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Editor's Note:

As this newsletter goes to press, Virginia Tech is about to celebrate Women's Month. And the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Collection Committee will be sponsoring an extensive display at the Wallace Hall Gallery, entitled, "Eating Their Words: The Importance of Cookbooks in Documenting Women's History." From March 13 through March 17, the display features cookbooks, diaries, recipes, and brochures, as well as other "artifacts" pertaining to the history of food preparation throughout history. By focusing on cookbooks, researchers learn many things about women and their lives, particularly in times and in places when women did not participate in the public sphere.

Culinary history takes other forms, as well. This issue of *The Virginia Culinary Thymes* serves up a few other interesting tidbits, including a book review on an Italian cookbook written from the point of view of a silver serving spoon; a glimpse into the culinary life of Vincent van Gogh; information about culinary collections across the United States; and an analysis of the common food saying, "It's easy as pie!" The newsletter ends with a tribute to Southern chef, Edna Lewis, and a fun

section on "Food as a Fictional Character," for those who love fiction and food with nearly equal passion.

Another addition to the Web site this month is a draft bibliography of cookbooks about, or related to, Virginia cooking. If you, or anyone whom you know, own any of the books listed, please consider donating copies to the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Collection at Virginia Tech's Newman Library. Note that the bibliography is sorted alphabetically by title; sorry for any confusion about author names—I'm still learning the EndNote program and hope to produce a version of the bibliography where titles come first!

The goal of the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Collection is: "To keep alive knowledge pertaining to the culinary history of Virginia, the United States, and the world, for future generations by gathering together cookbooks and other food-related materials into an accessible collection designed for research, study, and just plain enjoyment."

Note too that call numbers in brackets follow book titles owned by Virginia Tech libraries.

~ Cindy Bertelsen, Editor

Happenings in the World of Culinary History:

Submitted by Ann Hertzler

Biscuits, Gumbo, Sweet Tea, and Bourbon Balls: Southern Food and Drink in History, Literature, and Film

The 17th Annual Natchez Literary and Cinema celebration was held February 23-26. The program was a dream for culinary historians looking at what foods and beverages tell about the South. A few highlights follow.

Speaking about African-American food ways were **Jessica Harris** (*The Welcome Table*) and **Robert Hall** (*Food Crops and the Atlantic Slave Trade*). **Gerald Pateau** with the Historic New Orleans Collection talked about tracking historic resources through bibliographies, maps, dissertations, newspapers, and plantation inventories.

John T. Edge of the Southern Foodways Association talked about how we "rally" around food to define the thing we do and care about, told about the rejections of the informative *White Trash Cooking*, and presented several DVDs on food such as BBQ.

John Egerton talked about food, hunger, and survival and subthemes of race and poverty.

A panel of experts presented informative discussion with a bit of joviality on *Drinks in the American*

South - Wine, Beer, Moonshine, Ice Tea, Coca Cola, and Mint Juleps.

Writings of Zora Neal Hurston were analyzed for the many food meanings by **Judy Hood**. Ms. Hood focused on "teacake" and gingerbread in looking at main characters' use of food in Hurston's literature.

Literary awards honoring Mississippi writers were presented to **William Ferris** (UNC) and **Noel Polk**. Each compared literary writings of Richard Wright with scholars such as Faulkner.

The previous 16 theme-based lecture series have won many awards for outstanding humanities programming. Most of the conference is free. Special dinners and receptions are ticketed. Over 500 attended - university faculty and students, community groups, high school students, and Elderhostel groups. Good food, Good Friends, Good Times describe a stimulating and informative event.



Easy as Pie (Pye)

Submitted by Jean Robbins

EASY AS PIE (WAS NOT ALWAYS EASY)

In the early years of the Jamestown settlement, the colonists craved the rich puddings and mincemeat pies of their British homeland. However, the same ingredients were not available in Virginia. The best and most delicious pies were the ingenious adaptations developed from the native foodstuff of

the area such as potatoes, pumpkins, pecans, and fox grapes. One author told the story of a creative cook preparing a mincemeat pie with a cornmeal crust and a filling of bear meat, dried pumpkin, and maple syrup.(9,2)

Sweet pies and puddings have been a favorite food in Virginia since those colonial days. Crump discussed the pie, or pye, evolution from ancient times as being complicated and confusing, beginning when pie crusts were known as “coffins or coffyns” and used as containers in which sweetened fish or meat were baked, and today, their principal function is that of a dessert. Pie making flourished in America during the 19th century when the use of more efficient sugar-processing machinery and larger plantations in Louisiana reduced sugar prices. Lard, used as shortening, made very flaky crusts. Vents cut in the top crust, allowing steam to escape, helped to prevent the crust from becoming soggy.(2,3)

So significant were pies and pastries to the American diet that by 1830 a special cabinet called the pie safe was manufactured to protect the mouth-watering goodies from flies, insects, and mice. This simple wooden cabinet had perforated tin doors for ventilation and was usually kept on the back porch; it remained in vogue until the invention of the first true ice box.(10)

The Pastry

From their English heritage, the early Virginia cooks had learned to pour a filling into a pan, then top their dish with a crust. Later they used “paste” or pastry as a decorative rim around the edge of the dish. Recipe instruction for

the cook stated to “lay a puff-paste all over the dish, pour in ingredients, and bake it.” And thus, the pie as we know it was created.(3)

Puff-paste or pastry was difficult for the inexperienced cook to make, and today, few cooks are bold enough to attempt to make puff-paste (especially since it can be purchased now). To make puff-paste, cold ingredients were used, frequent chilling of the paste was required, and the most skillful handling was necessary to achieve success. Yet in colonial days the recipes called for this lighter-than-air pastry. Perhaps an explanation of the early pie makers’ willingness to tackle the most difficult type of pastry was the cool marble slab on which they rolled the paste for “codlin pyes,” transparent tarts and sweet meat puddings.(9)

Dabney wrote of the advice for pie-crust perfection from cookbook author, Martha McCullough-Williams. She emphasized that perfection in making pastry depends on “good flour, good fat, good handling, and most especially good baking”. She urged the use of very cold shortening and water or milk.(4) Mary Randolph stressed that paste must be handled lightly and that the finished product should be as light as a feather.(6)

The Williamsburg Cookbook states that a pie, like the English garden, is enclosed, and that a tart is open and smaller; both were brought into England from the Continent. The American pie, as we know it, is a compromise between the pie and the tart; it is not baked as it so often was in England in a deep pie dish, but when it contains the Old World fruits of apple, cherry, peach, or apricot,

it is enclosed with a crust in a pie pan. Pies of New World pumpkin and pecan are open like tarts.(11)

Different Kinds of Pies

- **Double Crust Pies or Pot Pies:** Among these are meat pies. The English tradition of meat pies dates back to the Middle Ages. These pies were cooked for hours in a slow oven and topped with a rich aspic jelly and sweet spices. Vegetables, meat and herbs were all considered proper dessert materials by colonial cooks. Parsnip fritters, flavored with wine and rose water, were served with a sweet wine sauce, and a “boiled tansey” contained “Spinage, a handful of tansey and a handful of sorrel.”(9)
In the early days, a pot pie was cooked over the fire. A pot was lined with pastry and filled with alternating layers of chicken pieces, slices of ham and squares of pastry. Water was added, and then the pie was covered with a thick pastry top. When the pie was done, the top was browned with a salamander, a thick plate of iron attached to a long handle. The salamander was heated, red hot, in the fireplace and then held over the pie until the crust was browned.(3)
- **Fried Half Moon Pies:** This is a favorite kind of pie especially in Georgia, the Carolinas, and parts of Virginia; probably due to the peach and apple farming in these states. The pies are made by cooking dried peaches or apples with water until softened. Sugar is added to sweeten. Then the mixture is mashed as puree. A regular pastry is made and rolled out as for pie crust but into small circles of pastry. A layer of fruit mixture is placed on one half of the pastry and the other half is folded over. The edges are crimped together with a fork. The pie is then placed in a heavy black iron skillet which contains about ½ inch hot lard or shortening. Each side is browned and may be served hot or cold.
- **Chess Pies:** These pies have been identified with Southern cookery.(5) Egerton stated that the Chess pie did not show up in American cookbooks until the twentieth century. There are several stories as to how the name originated. One is it has to do with a pie safe or pie chest; it may have been called a chest pie at first. And the other story is the cook identified the pie as “jes pie” which later was called chess pie. There are many similar recipes with different flavors: brown sugar, chocolate, lemon. Some consider the chess pie and the pecan pie to be similar except for the nuts.
- **Puddings with Crusts:** Custard pies, or pyes, were served in England before Queen Elizabeth I. Of course, the recipes were brought with the colonists and adapted to cooking in Colonial America. Custard pies appeared to be in great demand judging from the number of colonial puddings which were baked in a “coffin”-the equivalent to our

modern pastry shell. Even as late as the early 20th century, Virginia cookbooks had more recipes for puddings baked in pastry than for actual pies.

Some classify quiche and pizza along with pies today. The quiche dates back to Medieval Europe; pizza did not come along until around 1905 in New York city. It can certainly be said that Southerners and most Americans continue to enjoy the pie as a favorite food. And yes, today, dessert making is “as easy as pie”.

PIE RECIPES (PYE RECEIPTS)



CHICKEN PYE

Put your paste in the dish (in the Winter make it with full weight of butter, and in the Summer with as much butter as the flour will take in). Lay in two large or three small chickens cut up, strew between the Layers and at top, a double handful of bits of lean bacon boiled or raw (if raw your pye will require less salt—Lay at top several large lumps of butter, about one fourth of a pound. Strew over a heaped Tablespoon of salt and an even one of fine pepper black). Fill last of

all with cold water—Put into a Dutch Oven first laying in the Bottom a little warm ashes and let it bake gradually with the Top of very moderate heat and put coals under from time to time, when nearly done increase the fire on the top to brown the paste. It will take near two hours baking. Recipe from a manuscript cookbook printed in *The Williamsburg Art of Cookery*. [TX715 .B946 1961]

SWEET POTATO PIE

2 cups mashed sweet potatoes, 1 cup sugar, 1 teaspoon salt, 3 Tablespoons butter, 2 eggs, separated, 1 teaspoon cinnamon, ¼ teaspoon ginger, 2 cups milk, 2 (9 inch) unbaked pie shells.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees F. Mix all ingredients, adding stiffly beaten egg whites last. Pour into unbaked pie shells. Bake for 20 minutes. Reset oven to 375 degrees F. and bake for 25 minutes more or until set.

Recipe from *The Smithfield Cookbook*.

APPLE PIE RECIPE

2 unbaked pie shells, 1 1/4-1 ½ cups sugar, 1/8 teaspoon salt, ¾ teaspoon cinnamon, ½ teaspoon nutmeg, 2 Tablespoons all purpose flour, 6-8 tart apples, peeled and sliced, lemon juice, ½ teaspoon

lemon rind, grated, ½ Tablespoons
butter

Preheat oven to 425 degrees F.
Mix dry ingredients together in a
large bowl. Add sliced apples and
coat. Place apple slices in pastry
crust pan, laying slices first along
the outside and then working
toward the center until bottom of
pastry is covered. Continue placing
in same way until pan is filled.
Sprinkle with lemon juice and rind
and dot with butter. Moisten edge
of bottom crust. Cover the pie
filling with the second pastry crust.
Press edges together, flute, and
slash vents in center. Bake at 425
degrees F. for 50-60 minutes until
crust is golden brown.

Recipe from *The Williamsburg
Cookbook*. [TX715 .B725 1971]

LEMON CHESS PIE

2 cups sugar, 3 Tablespoons flour,
1/8 teaspoon salt, 3 eggs, beaten, 2
Tablespoons butter, melted, ½ cup
milk, juice and grated zest of 2
lemons, 1 unbaked(9 inch) pie
shell

Combine the sugar, flour and salt
in a bowl and mix well. Stir in the
eggs and butter. Add the milk,
lemon juice and zest and mix well.
Pour into the pie shell. Bake at 325
degrees F. for 45-60 minutes or
until set.

Recipe from *Vintage Virginia
Cookbook*. [TX715 .V578 2000]

PECAN PIE

½ cup sugar, 2 Tablespoons butter,
2 eggs, beaten, ¼ teaspoon salt, 1
cup light syrup, 2 Tablespoons
flour, 1 teaspoon vanilla extract, 1
cup chopped pecans, 1 unbaked
pie shell

Cream sugar and butter. Add eggs.
Then add all the remaining
ingredients. Pour into unbaked pie
shell. Bake at 350 degrees F. for
45-50 minutes.

Recipe from the files of Jean
Robbins.

CHOCOLATE CHESS PIE

2 eggs, beaten, 5 ounces
evaporated milk, ½ stick butter,
melted, 1 teaspoon vanilla extract,
1 ½ cups sugar, 3 Tablespoons
baking cocoa, 1 unbaked pie shell
Whisk the eggs, milk, butter and
vanilla extract in a large bowl. Add
the sugar and cocoa and mix well.
Pour into the pie shell. Bake at 350
degrees F. for 30-45 minutes.

Recipe from the files of Jean
Robbins.

BLENDER CHESS PIE

1 large lemon (Remove seeds and
cut off stem and then cut into 8-12
pieces)

1 stick butter, 4 eggs, 2 ½ cups
sugar, 1 unbaked pie shell

Blend all ingredients in a blender
until smooth. Pour into unbaked

pie shell. Bake at 350 degrees F. for 40-50 minutes.
Recipe from the files of Jean Robbins.

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Easy as pie

[Editor's note: Easy as pie (or apple pie) originated in Australia around 1920. The Australian expression to be "pie at" or "pie on" something means to be very good at something (from the Maori word "pai" = good).

If you are good at something, it's easy... as pie!

Sources:

<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/index.html> and [Joe-ks.com](http://www.joe-ks.com). Thanks to JoAnn Emmel for information about the phrases.]

American Culinary Collections: Window on Early History

Submitted by Dr. Ann Hertzler and reprinted with permission from Nutrition Today. (.pdf file forthcoming)

**Bibliography of Materials
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in American Culinary History.
These books formed the basis for
the Women's Month display
running from March 13-March
17 at The Gallery at Wallace
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Starving for Art: The Hunger of



Van Gogh

Submitted by Cynthia D. Bertelsen

Ask people if they've heard of
Vincent van Gogh, and they'll say, "Oh
yeah, that crazy artist, the dude who cut
his ear off and gave it to some hooker."
True. Using a straight razor, van Gogh
sliced off part of his left ear, wrapped it
up in a white napkin, and presented it to
a prostitute named Rachel in Arles,
France.

Crazy as mudbugs on a hot
griddle. Or was he?

What if that famous incident
actually had more to do with hunger and
malnutrition than with mental illness?

"Great art is not made on a full
stomach," proclaimed British journalist
Jonathan Jones in his May 17, 2003

article in *The Guardian*, “Painting on Empty.” Jones takes his readers on a tour through history, visiting artists like Paul Gauguin, Joan Miró, and—of course—Vincent van Gogh. Miró frankly admitted that hunger was his muse: “Hunger was a great source of hallucinations. I would sit for long periods looking at the bare walls of my studio trying to capture these shapes on paper or burlap.”

As popular myth has it, many are the starving artists and writers

What many people don’t realize is that Vincent van Gogh, who died a suicide in 1890, spent most of his adult life in a state of semi-starvation.¹ This is obvious from his countless letters to his

Today, most psychiatrists would diagnose van Gogh’s mental illness as a probable form of epilepsy—specifically temporal lobe epilepsy. Others might suggest that Vincent’s illness falls more into the diagnosis of a bipolar disorder, as Kathleen Powers Erickson and others suggest.² In general, analyses of his erratic behavior focus very little, if at all, on his starved state as a possible trigger for his epileptic attacks and depressions or simply as an underlying causative factor for his somewhat unusual behavior between attacks. Few experts discuss specifically the effects of long-term starvation in relationship to van Gogh’s behavior and his art. Only one expert, Wilfred Arnold, in his *Vincent van Gogh: Chemicals, Crises, and Creativity*, examines van Gogh’s life from a rigorous all-encompassing medical point of view. Arnold concluded, among other things, that van Gogh’s habit of licking his brushes clean

throughout history whose odd personalities made them appear possessed, ridden by demons and riven by nightmares.

The timeless stereotype of the mad artist persists. For example, Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun’s novel, *Hunger*, the myth lives on in his tormented protagonist, a starving writer.

As with all stereotypes, a certain degree of truth lurks behind the generalization. brother, Theo, an art dealer in Paris, working for Goupils & Co. The majority of Vincent’s letters catalog his illnesses and his hunger—both physical and mental—in painful, even excruciating detail.

might have caused lead poisoning, since he used lead-based paints.

Looking at van Gogh’s character through the prism of hunger is intriguing. Beneath van Gogh’s sheer, overwhelming poverty was an underlying text of religious asceticism, associated with fasting, similar to that which he practiced during his time as an evangelical lay preacher in the Borinage mining area of central Belgium.³ There, he gave away most of his clothes, his belongings, and much of his food to the poor miners of the area.

Vincent told Theo in 1880, “You must not imagine that I live richly here [Brussels], for my chief food is dry bread or some potatoes or chestnuts which people sell here on the street corners, but by having a somewhat better room and by occasionally taking a somewhat better meal in a restaurant whenever I can afford it, I shall get on

very well. But for almost two years I have had a hard time in the Borinage - it was no pleasure trip, I assure you.”⁴

Examining starvation in an individual is not an easy task, for without body measurements, food recall questionnaires, or any of the other standard tools that nutritionists use to measure nutritional status, accuracy may not be attainable. However, enough tantalizing clues exist in van Gogh’s letters and in contemporary accounts to suggest that his near-chronic state of semi-starvation affected him more than has been recognized.

According to a classic study of human starvation, performed by Ancel Keys at the University of Minnesota in the 1940s, food deprivation impacts greatly on human behavior, beyond the usual marker of weight loss.⁵ A careful examination of van Gogh’s comments in his letters and a comparison of these with the results of Keys’s controlled study, and other commentaries on starvation and behavior, prove eye opening.

Just what is starvation? How do doctors and nutritionists define the process?

Starvation is the lengthy and continuous deprivation of food⁶, a condition in which the absence of food forces the body to feed on itself. Causes of starvation include famine or other food shortages, war, fasting, systemic illness, or abnormalities of the mucosal lining of the digestive system.

No matter where in the world—or when in history—the human body needs at least two things in order to

survive, to prevent and surmount starvation. Those two things are adequate nutrient intake—protein, vitamins, minerals—and sufficient energy to spare the protein in the diet and to make sure that the brain, which uses only glucose, is well supplied without metabolizing any protein intake.⁷ [Without enough calories in the diet, the body begins to catabolize—or break down—muscle mass into the energy necessary for the body to function. If enough calories exist in the diet, this breaking down of protein does not occur.]

In the 1940s, when Ancel Keys studied the effects of starvation on 36 young men, all completely healthy both mentally and physically, he worked with subjects registered as conscientious objectors during World War II, providing them with a diet very low in calories. It is unlikely that any such study could ethically be carried out today, because of restrictions on the use of human subjects in medical research. For that reason, Keys’s study is all the more important. The Keys study allows scientists and others to learn about starvation in a controlled situation, rather than by extrapolating data from the so-called “natural” starvation that results during conditions of famine and war. And since the mental health of Keys’s potential subjects was also tested via standard tools, with only the most mentally stable men allowed into the study, psychological testing eliminated the potential variable of pre-existing mental illness.

Exactly what happens physiologically in starvation, other than the expected weight loss?

First to be lost are fat deposits and large quantities of water. The liver, spleen, and muscle tissue then sustain the greatest loss of weight. The heart and brain show little loss proportionately. The starving person becomes weak and lethargic. Body temperature, pulse rate, blood pressure, and basal metabolism continue to fall as starvation progresses, and death eventually ensues, unless feeding resumes.

Essentially a starving person moves from what medical jargon terms “positive nitrogen balance” to “negative nitrogen balance.” In other words, the body begins to catabolize, or break down, protein in the muscles, as mentioned above. Then, as the body seeks an energy source for the nervous system, primarily the brain, the body begins to burn fat. Although body fat cannot be broken down to glucose and thus provide a source of “food” for the brain, by breaking down fatty acids, which make up body fat, the body can, however, convert glycerol (with its three carbons) to glucose. But this is a very insufficient and inefficient source of energy. A starving person then goes into ketosis, which essentially means that an excessive amount of ketone bodies are circulating in the blood and present in the urine. Negative aspects of long-term ketosis include kidney damage, among others.⁸ (Ketone bodies result from the breakdown of fats.) This scenario accounts for the continuing craze for low-carbohydrate diets; people go into ketosis, after losing a large amount of weight at the beginning—chiefly water weight and lean tissue mass, which is rapidly regained when re-feeding occurs, as Keys discovered in the post-starvation part his study.⁹

In the beginning, some of the typical physical symptoms of the starving subjects in Keys’s study included fatigue, muscle soreness, and hunger pangs. Then the following symptoms appeared with regularity: gastrointestinal discomfort, dizziness, decreased need for sleep, hypersensitivity to light and noise, headaches, fainting, hair loss, poor motor control/clumsiness, decreased cold tolerance, visual disturbances (inability to focus, eye aches, “spots”), auditory disturbances (ringing in the ears, one reason many give for van Gogh cutting off his ear), and paresthesia or tingling in the hands and feet. According to Keys, one of the most noticeable symptoms turned out to be extreme emaciation in the face. Keys emphasized that these symptoms illustrate the extremes to which the body will go to preserve and produce energy for the brain’s continued functioning.

A close reading of van Gogh’s letters reveals that van Gogh, at various times, endured almost exactly the same physical symptoms as did Keys’s subjects.

For example, Van Gogh suffered from dizziness, usually while out in the open painting¹⁰, a symptom that could likely been a result of his hunger and excessive intake of caffeine. And in examining van Gogh’s self-portraits, 37 paintings and four drawings, facial emaciation is quite apparent¹¹

How do the adaptive processes described by Keys affect human behavior? In other words, how does a person living with an inadequate amount of food, or in a state of outright starvation, relate to his or her world?

Keys's subjects displayed irritability and frequent outbursts of anger, consistent with behavior demonstrated by van Gogh. Three months into the study, Keys's subjects experienced a lack of ambition and self-discipline; poor concentration; moodiness and depression, followed by periods of elation; diminished ability to laugh, sneeze, or blush; and decrease in muscle tone and strength. Reduced alertness and increased clumsiness, together with impaired comprehension and judgment, tended to be problems among Keys's subjects. Van Gogh encountered problems of this sort, too.¹²

But on tests of mental agility and intellectual ability, Keys's subjects did not exhibit any changes. This could account for van Gogh's continued ability to write and paint as well as he did, even when he committed himself to the insane asylum in Saint-Rémy in 1889.

Preoccupation with food is another common characteristic of people deprived of food over a long period of time. Keys's subjects spent much time collecting recipes, reading cookbooks, and buying kitchen equipment. And van Gogh's paintings and drawings often took on the subject of starvation indirectly, attesting to his ongoing preoccupation with food. His painting, *The Potato Eaters*¹³, is only one example of food as a "model" for him. Other van Gogh paintings, chiefly of the cafés and bars of the places he lived, still lifes with food—such as the Japanese-print-inspired still life of quinces, lemons, and grapes¹⁴—coffee, and even people tilling the soil suggest that food and eating never strayed very far from his consciousness.

Anxiety, such as their preoccupation with food, and general apathy became problems among Keys's subjects. Van Gogh's doctor, Dr. Peyron, wrote that van Gogh was "a victim of terrible anxieties." And Vincent remarked in many of his letters to Theo that anxiety seemed to be a constant companion to him.¹⁵

Isolationist and withdrawal proclivities, as well as anxiety, emerged as the men in Keys's study moved further into starvation mode. Van Gogh manifested an inclination toward isolationism and withdrawal throughout his life, as he wrote to Theo: "Except for Sien [a prostitute with whom he lived for a while], her mother, and for Father, I have not seen anybody, which is indeed for the best, though the days are rather lonesome and melancholy. Involuntarily I often think how much more gloomy and lonesome things are now than, for instance, when I went to Mauve [a cousin, another artist] for the first time this winter. It stabs me to the heart and depresses me whenever I think of it, though I try to throw the whole thought overboard like useless ballast."¹⁶ And another time, Vincent said, "Often whole days pass without my speaking to anyone, except to ask for dinner or coffee. And it has been like that from the beginning. . . . But up to now the loneliness has not worried me much because I have found the brighter sun and its effect on nature so absorbing."¹⁷

In addition to isolationist leanings, sleeplessness tormented the subjects of Keys's study. Van Gogh also apparently wrestled with insomnia, we may conjecture, as so many of his paintings depict starry skies and the

nightlife of various cafés. Often he must have painted or, at the least, observed his subjects at night. In a letter from 1889, he told Theo, “What is to be feared most is insomnia, and the doctor has not spoken about it to me, nor have I spoken of it to him either. But I am fighting it myself.”¹⁸

Fatigue, and not just insomnia, plagued Keys’s subjects during the entire period of the study. Like them, Van Gogh constantly complained of fatigue and a lack of strength in his letters to Theo.¹⁹ Considering that he was a relatively young man, in his 30s at the time of his death, these complaints suggest more than just hypochondria.

Besides insomnia and fatigue, several of Keys’s subjects experienced periods of sulking, unpredictable fits of anger, and petty attacks of pique. Two of Keys’s subject even committed acts of self-mutilation. One young man deliberately let a car he was working on fall on his hand, severing three of his fingers in the process. This young man tested psychologically normal prior to the study.²⁰ Such behavior raises provoking questions about van Gogh’s own self-mutilation tendencies, similar to the outburst that led van Gogh to quarrel with Paul Gauguin and then slash off his own ear.

Moodiness and depression pepper van Gogh’s letters, too. At age 28 he had this to say about his propensity toward depression: “But I am so angry with myself now because I cannot do what I should like to do, and at such a moment one feels as if one were lying bound hand and foot at the bottom of a deep, dark well, utterly helpless.”²¹

One particularly interesting observation was the tremendous increase in coffee and tea consumption among Keys’s study subjects, something they did to keep their stomachs full. Similarly, van Gogh consumed vast amounts of coffee. At one point, he wrote that he’d had only a few crusts of dry bread and 23 cups of coffee over a four day period.²² Perhaps the coffee drinking played dual roles. Firstly, as in the high Andes, where the people use coca—a substance with stimulatory properties—to keep themselves working despite chronic hunger, van Gogh used coffee for the same reason. And for van Gogh, another role for coffee may have been the effect of the caffeine on his imagination, a hint of the visionary, almost mystical, state that his caffeine addiction stimulated in him.²³

Like the subjects in Keys’s study, van Gogh often complained of stomach problems, including nausea. One of the side effects of starvation is the breakdown of fats (resulting in ketosis, as explained above), which produces nausea. He blamed “filthy wine and greasy steaks” in Paris for some of his stomach problems.²⁴ [Excess coffee drinking and alcohol intake, in the case of his addiction to absinthe, might also have caused his stomach problems.]

Just how starved were the men in Keys’s study? The Keys study diet strove to reproduce the dietary conditions prevalent in war-torn Europe at that time. The total number of calories provided to the men in Keys’s study was 1,570 per day. Two meals a day—consisting primarily of whole-wheat bread, potatoes, grains, turnips, and cabbage—provided their only food. Meat and dairy products rarely graced

their table. The subjects continued their normal daily activities, including work.

Typical meals for van Gogh included much the same types of food, with bread and coffee predominating, and with perhaps an occasional onion or small piece of meat. Vincent remarked on eating bread and drinking coffee many times in his letters. Depending upon just how much bread he actually ate, on many days van Gogh was not even close to reaching his nutritional requirements. One pound of black bread provides approximately 1,160 calories²⁵, depending upon the type and composition of the flour and other additions to the dough. Van Gogh mentioned eating black bread, so using that as a model, on a typical “bread” day, van Gogh’s caloric intake might have reached 1,160 calories or less. A so-called normal man between the ages of 31 and 50—with an average activity level—requires 2,800 calories, in addition to a number of essential micronutrients, found primarily in vegetables, grains, nuts, and dairy products.

Van Gogh’s other major source of nourishment seems to have been wine or absinthe, which respectively provide 75 calories per 3.5 ounces and 103 calories per ounce. Ship’s biscuits, each probably yielding 25 calories and mixed with milk and eggs, which don’t provide many micronutrients, apparently formed the bulk of van Gogh’s diet from time to time.²⁶ Gifts of olives from his friends, the Ginoux family, no doubt provided him with much nourishment when he lived in Arles; he made many comments concerning Provence’s olive trees and their beauty in his letters to Theo. For example, Vincent wrote, “Oh, my dear

Theo, if you saw the olives just now...The leaves, old silver and silver turning to green against the blue. And the orange-coloured ploughed earth. It is something quite different from your idea of it in the North, the tender beauty, the distinction!”²⁷ [Olives, rich in fat, generate about 225 calories per 1/2 cup or nearly 15-20 olives.]

A surprising aftereffect of starvation surfaced once the state of starvation ended and hunger was no longer a problem for the subjects in Keys’s study. The subjects still faced problems with eating and with food in general. Van Gogh alludes to his difficulties with this problem in a letter to Theo on December 28, 1888, when he said, “I’ve discovered that my appetite has been held in check a bit too long and when I received your money I couldn’t stomach any food.”²⁸ For months after the study ended, Keys’s subjects continued to hoard food and suffer some physical discomfort after eating, including stomach cramping.

Van Gogh constantly spiced his letters with comments about food. As he said in one of his last letters to Theo, “I feel so strongly that it is the same with people as it is with wheat, if you are not sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter? –in the end you are ground between the millstones to become bread.”²⁹

In Arles, especially after he committed himself to the insane asylum in Saint-Rémy in 1888, van Gogh grew more aware of the symbiotic relationship existing between good diet and good health, or “sanity,” as he called it. At Mme. Venissac’s restaurant in Arles, he willingly paid 1 franc a day for better

food, so great was his desire to avoid another nervous attack.³⁰ Absinthe (*la fée verte*—with its seductive greenness— and alcoholism possibly played a role in Vincent’s bizarre behavior, so toward the end of his life, he tried to limit his drinking. He said, “I am coming to believe more and more that the cuisine has something to do with our ability to think and to make pictures; as for me, when my stomach bothers me it is not conducive to the success of my work.”³¹

During the last 70 days of his life, in Auvers-sur-Oise, 20 miles north of Paris, van Gogh ate well at the Auberge Ravoux.³² And at Dr. Gachet’s house, also in Auvers, he enjoyed weekly four-to-five-course meals with his homeopathic physician. Along with art, Vincent discussed good nutrition with Dr. Gachet, a specialist in nervous disorders and an amateur artist.³³

Vincent van Gogh was indeed the stereotypical starving artist. Clearly his poor eating habits contributed a great deal to his physical and mental suffering. We can’t be absolutely sure of anything without having access to Vincent himself, in the flesh, but the evidence suggests very strongly that starvation, or at least chronic hunger, played a huge role in guiding Vincent’s life. He bought paint and canvases and brushes before he bought food, so his hunger for art taking precedence over his hunger for food.³⁴

Vincent himself knew this, for he constantly commented about the choice he had to make between food and art supplies. In one of his last letters he revealed to Theo that, “I am risking my life for it [his art] and my reason has half-foundered because of it”³⁵

And the world is a better place for his making that choice.

Notes

¹ W. W. Meissner, *Vincent’s Religion: The Search for Meaning* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 33. [ND653.G7 M523 1997]

² Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At Eternity’s Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 144-146; D. Blumer, “The illness of Vincent van Gogh.” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159, no. 4 (2002): 519-26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴ Letter 138 (All van Gogh letters documenting this article exist online at: <http://webexhibits.org/vangogh/>)

⁵ Ancel Keys et al, *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1950). [QP141 .M46]

⁶ Richard H. Williams and Thomas Lathrop Stedman, *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*, 25th edition (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1990).

⁷ Thomson Corporation, “Starvation.” <http://www.chclibrary.org/micromed/00066230.html>

⁸ Other side effects of ketosis include heart palpitations, kidney stones, osteoporosis, calcium depletion, depleted glycogen stores, electrolyte imbalances, gout, dehydration, dizziness, constipation, irritability, light-headedness, fatigue, depleted mineral stores, acidosis, coma, and death.

⁹ George F. Cahill, Jr., “Survival in starvation,” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 68 (1998): 1-2.; “The Biology of Malnutrition (an online summary of the Keys study).” <http://www.nutrisci.wisc.edu/NS350/PP>; and David M. Garner, “Starvation symptoms: The effects of starvation on behavior: implications for eating disorders.” <http://river-centre.org/StarvSymt.html> (1997).

¹⁰ Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 199.

¹¹ Self-portraits, in *The Works of Van Gogh, an online exhibit*. <http://atara.net/vangogh/self-portraits/>

¹² Letter 336

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http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/p_0082.htm

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http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/p_0383.htm

¹⁵ Erickson, 137; Letters 216, W11

¹⁶ Letter 208

¹⁷ Letter 508

¹⁸ Letter 570

¹⁹ Garner, 1997. (See also note 7)

²⁰ Letters 304, 306

²¹ Letter 173

²² Letter 546

²³ Erickson, 129. Letter W04

²⁴ Letter B17

²⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, *Nutritive Value of Foods* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981).

²⁶ Letter 520

²⁷ Letter 587, Letter to Ginoux family, December 30 or 31, 1889

²⁸ Letter 442

²⁹ Letter 607

³⁰ Letter 521

³¹ Letter B17

³² Alexandra Leaf and Fred Leeman, *Van's Gogh's Table at the Auberge Ravoux* (New York: Artisan, 2001).

³³ Letter 638

³⁴ Letters 308, 310

³⁵ Letter 652

Other books about the French art scene and the food enjoyed by the artists, besides the book on van Gogh mentioned above by Alexandra Leaf and Fred Leeman, include:

Joyes, Claire. *Monet's Table: The Cooking Journals of Claude Monet*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

_____. *The Taste of Giverny: At Home with Monet and the American Impressionists*. Paris: Flammarion, 2000.

Leaf, Alexandra. *The Impressionists' Table: Recipes & Gastronomy of*

19th-Century France. New York: Rizzoli, 1994.

Naudin, Jean-Bernard, Charbonnier, Jean-Michael, and Saulnier, Jacqueline. *Renoir's Table: The Art of Living and Dining with One of the World's Greatest Impressionist Painters*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Todd, Pamela. *The Impressionists' Table: A Celebration of Regional French Food Through the Palettes of the Great Impressionists*. London: Pavilion, 1997.

Book Review:

The Silver Spoon (First English edition 2005; Italian edition first in 1950)

Submitted by Sandy Bosworth

If I happened to be a silver spoon, what would I most want to do?

In the year 2005, I'd be the name of Italy's best-selling cookbook for over fifty years!

I'd be working my way through 2000 recipes for the first time in English.

I'd understand that "cooking is synonymous with good food, good wine, and good company."

I'd follow "the rhythm of the seasons....."

I'd see that "authentic Italian dishes are very often based on just a few humble ingredients.

What makes them as tasty and delicious is that, over the centuries, Italians have discovered exactly how to achieve the perfect mix of flavors."

I'd think the chapter about "cooking terms" is fascinating.

The descriptions are short and concise.

For example ...

"Bed." A base of vegetables, salad greens, or other ingredients on which a dish is served."

"Passata." Bottled, strained tomatoes which are less concentrated than tomato paste."

"Schidionata." Birds and small chickens cooked on a spit.

As a silver spoon, I love to taste sauces. There are 43 hot sauces and 32 cold sauces listed.

My two favorite hot sauces are Saffron and Walnut. The saffron sauce is for fish, and its color is a bit like the setting sun. The only ingredients needed are: fish stock, saffron threads, butter, flour and salt.

The walnut sauce is for fresh fettuccine or boiled turnips. Those ingredients are: walnuts, olive oil, heavy cream, salt and white pepper.

My two favorite cold sauces are Aioli, easy and tasty, and Gorgonzola sauce, used over raw vegetables.

Ah! Italian Antipasti.

No spoon needed!

My particular favorites are: Tomato Bruschetta, Spinach Hearts, Stuffed Porcini Mushrooms, and Tuscan Anchovy Crostini. The flavors of garlic, onions, and herbs are unbeatable.

Pizzas!

No spoon needed!

After making the basic recipe for pizza dough, you can move on to the Fisherman's Pizza, Margherita Pizza, or Calzone. Hard choices to make in the Pizza category.

Once again, as a Silver Spoon, I'm delighted to try "Various Soups."

Personally, Gazpacho is my lifetime favorite. The book's classic recipe uses bread, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, garlic, olive oil, salt and pepper. The Zucchini Flower Soup, and Mussel Soup are full of flavor and easy to make.

I dream of enjoying these soups while sitting outside, under a tree, with the table set with a vase of colorful summer flowers, and surrounded by friends.

As a Silver Spoon, "Eating is a Serious Matter In Italy"

Try some recipes in this book, and "Buon Appetito"

The Silver Spoon, published by Phaidon Press Inc, 180 Varick Street, New York, N.Y. 10014



A Tribute to Edna Lewis

Submitted by Cynthia D. Bertelsen

A state-wide moment of silence probably won't stop the trucks on I-81, the east-west interstate highway that links the coal mines of southwest Virginia to the fishing grounds of the Chesapeake. But there should be such a pause, yes, there should be. And flags ought to fly at half-staff, too, from the capitol building in Richmond to the post office in Bristol.

Virginia recently lost one of its talented, native daughters.

Edna Lewis, chef—and granddaughter of freed slaves who helped found Freetown, Virginia—died at age 89, on February 13, 2006.

Before she wrote *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, *In Pursuit of Flavor* (**TX 715 .L66835 1988**), and co-authored that recent jewel of a book, *The Gift of Southern Cooking* (**TX 715.2.S68 L45 2003**) with chef Scott Peacock, well, Edna Lewis did many things in her long, experience-rich life, including campaigning for Franklin D. Roosevelt. She also wrote the forwards to some Southern cookbooks, including a few written by Virginia cookbook author, Angela Mulloy. And of course, many

cooking magazines featured articles about her and her cooking. *Essence*, in February 2000, ran an article about cooking seafood Edna Lewis-style (thanks to Gail McMillan for pointing out this article). *Food & Wine* carried a piece about Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock's Thanksgiving menu in the November 1998. *Woman's Day* interviewed Edna Lewis for the November 1993 issue.

But she always cooked—what Southern girl from her background didn't?

Because she cared about cooking and freshness and people, all those sorts of things, cooking brought her fame.

In today's world, where a frozen pie crust suffices, Edna Lewis insisted on making her own pie crusts, so much so that once, when she was to prepare hundreds of pies for a reception in Georgia, she lugged a hundred pounds of her own pie dough with her on the train. She made her own baking powder, too, cream of tartar and baking soda.

Her gift to us was that insistence on the fresh, the natural, the personal touch that doesn't come out of a box or a can or a jar (unless she canned it herself). Getting it right and taking care. It was all about those kinds of old-fashioned values.

Lord knows, we need more like her in our world today.

Food as a Fictional Character

The Denver Public Library recently provided its patrons with a list of novels and other "reads" on food. We've added a few titles of our own favorites.

Aphrodite: Isabelle Allende

The Barbarians are Coming: David Wong Louie

Blackberry Winter: Joanne Harris

Breadmaker's Carnival: Andrew Lindsay

Bread Alone: Judith Ryan Hendricks

Chocolat: Joanne Harris (**PR 6058.A68828 C46 1999**)

Club of Angels: Luis Fernando Verissimo

Cookie Cutter: Sterling Anthony

Crescent: Diana Abu-Jaber (**PS 3551.B895 C74 2003**)

La Cucina: Lily Prior

Dark as Night: Mark T. Conrad

Debt to Pleasure: John Lanchester (**PR 6062.A4863 D43 1996**)

Devil's Larder: Stories: Jim Crace

Discovery of Chocolate: James Runcie

Esperanza's Box of Saints: Maria Amparo Escandon

Feeding Christine: Barbara Chepaitis

Five Quarters of an Orange: Joanne Harris

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café: Fannie Flagg (**PS 3556.L26 F7 1997**)

High Bonnet: A Novel of Epicurean Adventures: Idwal Jones

House of Seven Sisters: A Novel of Food and Family: Elle Eggels

How I Gave My Heart to the Restaurant Business: Karen Hubert Allison

How to Cook a Tart: Nina Killham

Hunger: Jane Ward

Keeping House: Clara Sereni (**PQ 4879.E718 C3713 2005**)

Kitchen: Banana Yoshimoto

Like Water for Chocolate: Laura Esquivel (**PQ 7298.15.S638 C6613 1992**)

Mangoes and Quince: Carol Fields

Olivia: Judith Rossner (PS 3568.O848 O43 1994)

Passion and Affect: Laurie Colwin (**PS 3553.O4783 P3 1976**)

Passionate Epicure: Marcel Rouff

Persia Café: Melany Neilson

A Recipe for Bees: Gail Anderson-Dargatz

Recipes from the Dump: Abigail Stone (**PS 3569.T627 R43 1995**)

*Reckless Appetites: A Culinary
Romance:* Jacqueline Deval

St. Burl's Obituary: Daniel Akst

Secrets of the Tsil Café: Thomas Fox
Averill

World of Pies: Karen Stolz