What Are Those Aromas Doing in Your Kitchen?

by Ellen Sandler

Did you know that Caltech, the prestigious science and engineering university and home to the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, has a Culinary Sciences Department? They do; and they also have a new online series, "Behind the Book: On Cooking and Science." The first event in this series was held on Thursday, July 28, with Caltech alum, Harold McGee, in conversation with Tom Mannion, Caltech Instructor of Culinary Science (besides teaching, he cooked for Stephen Hawking!).

If you don't know Harold McGee, he is the author of *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*. Appearing in 1984, it pioneered the translation of technical food science into cook-friendly kitchen science and earned McGee an iconic status among professional chefs as well as cooking enthusiasts everywhere.

Mannion and McGee have an easy rapport; and as a listener you feel like you're part of a convivial conversation and lucky to be there. During the 90-minute online event, they discussed the many connections between aroma and flavor, which is the subject of McGee's new book *Nose Dive: A Field Guide to the World's Smells*. The book starts with a description of a meal in England of grouse that was "on the cusp of decomposition," (which is, apparently, the way you are supposed to have grouse). The first bite was so strong, "I stopped talking," he says, "my brain shot off like I was having a seizure." It was a major experience in his life. It was so different! It was powerful because of sensations and those sensations were, "what drove me to investigate why things smell the way they do."

Turns out it has a lot to do with the transformation of molecules—how they break down, how they combine, and under what conditions. And McGee is just the guy to explain it all. He has the scientist's diligence for research and the writer's passion to share the excitement of his discoveries through clear and vivid explanations.

Like this one: "The fatter the meat the more aroma, because the heat breaks the lipids in the fats into smaller molecules which is what creates the delicious smell." Or this one, peppered with just enough opinion to make it tasty: "Acidity is one of the basic tastes and important in highlighting flavors and aromas—it's often what's missing in restaurant food."

To write about smell and flavor, McGee coined a new term: *Osmocosm*, which he defines as, "the world we can experience through smell." And write about it, he did; exploring this important sense, so vital to those of us who cook and love all things food.

Nose Dive: A Field Guide to the World's Smells is, of course, available online, but it's nice to support our local booksellers. Go here: **indiebound.org**

For more from Harold McGee, go to his website: **haroldmcgee.com**. You'll find his blog posts and many of his articles. *The Flavor of Smog*, his aromatic impressions of Los Angeles, which he wrote for the now defunct magazine, *Lucky Peach*, is of special interest.

"Behind the Book: On Cooking and Science" will be celebrating more books and authors in the coming months. To find out about future events, go here and sign up for emails: **https://events.caltech.edu/series/behind_the_book**. Events are open to the public and **FREE**, but you have to reserve to get the access links.

Ellen Sandler, television writer (Co Executive Producer, Everybody Loves Raymond), and author of* The TV Writers Workbook. *She shops at the Sunday Mar Vista Farmers Market, cooks every day, from scratch, and most nights she can be found sipping a small glass of Sancerre and cleaning up the kitchen while listening to an audiobook, usually about food and cooking. Most recently:* The Man Who Changed the Way We Eat, *a biography of Craig Claiborne.

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

The Culinary Historians of Southern California
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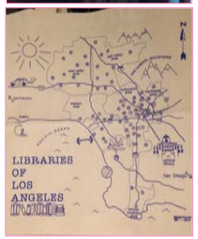
A fan of the puzzle phenomenon, Wordle? Now there's a new version: **Phoodle**, all about food, created by cookbook author Julia Loria.
Get your game on: **phoodle.net**



Upcoming Virtual Programs via Zoom Videoconferencing:

August 13, 2022
Charles Perry
"Antonin Carême: Mr. Nouvelle Cuisine of 1820"

September 10, 2022
Leslie Goddard
"Who Was Typhoid Mary?"

October 8, 2022
Constance L. Kirker & Mary Newman
"Cuckoo for Coconuts"

November 12, 2022
Nancy Harmon Jenkins
"Diaries: A Kitchen and a Garden on the Maine Frontier"

December 10, 2022
Lenore Newman
"Poutine on Mars: Culinary Tradition in Unusual Places"

January 14, 2023
Charles Perry
"Eat Like an Egyptian Pharaoh"

Breaking News!

LA Meekly has a fun new podcast

LA Meekly launched their new podcast last month, called "Candy is Dandy," which presents the history and review of old-time candy favorites, like Snickers and the Look! Bar. As far as we know, it's the only podcast out there for this topic. Check it out and satisfy your craving for sweets: https://youtu.be/AHNWGJrbL4I

THE FOOD JOURNAL

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Vol. 21 • No. 1

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

Charles Perry
CHSC President

Siberian Brandy

The Greeks invented distillation, but they didn't do much with it. The Arabs picked up the idea and used it for making perfumes, or more exactly fragrant *waters*, such as rosewater or sandalwood water. Western perfumes use alcohol as their medium, but even today alcohol-based perfumes are rare to nonexistent in the Middle East.

Did the Arabs ever distill wine into brandy? They never claimed to have, perhaps because it contravened cultural norms. Not so much the famous Islamic strictures against wine -- wine had been part of Mediterranean culture for millennia and was not easily gotten rid of. At various times and places Muslims drank wine -- but as the Greeks and Romans had: diluted with water. In medieval Baghdad, where innovations tended to be made, drinking wine neat was already considered living on the edge, so distilling it to make something stronger would have been beyond edgy.

But evidently they did distill alcohol, because *'araq*, the Arabic word for the liquid that condenses in a still, is the name for local varieties of hooch everywhere from West Africa to Indonesia. In local styles, of course. Mediterranean *'araqs* are flavored with anise, and we would consider Indonesian arrack to be rum.

In truth, distillation need not necessarily lead to debauched drinking. In Uzbekistan I saw

Continued on page 6

Nancy Zaslavsky
CHSC Vice President, Programs

Program Notes

Here we go again: Covid's new ultra-contagious BA.5 subvariant (and others) loom like a threatening intragalatic force over Southern California with a remarkable ability to surpass vaccines and boosters. Who knows what's in store for upcoming months with the return to school and holiday gatherings on the horizon. Will indoor masking once again hover on the horizon? For our safety CHSC will continue programs via Zoom at least through 2022. Plan ahead, and mark your calendar for the second Saturday of the month. Why not relax in your pj's with a cuppa joe and enjoy our slew of outstanding speakers lined up for this coming fall-winter season?

In order to access a virtual meeting, follow these steps:
1. Go to Zoom and sign-up: https://zoom.us/
2. Go to Eventbrite and sign-up: https://www.eventbrite.com/
3. Search Eventbrite for Culinary Historians of Southern California: https://www.eventbrite.com/o/culinary-historians-of-southern-california-9991771205
4. You must register for each event on Eventbrite. You will be sent an e-mail with the link to Join the Zoom event 10 minutes prior to the scheduled start time.

Last season Charles Perry kicked off 2022 with his annual January president's lecture, this time on "I Visited Yemen for the Food. Yes, the Food." He described how many of the country's esoteric ingredients fit a bit uneasily into the general culinary picture of the Arabian Peninsula. February brought Kevin Losar to wow us with his talk "Moonshine: The Eternal Spirit" about the worldwide love of illicitly concocting distilled spirits. Alas, due to virtual programming there were no samples via our unusually pouty hospitality committee. Mark Johnson also teased us, but this time via a lack of greasy fingers with

Continued on page 6

The Talented Groceries of Hollywood Post-Production

By Cecily Wong and Dylan Thuras

In the 1920s, when Universal Studios was transitioning from silent movies to sound, crewman Jack Foley showed them the way. His technique, now called "Foley art," was to lay an audio track over the film in post-production, adding sound effects like footsteps and slamming doors. Foley used unconventional methods to create convincing sounds, and today Foley artists reach for anything and everything to stimulate the crunches, splashes, and thuds in the movies, which means food has been tapped to play some serious Hollywood roles.

When freezing a wig and ripping Velcro didn't work, Foley artists turned to frozen lettuce to engineer the sound of Rose's ice-covered hair breaking as she clung to the headboard, waiting to be rescued after the shipwreck in **Titanic**.

The Foley artists working on **Fight Club** tried out many ways to mimic the sound of a physical brawl. One of the winners was punching a raw chicken stuffed with walnuts. The movie nabbed an Oscar for Best Sound Editing.

Terminator 2: Judgement Day opens with a postapocalyptic shot of Los Angeles in 2029, after a nuclear fire has killed three billion people. Shells of cars and human remains litter the ravaged landscape. From above the frame, a robotic foot crashes down, smashing a skull with a shattering succession of fractures and cracks. It sounds eerily like human bone. How did they do it? Pistachios.

Steven Spielberg wanted **E.T.** to sound "liquidy and friendly" when he moved, which inspired a Foley artist to wander a grocery store scouting for slippery, cheerful sounds. She found that packaged liver fit the bill, which, when mixed with the sound of jelly swishing in a wet towel and popcorn shifting gently in a bag, became the sound of the alien's movements.

When John Goodman lifts Jeff Bridges from his wheelchair in **The Big Lebowski**, Lebowski's back cracks audibly and he screams in pain – but it's just celery. Stalks of the green stuff are twisted and snapped to simulate breaking bones.

In **Jurassic Park**, a velociraptor hatches from its shell to the sound of an ice-cream cone being crumbled. The subsequent sound, of the baby dino emerging from its egg, was made by two gloved hands covered in liquid soap squishing the flesh of a melon.

Cecily Wong is a writer at Atlas Obscura and the author of two novels. Her work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *LA Review of Books*, *Self*, and *Bustle*. Visit her online: @cecilyannwong. **Dylan Thuras** is the cofounder & creative director of Atlas Obscura, has hosted the *NYTimes'* T-Brand podcast, "So You Want to Work Abroad," and is a correspondent for NPR's "All Things Considered." Visit him online: @dylanthuras.

This article is an excerpt from *Gastro Obscura: A Food Adventurer's Guide*. Reprinted with permission from the authors.

A Letter from the Editor

Whenever I hear the statistic that over 30% of our household food ends up going to waste, I wonder if there's a better way to salvage the inevitable leftovers, spoiled food, and overbought purchases. Understandably, life can get away from us and perishable food expires on its own timeline, but I feel badly when a farmer's efforts goes unappreciated or a chicken's laid egg gets sacrificed or that starving people in my community could've eaten what is now inedible, due to my lack of vigilance.

What about the huge amount of wastage that occurs in restaurants, agriculture, and food processing that is said to contributing to climate change and a global food crisis? Others have been mulling this over, too, and one San Francisco homegrown eatery has launched a concept to cook upscale food using typically discarded items purchased from local farms or food suppliers that can be repurposed into delicious meals. **Shuggies Trash Pie** (https://www.shuggiespizza.com), started by Kayla Abe and David Murphy, uses bruised fruit for frosé slushies, fish scraps for salmon belly pizza, or irregular cucumbers for upcycled pickles. They still use quality tomatoes, mozzarella, and pepperoni for menu and taste consistency, but combine it with a variety of ingredients that would otherwise go wasted. Online reviews have been mixed so far, but many customers like the food, the hip, fun restaurant atmosphere (dining chairs are shaped like cupped hands), support the idea, and are keeping an open mind about what's next.

Why Is It Called Canola Oil?

By Max Falkowitz

Canola is one of America's most popular vegetable oils, but if you go looking for a canola plant, you're gonna come up empty. That's because canola oil is really made from rapeseed, a widespread relative of the mustard plant that dates back to the earliest days of recorded human history, mainly for its oil, long used as a fuel rather than a food.

The name descends from the Latin 'rapum,' referring to turnips, another relative in the rapeseed family. But for obvious reasons the name became a tough sell for English speakers, so when a Canadian manufacturer started making cooking oil from a specific low-acid strain of the plant, a trade organization called the Rapeseed Association of Canada trademarked the name 'canola,' a hybrid, believe it or not, of the words Canada and oil. These days, 'canola' plants are grown and refined all around the world, not just Canada, and the term has effectively become generic for edible rapeseed oil.

Source: Falkowitz, M. (2019, Nov. 15). *Why Is It Called Canola Oil?* Taste. https://tastecooking.com/called-canola-oil/

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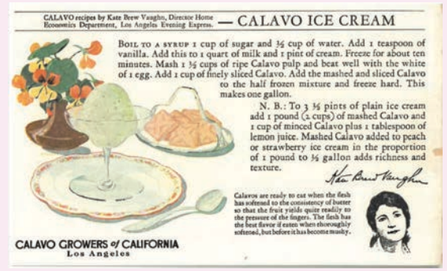
I Scream, You Scream for Avocado Ice Cream

By Tiffney Sanford


CALAVO recipes by Kate Brew Vaughn, Director Home Economics Department, Los Angeles Evening Express. — CALAVO ICE CREAM

Boil to a syrup 1 cup of sugar and ½ cup of water. Add 1 teaspoon of vanilla. Add this to 1 quart of milk and 1 pint of cream. Freeze for about ten minutes. Mash 1 ½ cups of ripe Calavo pulp and beat well with the white of 1 egg. Add 1 cup of finely sliced Calavo. Add the mashed and sliced Calavo to the half frozen mixture and freeze hard. This makes one gallon.

N. B.: To 3 ½ pints of plain ice cream add 1 pound, (2 cups) of mashed Calavo and 1 cup of minced Calavo plus 1 tablespoon of lemon juice. Mashed Calavo added to peach or strawberry ice cream in the proportion of 1 pound to ½ gallon adds richness and texture.

Kate Brew Vaughn

Calavos are ready to eat when the flesh has softened to the consistency of butter so that the fruit yields quite readily to the pressure of the fingers. The flesh has the best flavor if eaten when thoroughly softened, but before it has become mushy.

CALAVO GROWERS of CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Kate Brew Vaughn Calavo ice cream recipe card [circa 1930]. Cookery Ephemera Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

Summertime is a perfect time for ice cream, and Los Angeles in the early twentieth century was an ice cream town. The number of ice cream parlors and ice cream manufacturers steadily increased at the beginning of the 20th century, and by 1930 there were even eight ice cream cone manufacturers listed in the city directory! While Angelenos at the time were consumed by ice cream, they were also flooded with avocados. This convergence of foods might explain the charming photos of young women eating avocado ice cream found in the Los Angeles Public Library's digital collection.

Although Hass is the most common California avocado found in stores today, a 1925 report of avocado sales reveals more than 60 varieties, planted by nurserymen, ranchers, and backyard gardeners across the southland. Sadly, the avocado had an image problem. It was known by several different names (alligator pear, ahuacate/aguacate, palta, etc.), people were unsure how to serve it, many varieties were fragile and sensitive to temperature and jostling, unripe fruit was too hard, and overripe fruit had an unpleasant taste. In an effort to create a brand name that stood for a quality item, local avocado growers created a marketing division in the mid-1920s called Calavo (a compound of "California avocado").

Calavo opened a retail store at 430 ½ S. Hill, next to the Hotel Clark, to help introduce the fruit to Angelenos and tourists. Recipe cards and booklets were also handed out at public cooking demonstrations, giving housewives helpful tips on the best use of the exotic fruit. Alongside avocado cocktail (diced avocado smothered in French dressing) and avocado toast (Calavo crates were labeled the Famous Butter Fruit of California), Calavo marketed ice cream as a tasty way to use avocados. Chefs and maître d'hôtel were encouraged to include the dessert on their menus. Celebrity chef Victor Hirtzler of St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco even suggested serving rice cakes alongside avocado ice cream.

Food and home economics writers for newspapers were courted by Calavo as well. In Los Angeles, Prudence Penny (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*), Kate Brew Vaughn (*Los Angeles Evening Express*) and Chef A.L. Wyman (*Los Angeles Times*) helped spread the good word about avocados. As a matter of fact, Vaughn's recipe for Calavo ice cream was included in a set of the earliest recipe cards given out by Calavo. For the hostess in a hurry, she suggested adding mashed Calavo to peach or strawberry ice cream for a tasty, and easily prepared, treat. Ice cream recipes appeared in Calavo promotional materials for years, sometimes with the addition of a few drops of green food coloring or topped off with a green maraschino cherry.

Calavo also explored by-products that could be made from fruit that was blemished or too small. In addition to avocado sandwich spread (mashed avocado with ground sweet pickles, pimento, mayonnaise and vinegar), they worked on a commercial avocado ice cream base to sell to Southern California ice cream manufacturers. Sadly, neither product took off and were abandoned in 1932.

A young woman enjoying Calavo (avocado) ice cream [n.d.]. Eyre Powell Chamber of Commerce Photo Collection/ Los Angeles Public Library

Avocado ice cream may not have taken off the way Calavo wanted but maybe it's time for a revival. Visit the Los Angeles Public Library Rare Books Room to find several Calavo recipe booklets that feature ice cream recipes, or find avocado-specific cookbooks available to check out from the library's large culinary collection.

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.

Hired Help

Beyond making tasty meals to please customers, restaurants have the power to transform the lives of their staff. Here are three recent examples:

Pope Jai Thai

What started as a food stall has become a self-proclaimed social enterprise that hires and empowers individuals from 8 different beneficiary groups (disabilities, special needs, mental health conditions, deaf/hard of hearing, vulnerable, disadvantaged and youths-at-risk) to gain food and beverage training and experience in a real work environment.

The restaurant in Singapore teaches for specific roles through routine, protocols, peer mentoring and testing. If workers fail the test, they train again and retake the test. Once they pass, they receive a promotion and pay increases. The kitchen includes assistive tools and rules to socially distance more than 3 feet apart to prevent any mishaps among staff.

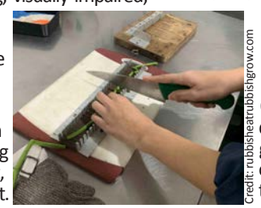
The restaurant has vegan and vegetarian options, is guide-dog friendly, and wheelchair accessible.

https://www.popejai.com

https://rubbisheatrubbishgrow.com/2021/01/28/pope-jai-thai-singapore/

The Restaurant that Makes Mistakes

This television series on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, in partnership with the Alzheimer's Society, depicts a group of 14 volunteers living with dementia, spanning different ages and stages of the disease, running a pop-up restaurant in Bristol under the guidance of Michelin-starred chef Josh Eggleton.



Chopping board and protective metal glove for the visually challenged.

Over a 5-week period, and with a dementia expert on hand to advise, the group is tasked with cooking, taking orders, serving, and making drinks for the public as well as celebrity guests.

At the beginning, all volunteers are tested for cognition, mood and memory. The tests are then repeated at the end with surprising results that challenge stigmas surrounding the disease and reveal the impact work has on a person's sense of identity and purpose.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9140352/

https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/19/the-restaurant-that-makes-mistakes-review-tv-to-prompt-waves-of-feelings

Down North Pizza

On top of making around 150 pizzas a day, Philadelphia's Down North Pizza is also working to lower prison recidivism rates and employment barriers by providing formerly incarcerated individuals with jobs, housing, and legal representation.

Executive chef Michael Carter spent 12 years in prison and his ultimate goal is to de-stigmatize incarceration through just working conditions while convincing other employers to do the same.

Pay starts at $15/hour, two apartments above the restaurant can house staff, and pro bono attorney services are are available for release and probation issues. Workers say they feel supported and a sense of comraderie when they don't have to hide their pasts at work.

The restaurant has made the national best-of lists for its Detroit-style square pies

https://www.downnorthpizza.com

https://www.npr.org/2021/11/23/1056856357/former-inmates-are-cooking-up-some-of-phillys-best-pizza

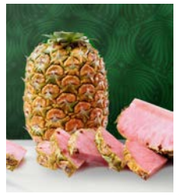
Celebrate Summer with New Fruit Varieties

Hopefully you're eating your healthy share of fruit this Summer. Looking for something new to excite your palate? Try some of these unusual types, if you can find them online, in stores, or when traveling!

Chocolate Pudding Fruit (Black Sapote): Native to Central America, this fruit has the texture of chocolate pudding, and looks like brownie batter, according to adventurous reviewers. When mashed and frozen, it resembles a fudge popsicle or chocolate sorbet. The most difficult thing is waiting until it becomes perfectly ripe, which is on the verge of decay, or it will be hard and unpleasant in taste.

Cotton Candy Grapes: More sugary than typical varieties, these cross-bred grapes are said to be straight out of the carnival and taste like cotton candy. Their harvest time is exasperatingly short, but expected between August and September. Reviewers say that they also taste amazing when frozen. In past years, they could be found at Trader Joe's, Sam's Club, WinCo and Whole Foods.

Tropical Bliss Strawberry: Driscoll's has created another specialty strawberry in addition to their Rosé and Sweetest Batch premium varieties. These come in shades of white and yellow and evoke a tropical punch, pineapple and passionfruit flavor. Most notably, they were created through traditional plant breeding methods, rather than being genetically modified.



Pinkglow Pineapples: A few years ago, the FDA approved a pink-fleshed pineapple developed exclusively by Del Monte and grown in Costa Rica. Classy to serve at a dinner party, Pinkglow Pineapple slices are said to be juicier and sweeter than the traditional fruit. Why do they cost upwards of $50 each? It takes up to 24-months to grow, is hand-picked, and each fruit's crown is removed and replanted before shipping in order to cultivate the next sustainable crop.

Thank you to our generous Angels, Benefactors & Patrons

The Culinary Historians of Southern California acknowledges the generosity of members who have joined or renewed at the Angel, Benefactor and Patron levels. Your gift allows our organization to enhance member services and increase our support of the culinary collections of The Central Library.

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Charles Perry, Siberian Brandy
Continued from Page 1

serious gentlemen toss back *araq* with their buddies without showing the slightest sign of drunkenness. You kind of wondered why they even did it. I suspected it was a way of demonstrating manly self-control, like Greek taverna dancing, which has been called a way of saying, "Hey, if I were drunk, would I be able to do this without falling down?"

The medieval Mongols were not temperate at all. They consumed huge quantities of an *araki* distilled from *kumis*, their traditional tipple of fermented mare's milk. The Chinese were appalled by the Mongol idea of an araki party, which wasn't counted a success until the guests had vomited and passed out. The Mongols conquered a vast amount of territory in their day, but many of their rulers died in their thirties with livers the size of Sichuan, which fortunately kept them from conquering more.

The Mongols may not have been great role models, but they were effective apostles for distillation. Because of them the word for vodka is *araki* everywhere from the Udmurts (relatives of the Finns living in the Ural Mountains) to the Chukchi, neighbors of the Siberian Eskimos in the far northeast of Eurasia, even including the Ainu of northern Japan. Siberians took to the idea eagerly; throughout this area, they will seemingly distill absolutely anything they can get to ferment. Those long winter nights must be *boring*.

Nancy Zaslavsky, Program Notes:
Continued from Page 1

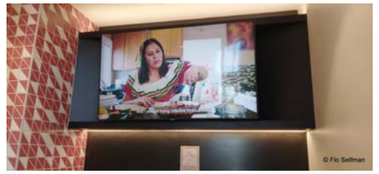
his "The Bacon Paradox: Danger and Desire in the Twentieth Century." What a cruel world. April invited us into Alex Peña's kitchen for a first hand lesson on his family's beloved "Lenten Capirotata Bread Pudding," and for the second month in a row we all craved scratch-n-stiff technology. May brought Laura Shapiro and her lecture, "What She Ate and Why I Wrote About It: Women, Food, and Biography" about six different yet famous women and told their stories by putting their food choices right up front. Darra Goldstein spoke in June on "The Kingdom of Rye: Russian Food and National Identity" from Peter the Great to today's revival of archaic techniques within Russia's growing artisanal food production, especially the country's beloved rye breads.

A friendly reminder since you're still shopping on line: Please purchase Amazon items (not only books) on AmazonSmile (***smile.amazon.com***) and make Culinary Historians of Southern California your charitable organization. There is no extra cost to you and CHSC gets a small percentage for the same products, prices, and services. Thanks to customers shopping at smile.amazon.com or using the Amazon app with AmazonSmile ON, everyday purchases make an impact. So far, AmazonSmile has donated $496.46 to CHSC, over $334 million to US charities, and over $377 million to charities worldwide.

A new reason to visit DTLA: LA Plaza Cocina

Article and photos by Flo Selfman

Although the Culinary Historians aren't meeting downtown at present, there are many great reasons to visit DTLA. Here's one of the newest: LA Plaza Cocina, the first museum in the US to explore the history and culture of Mexican food, opened in February 2022. Devoted to telling the Mesoamerican story of the cuisine's origin, LA Cocina's exhibitions and cooking classes are designed to explore how a world-renowned cuisine has evolved into a contemporary culinary phenomenon.



LA Cocina explores the variety of indigenous ingredients through exhibitions and cooking class series: Hecho con Amor: cooking and storytelling with LA's top chefs; *Platicas y Pruebas*: authors and experts, talks and tastings; *Sabor a México*: Mexican regional dishes. https://laplazacocina.org/culinary-programs/ Classes are Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings, taught in Spanish or English, and are fee-based. They are for adults, for children, or multigenerational. Offerings include food talks and tastings. Expect chefs from Mexico to present soon.

Should you visit on a quiet, sunny weekday afternoon, as I did, you may first be impressed by the massive high-ceilinged, colorfully tiled teaching kitchen, dominated by a Southbend stove and grill and Rational iCombi Pro oven. It is opposite a large island where up to sixteen eager students face a teacher. On this night, the kitchen will come alive with *Sabor a Michoácan: Tierra de Molcajete*. Individual *molcajetes* (mortar and pestles, *tejolotes*) and bright green cutting boards await the class. Students will learn about the origins of the *molcajete* (which, as many of the terms I encountered, comes from Nahuatl), how to season it, and how to prepare three authentic salsas. The instructor is Oscar Ochoa, owner, El Machete Handcrafted Chilli Sauces.

The large green-tiled work station to your left is for making tortillas.

You will spot the current exhibition: "Abuelita's Kitchen: Mexican Food Stories." Created by USC Professor Sarah Portnoy and LA Cocina director of programs and culinary arts Ximena Martin, the exhibit includes a documentary, audio stories, recipes (on shiny cards for you to take home), and artifacts from the abuelas' (grandmothers') own kitchens. Stars of the exhibit are ten local Mexican and Mexican-American grandmothers, whose kitchen wisdom includes Indigenous and Afro-Mexican tradition. They are from diverse parts of Mexico—Puebla, Yucatan, Costa Chica de Guerrero, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Mexico City, Guadalajara—and the US—Boyle Heights (mother from Torreón, Coahuila), and Santa Paula (Calif.; grandmother from Zacatecas). They reside throughout the greater LA area.

Where did they learn to cook their regional dishes? Most said from their grandmothers.

The photos and text on the wall show these women in all their varied, colorful beauty. Want to know them better? Just step back to the oven area, get a folding chair and headphones, and view a 30-minute film showing all the women gathered here in this very room earlier this year, and each interviewed individually in her own kitchen with her cookware and family members.

Each woman's story is different, but what they all share is love of cooking, and showing love to their families through recipes they learned from their mothers and grandmothers and are passing down to their own children. Margarita (Aliso Village) Lincoln Heights/Boyle Heights—mother from Torreón, Coahuila—lives in El Sereno, L.A., cooking Coliflor Lampreada), pointed out how each state in Mexico has its own cuisine. Elsa (from Cansahcab, Yucatán—now Montebello), whose recipe is Recado Negro Spice Paste, said, "We don't have blenders so we grind our own spices." María Elena (Chautengo, Costa Chica de Guerrero—now Watts), preparing Pescado a la Talla, shared how they went from a truck to an actual restaurant: María Elena's in Bell Gardens. And Merced (Santa Clara Huitziltepec, Puebla—now Boyle Heights) spoke of her pride in being part of history: helping to gather hundreds of street vendors together in a campaign to legalize street vending, allowing them to sell their wares without fear. Sarah Portnoy, PhD, a professor (teaching), Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures, American Studies and Ethnicity at USC, produced Voces de la Abuelas: Mexican Grandmothers' Food Stories. This beautiful film shows at LA Cocina through September 4, when the exhibition ends; however, I'm happy to report that it may have a life beyond this, so stay tuned!

Do visit the museum store, *LA Tiendita*, with its colorful, hand-picked selection of artisan kitchen products, cookbooks, and spices telling the diverse culinary story of Mexico. All proceeds go to supporting LA Cocina and its programs.

The Abuelas exhibition closes September 4, 2022, followed by: "Precious Water: The Legacy of Cacao," September 16, 2022—March 19, 2023. The history and culture of chocolate, the food of the gods, from its origin story in Mesoamerica to its trajectory around the world and back. Co-curated with Maite Gomez-Rejon, artbites.net

Muy sabroso!

LA Cocina's creative teams:

LA Cocina opened in February 2022. In late 2017, an advisory committee begin planning in earnest; it included James Beard Award-winners John Rivera Sedlar and Bricia Lopez, among many other chefs, restaurant owners, food suppliers, educators and more.

The interior's architecture, interiors, and lighting were designed by 64North, a Los Angeles-based design studio dedicated to collaborating innovative architecture, interiors, branding and more. The team included kitchen consulting by Myers Foodservice Design Group; mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineering by IDiaz Design; and additional interior design by RVD Associates.

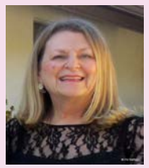
In style, LA Cocina honors the Mexican tradition of bright colors and graphics, warm naturalistic materials and textures in a contemporary setting. The space, which includes a teaching kitchen, gallery space, and a retail store, is designed in a flexible format that includes configurations serving many purposes in its 2,500 square feet.

With thanks to: Ximena Martin, director of Programs and Culinary Arts, Sarah Portnoy, PhD, a professor (teaching), Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures, American Studies and Ethnicity at USC, Abelardo de la Peña, director of Marketing and Communications Alexandra Alvarez, store manager, La Tiendita

LA Cocina

555 N. Spring St., Los Angeles, CA 90012
Open Wed.-Sun. 12 noon to 5 pm
(2-5 on Thursdays when there is a class)
Laplazacocina.org

Note: Spring St. is one block west of No. Main, where the white church and museum are



Flo Selfman is a Los Angeles-based copy editor and PR consultant. She is a board member of Culinary Historians and was CHSC's March 2021 program presenter, speaking on "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah (Shore)." She loves exploring LA, especially with a camera in her hand. www.WordsalaMode.com

Forbidden Berries (or Appetite for Distraction)

By Matt Siegel

Humans, as we've seen, like to eat a lot of strange things – pigeon pies, rendered bear fat, tiny ancestors of corn, sugar of lead, pigs sewed together with chickens, and fire-breathing peacocks – yet perhaps even stranger is our taste for chili peppers: a fruit[1] that, ecologically speaking, specifically evolved to repel us.

You see, whereas corn developed that tough outer casing to protect its seeds and other berries developed thorns, chilies developed a chemical defense mechanism in the form of capsaicin, the principal function of which is to cause predators pain.[2] The industry term for this is directed deterrence. Birds, which are natural seed dispersers and excrete seeds whole and intact, are immune to capsaicin, a biological reward for helping chilies spread and propagate. And this mutualistic relationship extends even further than just birds air-dropping seeds with piles of natural fertilizer in the form of their droppings. Explains culinary historian Maricel E. Presilla, the journey though a bird's intestinal tract not only camouflages seeds from seed-eating predators but also eliminates some seed-destroying funguses; as a result, seeds excreted by birds have nearly 400 percent better odds of surviving the wild.

> Bite into a habañero or order your food "Thai hot," and your body essentially thinks it's being attacked by a chemical weapon.

Meanwhile humans, whose mammalian teeth tend to crush and destroy seeds, making us an ecological threat to chilies, can sense capsaicin at less than one part per million. In contrast, the human threshold for sensing salt (sodium chloride) begins at about two thousand parts per million and sugar (sucrose) around five thousand. And it's not our sense of taste that's doing the work here, as is the case with things we perceive as salty, sweet, sour, bitter, or umami, but rather our trigeminal or chemical sense, which registers sensations of irritation, temperature, and touch to alert the body of potentially harmful chemicals and bacteria. In fact, the same pain sensor that alerts us to capsaicin, TRPV1, also responds to physical heat, specifically temperatures above 190 degrees Fahrenheit. So eating a pepper isn't unlike, say, being stung by a bee, licking a nine-volt battery, or burning your tongue on scalding hot coffee – all sensations intended to warn the body of exposure to harm and if necessary trigger a series of protective reflexes to mitigate the effects and prevent further exposure.

Bite into a habañero or order your food "Thai hot," and your body essentially thinks it's being attacked by a chemical weapon. Beyond the burning pain, which is supposed to compel you to reject or eject spicy food, you'll probably begin to sweat as your body attempts to flush your system; your nose will run to protect your corneas; you'll produce excess saliva to purge your mouth; and you might cough or sneeze to protect your airways – a lot of the same defense mechanisms you'd expect if you were to eat something you were allergic to or choke on a pretzel.

In contrast, foods that nature intended us to eat tend to elicit positive reflexes, such as triggering the production of stomach acid or pancreatic hormones. Explains Gary K. Beauchamp, emeritus director and president of the Montell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, "The traditional view of taste receptors is that they have to do with conscious perception and food selection," helping us differentiate between quality food sources and potentially hazardous poisons or bacteria. However, taste receptors also exist downstream in places like the gut and airways[3] to screen for criteria we're not completely conscious of (nutrients, calories, proteins) and help regulate satiation and digestion.

And this difference isn't limited to humans. Capsaicin is an effective threat deterrent almost unilaterally, from predatory insects and rodents to seed-destroying funguses. In lieu of electric fences (which are cost prohibitive and no match for elephants with nonconductive tusks), some farmers in Africa plant chilies along the barriers of their farms, mix chili powder with motor oil and smear it on fences, burn bricks of chilies and dried elephant dung, or throw condoms filled with chilies and firecrackers to keep elephants away from their crops.[4]

Capsaicin has even been used underwater to keep mussels from attaching to boat hulls, and natives of the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama allegedly drag lines of chilies behind their canoes to repel sharks – though there's little evidence this is effective, as numerous attempts by the US Navy to develop chemical shark deterrents have found that even those that are strong enough to kill sharks generally fail to deter them from eating the bait before dying.[5]

And similar uses apply to humans. In the 1960s, two professors at the University of Georgia developed pepper spray as an animal repellent, which was initially used by postal workers and meter readers to defend themselves against dogs but was quickly adopted by joggers and law enforcement for defense against other humans; mothers apply capsaicin to their breasts to initiate weaning or to children's thumbs to stop the habit of thumbsucking; and in the 1980s, some New York City transit employees sprinkled chili powder on turnstile slots in hopes of keeping teenagers from sucking out used subway tokens,[6] a practice that could net vandals up to one hundred dollars a day – at the time equivalent to about thirty hours of minimum wage.

Repeated attempts to induce a preference for chili peppers in rats, including gradually lacing their food with capsaicin, inducing sickness whenever they ate food without it, and provoking thiamine deficiency, then nursing then back to health with capsaicin in their recovery food, have failed, suggesting that rats have an innate aversion to capsaicin that disappears only upon destroying their senses. In all scenarios the rats showed a clear preference for foods that didn't burn them and an aversion to those that did, leading researchers to conclude, "One cannot fail to be impressed by the resistance shown by laboratory rats to the acquisition of a preference for chili pepper."

And neither can one fail to be impressed by the resistance shown by humans to physical pain and our own biological distress signals.

Ironically, our stubborn pursuit of chilies has taken them further than birds ever could.[7] They're now the most commonly used spice in the world, where they're grown on every continent (if we count a greenhouse in Antarctica designed to test plant cultivation technologies developed for human space exploration) and eaten daily by roughly a third of the global population, making up such staple components of regional cuisines as North African harissa, Korean gochujang, Thai sriracha, Indonesian sambal, and American Flamin' Hot Cheetos. More than six thousand years after first cultivating them, we're still spreading them like wildfire –and selectively breeding them to be even more potent, creating entirely new varieties like the Carolina Reaper, reportedly up to four hundred times as hot as jalapeños.

So clearly, our attraction to chilies wasn't just a phase; the heart wants what the heart wants – which is, apparently, frequent heartburn.

The Aztecs probably captured the inanity of this best. They revered chilies and ate them with every meal, going without them only during periods of ritual fasting (sort of the Aztec equivalent of sacrificing meat during Lent), and used them medicinally to treat everything from eye infections to labor pains. Their cure for acne? Wash your face with chili powder and hot urine. And, yet, they also used them for ritual punishment, rubbing chilies on the genitals of misbehaving children or holding their children over piles of burning chilies to choke and suffocate them with the fumes.[8]

Probably the simplest explanation is to pin things on food preservation, as chilies also happen to kill bacteria and mask the taste and odor of foods that aren't the freshest. This would explain why spicy foods tend to be more prevalent in hotter climates, where higher temperatures make food preservation more challenging, places like Central America, southern Asia, and Indonesia. And the same idea extends to the use of spices in general. When researchers at Cornell University analyzed nearly five thousand recipes from thirty-six countries, they found that the number of spices per dish increased alongside the average annual temperature of the region – and that cultures in warmer climates tended to use not just more spices in their dishes but specifically those with the strongest antibacterial potency, the average spice inhibiting around 67 percent of bacteria compared to 80 percent inhibited by chilies. (Surprisingly, sour acids such as lemon and lime juice inhibited a mere 24 percent.)

Meanwhile, people in arctic or subarctic regions tend to eat foods that are higher in fat content such as whale meat or *akutuq*, an Alaskan dish of whipped caribou fat, seal oil, and berries, often referred to as Eskimo ice cream, as well as fermented foods such as sauerkraut, fermented seal oil, or decomposed Icelandic shark meat that's been buried underground for months and marinated in lactic acid (described by Anthony Bourdain as the single worst thing he had ever put in his mouth which is significant coming from a man who has eaten Namibian warthog rectum). The fat, of course, provides energy, and the fermentation similar to capsaicin, provides another low-tech way to inhibit pathogens, yielding a lot of the same benefits of cooking (e.g., softening foods and breaking down or predigesting fats and proteins) without sacrificing valuable fuel.[9]

It could also be that eating chilies helps us cope with other types of pain, both physical and emotional, similar to the mechanisms of watching sad movies, running marathons, or scratching insect bites to the point of tissue damage – forms of self-inflicted torture that not only provide tangible distractions from real-world pains (in essence, giving us something else to cry about) but also trigger the release of feel-good chemicals that help block and suppress pain, one of the reasons distance runner experience a "runner's high."

> "It's not that we like [these experiences] despite the pain," explains Yale professor of psychology Paul Bloom. "We like them, at least in part, because of the pain."

This helps explain why capsaicin is a common ingredient in over-the-counter topical pain treatments for things like arthritis, sore muscles, and joint pain – and why the Aztecs used chilies as an anesthetic during childbirth.

As with childbirth, we tend to forget the intensity of pain from chilies once the initial sensations have faded,[10] leading us to continually burn our mouths after vowing never to do so ever again – yet another relic of evolution designed to ensure that fate of the species by encouraging individual risk. "The evolutionary advantages of this convenient amnesia are obvious," explain Terry Burnham and Jay Phelan, "and all of us who are not the first-born in our families should be thankful."

Another theory is that our habit of eating spicy food evolved as a method of peacocking, i.e., displaying bravado and masculinity in order to attract mates by showcasing an ability to protect them. Indeed, research shows a correlation between a preference for spicy foods and testosterone levels as well as personality constructs associated with the pursuit of money, sex, and social status, particularly among college-age males.

Cultural psychologist Paul Rozin, a legend in the study of human food selection and avoidance who coined the term *benign masochism* to describe our attraction to chilies and other "initially negative experiences that the body (brain) falsely interprets as threatening," similarly likens the attraction of chilies to that of roller coasters and horror movies, the idea being that we crave not just varied and complex sensations but the thrill of simulating danger and the rush of pushing ourselves to our limit.

"It's not that we like [these experiences] despite the pain," explains Yale professor of psychology Paul Bloom. "We like them, at least in part, *because* of the pain."

As Terry Burnham and Jay Phelan observe in their book *Mean Genes*, "We watch movies about rebels without a cause, not about people buying insurance." This is because we're the *product* of rebels," descended from the humans who left their caves, who tool risks and won.

Even though our jaws have softened and we've since reached the top of the food chain, where we hardly have to chew our food let along hunt and gather it, that taste for adventure – to push past our comfort level and endure the pain – is still inside us; it's how we got to the top of the food chain.

Then again, maybe the explanation is simpler; maybe we just can't resist the temptation of forbidden fruit – or, in this case, forbidden berries.

1 Although chilies meet the grocery store definition of a spice or vegetable (both culinary terms), botanically they're fruits – berries, to be specific – named after the Sanskrit pippali ("berry"), which, confusingly, is also the origin of the names of the spices long pepper and black pepper, both of which are of no relation to the chili pepper, which, also confusingly, is interchangeably written as "chili" or "chile" pepper.

2 Chilies actually contain a number of chemical compounds for this purpose, called capsaicinoids, including dihydrocapsaicin, nordihydrocapsaicin, homocapsaicin, and homodihydrocapsaicin. However, capsaicin is by far the most abundant, making up roughly 70 percent of capsaicinoids.

3 Brillat-Savarin was ahead of his time here, too, proclaiming way back in 1825, "Anyone who has been born without a tongue, or whose tongue has been cut out, still has a moderately strong sense of taste. The first instance can often be found in literature, the second has been fairly well described to me by a poor devil who tongue has been amputated by the Algerians, to punish him for having plotted with one of his fellow prisoners to break out and flee."

4 Other methods used to repel elephants from crops include cutting off their tusks with power saws to improve the efficacy of electric fencing and covering fences with beehives to release swarms of agitated African honeybees when disturbed.

5 At least one recipe for shark deterrents was developed with the help of Julia Child, who, before introducing mainstream America to French cuisine, worked for the Office of Strategic Services (the World War II equivalent of the CIA), where she was tasked with cooking up coatings to prevent sharks from accidentally bumping into and setting off underwater explosives. This is also where she met her eventual husband, intelligence officer Paul Child, who, in 1948, was transferred to the US Information Agency in France, fatefully exposing Julia (and thereby much of the world) to the joys of French cooking.

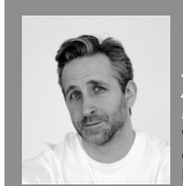
6 One would think the presence of rampant germs alone would have been deterrent enough, but seasoning the token slots wasn't effective either, as enterprising teenagers began bringing buckets of water with them to wash off the coin slots before sucking on them – then dumping the remaining water on transit employees.

7 Note that we've also taken them higher, as you can now buy so-called space peppers grown from experimental seeds that have been launched into space to test the effects of zero gravity and cosmic radiation on genetic plant mutation, which would make a great opening for a zombie-pepper film.

8 Other Aztec punishments involving pantry items included binding the hands and feet of naked children and stabbing them with the spines of agave leaves.

9 Sort of the opposite of chilies and their induced cooling effect through sweat, fermented foods might also make it easier to survive in colder climates by reducing the metabolic energy needed to chew and metabolize food, thus conserving more energy for bodily heat production.

10 As Seneca wrote in the first century, "Quae fuit durum pati meminisse dulce est" ("What was grievous to endure is sweet to remember").



Matt Siegel is the author of *The Secret History of Food: Strange but True Stories About the Origins of Everything We Eat*. He has written about food and culture for publications including *The Atlantic*, *Fast Company, and The Paris Review*. A former English professor, he lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his dog, Waffles.

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