

HOG RIVER JOURNAL

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What We Loved to Eat

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Hog River Journal asked readers to share their Connecticut-based food memories for this issue. We appreciate all the entries we received and regret that space constraints prohibit our printing them all. Here's a sampling of what you sent:

When I was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s in New Haven, my family often went out to dinner on Sundays. One of our favorite restaurants served Southern Italian food out of an attractive storefront in the Wooster Square neighborhood. The food was well made, the service was good, and, frequently, the owner would stop by the table to thank us for coming back.

The only thing missing were the other diners.

After arriving home from yet another Sunday dinner where we had the undivided attention of the sole waiter, I asked my father how the restaurant could stay in business. He laughed and told me that the food service was just a front for the illegal gambling that operated in the back.

Several years later, remembering how much I enjoyed the restaurant's veal parmigiana, I asked my father if we could eat there once again. He sadly informed me that the restaurant had been shut down, and he still missed its minestrone.

Mara Braverman, Newington

As a third-generation New Englander, my food tales should include memories of tender clams, sweet lobsters, and rich chowder. Yet my food roots follow a circuitous path to New England via Virginia and Jamaica.

In 1958, my Rhode Island-born mother, Gloria, married my father, Newton. He was not a New Englander, not even a Southerner, not American at all, but Jamaican. They moved to Bloomfield to raise their four children.

Dad arrived in Connecticut in 1952 and worked for the Hartman Tobacco Company in South Windsor and Hartford. He was used to fresh fruits and vegetables of his native Jamaica, which were a rare find in New England. What he found—bananas, oranges, grapefruit—lacked the succulent flavor he was used to.

In those early years, mom said she could barely understand his accent, let alone find out what to cook for him. So they

ate fried chicken... a lot of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and biscuits. It was what she cooked well, having learned to fry chicken from her Virginia-born grandmother. Mom was instructed to “listen to the oil. It will tell you when the chicken’s done.” It’s how she fries chicken today.

As a Jamaican man, Dad was not used to southern-style fried chicken. If he couldn’t have the fruits and vegetables of his homeland, he desperately wanted a taste of traditional island meat and side dishes. It would have taken so little to satisfy him: a small dish of ox tail, or curried goat, a mound of rice and peas.

By the time I was a child, our standard Sunday meal was a blend of Jamaican specialties and Southern cooking. The Jamaican portion included a steaming platter of ox tail, its savory meat seasoned with onions and bay leaves; and rice and peas—one of Jamaica’s national dishes—made with pink beans and long grain rice. The Southern contribution was collard greens, cooked in a broth flavored with smoked ham hocks.

There are many Jamaican dishes my mother never learned to cook, and Dad’s palate is now more American than Jamaican. Yet I’m proud to see my two cultures in perfect harmony at the Sunday table.

Kerry L. Beckford, Bloomfield

“The Metropole” used to be owned by two Polish brothers who used to serve “Texas Weiners”—the ultimate in chili dogs! I obtained the recipe for the chili sauce from The Courant in their Recipe Exchange section many years ago; the daughter of one of these guys published it. But mine never tasted exactly as I remember when I was young! I remember you used to be able to watch them make these delicious treats in their front window. On Sundays my parents would take us there to eat our fill. We’d always go back home stuffed and happy!

A great place to go for lobster was the “Down East Lobster Pool” on Wethersfield Avenue in the South End of Hartford. This was the place to go for great fried clams and reasonably priced lobsters. We’d go in and take a number, go over to the lobster pools and pick our own lobsters (and as kids we’d stick our hands in there and poke them all). Then our number would be called; we’d give our order and then find a place to sit. On Fridays (back in the day when good Catholics didn’t eat meat at all) the place would have a line out the door. Now I think it’s an Italian Soccer Club, but the unusual building is still standing!

Greg & Jeanne Ruffy, Wethersfield

This is excerpted from a longer essay submitted by the author.

My mother was a cook, a conservative and dependable Connecticut cook; a creature of habit in the kitchen. She never allowed herself to break any of her self-imposed rules of food matchmaking; pairings I saw as too common, mundane. Tossed salad inevitably involved tomatoes and was the must-have forerunner to spaghetti and meatballs, but would never share the table with pork chops; that spot was reserved for Mott’s applesauce. Everyone knows that broccoli goes only with poultry, not beef, and one bottle of Mazola corn oil is the only oil a kitchen needs—but you’d better make it a big one.

I was close to 40 when I took another look at my mother's kind of cooking. My own style of cooking had been an effort to excite, seduce, intrigue: paella, or some salty olivada, or good ripe tomatoes with basil and vinegar. But my mother's cooking had been constant, dependable, soothing and stable, simply and always good.

About a week before her death, my mother and I had lunch at her house. I'd offered to bring the food, a lobster salad, maybe. I asked her what she wanted. "I could really go for a hot dog today," she said. My 81-year-old mother, at ninety-five pounds, wanted a dog, preferably from Blackie's in Cheshire if they were open. And load it up, please. I picked up her hot dog, then drove down the road to Stop & Shop and grabbed a package of California rolls with extra wasabi for myself.

She'd set the table with two quilted pink placements. She asked, as always, if I'd like a little wine with my lunch. And as always, I said no. As we ate, she studied my sushi.

"What are those little pink slices?" she asked. "It looks like ham."

I answered with my mouth full. "It's pickled ginger. It has sort of the opposite effect of the wasabi."

"Oh, it looks nice. Is it good?"

"It's great. How's your dog?"

"Delicious," she smiled.

Jennifer Cooper, Glastonbury

Remember Honiss's?

It was next to the Old State House, at 22 State Street, beside the Isle of Safety. Started in 1845 as the Honiss Oyster House, it prided itself with serving one of Connecticut's most famous products: oysters. Going down the dusky stairs was going to seafood heaven. There was an old-fashioned dining room. If you didn't see a celebrity dining there, at least you might see many of the pictures had been signed by famous visitors.

Along with oysters, shrimp, and other great foods, one of my favorites was fried clams. When I was expecting my first child in 1957, my cravings were strong for this crispy treat. So my husband dutifully stopped by on his way home from work at the Travelers, one night, and brought me home my heart's desire. But after "tasting", those briny bivalves all day in my mind's eye, I was vastly disappointed. They were RAW! What a calamity. After overcoming my frustration and grief, I cooked them up and we did enjoy them, but of course they weren't as good as if cooked at the source.

There are still many good seafood places in Connecticut, but they don't have the style, taste and ambience of Honiss's. And oh! That oyster stew!

Gretchen Tedeschi, East Harford

Last evening my 92-year-old mother and I passed a long-ago closed restaurant that we used to like very much in the 1950s. We got to talking about our favorite hot dogs that we used to buy there. Tommie's Restaurant was open very, very late, and when I needed a break from studying I used to drive there and buy five or six "dogs with meat sauce" for all of us and my college friend who often spent weekends with us.

My brother had a way of checking the quality (he's now an engineer) by holding the bun on each end and seeing if a) the roll bent in the middle, b) the orange tinge of the sauce went onto the roll, and c) the pepper specks were clearly visible. We would sit around the table and comment on the "secret sauce recipe" and how delicious these dogs were. Eventually, the Greek man "Tommie" who owned the place wanted to sell but no one bought his place. Only he knew the recipe...it was rumored that when he was there alone, he concocted the spice mix and packaged it so the waitresses could make the sauce when he was not in. I experimented for years and years and finally came up with a reasonable facsimile and a recipe for us to follow.

As we rode by there last night, I remembered that Tommie is buried right there near the fence, overlooking his restaurant, with the secret still intact. When I arrived home I made the recipe and enjoyed it as I remembered him and his immigrant contribution to American life in a small city. I like to think he came here as a young man with his culinary heritage to help him invent such a wonderful sauce.

Tommie-Style Meat Sauce for Hot Dogs

By Lorraine French

1 tablespoon oil
1 onion, chopped fine
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 pound hamburger
¼ teaspoon cloves
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon oregano
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon allspice
1 ½ teaspoons cayenne pepper
1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 ½ teaspoons pepper
2 teaspoons cumin
1 tablespoon paprika
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
2 tablespoons chili powder
2 tablespoons tomato paste or ketchup

Fry meat, onion, and garlic for about 10 minutes, adding seasonings; keep chopping at the mixture to break it up. Add other ingredients and water. Simmer for 30-60 minutes. To thicken, add bread crumbs. Adjust seasonings to taste.