and memory:

*I was on vacation in San Francisco, and we ended up eating at what could only be referred to as a Chinese spaghetti restaurant. It was inexpensive and very popular. I ordered my meal, and they served soup as a starter. I took one bite, and it was my father's vegetable beef soup. I almost got up and checked the kitchen, because he had passed away three months before.*

*Finally I called my mom, and she said that's not your dad's soup; it is Muriel Humphrey's soup. Muriel was Hubert Humphrey's wife, who was appointed to his Senate seat after he died. My dad was a lifelong Republican, but clearly he could reach across the fence when it came to an amazing vegetable beef soup recipe.*

—Amy Jensen, Minnesota

## Three Theories of Plagiarized Family Recipes

Reviewing reader accounts bolstered one explanation for why secret family recipes turn out to be not-so-secret: Cooks and bakers enjoy passing recipes off as their own. One Gastro Obscura reader recounted how her mother passes off a Neiman Marcus chocolate chip cookie recipe as her own, and, when asked for it, tweaks the recipe so it won't work as well. Another story

involves a mother-in-law confidentially describing her taco sauce recipe: "Put pan on stove, pour Rosarita taco sauce into it, heat until warm, hide the bottle."



But these stories also reveal that many family recipes are not a lie but a misunderstanding: Often, younger generations assume a recipe is a family secret despite a grandparent making no such claim:

*Growing up, my mom would make pancakes with cottage cheese, milk, eggs, butter, and flour (plus a touch of salt and vanilla). She never looked at a recipe card, and for 20 years, my siblings and I had always assumed this was some secret family recipe learned in Lithuania. When I was long since grown and out of the house, I called to ask her for the recipe. With a nostalgic image in my head, I asked if she had learned to make these from her mother when she was growing up in Lithuania or Germany (as us kids had always assumed). My mom laughed and said, "No, I got the recipe from a cottage cheese lid."*

—Christopher Aedo, Portland, Oregon

As with any fake news, family legends about supposedly secret recipes seem to germinate because they feel true. And they're enabled by the surprising uncertainty we often have about our own history. One reader recounted how he thought his family's

Christmas cookie recipe came—like his family—from Germany. He later learned the cookie was Swedish, and that he was actually Irish and English.

A final explanation for this phenomenon is simply that true originality is rare. Multiple cookbook authors have stories of asking people to send in family recipes and receiving dozens of nearly identical versions. "A lot of that has to do with [recipes sharing] very common ingredients," says Stephanie Pierson, who wrote in to describe her experience asking for brisket recipes.

With so many people cooking and baking and tweaking similar recipes, it's hard to call anything original. "Recipes have been propagated through newspapers and community cookbooks since the mid-1800s at least," writes Maryland food blogger K.M. Harris of American food culture. "Some cookbooks even admit that nearly identical recipes were submitted from multiple community sources."

## What We Learned

When it comes to secret family recipes, people just want to believe. It's a powerful idea: A supposedly secret ingredient can turn a recipe from a lid of cottage cheese into a link to an ancestral homeland. A supposedly hallowed family recipe can turn Betty Crocker cake mix into the world's best lemon cake.

Plenty of readers expressed dismay about discovering that a treasured recipe had a common origin. (Variations on the phrase "I died a little" appeared in multiple accounts.) But more frequently, when readers learned the truth, they accepted it and loved the recipe more than ever. The cookies and cakes and potato salads were, after all, still associated with childhood memories and departed loved ones.

After Danny Meyer realized that his grandmother's recipe came from the side of a mayonnaise jar, he started laughing. "Here I thought I had scored this major coup, tracking down this secret recipe," he recalls. "I looked up to heaven and gave my grandmother a look and started smiling. I was happy."

Meyer's barbecue restaurant opened in 2002, and he's pretty sure they served his grandmother's potato salad (which was also Hellman's potato salad) for the first few months.

"I didn't care," he says with a laugh. "It was a good recipe."



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