

TASTE

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THE BUFFALO NEWS

Wednesday, August 28, 2013



Why do waiters keep grinding pepper?

By L.V. ANDERSON
SLATE

NEW YORK – After exploring the debate over whether restaurants should always have salt shakers on their tables, we at Slate wondered: What's the deal with waiters who grind black pepper directly from a pepper mill onto your plate? Black pepper isn't a rare or expensive ingredient, and it's not so perishable that it needs to be ground seconds before consumption. Plus, as Sara Dickerman has argued in Slate, pepper doesn't complement everything – unlike salt, it's not a universal flavor enhancer, and it can easily overpower subtler flavors. So where does this curiously popular tableside service come from?

It probably started in the early 20th century. The pepper mill wasn't even invented until the second half of the 19th century – Peugeot (yes, that Peugeot) began manufacturing its first model in 1874. By the turn of the century, the pepper mill was making its way to refined American tables: A 1903 publication called "The Steward's Handbook and Guide to Party Catering" referred to the French-inspired "fashion of much silver bric-a-brac" on tables at dinner parties, including a salt cellar for each guest and a single pepper mill to be controlled by the host. This imbalance might have had more to do with timid American palates than anything else – at the time, heavily spiced foods were frowned upon by trendsetters – but it presages the trend of pepper-mill-wielding restaurant servers.

In the 1910s, America's restaurant scene began changing in several significant ways, as Andrew Haley chronicles in "Turning the Tables." In the 19th century, there had been two kinds of restaurants: low-end places for working men, which were cheap, sold mediocre food and put no emphasis on service, and high-end French restaurants, staffed by impeccably trained waiters. At a place like this, each waiter would be assigned to a single table each night and would be expected to hover near the table for the entire meal to respond to patrons' needs. Waiters at this time had a lot of power over the quality of a customer's meal: Food was served à la carte, and servers determined

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Pick of the pierogi

IT SEEMED EASY FOR SOMEONE OF POLISH HERITAGE, BUT JUDGING A PIEROGI COMPETITION WAS A CHALLENGE



Photos by Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Scenes from "Buffalo's Best Pierogi" competition, at top, clockwise: poppyseed coconut by Dorothy Cepuchowski; State Sen. Tim Kennedy, a judge; Philly cheesesteak entry; judge Lynn Rosati; a hot stuffed pepper sample; and judge Jeremy Kaczynski. Above, from left: the prize-winning Hawaiian delight by Nancy Koniczny; firefighter Jason Crowe, a judge; and a bacon cheddar jalapeno by Chris Klinshaw.

By CHARITY VOGEL / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

For somebody with Polish blood in her veins, this should have been the easiest gig ever. Judge a pierogi competition? Piece of cake. In our house, we make well over 100 pierogi for Christmas alone. I learned how to roll the dough and stuff it with filling at the hands of my grandmother, Stanislaw, known as Estelle – her husband, my grandfather Aloysius, ran a well-known tavern on the city's East Side. So, really, pierogi deliberation seemed

like no big lift.

Right? Not so fast. The sixth annual "Buffalo's Best Pierogi" competition, held recently at the Dozynki festival at Corpus Christi Catholic Church on Clark Street, proved more challenging than expected.

One of a small group of judges, I sat at a table with other hungry folks, plastic forks poised, water bottles at the ready. Then the plates began to arrive.

Across the table, State Sen. Tim Kennedy – who admitted to buying frozen

pierogi, which was actually rather brave considering the setting – sampled and marked a ballot, as did a former winner of this contest, who said the tenderness of the dough was key.

Judging with me was my husband, a fellow News reporter who also has Polish-American ancestors. (Would he maintain that nothing, but *nothing*, could measure up to his wife's homemade version? I wondered.)

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'Silver Palate' cookbooks struck gold for Lukins

By BILL DALEY
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Sheila Lukins was a person who could be introduced successfully to strangers with just two words: chicken Marbella. This dish, from 1982's "The Silver Palate Cookbook," became a go-to recipe for two generations of home cooks. It epitomized her food philosophy: bold flavors, accessible ingredients, easy cooking.

Lukins would go on to author or co-author seven more popular cookbooks and serve for 23 years as food editor of Parade, a Sunday magazine distributed in many of the nation's newspapers, including The Buffalo News, before her death in 2009 at age 66 from brain cancer.

"She changed the way everyday Americans cooked every day," wrote Dorie Greenspan, the baker and cookbook author, in an email from Paris. "I think of 'The Silver Palate Cookbook' as the first cookbook that helped home cooks use the ingredients that chefs were using, ingredients that today seem commonplace, but that were then new and exciting. The book put balsamic vinegar in kitchen cupboards, pesto in weekday pastas and chicken Marbella in every pot."

Before "The Silver Palate Cookbook," co-authored with Julee Rosso (and with Michael McLaughlin), there was The Silver Palate, a gourmet takeout shop launched by the women in 1977 on New York's Upper West Side. And



before that? "Two women's personal desperation," recalled Lukins and Rosso in their foreword to the book.

Trying to be all a woman could be in the 1970s – and that definition grew exponentially through the decade – and do that while preparing "creative, well-balanced meals daily and an occasional dinner party at home" was proving too much for

them – and Lukins was a caterer. If this was happening to them, they reasoned, it had to be happening to others. That insight was confirmed when customers mobbed The Silver Palate on opening day.

"We knew we were doing exactly what we wanted to do, and people liked it," Lukins and Rosso recalled in "The Silver Palate Cookbook," which itself proved that their "big ideas" – and flavors – could translate to a national scale.

"The Silver Palate Cookbook" became one of the best-selling cookbooks of all time. Some 2.7 million copies are now in print, according to Suzanne Rafer, executive editor, director of cookbooks for Workman Publishing in New York City.

"It was a cookbook you wanted to read," Rafer says. "They made a lot of people happy – and well fed."

Lukins and Rosso followed up with 1985's "The Silver Palate Good Times Cookbook" and "The New Basics Cookbook" in 1989. Both sold millions of copies.

The Silver Palate was an estimated \$10 million-a-year business by 1985, the Los Angeles Times recalled in Lukins' obituary. The pair sold the business in 1988 and began to pursue solo projects. A few years later, there was a widely publicized falling-out. But by the time Lukins and Rosso teamed up in 2007 to launch the spiffed-up 25th anniversary edition of "The Silver Palate Cookbook," the feud was apparently forgotten.

