

Stocking the Beard Larder—A Seasonal Pleasure

Stocking our house for winter was an operation on a scale that would have been appropriate to the hotel business. Mother had really never left the hotel in her own mind, and I can assure you that once she had the larder full, all of Portland could have dropped by for a meal.

Summer and fall the Mason and Economy jars were in constant use. Let was called in at times to assist, and other friends of Mother's were on hand for particular canning events. Once again Mother had a staff at her disposal. The amount of work that was put in from June through October was staggering, but Mother thought it was a disgrace not to fill the cellar with the good things of life, and by the beginning of November a tour of our winter's food supply was an impressive experience.

She would not dream in those years of using any commercially canned vegetables, except an occasional

tin of French peas or mushrooms or truffles. So the first thing put down was apt to be asparagus—but not the green variety, and this was an absolute rule. It was the white we canned, and during the season asparagus was often shipped to us from California in lots of several cases... During the period of asparagus canning, restraint and patience were summoned up by each member of the household, for it was evident that a prima donna was onstage, determined to score a success with every palate.

Next in line for canning were certainly strawberries. And the Marshall or the Everbearing were all that were allowed into the house. Special growers in the nearby countryside were commissioned to have the berries picked for a certain week. Then out came the great brass preserving kettle. A sugar-and-water syrup was made, and the cleaned berries were popped into the syrup with additional sugar and watched with unwavering attention till they were just right. As a result of fine berries and careful timing, these became legendary for their firmness, wholeness and flavor.

Raspberries had their turn soon after this and were done in much the same fashion, but in greater quantity because they were used in so many tarts and desserts as a flavoring agent.

Apricots were sometimes worked into the schedule before we went off to the beach in June or July. These were often combined with canned pineapple—one of the rare concessions

to a can my mother would make. "I've traveled in the tropics," she would say, "and had ripe pineapple brought to my cabin every morning for breakfast. And no pineapple that reached Portland has ever tasted like that..."

At the beach we turned to the wild rather than to the farmer. Wild blue huckleberries were canned for use in pies and tarts. Many people used the wild salal berries for jelly, but my mother felt they required so much sugar that the taste of the berry was obscured. But the wild blackberries or brambles were another story. For weeks before they were ripe we reconnoitered for the best patches, and as soon as they were ready, the raid began. Family, guests and all were set to work gathering berries (and some brutal scratches). The jam was made on the beach stove and bottled and stored, to be carried home in September. And it was well worth the trouble. Sometimes there were enough wild strawberries to provide a few jars of elegantly flavored jam, and



The Young James Beard
Illustration by Stephen Leflar

done myself in the last ten or twelve years.

There was always a tremendous show of tempers in the house when we had duck. I liked mine cooked rare with a little onion and parsley inside. Mother liked hers not so rare with the simplest seasoning of parsley, salt and pepper. My father said that rare duck was for savages and insisted on having his stuffed and braised till it was thoroughly cooked. Naturally, out of sheer spite, Mother always gave him the oldest birds and refused to taste one of them. But Father was happy: the ducks were tender and deliciously savory, for the stuffing contained duck liver, onion or shallots, crumbs and either sage or thyme, my father's two favorite seasonings. Since those days I have learned several other ways of doing older duck, aside from a braised dish and a salmi, and I find their flavor totally captivating...

We always had one or two duck dinner parties a year, and then my father and all of us had to eat it the same way—cooked to my mother's taste. The menu would usually start with an old favorite of hers, turtle soup, which was followed by the ducks and her own version of polenta, cut into squares and browned in butter. There was never wild rice. For some reason we all hated it, and the bias remains with me still. I feel it is far overrated and appeals to people largely because it's expensive. It has no delicacy but rather a crude and overpoweringly strong flavor, and the more I think about it, the more I believe it is fit only for the birds, for whom it was probably meant anyway in the overall plan of the universe!

The crispness of the polenta squares made a superbly good contrast with the duck, and also we often had tiny onions—or good turnips, when they were in season—steamed in butter. Apple compote, not sauce—a bow to England again—was often passed with the duck, or sometimes currant jelly. Mother never realized how the flavor of currant ruined the palate for the accompanying wine. She was not, I'm afraid, as sensitive to wines as she was to food. She served wine with some dinners and no wine with others, as the mood struck her. Father, on the other hand, had more flair for wine and enjoyed a good one.

The dessert with duck was either an orange soufflé, made in the double boiler, or a Spanish cream. Often there would be a cheese course and coffee. Dessert was never a forte of Mother's. It was seldom served when we were alone, except for fresh fruit in season and preserved and cooked fruit. For guests there might be a Bavarian cream, a soufflé, sometimes apple charlotte, as often as possible Let's fabulous charlotte russe, and during the holiday season simple tarts and pies...

Let's Apple Charlotte

For 6 persons peel and cut into sixths 8 greenings or crisp Gravenstein apples. Cover them and steam them in 6 tablespoons butter to which you have added 2 teaspoons vanilla, stirring occasionally till the apples are soft but not mushy. Taste them for sweetness and add sugar accordingly. I seldom find it necessary.

Fry 12 to 18 thin slices white bread, from which the crusts have been removed, in butter till they are brown and crispy. Line the bottom and sides of a mold with the toast, overlapping the slices to make a practically leakproof lining. Fill it with the apple mixture and top the apples with more fried toast. Bake the charlotte at 350° for 20 to 25 minutes. Unmold it and serve it while it is warm with heavy cream or with whipped cream.

Sometimes Let would add some grated orange or lemon rind and a touch of cognac for a change. I have also done it successfully with the addition of sultana raisins and some good Calvados.

When there was good pheasant, special friends were invited to a rather informal gathering. We had a way with pheasant-sautéed in butter, *flambé* with cognac, and served with a sauce made with cream, the pan juices and the giblets chopped fine. This was the most delicious pheasant I have ever eaten. It was moist, tender and sensationally good. Pheasant always called for perfectly mashed potatoes, a garnish of watercress, if possible, and braised celery or some of Mother's special asparagus, served separately. To start the menu there was usually a clear soup, and to finish, for some reason, we invariably had pears baked in brown sugar with cloves and a little rum added to them. They were winter pears, full-flavored and exquisitely rich with syrup.

Sometimes this dessert was varied with a little ginger or ginger syrup from the large crocks of preserved ginger we kept on hand. With the pears went small sugar cookies or shortbread cookies, which Let made and which later on became a specialty of my mother's...

Older pheasants were done for the family alone, and perhaps one close friend. These were braised with our farmer's homemade sauerkraut and either apple cider or white wine and with bits of garlic sausage scattered through the sauerkraut, all somewhat in the Alsatian fashion. This was a superlative dish when eaten with boiled potatoes and pickled prunes, canned during the harvest season.

Our Wonderful Pheasant with Sauerkraut

This is best made with slightly older pheasant. Quarter two pheasants and brown them lightly in 4 ounces (1 stick) butter, turning them several times to color them evenly. Salt and pepper them to taste.

Wash 3 pounds sauerkraut well and put it on to cook with 2 cups white wine and several generous grindings of the pepper mill. When it boils, turn the heat down and simmer it for 1 hour.

Poach 1 large garlic sausage or several well-seasoned Italian sausages in water for 2 minutes. Cool the sausage and, if you are using the large one, skin it.

Remove the pheasant pieces from the browning pan. Line a large baking dish with salt pork slices and make a bed of sauerkraut. On it arrange the pieces of pheasant and some slices of garlic sausage. Cover them well with wine. Cover the casserole and bake it at 350° 30 to 45 minutes or until the pheasant is tender.

Serve the pheasant with mashed potatoes or with a chestnut purée, or even with squares of fried hominy.

A light Alsatian Riesling is delightful for making this dish and for drinking with it.

Venison was not a great favorite with us, although I was very happy when we had the luck to receive some jerked venison. If properly prepared and sliced, it has a texture and flavor not unlike the famous *Viande sèche* of the Swiss. Mother felt that venison which had to be marinated and cooked a long time in wine and spices wasn't worth the trouble, and I am inclined to agree. If, on the other hand, we had fresh chops or filets or an occasional saddle, that was another matter. These cuts were prepared with herbs and spices and some red wine and roasted rare or sautéed rare. A fine dish it was, which we enjoyed thoroughly but never offered to guests.

When we had teal, this also was reserved for the household. These tiny members of the duck family are devastatingly good when roasted simply and quickly-basted with butter and seasoned only with salt and pepper—and, like squab, eaten with the fingers. As an accompaniment we often ate braised celery or tender, raw celery, and potatoes cooked in the oven with broth. Years later I learned about a celery salad from a very great cook, which is perfection with this type of meal. Several years ago when I was staying in Yucatan I had teal served to me; it migrates there from the Northwest. It was the most sentimental meal I ever had eaten, and I relished each bite. In France one occasionally finds teal. It is called the sarcelle, and is as good there as it was in Oregon in my youth.

Mother's salmi was famous with the women friends whom she entertained from time to time. During the holiday season she would invite some of these friends over to "spend the day," as she put it, and when they arrived, she would arrange to be busy working on candied fruits for a cake or for mincemeat. Naturally they would fall to and assist her, and when enough work had been accomplished she would whip together the salmi and other goodies and feed them lunch. Often after lunch she'd manage to get another couple of hours' work out of them, charming them all the while with her witty talk. **They spent the day, indeed! But the bait of Mother's food and company always caught.**

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