

*Good
lumber camp stuff (P.V.)*

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"A COOK LOOKS IN ON THE AMERICAN KITCHEN"
BY
WAYNDLE R. JOHNSON.

When one has devoted the greater part of his adult life to the art of cookery, both as a vocation and an avocation, he will, in all likelihood, say: "There ain't no romance in the kitchen!" If he is thinking in terms of hot steamy kitchens, with its eternal rattle of pots, pans and dishes sounding like a symphony playing in the wrong key; the odors of garlic blended with vanilla, fish and the sweet smell of rising yeast dough,--confusion, sweat, tired nerves, tried patience, aching feet, and then at the end of the day going home with an empty stomach because the labors of the day with its accompanying contact with all the delicacies from the four corners of the globe has robbed him of every vestage of appetite, he begins to wonder why people have to eat; surely there must be more pleasant work in this world for mankind, such as, laying bricks, driving trucks or the easy job of setting in a bank counting money. No; When one see's the American kitchen from

that angle he is most certainly blind to any romance there-in.

There is, however, a more pleasant side to the American kitchen; a side that gives the worker the opportunity to run the complete gamut of his creative imagination. (Providing the boss is not looking.) His opportunities in this regard would make the scientist in his laboratory green with envy; for there's no limit of opportunities for the amateur artist to do his stuff in a well equipped American Kitchen; and in this regard there should be strong emphases on the American kitchen because in all the other countries of the world [↑]there is a set plan for all dishes with little variations. It is just not orthodox, that's all. Probably the reason why it is almost impossible to trace down the historical origin of some of our most commonplace American dishes today is that the originator never for once realized that he was the first to concoct that particular dish. Now, if he were a chemist or scientist he would jot down every grain of this and every drop of that, searching eternally to arrive at a certain point. His whole plan is not dictated by necessity. With the cook, and this is particularly true with the American Cook, his original dishes are created out of necessity of the particular moment. He has no set plan of approach; If, for example, he finds at the end of the last meal of the day that there was an unanticipated surplus of cooked foods on hand he would not in any sense of the word be a cook if he dumped the surplus in the garbage can. He would not last long on the

job if he sent all the profits down the sewer. His creative imagination is often called upon when there is an unanticipated shortage. There must be some easily accessible substitute that will satisfactorily fill in this gap. A good cook never falls down when such a situation arises.

An example of the ingenuity of the American Cook can be well illustrated in how the so-called Chinese dish, Chop-Suey came into being. This, however, was not a case of a shortage or using left-overs, rather it was an over-boastful Irish-American cook was called upon to back-up his concieted boastfulness. It happened in Seattle, Washington, in the late Ninties. That city was very active because it was the principle shipping point for the Alaska-Yukon gold rush. This particular cook was employed by one of the city's leading restaurantuer's,¹ Chauncy Wright. A young news-paper man by the name of Blethin thought that he would put the boastful Irishman in his proper place; his everlasting bragging that he could cook any dish that had ever been cooked before--and some that had not been cooked before. With a group of friends, Blethin dropped into Wrights and requested Gallavan, the cook, to fix all of them a dish of Chop-Suey. These were only a couple of imaginative words hatched from the brain of Blethin. Well, if he thought he had the cook with his back to the wall he soon learned that he was very much mistaken, for the cook nonchalantly grabbed a stalk of

1: Col. Blethin, owner of the Seattle Times died Nov.3, 1941.

celery some onions, veal, soy sauce, blended them together and cooked them in a sauce. To add a little of the Oriental touch he threw in a bowl of steamed rice and a cup of green tea. While he was serving them he kept talking about the time when he was working in Singapore and was called upon to make hundreds of gallons of Chop-Suey every day. Needless to say that around that dish an American Industry came into being, the Chinese-American Restaurant and the Oriental-foods canning industry. Chop-Suey was not introduced into China until about 1910 by ~~af~~ all things, a Jewish-American discharged soldier who later became a millionaire from his exclusive peanut and pop-corn concessions in Shanghai. There have been so many variations and improvements to this dish that it is doubtful that Gallavan would identify it as a child of his own creation. Another example of the ingenuity of the American cook that has made two southern Californians very wealthy men and often causes the writer much disgust because he was blind to its great possibilities. Who first originated the idea it is doubtful if anyone knows. For several years it has been the custom on American merchant ships for the cook to bone-out all the tough cuts of a side of beef and then hang these cuts in the refrigerator and allow to freeze solid. After they are in this frozen condition he takes them and slices them paper thin; laying each slice in perfect order on the slices previously sliced. When he has enough slices in this order to make the required thickness of a steak he puts

the pile aside to thaw-out in normal temperture. After they thaw they cling together as though they were in one whole piece, and when cooked they are as tender as tenderloin. To-day you can buy these same steaks on the market --- and you pay a premium for them. They are known as CHIPPED steaks. Meat Packers pay a royalty for the use of this idea.

You may be a good cook in Alabama but you're only a dishwasher in Montana and vice versa. It is doubtful that there is any other single nation in the world where the cuisine varies so much as it does in the United States. What would the average Montanan think if he were to set down to a breakfast of Baked Beans, Brown Bread, Black Coffee and Pumpkin Pie. Well, if he was working in a Maine lumber camp that would be a fair sample of his breakfast. If he don't like this kind of a breakfast he can move accross the continent and try his luck in Ket-chikan, Alaska; There he could enjoy a breakfast of boiled Cod-fish tongues and sounds, boiled potatoes in their jackets, melted butter, or, it may be boiled salmon bellies or finnan of haddie. After a fill of fish he can jump over into the Ham and Eggs belt which begins in Colorado and runs through to the Atlantic. Should he travel left, to the north there would be pan-cakes with maple syrup as a side dish, however, if he chose the southern route, to the right, it would probably be Cracklin' corn-bread, Hominy grits and sorghum molassas plus some of the finest brewed coffee in the world. For added measure he could drop off in one of the small

towns in southern Louisiana and have a plate of baked oysters so highly seasoned with tobasco sauce that before he has completed his meal he will be wondering if he is not on a tour through Hades. However, man does not have to travel all over America to find these varities; Los Angeles, California supply's them all. That is because Los Angeles is made up with a population from all over America. All the fore-going covers pretty much of America except Montana and its neighbors. To the cook who is looking for the easy job, Montana, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota and Minnesota is a virtual paradise. But for the Imaginative and creative cook; it is a sorry place indeed. I have often heard among the culinary fraternity in other parts of the country; "that the people of the North-West do not know how to eat." Of course there are exceptions to this rule in isolated spots of this section, Butte, Montana being one of them, Wallace and Kellogg, Idaho are others. The reasons for this will be explained later in this narrative.

Just why is Montana and the North-West the easiest section for cooks? It is because any fair cook can turn out a satisfactory meal with no other seasoning than salt; this does not mean that there are no other seasonings in the kitchen, however, it does mean that the spices used per captia in Montana cookery is about 40% of that of Louisiana and Mississippi. There are historical reasons for this. In Mississippi and Louisiana, and their southern neighbors the tastes of the people have been handed down by the Latan followers of De Soto, La Fette and others.

The colonizers being principally Irish, English, Scotch, French and Spanish. Among the early Americans of English ancestry there was a major portion of them sea-farers. In their travels they were heavy traders in spices; always they were returning from the far away places of the globe bringing back spices from their ports of call. Now, you may still be wondering; just where Montana fits into the gastronomic scheme. It is, that it was colonized by people from other environs, principally from Scandinavia, and of course, a smattering of settlers from Civil-war torn Missouri in the 1860's. The Scandinavians never were a people who cared for spices, it thinned out their Nordic blood too much to cope with the rigors of the Northern climate. They were heavy eaters of heavy starchy foods, fish and meat. As a Swede once told me: "Cook my fish any way you want to yoost so long as you boil it." With few exceptions such as cured meats and fish there is little seasoning used among the Scandinavians. I do not wish to imply that all Scandinavian meals are flat and tasteless, their smorgasbord spreads are ample proof that such is not the case. It must be remembered, however, that smorgasbord is no more a regular diet with the Scandinavians than is Dutch lunch with beer is the regular diet with the rest of America. The strong Nordic influence in Montana and the North-West has been the greatest single influence in charting the eating habits of its inhabitants. Now, getting back to Butte, Montana and why it has been able to withstand absorption into the general scheme of the rest of the North-West. To begin with; most of the Nordics earned their livelihood by working on Rail-Road construction gangs,

Lumber camps, Ranching, General Dairying and farming. Man's place was on water or land where he would never be out of sight of the moon and sun. In their logical way of reasoning the only thing that belonged under the ground was gophers, snakes and corpse. Butte being a one-industry city and that industry operated two thousand feet under the earth certainly held no allure for the hearty Viking. If the sand-hog Irishman, the Serb with his mace, the Slav with his garlic, Italians and olive oil, Hungarians and paprika, Greeks and oregano want to match wits with the mole that's his business; he'll remain faithful to Paul Bunyan and TIMBER!!!. Taking into consideration the fact that in the last few years that there has been a large increase in the Nordic population in Butte; Finlanders contributing the greater share of this group, that group has a great tendency to remain as a unit rather than to penetrate into the population of the whole of the city. It is one noteworthy fact that the eating habits of Butte has filtered more into the Nordic's diet than has the Nordic cuisine influenced the general eating habits of Butte. Any of the Finn Boarding-house's should prove this point. The fact that there is a large floating population in Butte places it almost in the same category as that of Los Angeles. That, no doubt, is the reason that Butte has a greater appeal to the cook, and the man with the cosmopolitan tastes than any other city in the state.

A few years ago the writer was working in a lumber camp near Plains, Montana. He received a gracious welcome; his name meant something to these lumber-jacks.---(The name being Johnson, and hav-

ing light colored hair and a fair complection, he had all the earmarks of being a son of some mythological Norse God. The truth of the matter is that he is not a Nordic; he is an American whose ancestry can be traced back to more than 250 years in America, and has decended from the Irish, Scotch, English, Welsh and French; and his ancestors spelled the name: J O H N S T O N E.) When he arrived at the camp he found that the trouble with the previous cook was that he took his drinks at the wrong time of the day. The crew was liable to have Corned beef on Sunday and Chicken on Wednesday. The writer, being very anxious to please and to make up for his predecessor's short-commings; went to the trouble of making French Dough-nuts, Belgian Baked potatoes, Prime Rib of Beef, rare, (as it should be) Buttered asparagas tips and corn muffins. Now, any place else but the North-West that would be considered an excellent meal and the cook would have received many fine compliments from the crew. Because there seemed to be a growing indifference in their attitude toward him he blamed the whole thing onto the fact that they had been used to better fare so he tried all the harder to turn out more palatable meals only to finnally be confronted with antagonism for his efforts. The only thing that seemed to please them was his sour-dough hot-cakes and French toast. One morning he changed the breakfast bill and served cottage fried potatoes, southern fried ham with natural sauce and shirred eggs. When the meal was about half compl^eted the Superentendent came roaring into the kitchen and started belloring: "Gott Damnit to Hell, Kuuk, why in the Hell dont you

give us something thats fit to eat, Every day its dem Gott Damned potatoes kuuked in fat, Dont you ever use water for anything but to mop the floor? Give us some ^{Potatoes} ~~food~~ wit de yakets on and some meat thats boiled --- and burn that Gott Damn garlic. We want potatoes wit de yakets on, do you understand?" The cook's reply to this bombast was "You'd better send to Missoula and get some punk that learned his trade watering elephants at the circus to feed a bunch of animals around this lay-out for I am pulling out tonight."

Shortly after leaving the lumber-jacks with their boiled beef and boiled potatoes, he secured employment as a Mess Steward in a C.C.C. Camp near Whitehall, Montana. This camp consisted of a group of young men from the states of Indiana, West Virginia and Kentucky. They were sure one hungry lot. Due to mismanagement of of previous Mess Officer's and Mess Steward's, their mess had a deficit of about \$800.00. It was the Mess Stewards job to eliminate that deficit and at the same time turn out wholesome meals. It was his attitude that a full garbage ^{CAN} was wasted food, that if it had been properly prepared that it would have been consumed instead of going to fatten the hogs.---That what went into the garbage can had to be supplimented with something else which was a heavy drain on the ration allowance. Therefore he proceeded to first; Instruct the amateur cooks on their responsibility, and second: To study the market daily and buy only that which was most reasonable in price in large lots to carry over when the market went up. To one who has had experience in this type of buying ^{KNOWS} that the price of all food-stuffs ^{NOT} are high priced at the same time. He was not long in learning

that he could not expect any co-operation from his immediate superiors coupled with a deep resentment of the crew that one of their own fellowmen had not been promoted to the post, especially since they gave the job to, of all things, a Sheep-herder. (Montanan) In the face of such trying conditions the new Steward called on every trick of the trade and some that in no sense could be considered as relative to a mess, in an effort to operate the mess within the allowed budget. One morning, he went into the kitchen, and to his surprise he found one of his big raw-boned Kentucky cooks throwing pound cubes of butter into the stove to make the fire burn better, while at the same time the crew were getting butter with only seven meals a week. When he remonstrated with the cook the crew sided with him against the Steward and went on a ~~###~~ set-down strike until the cook was re-instated.

French toast, is generally liked as an excellent breakfast anywhere in America. One Sunday morning the Mess Steward instructed the cooks on how to prepare it. Instead of receiving compliments he almost caused a riot. After the crew were seated and the French Toast was served there begin to be an ominous rumbling among them. Finally one of them jumped up from the table and came over toward the Steward and started in bellowing:--- "Say, you God Damned Belly Robbin' Sheepherder, I'm goin' a cut yer gizzard out and ram it down your throat." Holding up his plate before the rest of the crew, he shouted; "Look! The lousy cheap gut-robber figures that we are so damned dumb that instead

of givin' us aigs that he can soak up some of his old stale bread and push it off on us." He then turned and threw his plate at the Steward; pandemonium broke loose and plates, cups, knives and syrup pitchers were heaved at the kitchen. After that eposode the Steward asked for a transfer to an organization of so-called shepherders. The point in telling this story is to demonstrate the difference of the eating habits of Americans from different sections of the United States. Had the Steward been smart and served these young men from the Cumberlands the same style of food that he had served the lumber-jacks he would have succeeded in his job; These men wanted Corn bread and fried potatoes, they would have prefered boiled navy beans to roast beef. And if ^{HE} you had served them baked potatoes or boiled potatoes in their jackets they would have complained that the kitchen staff was too lazy to peel them.

When one has served food to the public for several years he will, if he is observant, see many strange things in the habits of the American eater---and sometimes in the American cook. Some of our most capable cooks have been guilty of making blunders that any sensible person could never understand. One such blunder happened in Missoula, Montana a few years ago. In that city there is one of the best cooks in the business, Harold Kinsey, is his name. He and the writer worked together in 1929 on the Motor-Ship, West Cussata, plying between the west coast of the United States and the Union of South Africa. After leaving the sea, Kinsey moved to Missoula and secured employment at the "Oxford" where he has been

ever since. The late Asa Duncan, one of the Judges in the 4th Judicial District, often dropped into the Oxford for breakfast. Due to his ill health he could be pretty grouchy when he was not feeling well. One morning he requested a bowl of Buttered milk toast. When the waiter transmitted the order to Kinsey he used the same words as did Judge Duncan instead of using the term; "Grave-yard Stew" which is understood by cooks all over the country as Milk toast. Kinsey knew that Judge Duncan was rather eccentric in his eating habits, so he proceeded to prepare the dish as ordered. Well, When the Judge received his order and took the first mouthful, he started spitting and spluttering, and hollering; "What do you call this stuff you are trying to feed me?" Kinsey came up and asked what was wrong with it. The Judge said; "Taste it for yourself and then tell me what it is." Kinsey tasted it and replied that he could not see anything wrong with it, that it was just what the Judge had ordered. The Judge getting angrier all the time, shouted that he had never ordered any such kind a dish, and wanted to know what it was. Kinsey, said, "Listen, Judge, When I took your order I thought that that was a funny way to eat toast but I figured you knew what you wanted. I toasted the bread and then boiled a pint of "BUTTERMILK, and there you have it." Anyone knowing Judge Duncan would have expected him to start throwing his crutch at the cook. Instead, the old gentleman burst out laughing, and it is doubtful if he had laughed so well in years.

Some of the peculiarities of individual American eaters are astounding. Briefly stated, the following are some of the unusual things that the writer has witnessed.

The man in Kansas City, Mo. who used three tea-spoons of Sugar in a bowl of Chilli Con-Carne. The lady in Toledo, Ohio who ate Sardines with Mince-Meat Pie. Another lady in Pyotte, Texas who used a teaspoonful of Hot Tobasco Sauce in her coffee instead of cream or sugar. The tailor in Missoula who ate raw liver, A Ships Captain that would order Garlic with the kernals strung out on tooth-picks that looked like the tail of a rattle snake, and would eat one of the kernals with each mouth-ful of food. Another ships Captain who wanted his steaks fried so well that they would be brittle like a soda cracker yet he would eat raw peeled potatoes like eating an apple. Then there is the lady in Great Falls, Mont. who takes green bell peppers and cooks them into a pie with the same ingredients that she would use for any other fruit pie. One of the most peculiar dishes is the one ate by a man in Tulsa, Oklahoma, He would have his eggs poached in vinegar. Now, anyone who has ever cooked an egg in vinegar knows that they will be like rubber, they are so elastic that if stretched they will come back in place when released; in fact that is one of the ways of putting an egg in a milk bottle---by boiling it in Vinegar, squeezing it into the bottle and when it cools it is hard. Watching this man eat his poached eggs was much like watching some one setting before a plate of Wrigleys Chewing Gum, and relishing it like it was one of the best meals in his life.

If one is ever called on to do mass cooking for Montanans he will discover that he will win their favor much quicker if he will serve them roast beef instead of fried oysters. They will frown on Lobster a la Newburg and smile on veal stew. Sugar is more important than salt. Among the younger generation they are very reluctant toward eating anything that never had at home. The cook will learn that the most thankless group is the well fed group; That Rail-Road workers are the hardest to please and that miners' are the easiest to please. That a strange paradox exists among the ranching element in that they welcome the cooking of a man cook out on the range but, are skeptical of man's cooking in other places. Lots of fried chicken, lots of potatoes, lots of beef veal and mutton, and lots of pastry, fruits and vegetables but go easy on the stewed prunes, peaches and apricots. Give the average Montanan that kind of food and you will win your spurs as being "One damned good cook".