



## 2018 WINNING ENTRIES

### LDEI's M.F.K. Fisher Awards Contest to Excellence in Culinary Writing

#### PRINT CATEGORY

**Grand Prize and First Prize** (\$1000 and trip to Seattle LDEI Conference)

**Elaine Cicora**, Macedonia, Ohio. Entry published in *Edible Cleveland*, Summer 2017.

#### **Me and Chef Boyardee**

*How Cleveland's first celebrity chef made me the woman I am today*

I owe my career to Chef Boy-Ar-Dee. No, not a can of Beefaroni. The real, honest-to-goodness man behind the can, Ettore Boiardi—groundbreaking chef, visionary businessman, savvy restaurateur and, by all accounts, a really nice guy who hung his toque in Cleveland on his way to becoming a multimillionaire in the packaged foods industry.

Like his eponymous boxed dinners, Ettore – or Hector, as he was known following his 1914 arrival at Ellis Island from the northern Italian town of Piacenza – was pretty much the complete package.

To begin with, he must have been a mighty chef. In an era when Italian immigrants were sneered at as “garlic eaters,” or worse, and their cuisine denigrated as smelly, impoverished, and even sinful, Hector made short work of the long climb up the ladder of culinary success. He started out as a 17-year-old cook in the kitchens of New York’s tony Plaza Hotel. One year later, he was a head chef, presiding over President Woodrow Wilson’s wedding banquet at West Virginia’s even tonier Greenbrier Resort.

Cleveland was a pretty tony town in those days too, and local hoteliers wasted no time in wooing the Italian wunderkind to the North Coast. Hector arrived at the Hotel Winton, on Prospect Avenue, in 1917, where he commanded the kitchen and caused a veritable sensation with his exotic spaghetti dinners, which – much like sushi in the 1980s – proved to be a thrilling departure from Clevelanders’ usual Midwest fare.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to call the chef a groundbreaker. Historian Pamela Dorazio Dean, curator for Italian American history at the Western Reserve Historical Society, explains. “Italian food was foreign at that time,” she says. “It was pungent; it was offensive. Yet Clevelanders liked his food so much, they were asking how to make it at home!”

Like any rising-star chef, Hector’s next step was to open his own restaurant, the Giardino d’Italia (or Italian Garden). Settled on East Ninth Street and Woodland Avenue, in the former “Big Italy” neighborhood, it was a similarly huge hit, attracting locals and visiting celebrities alike. In Hector’s 1985 Plain Dealer obit, son Mario described the place as “the meeting ground for all the Metropolitan Opera singers and maestros” in town during tours in the 1920s and ’30s. “When they were here, they wouldn’t go anywhere else,” he said.

According to legend, the chef’s spaghetti sauce, in particular, proved so irresistible that guests started begging to take some home. At first, he obliged by filling cleaned milk bottles with the red stuff; by

1928 the chef was making and packaging his sauce – along with spaghetti and packets of Parmesan cheese – in a series of ever-larger Cleveland factories, while quickly branching out into national retail sales.

In the process, the chef-restaurateur broke another type of ground: as one of the world’s first culinarians to catch on to the potential of “convenience” foods.

The packaged-foods business eventually led Hector to an abandoned mill in Milton, Pennsylvania, where in 1938 he opened a 300,000-square-foot processing plant to meet the ever-growing demand for his products. Sometime during these years, he brilliantly changed his company’s name to the phonetic “Boy-Ar-Dee,” making it easier for American tongues to wrap themselves around his brand.

Meantime, back in Cleveland, Hector’s restaurant empire continued to grow. In 1931 he opened Chef Boiardi’s at 823 Prospect Ave., changing the name to Chef Hector’s after his branding epiphany. In 1945, he joined fellow restaurateur Albert Caminati in operating Pierre’s Italian Restaurant on nearby Euclid Avenue. And in the 1950s, the duo opened Town & Country restaurant on Chagrin Boulevard.

During the war years, Hector garnered fame and glory – not to mention a gold medal from the U.S. military, the Order of Lenin from the Russian government, and a Cross of Honor (and the title, “king of the spaghetti dinner”) from the Italians – by creating and producing field rations for the troops. In 1946, when opportunity came knocking in the guise of a purchase offer from American Home Foods (now ConAgra), the former Italian immigrant was able to leverage his business acumen and international reputation into a \$6 million payday.

As Boiardi family friend Mary Garvey puts it, “He was the American success story, personified.”

It was in the mid-1950s, when I was 4 or maybe 5, that fate finally brought us together.

For this, I must thank my father, George. A first-generation Italian American, former U.S. Army cook who served in Italy during World War II, and himself a better-than-average eater, George had a massive, if somewhat unexplainable, fondness for Chef Boy-Ar-Dee products. Was it nostalgia for the war years? The bonds of Italian brotherhood? The allure of a cheap dinner? Who knows the source of this attraction. But for years, the arrival of TGIF time in our suburban home was marked, not with martinis or manhattans, but with the emergence of the cheerful yellow box of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee from the kitchen cupboard.

Dad’s brand loyalty extended to a memorable visit to Chef Hector’s restaurant, an odd little space reached by a long walk through what at the time was the area surrounding the old Central Market (now occupied by Quicken Loans Arena). Twisting and turning through the narrow streets, I recall making our way up a little alley until we finally emerged on Prospect Avenue, in front of a door that lead down a set of stairs into a dim, subterranean dining room.

I ordered the spaghetti.

I ate the spaghetti. In fact, to have heard my dad tell it, I more or less hoovered the spaghetti right off the plate.

My childish enthusiasm so tickled our waiter that he asked my parents if he could bring me a second serving of spaghetti – on the house, to be sure – which I also inhaled.

“She’s such a good little eater,” he told my parents with an approving nod. And with that benediction from a waiter at Chef Hector’s, the die was cast and my career as a professional food writer was assured.

I’ve gone on to dine at fine restaurants throughout the world, spending more than two decades reviewing and writing about the Cleveland food and dining scenes. As for the chef, he enjoyed the fruits of his labors for an additional 30 years, closing Chef Hector’s in 1967, Pierre’s in 1974, and finally retiring as a consultant for American Home Foods in 1978. He had homes in Shaker Heights and Hollywood, Florida. He savored the company of friends and family, including wife Helen, son Mario, and several grandchildren, great grandchildren, and assorted nieces and nephews. (Indeed, grand-niece Anna Boiardi made a brief splash in 2011 with her cookbook/memoir *Delicious Memories: Recipes and Stories from the Chef Boyardee Family*.)

By all accounts, Hector remained a gentleman throughout. Those who knew the plump, mustachioed chef – who continued representing his brand in print and on television until 1979 – describe him as “elegant,” “charming,” and never without a tie.

“He was very European: formal, but very warm,” recalls family friend Dorothy Ceruti, who dined at the chef’s home on at least one occasion. “He cooked very simply – steak, I think – and cautioned [perhaps tellingly] against using too much garlic.”

Mary Garvey, whose *nonna* had won a dance contest with a young Hector, remembers him stirring polenta in her parents’ kitchen. “He was jovial, fun loving. He always had a twinkle in his eye,” she says.

When Hector died in a Parma nursing home in 1985, his obituary made *The New York Times*. He was buried in Chardon, at All Souls Cemetery. He left an estate estimated at \$60 million.

Ten years later – the year that Helen passed away – Chef Hector was posthumously inducted into the James Beard Foundation’s Culinary Hall of Fame. During the awards ceremony, the James Beard Foundation spokesperson characterized him as “one of Cleveland’s most recognizable contributions to the food world.”

Whatever gastronomic nirvana Hector may now inhabit, I hope Cleveland’s first celebrity chef sometimes takes a moment to relish his many accomplishments. Somewhere on that list, as a tiny footnote to his many greater deeds, is this: He set at least one good eater on the path to a tasty career.

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The story with photos can also be seen at:

<http://ediblecleveland.com/stories/summer-2017/me-and-chef-boyardee#readmore> .

## PRINT CATEGORY

### **Second Prize (\$100)**

Catherine Neville, St. Louis, Missouri. Entry published in *Feast* magazine, August 2017

### **“The Kings of Kansas City”**

Smack-dab in the middle of the very first edition of The Kansas City Star (then called The Kansas City Evening Star), published on Sept. 18, 1880, is a story with the prophetic headline “The Grand Barbecue.” According to the article, those early Kansas Citians were so elated at the completion of a long-delayed railroad connection that they held a parade, which culminated with a “grand old fashioned barbecue” attended by more than 3,000 citizens, and “celebrated in a manner and style peculiarly characteristic of Kansas City pluck and enterprise.”

Barbecue had long been a part of America’s civic culture. If you wanted to feed a large group of people, barbecuing whole animals was an efficient and delicious way to do so. On July 3, 1869, Kansas Citians celebrated the historic opening of the Hannibal Bridge – the first permanent railroad bridge to cross the Missouri River – with a parade and a barbecue. Accounts of the event describe how the public, having endured seemingly endless orations by long-winded politicians, “attacked the tables” once the speechifying was concluded. (The Hannibal Bridge, in fact, was the critical link among railroad lines that helped create a hub that led to the Kansas City stockyards in 1871.) The sheer volume of livestock consumed at these celebrations can be surprising to those of us reading the history today. For example, in October 1876, now-defunct The Kansas City Times published the following notice encouraging readers to attend a large public barbecue:

“Fifteen beeves, one hundred and twenty sheep, twenty five hogs, and five car loads of turkeys and chickens have been provided for tomorrow’s barbecue on the Exposition grounds. Everybody invited.”

It’s no wonder barbecue took root in late- 19th-century Kansas City culture. First, meat was inexpensive and plentiful thanks to the city’s stockyards. Second, although Missouri is not generally classified as a Southern state today and was a border state during the Civil War, it was also considered a part of the South, as maps from the period definitively show. With the ready supply of pork and beef close at hand and the prevalence of hardwood trees, the Southern tradition of barbecue found a home in Kansas City.

After the Civil War, many freed slaves left the defeated Confederacy. Kansas City was a logical destination: Located on the far northwestern edge of what was then considered the South, it had become a thriving river and rail hub with a flourishing meatpacking industry. There were jobs to be had and the promise of a new life. These new Kansas City residents brought with them their culinary traditions, and the city’s love of barbecue became, for many, a way to make a living or earn additional income. It was during this period that local barbecue culture began to change.

The style of cooking that had primarily been associated with large civic celebrations slowly became a commercial enterprise, one that took root in the city’s 18th and Vine Jazz District. This area of Kansas City, just east of downtown, was a place full of jazz and barbecue and is considered one of the country’s most historically significant birthplaces of jazz.

In 1907, Henry Perry, a native of the Memphis area, arrived in Kansas City. He was in his early 30s and, since he was 15, had been earning his way in the world as a cook on riverboats steaming up and down the Mississippi River. He began plying his trade in an alley at the corner of Eighth and Banks streets, in Kansas City's Garment District, selling barbecue from a stand. Such was the humble beginning of a barbecue legacy that continues to this day.

#### The Fathers of Kansas City Barbecue

Within five years of his arrival in Kansas City, Perry went from selling meat from his alley stand to operating a restaurant, moving what had been dubbed Perry's Barbecue to 17th Street and Lydia Avenue, and then, in the 1920s, to 19th Street and Highland Avenue.

Situated in the bustling 18th and Vine District, Perry served his 'cue from an old barn that previously housed trolley cars. This was during the height of Prohibition, the roaring Pendergast era when Kansas City was known as the Paris of the Plains. The neighborhood was hot with jazz and barbecue, a recipe that made the district thrive.

Perry's sauce was considered "harsh and peppery," a fiery concoction that was much more vinegar-forward and spicy than the style of sauce Kansas City is known for today. Perry pit-smoked his meats, which included pork ribs and beef along with wild game such as opossum and raccoon, directly over smoldering hickory and oak, and he served everything wrapped in sheets of newsprint.

At the time, the barbecue scene was growing, and there were many competitors entering the market with newfangled barbecue ovens, but Perry stuck with tradition in the face of so-called progress. He was quoted in an article in *The Call*, a Kansas City newspaper, as saying, "There is only one way to cook barbecue and that is the way I am doing it, over a wood fire, with a properly constructed oven and pit." By 1932, when Perry was interviewed for the article, *The Call* wrote that there were "more than a thousand barbecue stands" in the city.

When Perry died in 1940, he owned three prosperous and popular barbecue restaurants in Kansas City. One of these, which was referred to as Perry's #2, was managed by a Texas transplant named Charlie Bryant, whose younger brother, Arthur, came to work at the restaurant after college. When Perry died, he left Charlie the restaurant that he'd been managing. When Charlie retired in 1946, Arthur took over and reworked Perry's sauce recipe to make it less fiery and more widely appealing.

In 1972, well-known journalist and food writer Calvin Trillin, a Kansas City native, wrote an article for *Playboy* extolling the virtues of Kansas City restaurants. He spoke with Arthur Bryant, who said Perry "used to enjoy watching his customers take their first bite of a sauce that he made too hot for any human being to eat without eight or 10 years of working up to it."

Bryant also renamed the enterprise after himself. Arthur Bryant's joint became a favorite of performers such as Count Basie (who reportedly spat on his ribs to keep his bandmates from eating them while he was performing), Jack Nicholson and Robert Redford as well as politicians, including former President Harry S. Truman, who frequented the "grease house" on a regular basis.

In Trillin's widely read *Playboy* essay, in which he praised Kansas City burgers and barbecue, he wrote that "the best restaurants in the world are, of course, in Kansas City. Not all of them; only the top four or

five.” He referenced Arthur Bryant’s specifically, calling the beloved spot only “the single best restaurant in the world.” Trillin went on to write extensively about Bryant’s burnt ends, the crispy, caramelized edges of smoked brisket that have since become Kansas City’s signature contribution to the national barbecue tradition, providing context for their origin and referring to them as “burned edges”:

“The main course at Bryant’s, as far as I’m concerned, is something that is given away free – the burned edges of the brisket. The counterman just pushes them over to the side and anyone who wants them helps himself. I dream of those burned edges. Sometimes, when I’m in some awful, overpriced restaurant in some strange town, trying to choke down some three-dollar hamburger that tastes like a burned sponge, a blank look comes over me: I have just realized that at that very moment, someone in Kansas City is being given those burned edges for free.”

Bryant’s popularity surged to new heights, becoming a destination for tourists and celebrities (and they started charging for those burnt ends). When Arthur Bryant died in 1982, the restaurant nearly went under, but was ultimately sold by Bryant’s niece, Doretha Bryant, to Bill Rauschelbach and Gary Berbiglia, who kept it running strong – and virtually unchanged. Today, Arthur’s tweaked version of Henry Perry’s sauce, a grainy, orange-hued, vinegar-based dip with tomato and hints of curry powder, paprika, chile and meat drippings, can still be had, along with the new Sweet Heat and Rich & Spicy varieties developed by Berbiglia, who sold his interest in the company to Rauschelbach in 2014.

As fate would have it, 1946 was a momentous year in Kansas City barbecue history. Not only was it when Arthur Bryant took over his brother’s joint, but it was also the year George Gates and his wife, Arzelia, bought Ol’ Kentuck Bar-B-Q, a run-down little place at the corner of 19th and Vine streets in the same 18th and Vine Jazz District. Bryant’s was located nearby at 1727 Brooklyn Ave., just blocks away from Municipal Stadium, where Kansas City’s professional baseball and football teams – including the Kansas City Chiefs and the former Kansas City Athletics – played.

When visiting teams and sportscasters came to Kansas City, they were captivated by the aroma of smoking brisket, pork butts, ribs and sausage. They then returned home and reported on their sampling of Kansas City-style barbecue, and the city’s reputation began to spread. George’s son, Ollie Gates, current owner and chief executive officer of Gates & Son’s Bar-B-Q, credits those radio announcers with spreading the gospel of Kansas City ‘cue far and wide.

“When the wind was blowing just right, it would permeate the air with those aromas from the smoking pits,” Ollie says. “Once the announcers figured out where those odors were coming from, then we started carrying it up to the ballpark and letting them taste it. And so they took word of it back to wherever they were coming from – Minnesota or New York – and that’s what really started the idea of ‘Kansas City barbecue.’”

George Gates initially bought the restaurant for its liquor license, intending to turn it into a tavern. But Mrs. Gates was a devout Methodist and disapproved of whiskey, so the barbecue became the emphasis.

A man named Arthur Pinkard, who learned the art of barbecue from none other than Henry Perry himself, was working at Ol’ Kentuck when it was purchased and stayed on to run the pits and teach George and Ollie Gates everything he knew. “When Dad bought the restaurant from a guy by the name

of Johnny Thomas, [Pinkard] was a part of the fixtures that came with the restaurant,” Ollie says. “He was an integral part.”

Ollie was in high school when his father bought the restaurant, and he grew up working alongside him. “I was the head dishwasher, toilet-cleaner-upper, floor-mopper, basic cleaner, wood-carrier to the pits. That’s what I was,” he laughs. In 1956, after college and a stint in the U.S. Army, he began actively working for the family business, and its name was changed to Gates & Sons Bar-B-Q.

Today Gates serves ribs, beef, ham, chicken, sausage and mutton, and is internationally famous for its “Hi! May I help you?” customer service, which can be traced back to a noisy door spring.

“We had an old, screechy screen door in our first restaurant,” Ollie recalls. “That door would screech open, and I could hear when somebody was coming in. I’d jump up from the counter where I was sitting, reading comic books, and say hello to people. And then my dad fixed the door so it didn’t make any screechy sound. He snuck up on me and slapped me in the back of my head and said, ‘See there? You’re not aware.’ And so, from there on out, I watched the door, and as people came, I’d say hi to them. That’s where, ‘Hi! May I help you?’ came from.”

Just as famous as its hospitality is Gates & Son’s barbecue sauce, which has a tomato base enhanced with vinegar, of course, but also a secret blend of spices and other seasonings, “and some love,” Ollie says.

[Story continues but is beyond the 2,000-word contest limit.]

**Entire article with photos can be read online at:**

[www.feastmagazine.com/features/kansas-city/article\\_df738fb4-8761-11e7-ac98-8323da185876.html](http://www.feastmagazine.com/features/kansas-city/article_df738fb4-8761-11e7-ac98-8323da185876.html)

## [PRINT CATEGORY](#)

### **Third Prize\_(\$50)**

**Jamie Schler**, an American writer living in Chinon, France. Story published in *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2017.

### **My Brother Was Deteriorating Before My Eyes.**

*I could think of only one thing to do.*

My brother stood near me as I measured out flour, cocoa powder, baking soda and salt, as I poured buttermilk, broke eggs and measured in spoonfuls of blood-red beet juice. I was making his favorite cake, a chocolate red velvet with a rich chocolate ganache frosting following the same recipe he used every year for his own birthday. He watched silently, occasionally shaking his head no when I needed correction, more often than not smiling with that familiar smirk, mugging for me in an attempt to infuse his Brooklyn kitchen with the old humor and joy of years of cooking and baking together.

There was none of his witty conversation, none of his usual wisecracks, nor even any brotherly advice offered beyond a pointed finger. There was no conversation, for my brother had no words.

Michael was well into his second year with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive degenerative motor neuron disease characterized by muscle atrophy, increasing difficulty swallowing and breathing, growing weakness that leads to the loss of motor function and mobility — and, eventually, a shutdown of the body. He could barely croak out words, so he communicated with gestures and grimaces. He was already having trouble swallowing, so eating with him sometimes ended in a choking fit as I stood and watched, helplessly wringing my hands. The gradually imposing dementia, rare for this disease, was making it increasingly difficult to have a complex discussion. It had been a mere six months since his immediate family discovered he had been stricken by this rapidly advancing disease, and now there I was, spending two months with my older brother, offering what help I could.

I was at a loss. My usual yearly visits, whether on my own or with my two sons in tow, had been filled with museum exhibits, trips to the cinema, tromps through archives and cemeteries with Michael in our quest to discover our roots, and lengthy discussions about fashion, art, movies and literature. And when he wasn't taking me out to dine at one of his longtime favorites or to share a new discovery, we would market and cook together.

All of this was now out of the question. But I knew I could cook, and feeding him was a priority. His body was ravaged; his slim yet strong figure had melted to be feeble and unsteady, and he was losing weight rapidly. His legs wrapped in heavy braces, he would steady himself against the wall as he shuffled between rooms. Hands that once played piano, kneaded dough, sketched and pieced together costumes for the Boston Ballet and Broadway shows were atrophied, clenched in permanent fists that could no longer twist the lid off a jar, slice a tomato or use a can opener. His weakness made it near impossible for him to lift a pan of boiling water from the stove or remove a baking dish from the oven.

He needed to be nourished, and I was desperate to feed him. Each evening, I would pull out the pile of takeout menus he kept tucked beside his stand mixer, and we would choose a cuisine — Cuban, Italian



or Thai — and he would point to what he wanted, urged on by me to pick whatever was most caloric. Or I would fix him a meal under his wordless guidance, something that made him still feel like the excellent cook he had been and the big brother he still was. He showed me how to pull off all of the skin of chicken pieces and rub the flesh generously with bottled curry paste before baking; he silently instructed me how to steam Brussels sprouts to be perfect, tender buds without the bitter edge; together we roasted vegetables and made pancakes and stirred pots of soup.

And, surrounded by the silence, I baked him his favorite chocolate red velvet cake, placing a thick wedge and two large scoops of ice cream in front of him at the end of each meal, making sure he ate every bite. He would smile, nodding his head that the food was good, that his kid sister had done all right. Sometimes, through these familiar gestures, sharing a meal almost felt like it used to.

I had also lived in Brooklyn, a long time ago, just a couple of years out of college. Michael found me an apartment, a one-bedroom one story up from his own in an old six-floor walk-up off Fourth Avenue. Once I settled in, he showed me his preferred grocery store and his favorite Korean market, the little Italian place that sold handmade ravioli and marble-sized ciliegine mozzarella balls, his tried-and-true bagel shop and bakery for real rugelach and hamantaschen. He showed me where I could buy a paper plate weighed down by half a roasted chicken and the best Cuban red beans and rice, all for just five bucks. An extraordinary cook, Michael watched over me as I attempted to bake my first yeast breads (he enthusiastically gobbled slice after rock-hard slice) and my first Thanksgiving turkey, gave my first dinner party and tested recipes for a friend's cookbook. In the two years I lived above him before moving to Europe, Michael fed me chicken soup, steaming plates of lasagna, omelets and salads, bagels and lox when my own paycheck didn't get me through the month.

When I moved to France, married and became a mother, we spoke on the phone every two weeks, and our conversations invariably turned to food. I worked in gastronomic tourism then as a food writer, so we shared discoveries of and gossip about restaurants and chefs, discussed cookbooks purchased and recipes developed. I would return to Brooklyn once a year or so with my sons, and we would follow Michael from restaurant to restaurant. He would cook for us, introducing my sons to chile con carne, *bami goreng*, gumbo, and chopped liver, and we would dog his brisk steps as he led us to the grocery store or shops or down into the subway. He was always leading.

And now I would navigate the streets of Brooklyn on my own. Instead of trotting to match his stride, I would grip his elbow and help him carefully maneuver the steps, the sidewalks, making sure he didn't fall. But mostly he would stay at home while I wandered his new, unfamiliar neighborhood. I would choose what to buy, what to cook, what to feed him, which was never easy for me, who all too often relied on others — and mostly on my big brother when we were together. No advice, no discussion, no excitement, no fun. I was there only to make sure he ate as much as I could get him to eat. I ordered takeout, I heated up pot pies and casseroles, I bought doughnuts and cookies that I would place before him as often as I could persuade him to sit and eat.

Cooking and eating were all we had. We spoke little during those two months I stayed with him. We avoided each other when we weren't sharing a meal. He watched TV for long hours and I read, the silence heavy with what we loathed thinking about: his illness and impending death. In the confusion and denial caused by his dementia, he refused to believe he was dying; in my fear and sadness, I simply

could not face it. And so I busied myself with cooking, praying that those slices of cake, bowls of soup, plates of chicken and Brussels sprouts could save him.

My brother and I have never been demonstrative with our affection. Although we were devoted to and fiercely protective of each other, sharing food and cooking and eating together had always been how we expressed our love, how we entertained ourselves and made the other happy, how we protected and soothed each other from life's bumps and bruises.

As I stood in his warm kitchen during those cold, dark February days so long ago now, back in 2009, and watched him eat, I recalled my mother once telling me that when she brought me home from the hospital 50 years earlier, Michael, all of 3 years old, decided it was his responsibility to feed me. We had come full circle, and now it was my turn to feed him.

The last day of my stay, I left Michael standing in his doorway, that familiar crooked smile on his face as he and I said our goodbyes, much like all the other goodbyes at the end of one of my visits, quick and slightly embarrassed by the lack of a hug. I stepped into an early March morning, the taxi waiting to take me to the airport and back to my husband and sons in France. But I knew that if I left that way, I would always regret it. I turned around and ran back up the steps, wrapped my arms around him, now all skin and bones, and he laughed nervously. "I love you," I murmured into his T-shirt, tears in my eyes. I turned to the woman I had hired to care for him, our shared look speaking volumes: "You take very good care of him. Feed him well, and make sure he eats."

I hadn't thought twice about making that difficult trip over to care for Michael, no matter the sad silence that hung between us. The time I spent preparing and serving him chicken and vegetables, urging him to eat another slice of chocolate cake, made me realize just how much that food is our first and our last connection with those we love. Although our history is infused with so many stories of shared meals, cooking and baking adventures, I had never before felt the overwhelming power the simple act of nourishing carried to comfort not only my brother, but me.

I couldn't get back to Michael at the very end, after they brought him home to Florida; he could no longer stay in his own house, even with home care, the last couple of months before he passed away on Sept. 15, 2009. The end came so quickly. My sister Sue told me how she spoon-fed him bits of applesauce and water when he could no longer lift a spoon, when he could no longer swallow much of anything, the same thing I had done for our father twenty-some years earlier when he was dying of the same disease.

Years of sibling rivalry between Sue and Michael melted away under the weight of necessity, the raw emotions of love and devotion, the innate reflex to protect. Our lives whittle down to basic needs, and we take to the responsibility without a thought. We feed, bathe, dress them as we did our children, as they, Michael and Dad, did for us when we were young.

END

Story with photos can be read at:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/my-brother-was-deteriorating-before-my-eyes-i-could-think-of-only-one-thing-to-do/2017/09/14/800c76f8-9972-11e7-82e4-f1076f6d6152\\_story.html?tid=ss\\_fb&utm\\_term=.db6e6ded3b5d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/my-brother-was-deteriorating-before-my-eyes-i-could-think-of-only-one-thing-to-do/2017/09/14/800c76f8-9972-11e7-82e4-f1076f6d6152_story.html?tid=ss_fb&utm_term=.db6e6ded3b5d)

## BOOK CATEGORY

### **First Prize (\$500)**

#### **Bianca Bosker, New York City**

From her book *Cork Dork* (Penguin Books/Penguin Random House, 2017).

### ***Cork Dork: The Secret Society***

For the sommeliers in Morgan's blind tasting group, showing up at ten o'clock each Tuesday morning to taste at Eleven Madison Park (EMP) had all the glamour of a date with the StairMaster. They'd been doing this every week for years. It was their tongue cardio.

But I was not jaded and I was not experienced, and I did not play it cool. I hauled open EMP's large brass doors feeling very impressed, both with the somms with whom I was about to taste, and with myself for having been initiated into this secret wine society, hiding in plain sight in one of the city's most visible restaurants. My grandiose mood was only compounded by the sumptuousness of EMP's formal dining room. It was like getting a hug from someone's extremely rich great-aunt. I parted heavy velvet drapes to reveal an Art Deco masterpiece of a room. Enormous gridded windows looked out over a park, and the double-height ceilings were caked in layers of molding with pink scalloped trim. Morgan waved me over to a linen-covered table in the back, and I sidestepped a florist arranging bouquets of dogwood and amaryllis that would have had trouble fitting into my studio apartment. My boots echoed loudly on the floor, like footsteps in an empty church. And in the food world, there is something approaching holy about EMP. The restaurant has racked up serious accolades, including a spot at number four on the San Pellegrino list of best restaurants in the world. EMP spends ten months training its staff to pour water and employs people with the title of "dreamweaver," whose job it is to enhance the meal through miniature miracles, like delivering a sled to a guest who, over the third course, mentions wanting to play in the snow. Dinner for one begins at \$295, takes three and a half hours, and, the theory goes, makes an impression that lasts a lifetime—which is conveniently the amount of time you might need to pay off your credit card bill, if you order some of the top bottles on offer.

Four guys out of the group's twelve or so members had shown up. They'd been tasting together for nearly four years. Dana Gaiser was a sommelier-turned-distributor who'd graduated from Stanford with a degree in mechanical engineering. He was in his midthirties, had frenetic Edward Scissorhands hair, and exuded this-month's-GQ cool in a tight suit and a pink shirt. Jon Ross, who was just a few years younger, had on a rumpled sweatshirt and looked exhausted—no surprise for someone who puts in the punishing seventy-hour workweek that's standard for a sommelier at EMP. "They own you. Like not even vaguely," Morgan told me. Yannick Benjamin was a sommelier at the University Club, a members-only club favored by the city's bankers, lawyers, doctors, and trust-funders. A car accident in 2003 had left Yannick wheelchair-bound, but that didn't stop him from following a long line of Benjamin men into the restaurant business. Morgan was Morgan. All four tasters were prepping for the Master Sommelier Exam. Yannick was attempting it for the ninth time.

Dana, Jon, and Yannick were sullen and sleepy. Morgan chattered like he'd just blown a few lines back in the kitchen. "Has anyone told you the dirty sommelier mnemonic for remembering bottle sizes?" he

said, pouring his wines into decanters so that all details about the bottle, including its shape, would be disguised. “‘Michael Jackson Really Makes Small Boys Nervous.’ So Michael is Magnum; Jackson is Jeroboam; really, Rehobaum; makes, Methuselah; small, Salamanzar; boys, Balthazar; nervous, Nebuchadnezzar.” (With slight variations depending on the region, a magnum contains the equivalent of two standard bottles; a Jeroboam holds four; a Rehobaum six; a Methuselah eight; and from there the volume increases by four bottles per size up through the Nebuchadnezzar, which holds twenty standard bottles and guarantees a good time.)

I apologized for not having brought wine and offered to bring some next time.

“No, it’s okay. If you did, we’d most likely just whine and yell at you about it like little bitches,” said Jon.

It wasn’t an empty threat. Blind tasting practice works best when sommeliers train with classic examples of wines. The bottles should exemplify the typical style of a Malbec from Mendoza, Argentina, or a Grenache blend from Châteauneuf-du-Pape in France, for instance. “Like, if you bring seven-year-old Chilean Cabernet and an unoaked, \$16 bottle of Mâcon Chardonnay, you’re wasting my fucking time,” snapped Morgan. Another no-go was repeatedly showing up with niche grape varietals that were unlikely to be among the fifty or so believed to be fair game for the Master exam. (Though the Court doesn’t reveal what wines are eligible for the test, examinees have spent years trying to reverse engineer what the judges might throw at them, so they have a pretty good idea.)

“Everything still tastes like toothpaste,” Jon complained. “Usually brushing my teeth doesn’t affect me, but I used a different toothpaste than normal. So I will not be using that one again.”

I hoped no one would get close enough to smell the minty freshness of the Listerine I’d gargled before leaving home. Brushing my teeth was also beginning to feel like a bad idea.

We had eight wines to go through. Jon put out plastic spit buckets, and, because service never stops, the choice of sparkling or flat water. Today we’d be “round-tabling”: Each person would taste one wine at a time and, per the format of the Master Sommelier Exam, recite their analysis out loud. The others would listen and critique.

“Okay, I’m counting the ‘ums’!” Morgan announced. With his theater background, he appreciated the need for polished delivery. Plus, the Master Sommelier blind tasting test allows twenty-five minutes to get through six wines—three white, three red—so with just fourish minutes per glass, each “uhhh” and “hmmm” could eat up valuable time.

Whites were first, and Dana was up.

“He can do a flight on the nose alone,” Morgan boasted. Dana didn’t correct him.

I picked up my glass and stuck my nose into it. Dana was still inspecting the color, so I took my nose out and examined the liquid. On the spectrum of red or white, this was a white wine. So far, so confident, I thought. Wrong.

“Pale gold, with some rim variation at the meniscus, flecks of gold and green. It’s star bright, no signs of gas or sediment, and viscosity is moderate-plus,” Dana said in a low monotone, speaking as quickly as he could. So “white” wasn’t quite what they were going for.

I sniffed. It smelled, I hated to say it, like wine. You’re a writer, you can do better than that, I chided myself. I sniffed harder and lifted the glass closer to my face. Wine dribbled into my nostrils, down my chin, and onto my lap. I dabbed at my face with a page from my notebook. I sniffed again—maybe one could say apple. Something sweet? Yes. Apple and sweet, I decided. A flicker of doubt: Could sweetness be smelled?

Dana was already racing ahead. “Ripe peaches and peach candy. Apricot. Meyer lemon. Candied grapefruit. Some very liqueur-like fruits, slightly candied. Tangerine. Candied tangerine and candied orange peel. Getting a slightly Grand Marnier thing going on. Honeysuckle. Um”—Morgan made a check mark—“Lily. Heavy cream. Yogurt. Butter. Butterscotch. Slight hint of tarragon and basil. There’s uh”—check—“vanilla and baking spice indicating new oak barrique.”

He hadn’t even tasted it yet.

I alternated between skepticism and awe. Candied tangerine? Grand Marnier? Really? I rushed to take a sip. I liked the wine, I knew that. The apple flavor was there again . . . right? I mostly tasted Listerine.

Dana took a sip and gargled the wine. He picked up an herb garden and spring bouquet on the palate. Sweet basil, dried lilac, honeysuckle. “There’s lilies, Easter lilies, all the types of lilies.” He called it dry, with moderate-plus acidity, and moderate-plus alcohol.

Dana paused and took a deep breath, crescendoing to his final conclusion: “I’m going to call this 2010—no, 2011 Viognier. France. Rhône Valley, Northern Rhône, Condrieu.”

Morgan pulled out the bottle and read off the label. It was indeed a Viognier, a floral, richly perfumed grape. It was from France, from the Northern Rhône. Within the Northern Rhône, it was from Condrieu, an appellation five hundred acres in size that is about half as big as Central Park. And it was a 2012.

My mouth dropped open. I wanted to applaud. Instead, I adopted the stony façade of the others, who looked unimpressed. Morgan pointed out that Dana had gone ten seconds over his allotted time. Jon quibbled with Dana’s acid call.

“I think there’s a saltiness in this wine that makes you think the acid is higher,” he said.

Morgan sniffed at the wine. “It smells like hot dogs.”

“Orange Tic Tacs,” Jon corrected. “Or rubber chicken.”

Dana shook his head. “Rubber chicken is more like . . . Clare Valley. Aussie Riesling.”

Morgan, Jon, and Yannick each took a turn blind tasting a white, and, after critiquing one another’s notes, started in on the reds. Relegated to silence, I listened to their analysis and tried to work out what

each wine might be while desperately struggling to detect whiffs of the improbable things they claimed to smell. More than an hour passed in a blur of adjectives spoken into the echoing cavity of a wineglass. “Wet asphalt,” “surgical glove,” “dried pomegranate,” “asparagus pee,” “pyrazines,” “terpenes,” “Dana’s taint.” A few of these aromas were familiar, some I’d never smelled before, and others referred to chemicals in the wine that I was hearing about for the first time. The guys spent awhile arguing about how to best describe the smell of an oxidized Chenin Blanc. Dana suggested dried cardboard, Jon countered with cereal box or Apple Jacks. Morgan voted Cheerios.

I joined Morgan for lunch afterward at a greasy diner around the corner. We tore into the food, our stomachs frantic after being teased by all the sniffing and tasting with no swallowing. The blind tasting part of Morgan’s brain stayed in overdrive. I was getting the sense it never switched off. He described a comparative bacon tasting he’d organized with his roommates the other weekend. He dissected how I could spot Chablis by its “oyster-shell kelp yogurt”-ness. He deconstructed what made my burger delicious. “The whole reason this dish is excellent is the contrast between this sweet-and-sour thing and this salty-fatty thing,” he explained through mouthfuls of an egg-salad sandwich. “You can’t deny that there’s an umami-ness. Why do you put a tomato and some lettuce on it? Tomatoes have a ton of acid. That’s why the experience is enjoyable. Because there’s the contrast of flavors. The sweetness of the ketchup with the salty-fatty. And yeah, there’s a ton of vinegar in ketchup.”

It wasn’t a romantic way to think about a meal. But I appreciated Morgan’s deconstruction. It gave me a new way of wallowing around in the pleasure of each bite. Morgan prattled on about what he’d pair with foie gras. I focused on the sugar and acid of the ketchup, and how it played off the fattiness of the fries.

END

## BOOK CATEGORY

### Second Prize (\$100)

**Laura Shapiro**, New York City, author of *What She Ate* (Viking/Penguin Random House, 2017)

### **Introduction to *What She Ate***

“Tell me what you eat,” wrote the philosopher-gourmand Brillat-Savarin, “and I shall tell you what you are.” It’s one of the most famous aphorisms in the literature of food, and I thought about it many times as I was probing the lives of the six women in this book. Food was my entry point into their worlds, so naturally I wanted to know what they ate, but I wanted to know everything else, too. Tell me what you eat, I longed to say to each woman, and then tell me whether you like to eat alone, and if you really taste the flavors of food or ignore them, or forget all about them a moment later. Tell me what hunger feels like to you, and if you’ve ever experienced it without knowing when you’re going to eat next. Tell me where you buy food, and how you choose it, and whether you spend too much. Tell me what you ate when you were a child, and whether the memory cheers you up or not. Tell me if you cook, and who taught you, and why you don’t cook more often, or less often, or better. Please, keep talking. Show me a recipe you prepared once and will never make again. Tell me about the people you cook for, and the people you eat with, and what you think about them. And what you feel about them. And if you wish somebody else were there instead. Keep talking, and pretty soon, unlike Brillat-Savarin, I won’t have to tell you what you are. You’ll be telling me.

One of the reasons I began writing about women and food more than thirty years ago was that I was full of questions like these, and I couldn’t find enough to read to satisfy my, well, hunger. Plainly women had been feeding humanity for a very long time, but for some reason only the advertising industry seemed to care. History, biography, even the relatively new field of women’s studies weren’t producing what should have been floods of books on female life at the stove or the table. I couldn’t figure it out. Surely women spent more time in the kitchen than they did in the bedroom, yet everybody was studying women and sex, and nobody was studying women and cooking except the companies selling cake mix. Maybe because I was a journalist, not an academic, it struck me as obvious that everyday meals constitute a guide to human character and a prime player in history; but I began to see that food was a tough sell in the scholarly world. The great minds were staunchly committed to the same great topics they had been mulling for centuries, invariably politics, economics, justice, and power. Today we know that all these issues and more can be brought to bear on the making of dinner—those stacks of books that were once missing are piled high by now—but back then the great minds, not to mention most of their graduate students, were reluctant to descend to the frivolous realm of the kitchen. After all, academic reputations were at stake. Home cooking was associated with women, which was bad enough, and housework, which was fatal.

Luckily I had come of age writing for the alternative press, where we made a point of ignoring any precepts set down by the great minds, so when I began working on my first book there was nothing to stop me from asking people what they ate and why. I posed these questions to the dead, primarily—a luxury unknown in journalism, but I realized that if I thought of myself as a writer of history, I had many more sources available and none of them could hang up on me. Over the years that followed, as I explored women and food in different eras of American life, I focused chiefly on pacesetters and

enthusiasts, the women whose work in the kitchen had made an impact beyond their own lives. Then I had an experience that sent me in a different direction.

One night, bleary with insomnia, I had been staring at a bookshelf for a long time when I finally pulled out a biography of Dorothy Wordsworth. All I hoped to gain from this choice was a short, peaceful visit to the Lake District, where she famously kept house for her brother William—a visit that would lull me back to sleep. Sure enough, here was the calm, sweet record of their years in Dove Cottage: William devoting himself to poetry, Dorothy devoting herself to William, both of them aloft in reveries inspired by the mountains, the clouds, the birds, and of course the daffodils. Then William married, I skipped a few chapters, and Dorothy turned up in a dreary village far from the Lake District, now making a home for her nephew, the local curate. It was winter; she seemed to spend a lot of time trying to improve his sermons, a desultory cook was giving them black pudding for dinner—and suddenly I was wide-awake. Black pudding, that stodgy mess of blood and oatmeal, plunked down in front of Dorothy Wordsworth, the daffodil girl? There had to be a story.

And there was—a story that opened up a startling perspective on a woman I thought I knew. As soon as I was jolted into focusing on how she cooked and ate, the whole picture of her life seemed to shift, like a holographic image that changes as you tilt it. I had always imagined her as a kind of folk heroine of the Romantic movement, enshrined in the imagery of the Lake District until at forty-seven she began a descent into sickness and dementia. Conventional wisdom sees these later years as a tragedy and leaves them at that, but conventional wisdom isn't looking at the food. The food was telling me something else about Dorothy's long decline, something I found both disturbing and oddly reassuring. Dorothy's food story became my first.

In this book, I take up the lives of six women from different centuries and continents—women who cooked and women who didn't—and in recounting these lives, I've placed the food right up front where I believe it belongs. Food, after all, happens every day; it's intimately associated with all our appetites and thoroughly entangled with the myriad social and economic conditions that press upon a life. Whether or not we spend time in a kitchen, whether or not we even care what's on the plate, we have a relationship with food that's launched when we're born and lasts until we die. As a writer who's been curious for decades about what prompts people to cook and eat the way they do, I've often marveled at the emotional and psychological baggage we bring to the table, baggage we've generally been lugging around since childhood. Cooking, eating, feeding others, resisting or ignoring food—it all runs deep, so deep that we may not even notice the way it helps to define us. Food constitutes a natural vantage point on the history of the personal.

Today, of course, popular culture is on a culinary binge; and so much personal writing is now devoted to gazing back upon the kitchen and the table that we've had to invent a new literary genre, the food memoir, to contain all of it. But this mania is recent. Biography as it's traditionally practiced still tends to honor the old-fashioned custom of keeping a polite distance from food. We're meant to read the lives of important people as if they never bothered with breakfast, lunch, or dinner, or took a coffee break, or stopped for a hot dog on the street, or wandered downstairs for a few spoonfuls of chocolate pudding in the middle of the night. History respects the food stories of chefs and cookbook writers and perhaps takes note when a painter or a politician happens to be a gastronome as well; but in the published accounts of most other lives, the food has been lost.



And it really is a loss, because food talks. Food talks whether the meal is sitting on the table or never leaves the recipe box. In May 1953 the popular and prolific food writer Nell B. Nichols, who had a regular column in the *Woman's Home Companion* called "Nell B. Nichols' Food Calendar," selected May 8 as the right day to offer a recipe for peanut-butter sandwiches that had been dipped in an egg-and-milk batter and then fried. We'll never know the reactions of any family that might have been offered this surprising variation on French toast. We'll never even know if a homemaker was inspired to prepare it. What we do know is that Nell B. Nichols, tapping into the food corner of the nation's collective imagination, pulled out a culinary artifact worthy of being titled *American Gothic*. The food tells us everything. It tells us about our powerful loyalty to peanut butter, first of all, and our willingness to follow it across any terrain. It tells us how midcentury American cooks liked to color outside the lines while holding fast to the coloring book. And of course it tells us about the national palate, stunned into acquiescence after decades of gastronomic novelties dreamed up by the food industry.

Food always talks. The arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan, who became friends with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, wrote once that Stein "had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved beef, and I used to like to see her sit down in front of five pounds of rare meat three inches thick and, with strong wrists wielding knife and fork, garnish it with gusto, while Alice ate a little slice, daintily, like a cat." Many, many people wrote about visiting Stein and Toklas in their famous Paris flat, but we have few descriptions as succinct and revelatory as this one. Luhan noticed the food.

Food talks—but somebody has to hear it. William Knight, the philosophy professor who was one of the first and most dedicated scholars of the Wordsworths, read through Dorothy Wordsworth's journals early on and decided they should be edited for publication. Dorothy had been a close observer of William as he worked, and the two of them were at the center of a swirl of family and literary relationships important to his poetry. Unaccountably, however, the journals were also littered with what Knight called "numerous trivial details" of Dorothy's housekeeping. He couldn't think of a single reason why posterity would ever want to know what Dorothy cooked or sewed, and it certainly didn't occur to him that the prose devoted to such chores might be worth reading for its own sake. One gets the sense from Knight's brief preface to the journals, which he published in 1897, that he was a little irritated by all the meals and domestic doings that Dorothy insisted on telling him about, possibly at the expense of providing more information about the great Romantic. "There is no need to record all the cases in which the sister wrote, 'To-day I mended William's shirts,' or 'William gathered sticks,' or 'I went in search of eggs,' etc. etc.," Knight explained wearily. He assured readers that he had snipped out only the material that plainly lacked "literary or biographical value." Later editors put the shirts and the eggs right back in; and to this day the *Grasmere Journal* is recognized as a classic of intimate prose, with a charm that has outlasted a fair amount of her brother's verse.

This dismissive attitude toward women's domestic lives continued to nourish for another century or so. Indeed, the very term "trivial" would come to haunt the post-World War II British novelist Barbara Pym, who loved nothing better than to include a mention of tinned spaghetti when she was constructing a character, though she knew such homely references were considered unworthy of serious fiction.

END

## BOOK CATEGORY

### Third Prize (\$50)

**Jess Thomson**, Seattle, Washington, author of *A Year Right Here* (University of Washington Press, 2017)

#### **“To Market, To Market” from *A Year Right Here***

There’s an international product-delivery company based in Seattle, which once just sold books, that is named for a swath of territory in South America famous for hosting the largest variety of plant and animal species on the globe. After an initial beta test in 2007, the company started delivering groceries and other sundry items in Granny Smith—green refrigerated box trucks, which crisscrossed the city to drop off groceries on peoples’ front porches in certain Seattle zip codes. True to the company’s standards, there were a vast variety of products that appealed to the kind of generally kid-busy, double-income families that people our own neighborhood. For some, it changed grocery shopping in Seattle. You could order organic grapes and king salmon and a new bike tire and a bath mat and an emergency birthday gift, all with the click of a mouse, and a grocery elf would drop them on your front step in the dark of night, at little to no charge. Sometimes he left muddy footprints on the porch.

It was an embarrassing habit. But taking a child who hasn’t really learned to walk independently to the grocery store is a little like bathing a cat—it’s awkward, it’s messy, and someone always ends up crying or bleeding—so ever since Graham had grown out of the small seat that folds out of the front of each metal grocery cart, I relied on AmazonFresh when my husband left town. When Jim was home, I went to the grocery store alone. But when he was at sea, I opened the little green iPhone app with a tap of my finger, and, with an implicit agreement to forgo personal approval of anything I’d normally touch or smell or take part in buying, I grocery-shopped from my couch. The druggish high of finishing a task without expending either time or effort outstripped my need to touch my tomatoes before buying them.

But when Jim left for his Arctic trip, the unthinkable happened: rather than delivering groceries for next to nothing, as they’d been doing for years, AmazonFresh began charging a yearly \$299 membership fee. I took advantage of the new system’s free thirty-day trial, but when we came home from Thanksgiving, the gig was up. I decided that, having made huge strides recently in physical therapy (no pun intended) but still hesitant to use his new walking skills in the wild, Graham was ready to come grocery shopping with me. And so the first weekend in December, when he’d had a week’s worth of good sleep, I cooked a big breakfast, made a shopping list in my best fat first-grade handwriting so Graham could read it, and drove us to Ballard Market in the rain.

December is an overwhelming time to visit the market for anyone. But for a child who has rarely considered sky-high piles of underripe avocados and mountains of shiny clementines from his three-foot-eleven stature, the sheer square footage of edibles is mind bending. Add in towers of gingerbread-making kits, pricing signs that he could now read, and the cacophony of normal Sunday-morning grocery-store traffic, and you wind up with a kid standing stock-still in the center of the floor mat just a foot or so beyond the building’s automatic doors, wide eyed and stunned.

“Keep walking, please,” I ushered. “There are people behind us.”

“I forgot that this place is seriously big,” Graham said casually, coming to.

“Do you want some Clementines?” I asked, eager to make room for other shoppers to enter the store. “We could put them in your lunch this week.”

“Yeah!” he cheered, making a beeline for the baby oranges. “Here.” Close to the display, he handed me one of his yellow crutches so that he had a hand free to probe the bin. And in one too-quick motion, he tried to scoop up five or six little orbs at once from the corner of the display, sending most of them skittering across the linoleum floor before I could catch them all.

“Oopsie,” he said lamely, watching them roll. “Guess that’s why they come in those blue bags.”

And so he grabbed a bag, and froze under its weight. As I purposely busied myself picking up clementines, he wrestled with how to make sure his little clutch of treasure made it home with us. He still wasn’t used to moving with only one crutch, and he had the three-pound orange bag grasped in the hand closest to the display, not the hand closest to the shopping cart. First, he made a move to lob the package overhead and behind him, across his crutch hand toward the cart. But he quickly realized both that the oranges were too heavy for him to lift above his head, so there was no way the rocket-launch approach would work, and that the cart was still too far away, even if he managed a good toss. And so, working slowly, he improvised: He shuffled each foot a few times, using the remaining crutch for balance, to turn his body so it was facing the cart. Using the oranges as ballast, he moved the crutch toward the cart, then scooted his feet toward the crutch. He did it again, theoretically applying the one-crutch walking drills he’d been doing with his physical therapist for weeks. By then, I’d gathered all the wayward clementines, and glanced up to see people watching me watching him, wondering whether I’d help him. Or perhaps they wondered how long they’d taken for granted the reflexive, mundane task of loading a bag of oranges into a grocery cart. Ours made it into the bottom of the cart with a cluster of dull thuds.

“What’s next on the list?” Graham asked. I wondered how many items would make it home. We’d spent five full minutes on the Clementines.

“Fruit strips,” I invented, pointing to the nearest display, which held the kind of packaged fruit leather he loves. I stretched the second crutch out to him so that we could move across the produce aisle toward them.

And without hesitation, he turned his back on me, and on the wagging stick I proffered, and moved forward on just one crutch again, taking the few hobbling steps that remained between him and his favorite snack. As if it were totally normal, he crouched down (instead of falling to his knees to access something low on a shelf, the way he’d always done), snagged his favorite flavors, and tossed them into the cart nonchalantly.

“What now?”

I took out the list, trying not to congratulate him, trying not to interrupt the long neurological chain reaction an emphatic expert had once told us must finish on its own for each new skill to be fully

integrated into a cerebral palsy patient's life. Trying not to reach into my pocket for my phone, so I could take a photograph, in case it never happened again. Trying to pick the most enticing items first, so whatever magical force had convinced him to walk happily with one crutch in the real world would stick around.

"Apples and red bell peppers," I read. "They're—"

But before I could finish directing him, he interrupted, holding his free hand out in front of his face, palm out like a Supreme, asking me to stop in the name of love.

"Mooommm," he moaned, annoyed.

"Yes, Graham?" I was missing something, clearly.

"You don't have to tell me where everything is in this store," he whined. "I can use the Force to find it." And as much as a kid with one crutch and a precarious sense of balance can, he stomped off in search of apples with one hand outstretched, clearly upset with me for my limited faith in the powers bestowed upon him by his recent Luke Skywalker Halloween costume.

We developed a pattern: Graham wandered the produce aisles on one crutch, with one hand thrust out in front, using the Force to find things, occasionally toppling displays unknowingly until I taught him, amid much objection, to use the Force to find the highest item in each pile. ("Find the tallest apple, you should," I said in a raspy Yoda voice, after he'd unhinged a few apples from the lowest line in the Honeycrisp display.)

He zigzagged around in search of berries with that same arm flailing, pausing occasionally to close his eyes like a Jedi might if the Force was guiding him through the grocery store, causing a veritable traffic jam between the peppers and the potatoes. (I think shoppers wondered whether he was, among other things, also blind.) It was hard not to direct him, but his sense of accomplishment was palpable. He could buy anything, I'd said, as long as it was a good choice for his lunch, and as long as he helped me gather everything I needed for dinner. "Blueberries don't grow here in the winter," he admitted, piling two cartons of pricey winter blueberries in the cart. "But I found some that grew on [the Forest Moon of] Endor, so we can buy them." I had trouble arguing with the agricultural patterns of a fictitious Star Wars planet.

At the far end of the produce section, we stopped to scan the list.

"Okay, so when I say a thing, if we have it, you say 'Check,' okay?" I instructed. "Potatoes?"

"Check," he said.

"Brussels sprouts? Carrots?" "Check and check." "Lettuce?" I asked.

"Is that what goes in salad?" wondered Graham, eyeing the fluttery green section next to us. It seemed like a terrible oversight, but I couldn't remember ever having asked him to eat lettuce, as opposed to eating salad. I nodded.

“I’ll get it,” he said importantly, returning with a head of romaine that dripped its recent thunderstorm-on-command down the back of his little hand. I worried that the stick still being used would slip on the mess he was making and we’d wind up in the same emergency room we’d visited a few weeks earlier. “Lettuce?” I asked again, smiling. I loved how seriously he was taking this; he was performing an adult’s physical equivalent of shopping while hopping on a balance beam on one foot. I could see sweat beading up on his temples.

“CHECK!” he yelled, thrusting it toward my face. A man at the meat counter forty yards away turned around. We turned the cart toward him.

“Should we buy a whole chicken?” I asked, pointing to a neatly wrapped bird in the poultry case. “Or should we buy a chicken that’s been cut up into all different parts?” I pointed to the cut-up version.

“Chicken costs three hundred and forty-nine dollars?” he protested, again very much out loud, misreading the label for the parts. “This store is so expensive! That’s more money than a really big Lego set!”

“Three dollars and forty-nine cents,” I explained quietly, indicating the decimal point. “And that’s the price for every pound, so every package costs a different amount. So this package is sixteen dollars,” I added, “because the chicken weighs almost five pounds.”

Relieved, he combed his hand across the five-pound bird, fingers seeking purchase in the packaging. He realized he couldn’t pick up a whole chicken with one hand.

“Parts,” he answered matter-of-factly. He poked a thumb through the plastic packaging surrounding the cut-up chicken, grasped a raw leg, and used the leg’s secure spot in the wrapping as leverage to pick up the whole package with one hand. “Here,” he said, handing me the package, which now dripped raw chicken juice onto my shoes.

“Thanks,” I said, wincing. Because my kid was standing next to me at the grocery store, and he was helping me pick out food for dinner, and there was nothing more to say.

END

## INTERNET CATEGORY

### First Prize (\$500)

Eagranie Yu, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Published at [www.saveur.com/tayybeh-vancouver-immigrant-dinner-series](http://www.saveur.com/tayybeh-vancouver-immigrant-dinner-series)

### **Vancouver's Wildly Popular Dinner Series is Helping Syrian Women Settle into a New Home**

*Tayybeh, a Canadian pop-up and catering project powered by immigrants, sells out 150-seat meals in hours*

What is Syrian food? It is *muttabal shamandar*, a velvety dip fragrant with beets, tahini, and olive oil; it is baba ghanouj, a chunky riot of eggplant and bell pepper; it is *kebab hindi*, tender meatballs swaddled in spicy tomato sauce.

To Vancouverites, Syrian food is in part a way to support recently arrived refugees. And to the Syrian women who prepare the food, it is a way to find their footing in a new home.

One year ago, Nihal Elwan founded Tayybeh: A Celebration of Syrian Cuisine. With a \$500 CAD grant from a local foundation, the Cairo-born international development consultant organized what was to be a one-off dinner to connect Syrians and Canadians. Today, Tayybeh (pronounced tie-beh) holds dinners every six to eight weeks, typically selling out the 150-seat feasts within hours. They've also launched a catering company.

“We want to create bridges with different communities in the city,” says Elwan. So far, they’ve cooked in a Palestinian restaurant, church halls, and a grade school cafeteria.

In September, I was one of 160 people at the largest Tayybeh dinner to date, held at the Vancouver Japanese Language School. “[The location] really resonated with us, given the Japanese community were newcomers and that they went through their fair share of adversity,” says Nihal, referring to a period in the 1940s when the government seized Japanese-Canadians’ property and sent them to internment camps.

Under the roof of one community’s resilience, we dug in to help another establish itself. I couldn’t stop spooning up *mloukheye bil jaij*, Middle Eastern greens with chicken. The first bite yielded a silky green reminiscent of tea—slightly tannic, with the texture of chard—that gave way to the richness of a Sunday roast chicken, then a punch of tomato and lemon. That night I dreamed of pomegranates, chicken stew, and nearly fluorescent beet dip.

When I meet Maha Almaarabani a few weeks later, her magenta headscarf and hot-pink Tayybeh apron echo the color of that dip. Originally from Damascus, she came to Vancouver in October 2016, and coincidentally, *mloukheye* is her favorite dish to prepare.

“The stew with greens and chicken?” I ask. My excitement needs no translation. With Nihal acting as interpreter, Maha explains that each Syrian city has a different way of preparing the dish.

A few feet away, Raghda Hassan pauses from stuffing rounds of dough with a cheese-olive mixture to wink at me.

“You tried the recipe from Latakia [where Raghda is from],” says Nihal. As Raghda and Maha debate, she translates. In Latakia, the greens are boiled in water first, while in Damascus they’re pan-fried in ghee for a crunchier texture. In Vancouver, the ladies buy the greens dried, and can only find them in a few Arab stores—a far cry from back home, where Maha got fresh leaves and dried them herself.

Canadian cheese is challenging, too. Nihal says they’ve tried many different kinds, “but they keep saying, ‘it’s not right, it’s not right!’” Meat comes frozen from the halal butcher. When I ask about it, Maha makes a face. “She says everything tastes different here. The meat is almost dry,” translates Nihal.

Still, the ladies power through as best they can. The notion of a recipe, in the Western sense, seems foreign to them; Maha says she has a “breath” for cooking that doesn’t rely on instructions. Another Tayybeh chef, Hasna Shekh Omar, blends dishes and techniques from Idlib, Aleppo, and regions across the Turkish border.

For the ladies, the Tayybeh project is a natural extension of what they’ve done their whole lives: cook and welcome people to the table. It is especially fitting for Hasna, whose seven children are now spread among Canada, Turkey, and Syria. “You see how all these people come to our dinners and they love our food? This is the same that we had [in Syria],” she says through Nihal.

But it’s also something new. Raghda and Maha and Hasna have never worked outside their homes, never mind in a professional kitchen. For them, the company is a gateway, not just to a better income than they’d receive in other restaurant work, but to developing the skills they need in Vancouver: learning English, navigating public transit, and building up a resume.

So what does Syrian food taste like? It tastes like dried greens from the Arabic store, soaked in water like they do in Latakia, melded with stock from too-lean Canadian chicken, and stewed until silky. To Vancouverites, it tastes like a pop-up dinner in a community hall. To the ladies of Tayybeh, it doesn’t quite taste like home. But it tastes like home for now.

END

## INTERNET CATEGORY

### Second Prize (\$100)

**Bianca Bosker**, New York City, published at [www.foodandwine.com/wine/is-terroir-real](http://www.foodandwine.com/wine/is-terroir-real)

### “Is Terroir Real?”

Devin Shomaker’s vineyard is located at an altitude of exactly five floors above sea level. It sits on a roof in Brooklyn’s Navy Yard with views of the Freedom Tower, a public housing project, and a natural gas cogeneration facility topped with two soaring smokestacks. The vines are planted not in the earth underfoot, but in waist-high aluminum planters, created from scratch by Shomaker and his partner Chris Papalia. They have also designed the vineyard’s soil: Far from being found in nature, the mixture is a blend of crushed recycled glass and perlite pebbles that was developed with Skyland USA, a provider of “engineered soil.” It was trucked in from a manufacturing plant in New Jersey, and specifically produced to have a pH of 7.3—slightly basic to accommodate the acid rain that can plague cities like New York. Besides the vines, the roof’s only other nod to nature is a runner of neon green astroturf, which is Shomaker’s homage to a field.

“We’ll be enclosing this back area in turf and making a meadow scene,” Shomaker explained to me, one chilly afternoon in December. He and Papalia, bundled in fleece jackets, had taken a break from dismantling a deck to lead me on a tour of their nearly two hundred vines.

In other settings, these growing conditions might collectively be labeled the vineyard’s “terroir,” a French term you’ve invariably heard mentioned if you’ve ever bought a bottle of wine. But here, at a former warship manufacturing site, the word seems incongruous. Terroir is generally used to describe the ways a vineyard’s natural environment, from altitude to climate, leaves its mark on wines. It’s often effectively synonymous with quality: many critics argue that a hallmark of great wines is that they taste of their terroir. Some contend it’s what makes natural wines so special, or helps explain why certain bottles, like a Grand Cru from Burgundy’s Vosne-Romanée, cost ten times more than others.

So does terroir exist here, at Rooftop Reds, where high-rises outnumber trees?

“Yeah. I mean, of course,” said Shomaker, a spindly 31-year-old with piercing blue eyes and shaggy hair. “I just don’t see why we would splice and dice terroir and say, ‘This’”—he gestured at the rooftop—“isn’t terroir, but a traditional vineyard is absolutely terroir.” Shomaker’s partner looked surprised. “I stand on the opposite side of what he said,” Papalia countered. “There is no existing terroir here. It’s all manmade.”

Their disagreement underscores a confusion that has long plagued the wine world: “terroir” is arguably the oldest, most influential, and most-frequently-used buzzword that no one can quite agree how to define. More than four centuries ago, connoisseurs had already decided that wines could have “a certain smell, a certain taste” derived from their terroir. Yet what exactly “terroir” consists of—and how it might flavor wines—has remained stubbornly elusive and contentious. Many oenophiles stress the link between terroir and “terre,” French for earth, suggesting vineyard bedrock shapes the taste of a wine. “The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content,” asserted German winemaker



Gregor Messmer in a 2014 interview. An international zoning group characterized terroir more broadly as “a complex of natural environmental factors,” while Wine Spectator critic Matt Kramer dubbed it a wine’s “somewhereness.” Then there are those who counter terroir doesn’t exist. Mark Matthews, a viticulture professor at the University of California, Davis, dismisses terroir—“the most controversial myth of wine-growing”—as nothing more than “a shibboleth that establishes an in-group in a world unto itself” and a “marketing ploy.”

Matthews, together with Rooftop Reds founders Shomaker and Papalia, are part of a growing chorus of voices who are pushing the wine industry to reevaluate whether the received wisdom about terroir is correct. In fields from chemistry to anthropology, researchers have at last been giving this thorny concept a sustained, critical look in an attempt to lend greater precision to its meaning, as well as to untangle its effects on the flavors in a glass of wine.

The stakes are high: a more nuanced understanding of terroir—what it consists of, how it alters the finished product, and why it matters—could revolutionize how wine is made. And yet questioning terroir is highly controversial, in part because established producers have a vested interest in its existence: if great, distinctive wine can be produced anywhere, or if certain hallowed environmental inputs are less important than assumed, that could undermine fundamental assertions about what makes for fine bottles. At the very least, it could overthrow the European wine world’s historical hierarchy. The idea of terroir forms the basis for rules that have carved grape-growing regions into distinct appellations. It is the foundation for charging more for a wine from a Grand Cru vineyard than a humble villages plot. And it is closely connected with the romance and mystique of wine. Burgundian winemakers, early champions of terroir dating back to the region’s medieval Cistercian monks, contend terroir contributes to their bottles’ “sacredness.”

Saying that terroir is more or less b.s. is a quick route to unpopularity. Wine importer Thierry Theise has noted, in a what sounds as much a veiled threat as a statement of fact, that “it is an inhospitable place for a person who denies the truth of terroir[.]” Mark Matthews knows this first-hand: “On this journey, I have lost relationships with some colleagues,” he writes in his book *Terroir and Other Myths of Winegrowing*, published last year. The “terroir deniers”—so-called by their critics—stand accused of oversimplifying wine, undermining the artisans who tend to the vines, and ignoring the indisputable flavor differences of grapes grown on disparate sites. But far from reducing wine into a cookie-cutter commodity, this active engagement with the concept of terroir has reinforced how dynamic, complicated, and even mysterious the art of making wine really is.

“I get a bit annoyed when people say ‘Scientists, go home. You’re spoiling everything,’” said Alex Maltman, an amateur winemaker and a geology professor at Aberystwyth University in Wales, who has authored one of the most comprehensive critiques of soil’s contribution to terroir. “The more we try and find out, the more complex the whole thing is, the more respect and admiration I have for it, and the more romantic it becomes.”

Over the past several centuries, the definition of “terroir” has undergone numerous revisions, and its current link to quality marks a relatively recent development. As explored in Amy Trubek’s *The Taste of Place*, Thomas Parker’s *Tasting French Terroir*, and Matthews’ *Terroir and Other Myths of Winegrowing*, terroir has been a continuously evolving idea, one these authors argue could be informed as much by business incentives as concrete knowledge of cause and effect. Though terroir is now

associated with top-tier bottles, through the 18th century, wines with a taste of terroir, or “gout de terroir,” were considered defective. “One says that the wine has a taste of terroir when it has some disagreeable quality that comes to it from the nature of the terroir where the vine is planted,” explained a French dictionary published in 1690. In France’s ancien régime, food doubled as a status symbol that reinforced class hierarchies, and the elite rejected terroir-inflected wines as rustic and impure. By contrast with our current farm-to-table culture, eating “local” was for peasants.

It took until the early twentieth century for terroir to complete its transition from a flaw to a virtue. Vintners from Champagne led the way, claiming their land had special characteristics that lent their wines their distinctive taste. As Trubek explains, drinkers’ love of sparkling wines from Champagne counterintuitively did little to improve the livelihoods of local growers, and the wines’ success actually threatened to devalue the Champagne name—turning it into a commodity that could be made (or knocked-off) anywhere in the world. “The vigneron wanted to retain some proprietary rights to the name champagne, now used all over the globe, so they turned to the soil,” Trubek writes. “The agrarian roots of the movement to create protection for place and products situate the history of terroir.”

In 1905, the region’s growers successfully lobbied for the creation of strict rules—the first of many to come—mandating where (and how) wines must be made in order to bear their place of origin. (It’s for this reason that only sparkling wine from Champagne can technically be called “Champagne.”) Growers in Burgundy, also wary of competition and fraud, joined in the early push to valorize terroir, such that by the 1930s one Burgundian folklorist was marketing the region’s wines as a “subtle emanation from the soil” responsible for locals’ “joie de vivre.” Matthews contends terroir underwent another “dramatic uptick” in usage and prestige after Californian bottles bested some of France’s top wines in the historic 1976 Judgment of Paris. As the French sought to fend off American competitors, they re-emphasized the connection between quality and place in a way that gave France a permanent advantage: New World winemakers could use fine barrels and employ talented vintners, but only Gallic vigneron had France’s exceptional land.

History suggests the celebration of terroir was not purely a reflection of nature’s effect on grapes, but was also shaped by economic needs. Growers championed terroir because “they saw the potential benefits of a foodview celebrating an agrarian and rural way of life,” writes Trubek. (As she sees it, we’re living through another golden age of terroir, as white-collar yuppies embrace artisanal fare as an “antidote” to their “increasingly fast-paced urban lives” and the globalized food system.) California vintner Sean Thackery argues his fellow winemakers extol terroir because it’s good for their bottom line. If growers insist that great wine is made in the vineyard—not the winery—owing to the properties of their land, quality becomes inextricably tied to real estate, rather than to the experts who vinify the grapes. Land that produces high-quality wine can in turn be sold for a high price-tag. “In short,” said Thackery in an interview with the blog Gang of Pour, “billions of dollars depend on acceptance of the concept of terroir, whose most important mineral component is therefore a very large grain of salt.”

But that’s not to say that all wine tastes the same, regardless of where the grapes are grown. Though the meaning of terroir has shifted with the priorities and prejudices of the day, few (if any) drinkers would disagree that wines from different sites take on distinctive characters. “The argument always comes down to, can you taste it or not? And you can taste rocks in your wine, so this bullshit about terroir is just bullshit,” said Alice Feiring, author of the Feiring Line newsletter and a forthcoming book about the role of soil in winemaking. Feiring detects more “saltiness” and “leanness” in wines from granite, and

picks up a “chewiness” and “dense fruit in the middle of the palate” when drinking bottles from heavy clay soils. Less anecdotally, in a 2011 study on terroir, oenologists harvested Riesling grapes from twenty-five vineyards around Germany, then used the grapes to make wines that were evaluated according to color, taste, and smell. The researchers concluded the wines’ flavors reliably varied according to soil type, such that Riesling grown in basalt, for example, produced wines with “smooth acidity” and a “smoky,” “cantaloupe” perfume, while moving to sandstone yielded wines with “harsh acidity” and aromas of “boxwood” and “green grass.”

To explain these nuances, some oenophiles suggest the land may flavor wine the way cumin spices a curry. “Please posit a theory as to why Champagne tasters have spontaneously arrived at tasting terms that include marine images of iodine, oysters, and seafood shells that is more persuasive than the one that says it’s because the vines grow in soil made up of agglomerated sea fossils,” writes Thierry Theise, expressing a frequently-encountered view.

Geologists and plant biologists, though, have pushed back against that idea. In two papers published in the *Journal of Wine Research*, Maltman, the geologist, analyzes why it is scientifically untenable for the soil to influence the taste of a bottle, as though the vines were slurping up minerals from the earth, passing them on to the grape and then getting mixed into the finished wine. The foundation of his argument rests on plant physiology: To grow, grapevines require sixteen dissolved single elements, such as nitrogen, potassium, and zinc. Though often referred to imprecisely as “mineral nutrients,” these elements are not the same minerals that make up the soil—those are complex organic compounds, such as graphite and quartz, that are as difficult for vines to absorb as it is for humans to breathe underwater. “The notion of being able to taste the vineyard geology in the wine—a *gout de terroir*—is a romantic notion which makes good journalistic copy and is manifestly a powerful marketing tactic, but it is wholly anecdotal and in any literal way is scientifically impossible,” writes Maltman.

Even so, scientists posit that geology plays a more complex and varied role in shaping vineyards (and wines) than previously thought. Maltman considers the mineral content of vineyard bedrock a red herring that distracts from more influential, but less visible, natural forces that act on grapes’ character. Different soils drain and retain heat differently, for example. Land topography causes variations in altitude, exposure, angle, and convexity that can expose vines to different airflows, humidity, and mesoclimates—all of which may have a more meaningful effect on taste than the mineral content of limestone versus granite. “You can’t see those things, so we ignore them,” said Maltman, while acknowledging the possibility that soil could still flavor wines in an “indirect” manner science has yet to unravel.

An additional unseen factor contributing to the *gout de terroir* might be the “*airroir*” of vineyards—the contents of the air. When eucalyptus is planted near vines, for example, the minty aromatic compounds in the trees’ leaves can travel onto the grapes, where it can persist in the wine. And though it doesn’t make for sexy copy on labels, there is mounting evidence that microbes have a powerful effect on flavor differences that are traditionally ascribed to other natural conditions, like the soil. Vineyards are home to hundreds of species of fungi, whose population and genetic makeup varies dramatically across growing sites. To examine whether the microscopic living organisms on grapes influence flavor, ecologists at the University of Auckland collected thirty-six strains of *saccharomyces cerevisia* yeast from six regions across New Zealand, then made thirty-six wines—one from each strain—by adding the yeast to separate batches of homogenized Sauvignon Blanc juice.

The researchers found that changing the yeast altered the chemistry and aromas of the resulting wines. For example, certain strains were found to boost compounds responsible for wines' peach and apple aromas; others enhanced the floral notes. "It's very apparent that when you conduct ferments with different types of yeast that you got from different places, they bring different affects to the wine," said the study's co-author Matthew Goddard. His findings were confirmed in follow-up research by the University of California, Davis and University of Chicago. Perhaps someday, bottles' labels will swap their evocative references to chalk and quartz vineyards for promotional copy about their unique strain of *S. cerevisia*.

The living organisms that contribute to a bottle's "terroir" could even extend to people. There is a growing movement, with roots in the past, to expand the definition of terroir to include not only a site's natural characteristics, but also its human heritage. Analyzing the evolution of the France's appellation d'origine system—an outgrowth of the rules pushed by turn-of-the-century Champagne growers—Oxford University professor Dev Gankee sees a shift away from soil and environment as the sole criterion for terroir. Instead, there has been a push to include the cultural "savoir faire" honed over generations—farmers' traditional techniques for limiting yields, treating pests, and aging wines, for example. Bordeaux's renowned Château Haut-Brion embraces this broader understanding of terroir as something created by humans working in collaboration with the earth, calling terroir a "veritable ecosystem where natural conditions have been modified and transformed by man, who throughout the centuries has exploited the land to the best of his ability using what nature has given him."

So what are we left with when it comes to terroir? Is it independent of the human hand, or wedded to it? Natural or cultural? Animal, vegetable, or mineral—or all of the above? What remains appears to be a chameleon term that means everything and nothing at the same time, a concept that conveniently adapts itself to fit any situation or argument. It is clear that "terroir," in its slippery elusiveness, has benefited the wine industry. Yet it's less obvious whether it has been an asset to wine drinkers. Its fuzziness can breed confusion. And the resistance to probing long-held beliefs about terroir may be hampering growers from making better wine. Teasing apart terroir and testing its assumptions doesn't diminish the artistry and beauty of wine. Rather, investigating the nature of terroir through science and careful research can shed light on the indisputable differences that make one plot special, and how to showcase those nuances in ways that might not have been understood.

It's possible that at least one aspect of terroir will soon become clear: Without realizing it, Shomaker and his partner have, with Rooftop Reds, embarked on a radical experiment to test where the natural world ends and the human begins when it comes to terroir. As we prepared to part ways for the day, Shomaker pointed out another rooftop in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, across a gravel parking lot containing trucks and a few dumpsters, that he hoped to use for a second vineyard. From there, said Shomaker, Rooftop Reds could travel just about anywhere, replicating the vineyard's aluminum planters and industrially-engineered soil on buildings across the country.

"We're considering this to be the first franchisable model of a vineyard system in the world," said Shomaker. "One of our big ambitions was to create a vintage that truly represented New York City. But who says that emphasis wouldn't be there for Washington, D.C., for Philadelphia, for San Francisco, for LA, for Austin?"

The earth in which Shomaker plants his vines will stay constant, even as the air, microbes, climate, and water around them may change. And if terroir-driven wines can taste of people as well as place, then perhaps Rooftop Reds' bottles from Washington D.C. will be as mineral as they are ambitious, or the New York City wines acidic, with a touch of aggression.

END

## INTERNET CATEGORY

### Third Prize (\$50)

Heather Arndt Anderson, Portland, Oregon, [www.tastecooking.com/before-guy-there-was-graham/](http://www.tastecooking.com/before-guy-there-was-graham/)

### “Before Guy, There Was Graham”

In his brief but influential television career, Graham Kerr taught people to cook heartily—with lots of clarified butter—and laugh even harder.

If midcentury television food celebrities were a family, James Beard was the aggressive firstborn who paved the way, bossy and prone to petty jealousy. Julia Child was the diplomatic middle child, a people-pleaser and peace-keeper. And Graham Kerr, the baby of the family, was the risk-taker who would do just about anything for a laugh.

Leaping over chairs with wineglass in hand, joking bawdily about Amsterdam’s red-light district or the anatomies shared by a chicken and a woman, the Galloping Gourmet lived up to his moniker as the “high priest of hedonism.” Kerr’s onscreen humor was heavy-handed and coarsely suggestive (holding button mushrooms up to his nipples, for example), but being tall and rakishly handsome (with a British accent to boot) likely excused much of his cheek, if it didn’t enhance it.

His show, a 30-minute cooking program featuring footage of his global travels and instructions for cooking dishes from his destinations—peppered with his trademark droll banter—aired nationally on CBS at the sudsy timeslot of 1 p.m. weekdays to a predominantly female live studio audience. He was a good-looking amalgam of Peter Sellers and Guy Fieri, he was jet set in the golden age of air travel, and his show was a goddamn sensation. In 1971, after two years of recording hundreds of episodes at a breakneck pace, the show abruptly ended when a 16-wheeler speeding down the foggy curves of Highway 101 smashed into the Kerrs’ Winnebago from behind, dislocating Kerr’s spine. The starstruck nurses in the hospital harangued Kerr for autographs, leading his wife to declare the show officially over.

Today Graham Kerr, a youthful and sterling 83, lives in a tidy, modest house in Mt. Vernon, Washington, a rural paradise 60 miles north of Seattle. His custom-built home is dwarfed by his neighbors’ mansions, a point of pride for Kerr. “It’s only 1,400 square feet,” he brags. The home, dubbed Nonsuch Cottage, is as full of character as its owner, with kooky nautical motifs, an accent wall papered in a quiet forest scene, a groovy modular dinette set. His late wife, Treena, laughs in photos throughout the house, and picture windows look out over the tranquil Skagit Valley.

While we chat over the course of a cozy fall afternoon, Kerr prepares an unexpected collation of sensible foods, a time capsule of 1980s gourmet cuisine for the health-conscious: salmon patties topped with timbales of delicata squash from his garden that he’d neatly hollowed and filled with scrambled egg cut with Southwest-flavored Egg Beaters and capped with a half slice of melted pepper jack. (This flavor of Egg Beater is evidently his invention; he tells me he’d asked ConAgra a while back to improve the flavor of their egg substitute, and this was what came of it.)

This is a far cry from the televised version of Kerr, the one who moans ecstatically at a two-inch-thick Florentine steak, or dives into a soup bowl of crème brûlée he's just made, crying, "Oh! it's just a dream! it's divine!" On air he made a classic English treacle tart, smoked eels on toast from Holland, and Jamaican rum-soaked pork pot roast, managing to squeeze about a cup of clarified butter into everything he did. After pendulous swings from lavish abundance in the groovy '60s to ascetic self-denial following his wife's stroke and heart attack in the 1980s (finding evangelical Christianity in between), the decades of moderation look good on the man. Kerr seems as vibrant as ever, and hasn't shrunk an inch of his nearly six and a half feet in height. "Keep this up," I jokingly warn him, "and you might live another 20 years." He politely chuckles. But the thought clearly worries him. This day is his anniversary; he and Treena would have celebrated their 60th had she not passed away a few days shy of the date in 2015. His autobiography, published the same year, is dedicated to her and includes a touching (if somewhat morbid) promise that he's on his way to join her.

On air, part of his shtick was laughing off his frequent cooking gaffs, interspersed with moments of exhibition, like chatting up his audience while chopping vegetables, making a point to cavalierly keep his eyes anywhere but his hands. Like Guy Fieri, Kerr's larger-than-life personality was adored by a wide audience and held a populist appeal, but his colleagues—a clubby group mostly living in the cities of the Northeast—were less than charmed. Much of the culinary "It" clique [MR9] openly derided Kerr's work as schlock. Their reaction was a collective eye roll at his mockery of their refined discipline; his was a light entertainment for the lay user. Food writer Michael Field dubbed him "the Liberace of the food world." New York Times television critic Jack Gould bemoaned Kerr's "cultivation of a suffocating demeanor of haughty cuteness."

Although Kerr's unique combo of boisterous humor and debonair swagger did much to encourage men to enter the kitchen, James Beard found Kerr obnoxious and took sport in throwing shade at any opportunity. He called Julia Child on the phone to lambast Kerr after meeting him for the first time. Beard also went on the record with LIFE magazine in 1969, saying, "I don't think he's a great food authority, and he hasn't done much to increase the cause of good food." (This was particularly rich, considering Beard—who long took money from food companies to produce what we now call sponsored content—began his culinary profession as a hustle for cash when, by his late 30s, his acting career had still failed to take off.)

The ever-magnanimous Julia Child appears to have been the only food celebrity with whom Kerr got along well, and the two remained friends over the years. "I could never jump over a chair!" he says she once told him (doing a spot-on impression of her), while acknowledging with self-deprecation that the only reason his show could compete with hers was his flair for zany acrobatics. Although Child found him "just charming" and said he had a good personality for TV, she later playfully mocked his health-crazed philosophical flip. "Graham is nonalcoholic and ten percent or less fat, which is absolutely what I am NOT," she said during a cooking demo with Kerr in 1996.

Kerr's first cookbook, *The Graham Kerr Cookbook* is as cookable today as when it launched in Australia in 1966 (the American edition was in the works before the show aired). "He had a feverish attention to detail," cookbook author Matt Lee told me over the phone; "his zeal for the scientific method carries through with the rigor applied to his recipes, making [the book] far ahead of its time." This is why Lee and his brother Ted have worked with Kerr on the reissue of Kerr's cookbook (due out in April 2018). They bring back those features from the original Australian edition lost in the American

one; they updated the recipes to reflect modern ingredients availability; they added archival color images from the show's original photographer Bob Peterson; and the new issue includes Kerr's handwritten commentary on the recipes.

Nowadays, Kerr eschews fine wines and cheeses for the ephemeral delights of a Yakima peach in August or the local one-day strawberries ("We grow them here, and they're only good for one day," he softly gushes). He believes in putting "nourishment before delight" and dismisses comfort food as a false idol, saying that it's our memories, not the foods served while we're making them, that are important.

Not surprisingly given his age, Kerr seems preoccupied with his legacy, talking openly about reducing consumption, philanthropy, and faith. Sounding a bit like a hippie sage, he implores us to "search for a way (to) get beyond our own immediate self-interest" and live and behave more altruistically. "And if we could do that in an interesting way," he says, "so that it flexes and doesn't become self-righteous, then I think we could actually see a mechanism of reducing our own personal consumption in order to have something to share with somebody else." He acknowledges that it's all a bit pie-in-the-sky, but he hopes for it nonetheless.

Now in his twilight, Graham Kerr has entered a period of what he calls recalculation. After all the U-turns his culinary viewpoint has taken, I ask him if he's all out of swings. With his eyes sparkling, he tells me that he's working on another book. It's about making changes.

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