

THE Chicago FOODCULTURA CLARION

FoodCultura: The art and anthropology of food and cuisine ANTH 25320



Sweet Home Chicago:
The story of Greek American candy makers

PARDON ME. EAT MY FRIENDS

Chicago Tongue

Guest Artist:
Laura Letinsky

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TAMALE GUYS:

TAMALES AND TAMALEROS IN CHICAGO, FROM 1893 to 2020

Taking your **SANDWICH** on the go?

FoodCultura:

The art and anthropology of food and cuisine

ANTH 25320

by Stephan Palmié

Gentle Reader,

The insert that you just pulled from the *Chicago Reader* is the first of three planned issues of *The Chicago FoodCultura Clarion* distributed in a limited edition of 3000 copies across Chicagoland. Lucky you to have gotten a hold of one!

The *Clarion* grew out of a collaboration between the Barcelona/Miami-based multidisciplinary artist Antoni Miralda and the University of Chicago anthropologist Stephan Palmié. If anthropology and contemporary art have one thing in common, it is the goal to deliberately de-familiarize taken-for-granted ways of being in the world. Anthropologists do so by means of ethnographic comparison, artists by means of aesthetic provocation. Both aim to open up new forms of understanding of the complexities and diversity of human social life, and to encourage critique of the complacency with which many of us take our own lifeways for the way things simply are, or ought to be. Both art and anthropology seek to provide food for thought.

Under the auspices of the University of Chicago's Richard L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, and with the help of a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Miralda and Palmié developed a year-long project centered on an experimental course entitled "FOODCULTURA: The Art and Anthropology of Food and Cuisine" that they held at the University of Chicago in the happier days of the fall of 2019. In the course of that autumn, groups of our students fanned out to do ethnographic research on Chicago's fascinatingly diverse culinary worlds to eventually present collective projects straddling the divide between the arts and the social sciences.

Themes pursued by our students included live butchery and nostalgia, cakes and Bauhaus architecture, the limits of the concept of "taco," home food and elevated cuisine, offends for Chicago's Día de los Muertos celebrations, fried chicken in Chicago as a palimpsest, food chains and individual consumption, restaurant groups and Instagram, and then some. The format of the final presentations ranged from conventional academic papers, poster sessions, photography and video, non-fiction narrative, even a couple of well-thought out meals designed to highlight the groups' research questions and findings (such as a "traif-style" kosher bacon cheese burger as a clever riff on kosher-style food, or a menu of elevated versions of immigrant comfort foods).

We had planned to conclude this collaboration with a one and a half-day symposium to be held at the Chicago Cultural Center, alongside a pop-up show centered on a Chicago version of Miralda's ongoing *Sabores y Lenguas/Tastes and Tongues* project. But then the pandemic struck, making hash of our plans to introduce our project to the wider audience that we had hoped to reach in Chicago's aptly named People's Palace.

Enter *The Chicago FoodCultura Clarion*: a medium for open-ended discussion among artists, anthropologists, historians, food writers, practitioners of the culinary arts, and our students. Though Miralda and Palmié's brainchild, the *Clarion* is very much a collaborative effort of its editorial team consisting of Peter Engler, Eric May, Antoni Miralda, Stephan Palmié, Paige Resnick, and Richard Zhao. Together with our authors we have ventured to cook up a rich and succulent pot-pourri for you, dear reader, which we hope will be – like all good soups and stews – more than the sum of its parts.

In this first of three issues of *The Clarion* you will find essays and images on Southwest Signs's grocery store art, Chicago's tamaros and their history, Greek immigrants in Chicago's candy industry, an essay by Michelin-starred chef Philip Foss on high cuisine and fine dining under pandemic conditions, food still life photography by Laura Letinsky, a Chicago Tongue centerfold by Miralda, a visual hors d'oeuvre of student projects that will be featured more fully in the next two issues of *The Clarion*, and then some. We hope we have whetted your appetite for more to come in our next edition to be released early in the coming year.

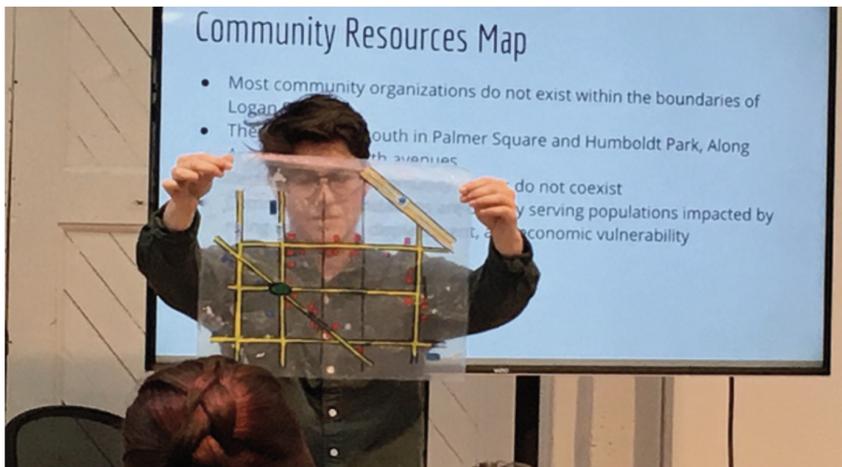
Our thanks for their support of the project go to Zach Cahill and Mike Schuh at the



Kosher Food Ways (Palmié and Miralda carrying the "traif-style" bacon cheeseburger)



Food Chains



Food & Community Responsibility

Gray Center, Chris Skrable at the University of Chicago's Chicago Studies Program, culinary historians Bruce Kraig, Catherine Lambrecht, and Dominic Paeyga, food critic extraordinaire Mike Sula, the *Chicago Reader's* publisher Tracy Bain.

Thanks of a different order go to our extraordinary student food sleuths Rachel Abrams, Hanna Batlan, Eli Bec, Irina Bercu, Mahesh

Bhide, Casey Breen-Edelstein, Nora Burkhardt, Yoon-Jee Choi, Jordan Cooper, Molly Donohue, Alana Ferguson, Sofia Franzon, Zhen Fu, Ayelet Goldman, Noah Goodman, Madeleine Johnson, Rahul Kukreja, Anant Matai, Hunter Morgan, Maya Osman-Krinsky, Lina Palancares, Paige Resnick, Liz Rice, Cleo Schoeplein, Michael Shen, Daniel Simantob, Logan Smith, Isabelle Sohn, Maisie Watson, Nick Wilkins, Evan Williams, Sam Winnikow,

Nancy Xue, Richard Zhao, and Wendy Zheng. Remains to express our gratitude to our graduate ethnographic expert facilitators Hazel Çorak, Alice Diaz Chauvigné, Vanessa Mukhebi, Will Ockendon, Valentina Sarmiento Cruz, and Zach Sheldom, who shepherded the projects to their successful conclusion.



What makes a Taco

The Roesser's Bakery Bauhaus Cake Project



The Plant

Día de los Muertos



Cotton Candy/Inflatable Sculpture

The Camara Eats First

Chef Phillip Foss pouring sub-zero vanilla-infused cream



M&K Live Poultry

Home-cooking



Fried Chicken as a palimpsest

Highlights from dinner discussion

- How does the presentation of food affect our perception and expectation?
- What differentiates elevated cuisine vs. high cuisine?
- How is culture/familiarity incorporated into food?
- How does space and service affect our experience of dining?



Elevated home-cooking

Clarion Editorial Team

Paige Resnick is a nonfiction writer, an amateur yet confident cook, and a very good eater. She grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, lives in Chicago, Illinois, and has a strong Midwestern accent. She writes about food, culture, and her perplexing childhood.

Richard Zhao is a fourth year student studying Economics at the University of Chicago. Originally from Beijing, China and having lived in D.C. and Chicago for 8 years, Richard is passionate about food, cuisine, and the rich culture behind them. In the future, Richard hopes to make a difference in the food and beverage world.

Miralda is an artist whose work since the 1960s has evolved around the object, food, processions, and participatory interventions in public spaces.

Stephan Palmié is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. He works on Afro-Cuban ritual traditions, and likes to think with food.

PARDON ME, EAT MY FRIENDS



by Magnus Fiskesjö

The Thanksgiving turkey pardoning that takes place at the White House every November is an illustration of a certain idea of power: Sovereign is he who decides on the exception: who lives and who dies.

The U.S. president makes an exception for one turkey, letting it live. This opens for roasting and eating millions and millions of pre-frozen turkeys. In this sense, the president also acts as a first-fruit sacrifice mediator, who gives one bird back to the gods, with thanks, so that his people can stay in their grace.

It would seem so, from the annual Thanksgiving Proclamation which is issued just days before, ever since Lincoln.

But it's for show, of course: For starters, it isn't the president that picks out which turkey will live. That's up to the turkey farmers' association, which rotates the honor annually, between different farms in the US, and has a vested interest in the business gimmick of the Rose Garden ceremony. They give the "National Turkey" special treatment, play music for it and carry it around so it won't be too jittery.

Then they fly it to Washington D.C. in First Class, so that it's ready on the Big Day, usually the Tuesday or Wednesday before Thanksgiving Thursday. The President awkwardly waves his hand over it, and declares it formally pardoned. There's usually a few jokes about the turkey, and its back-up friend, a second turkey which is also given a name in an internet contest. It's kept in an "undisclosed location" (their hotel?) in case something goes wrong.

This is clearly a highly important national ritual, which only the president can perform — Bill Clinton was running late once and had to be rushed to his plane in Tokyo so he could make it back to D.C. in time! (and no VP will do).

The ritual elevates two birds to the human level, and shows them the mercy to go with it. Yet when the cameras stop rolling and the photo-op school kids go home, the twin national turkeys are both sent off to a retirement home. They will die there shortly, as today's turkey's are engineered to pack so much meat that their legs can't carry them for very long.

I know of only one case where a pardoner picked their turkey. This was Sarah Palin, in 2008. Shortly after losing to Barack Obama and Joe Biden, she decided to hold her own turkey pardoning ceremony. She went out to a turkey farm in Alaska, waded out in a sea of turkeys waiting to be slaughtered, picked one out, and later declared it pardoned in a makeshift ceremony.

Her attempt to usurp the presidential glow of merciful turkey-pardoning is mostly remembered for how the TV cameras kept rolling while the gruesome slaughter of the other turkeys continued apace, right behind her press conference podium.

Note how Palin helped highlight the intensely political nature of the pardoning. Ever since the pardoning gimmick was first launched, in Alabama in the 1940s, the show has been played up as a mirror of the actual pardoning power over people on death row, which is vested in the governors and indeed in presidents, too. Presidents also launch wars, which is about the same thing.

That exalted power over life, death, and guilt is at the core of the spectacle of sovereignty, and that was obviously what Palin desired. Obama, not so much; like a few other presidents he seemed to wonder why the heck he had to waste time on this weird spectacle. Trump simply likes to be on TV.

Why, then, is this so incredibly important — and a silly joke at the same time? One explanation must be the inertia of tradition: once in motion, it can't be stopped. We must have cranberry sauce, and we must have the turkey pardoned first — this even if the pardoning show is not very ancient at all. It only dates

to when George H.W. Bush suddenly decided to pardon, and not eat, the turkey that had been sent to the White House as a promotional Thanksgiving gift. (He didn't eat the broccoli the veggie farmers sent either. He declared that "I'm the President," and had it sent to the D.C. soup kitchens).

One powerful reason for sticking with the ceremony must be the mesmerizing force of the ritual's play on the real pardoning power placed in the hands of presidents (and governors, but no VPs or lieutenants). Bush himself may have been inspired by the Iran-Contra scandal, and how he pardoned the key people involved. And under his son, Bush the younger, the "joke" was that Saddam Hussein would not be pardoned, but would "roast in the oven."

Another explanation for the mystery lies in how the pardoning anchors the whole Thanksgiving ritual and holiday, which has three components: the president's Proclamation of the holiday (since Lincoln), then the Turkey Pardoning, and the Dinner. The crescendo is still the Dinner, which is framed and reinforced by the first two parts, as an important national event.

The Dinner itself actually goes back to the formal creation of Thanksgiving by Sarah Josepha Hale, the author and activist who was its main architect and chief lobbyist. After the American Civil War, she convinced Lincoln. As Amy Kaplan has shown in her

work on American "Manifest Domesticity," the gendered roles which Hale assigned, of cooking and carving and table seating, was all meant as the core bedrock of a post-bellum re-united nation, which she hoped would be purified, and conquer the world (her original nation-building design also included finishing off the Indians and expelling all former slaves).

The other powerful strand in the national mythology is the fiction of the thankfulness and servitude of the Indians at a mythic First Thanksgiving. This was actually invented only later, fueled by both guilt and nostalgia. Early American settlers were unapologetic about ethnic cleansing and stealing the land; later, the nostalgic, self-serving story of a shared meal developed just as the settler's descendants were working hard to bury the memory of the genocidal King Philip's War and other conflicts that cleansed most of the country of its native inhabitants.

Today, the Plymouth story of a meal shared on equal terms has become a set piece in the contemporary striving for inclusivity and mutual respect. In the many children's books I have seen, it dominates. "Everybody brought something — a poduck," is the message. Only very few children's books or films tell the stark truth about what really happened. And we have James Loewen's marvelous American classic, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which dismantles the Plymouth myth.

There is a long-running competition over this mythic beginning. Even if thanksgiving dinners have of course been eaten on this continent for many millennia, there are ever new places rising to claim to have hosted the First Thanksgiving Dinner, supposedly taking place in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. "In Virginia we ate pigs for the first Thanksgiving!" and "No, it happened in Florida!" These places are of course envious of Plymouth and its tourist fame, and want to place themselves at the beginning of the story. But the story started long before their time.

Thanksgiving dinner really can happen anywhere. Just because it's been captured and framed in a particular way, doesn't mean it can't be liberated from that trap. Let's reset the table.

Magnus Fiskesjö studied anthropology at the University of Chicago and now teaches at Cornell. He is the author of *The Thanksgiving Turkey Pardon, the Death of Teddy's Bear, and the Sovereign Exception of Guantánamo* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003; free download at <http://www.pricklyparadigm.com/titles.html>, Pamphlet no.11), and the follow-up piece on Obama's and Palin's turkeys, "The Reluctant Sovereign: New Adventures of the US Presidential Thanksgiving Turkey," *Anthropology Today* 26.5 (2010), 13-18.

Saint Stomak

On the 16th of October, 2009, the Foundation *FoodCultura* celebrated *Sant Stomak*, the patron saint of metabolic equilibrium, agro-biodiversity, master of conviviality, with the idea of participating in the global discussion of food and the contradictions surrounding it (hunger versus obesity, the undernourishment of processed food, tourism versus diaspora...). In consonance with the anniversary of World Food Day, established by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to raise awareness of the challenge of feeding the world, *FoodCultura* contributes to this goal through its unique perspective which contemplates art and anthropology, taking into account the vast complex of beliefs, values, customs, techniques and representations related to food.

A language that is particular to art allows *FoodCultura* to focus on these reflections through the exploration and combination of symbols and material objects. In 2015, Antoni Miralda, director and co-founder of *FoodCultura* along with Montse Guillén, designed a reliquary with the collaboration of the architects Flores & Prats in the form of a wooden cabinet with gold leafing, inspired by a brass Neapolitan ex-voto which the artist found in the archives of the MUCEM in Marseille. This was the first of many representations of *Sant Stomak* that would spread its cult throughout the world.

This cabinet-reliquary was installed in stand #437 of *La Boqueria* of Barcelona, the oldest food market in Europe. *FoodCultura* transformed the stand into an interactive art center (2015-2018) in which numerous artistic projects related to food were exhibited. Many of the exhibits and performances were the result of *in situ* investigations that explored the relationships of art with food with the idea of connecting *La Boqueria* with other cultural centers and artistic events (MACBA, ACVIC, Massana, EINA, Loop, La Place, and others). Art was placed in a food market and a food market was placed in art, all under the vigil of *Sant Stomak* who would receive in its belly the prayers and offerings of curious visitors and customers as one more aspect of the market's life. On each 16th of October, a special event was organized to celebrate its saint's day. Now the saint is back in Poblenou, the headquarters of *Fundación FoodCultura* in Barcelona, presiding over the vast Sant Stomak library and welcoming interested visitors. It continues to be honored each year on its day.

In 2019, Alicia Rios, a frequent collaborator at *FoodCultura*, organized the saint's day in Cádiz with a new image of the saint. A newspaper created for the occasion, *FoodCultura Cádiz News*, published the programme of activities that was handed out at the entrance next to the "Reticula Stomakalis". The celebration lasted two days in tribute to the Cadiz festive nature of its population and included interactive rituals, projections of stomach imagery, a poetic digestive concert, and a menu of the saint's specialties: tongue, viscera empanadas, chocolate "sausages" from *Saint Caganer* ("Pooper" in Catalan), seasonal pharmaceuticals, and wine. The enthused people of Cádiz venerated the saint with songs and verses thus extending its cult to Andalusia.

Sant Stomak manifested itself this year in its third incarnation in Ferrán Adrià's El Bulli Foundation. Miralda and Adrià chose the restaurant's pantry as the ideal place for Miralda's intervention, baptizing the space as the *Capella Robost* ("Pantry Chapel" in Catalan). Miralda resorted to the original Neapolitan ex-voto, but this time it is monumental, made of wood with glass shelves, gold leafing, curved spoons as handles and LED lighting. This year's celebration in *elBulli1846* included the ritual of the gastric juice (the late Juli Soler's favorite sherry, who created the restaurant along with Ferrán Adrià). The liquid was consumed ceremoniously with a medicinal teaspoon not only lubricating the ceremony, but also emphasizing the healing aspect of food so essential within the concepts of *FoodCultura*. One can think of *FoodCultura* as a vehicle dedicated to the healing of society through cultural as well as physical nourishment. It is no coincidence that the text accompanying the image that was distributed along with the gastric juice in the *Capella Robost* reads: "*Sant Stomak*, be our pharmacy." Our hope is that, in better days to come, the good saint will find its worshippers in Chicago, too.



Pantry Chapel elBulli 1846

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Of agro-biodiversity
Master of conviviality
Be our guide in the world of food and its nutrients.
Make us meditate on the contradictions
Surrounding food in today's society.
Agro-Culture devoured by consumerism.
Artificial nature and the diesel of deforestation.
Protect us from
Food insecurity.
Fast food and obesity.
Teach us to respect the flavour of memory
Through knowledge and taste.
Be our pharmacy.

Image: Elveto, Naples, MUCEM, Marseille collection
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Equipe FoodCultura-Barcelona www.foodcultura.org

Sweet Home Chicago: The story of Greek American candy makers

EXHIBIT AT THE NATIONAL HELLENIC MUSEUM, CHICAGO, 2016

by David Sutton

In an article titled "The Pioneers of Confection in America," Steve Frangos notes the "commanding presence [of Greek Americans] in the confectionary industry, dishing up tons of sinfully sweet treats from behind the counters of their candy stores and ice cream parlors" (Frangos 2004, 1). More recently, Frangos has lamented the lack of scholarly interest in the question of why Greek Americans were so central to the confectionary life of the United States. He suggests, speculatively, that something about Greek American *taste* may have led them into not just the sweet business, but into restaurants, coffee shops, and blended tobacco production in the U.S. (Frangos 2016). He is suggesting here, I believe, that the culture of Greek foodways—or what I refer to in my own work as the "robust food culture" of Greece, in which *taste matters* on a day-to-day level, may have contributed to this central occupation for Greek Americans. This may have developed, Frangos notes elsewhere, out of the felt need of early Greek male migrants to develop cooking skills, which some later turned to business ends: "A point brought up in every family story is that each man learned to cook Greek food and bake bread" (Frangos 2003).

percent of Chicagoans were born abroad or were children of immigrants."

The eight panels appended to the exhibit by the Hellenic National Museum focused on Greek American immigrant confectioners, though with a geographical scope broader than Chicago, extending to the wider Midwest region. These panels tended to touch on themes of family connections and family histories, occasionally broadening into larger community issues.

A panel entitled "The Stefanos Brothers" describes the three brothers who came to the United States from Messina in the 1930s and who went on to "ma[k]e confectionary history in Chicago." The panel briefly tells



Legend has it that Leo Stefanos created his own ice-cream bars in 1956, after a scare, watching his son Michael (pictured here) run after an ice-cream truck.

How does this apply to the confectionary business? Consider the centrality of sweet shops (*zacharoplasteia*) in Greek communities as both places to purchase a tray of *galaktoboureko*, or other gifts to bring to celebrate a name day, and social spaces themselves, which, until recently, were explicitly marked as family and mixed-gender spaces in opposition to the all-male coffee shops. Then there are the spoon sweets, made from anything from quince to carrots, which many women offer as part of home hospitality (see Cowan 1991), and which has become an attractive alternative to buying sweets during the current economic crisis for some women on Kalymnos (where I conduct my ethnographic research). Others recall a pre-World War II Kalymnos, when itinerant candy makers would pass through neighborhoods selling all sorts of sweet treats from their carts.

It is this terrain of Greek American confectionary that was the focus of a recent (autumn 2016) exhibit presented at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago entitled "Sweet Home Chicago: The History of America's Candy Capital." This was part of a larger exhibit developed by the Elmhurst History Museum on the culture of candy in Chicago, with no particular attention to Greek Americans. The National Hellenic Museum adapted the exhibit by adding an additional eight panel displays focusing on the role of Greek Americans in sweet shops and the candy business in the United States.

The tone of the overall Chicago exhibit was, not surprisingly, nostalgic, meant, no doubt, to capture the way that childhood memories can be encapsulated in candy; the stress is on telling the history of candy making in Chicago while presenting photographs and objects that will, perhaps for many, act as a Proustian madeleine in unlocking "the vast structure of recollection" (cited in Sutton 2001, 84). Thus one panel on "Serving Unique Audiences" presents a section including images of Willy Wonka products marketed to children, licorice as a medicinal "adult" candy, and the popularity of chocolate bars for school fundraisers. The same panel also includes information about vitamin-infused candy as evidence of Americans' enthusiasm for vitamin supplements earlier in the twentieth century, as well as an image of Charlie Chaplin, from the film *The Gold Rush*, eating his boot, which was made of licorice and provided by the American Licorice Company. Another panel highlights the role of immigrants in Chicago candy making with several pictures and objects from candy makers such as Bunte Bros. and Boves-Allegretti, and accompanying text noting that "Gustav A. Bunte, born in Germany, was one of dozens of immigrants who opened confectionary businesses in Chicago. By 1890, 79

the story of Dove Candies, Joy Candies, and Cupid Candies (a few objects including candy molds are included in a nearby display case). Leo Stefanos opened Dove Candies.

He was the inventor of the ubiquitous Dove Bar of ice cream covered with bittersweet chocolate, was "practically an overnight success." The eventual sale of Dove by the inventor's son to M&M/Mars Inc. is presented as a further success, "making it possible for people all over the world to enjoy his father's creation." Another Stefanos brother, Polychronos, or "Paul," brought with him, presumably from his home village, recipes for fudge and caramel and named them "Turks," (one of the few references to intercommunal relations, even, in this case, based on the stereotype of Turkish dark skin). He opened Cupid Candies, which flourished in different Chicago neighborhoods before becoming newly relevant in later decades as they contracted to produce Marshall Field's famous "Frango Mints" line.

The theme of entrepreneurial business success repeats through a number of panels. [I] For example, the panel entitled "Gayety's Candies" highlights the fact that United Airlines chose it from among 45 international competitors to produce chocolate truffles for their premium service flights. This frames the



James Papageorge with his nephew (left). Elias "Lee" Flessor (Top right). Elias "Lee" Flessor (1984) (Bottom right).

humble beginnings of Gayety's (named after a local movie theater), once again a story of early twentieth century migration (from Aleppo in Tripoli) and family continuity, as Gayety's built its business around proximity to Chicago's South Side steel mills. Even after the steel mills closed, Gayety's revived its business in suburban Lansing, playing on



nostalgia for the old-fashioned ice cream parlor: "with its comfortable booths, traditional ice cream tables and picture gallery, Gayety's continues to be the place where everyone is treated like royalty."

One panel departs from the Midwest: "Chocolat Moderne" describes a "New York Greek revival." Joan Coukos grew up in New York, the daughter of immigrants from Lesbos. She recounts memories of her favorite foods both eaten at home with her family and on trips to Greece. But it was on a trip to Belgium where she began to learn the art of chocolate making. After twenty years in banking, she opened Chocolat Moderne, a high-end, artisanal chocolate shop to much critical acclaim. In Coukos's case, the connection with tradition is more emblematic than direct, though she does feature a "Greek revival" chocolate line, decorated with Ancient Greek vases and geometrical patterns and made with "authentic Greek ingredients." Chocolat Moderne seems to



represent the ethnicity of choice, described in the following quotation from Coukos herself: "I wanted to look to my own roots and [I] realized that many new, upscale, trailblazing Greek restaurants were opening, with chefs who were being recognized by the restaurant world at large, not just as artists within their ethnic cuisines." This is also the one panel that focuses on the role of a female entrepreneur in the confectionary world, which raises questions about the association of sweetness itself with femininity. Not to deny that Greek men may love their sweets! But sweetness, itself, is gender marked in Greece—and elsewhere—as Cowan has persuasively shown in her ethnography set in northern Greece in which she argues that by ingesting sweet substances, "Sohoian girls and women literally produce themselves as properly feminine persons. Consuming sweets, they do what they 'should' (observe the etiquette of guest-host relations) as well as what they 'want' (since they are thought 'naturally' to desire sweets), a conflation of moral propriety and desire that obscures the coercive aspects of such consumption" (184).

Aside from the question of taste, as noted by Steve Frangos as well, it would be interesting in the future to consider the relation-

ship of Greek American confectioners to the tradition of sweet consumption in Greece itself. "Sweet Home Chicago" makes clear that Greek American confectioners have not been working in a so-called ethnic ghetto of food traditions defined by Greekness, but have rather, from the beginning, in one way or another, developed their professions in a recognizable American context of soda fountains, candy, and ice cream. A more complex picture, however, could no doubt be portrayed in more explicitly drawing out some of the Greek ingredients, tastes, and social practices that tie the sweets to identity and the reproduction of cultural life.

In viewing this exhibit, I found it hard not to look wistfully across Halsted Street to the Pan-Hellenic Pastry Shop, with its offerings of *kourabiedes*, *galaktoboureko* and *baktlava*, and to wonder why it was not included in the exhibit. It, too, was founded by immigrant siblings who learned their craft without explicit professional training: "It's just something that's done by tradition. You grow up learning about these things" notes founder Louis Manolakos (Cantrell 1991). Perhaps it is because this story only stretches back to the 1950s, when Louis first attempted to open a pastry shop in Montreal. He found his Greek customers lacking money to spend to support his business, unfortunately, so, in 1973, he moved it to Halsted Street. The Pan-Hellenic Pastry Shop's menu offers a lovely mix of identifiable Greek sweets alongside other bakery classics such as Black Forest Cake, as well as the owner's own creations such as Louie's cookies: a chocolate and walnut meringue combination with fudge in the middle.[II] Any consideration of Greek sweets also must include *koliva*, the Greek funeral food (made from boiled wheatberries, nuts, almonds, pomegranate seeds, and other ingredients covered with a layer of sugar) and served at memorial services for the dead and on All Souls Day. With *koliva* we see how sweets play a central role in the identity and memory of the community (Sutton 2003), not to mention how they are gender linked: on Kalymnos, for example, they're invoked by wives as threats to their husbands: "Watch out or I won't make *koliva* in your memory after you die!" One wonders whether bakeries such as these, or even more "Americanized" ones portrayed in this exhibit, provide *koliva* for memorial ceremonies (*mnimosina*) in the United States. As much as we learn from "Sweet Home Chicago," it would be interesting to know what impact tastes for *koliva*, *melomakarona*, or *kadaifi*—and their corresponding social spaces and cultural practices—might have on the ongoing reproduction of a sense of what it means to be Greek American in the twenty-first century.

This essay was originally published in *Ergon Online Journal of Greek American Arts and Letters* <https://ergon.scienceonline.com/>. A complete version of the essay including a discussion of all 8 panels can be found there. Thanks to Yiorgos Anagnostou for permission to reprint here.

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- [I] For a discussion of the narrative of entrepreneurial success among Greek Americans, see Anagnostou 2003. "Entrepreneurial genius" is the phrase used in a short description of the exhibit which appeared in the Greek American newspaper *The Greek Reporter* (Kolasa-Sikiriadi 2016).
- [II] <https://dccc.com/places/pan-hellenic-pastry-shop-chicago-us/>. Note that the shop closed in May of 2017, but the owners hope to reopen in a new location and offering an expanded menu in May of 2017. See: <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/2017/05/31/greektown/pan-hellenic-bakery-closes-greektown-louie-manalokos-helena-james-athens-greek-american-taste/>



The Chicago Tongue is a visual and poetical portrayal of the Culinary Topography of Chicagoland. The pictures are the symbolic taste buds. But as there is "no accounting for taste," yours may be different. If so, please send your photos, ideas, or texts to thechicagoclarion@foodcultura.org and we'll try our best to incorporate them in the next issue of *The Clarion*. We want our paper to be as open and interactive as our readers want it to be. So don't be shy; send them along!

BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH

by Phillip Foss

I'm not well versed in Shakespeare, but the Soothsayer's premonition to Julius Caesar to "Beware the Ides of March," was on my mind as I walked out to the garage to procure liquid nitrogen. It was mid-menu on March 15th at my Chicago based, Michelin-starred restaurant, EL Ideas. This service would be the final one for our foreseeable future, as earlier that day our state's restaurants had been mandated to close on account of Covid-19. As I had done almost every service over the last decade, I took a drag of weed from my vape pen as the snake-like, metal hose loudly screeched liquid nitrogen from the five-foot tall, cylindrical dewar. Smoke billowed from my lips and steam from the nitrogen as the almost 300 degree below zero liquid met our much warmer atmosphere.

The liquid nitrogen is used to make the ice cream for our signature redux of the Wendy's classic: dipping French fries into a Frostee, inspired by my two daughters. The concoction is an interactive tableside explosion of hot and cold combustion, and the course had become ubiquitous with our dining experience. Small cubes of thrice fried French fries stay miraculously crispy under a hot potato leek soup, and along with the ice cream, all the basic elements of the hot and cold and sweet and salty original version remain.

The feeling of the extreme hot and extreme cold meeting in the mouth for the first time is a sensation unlike any other. You half expect your mouth to be either burned by the hot soup or frozen by the ice cream, but instead, one balances the other to the perfect temperature. If you know what you're doing, you can even make steam come out of your nose like a fire breathing dragon. To add a visceral shock to the experience, when the guest submerges their spoon in the glass and the sub zero ice cream collides with piping-hot soup, steam erupts from the glass with the fury of a geyser, and the whole room fills with a fajita-like, CRACK! Surprise and smiles inevitably wash over the faces of even our most stoic guests, and no matter how bad a day I may have had, looking back at the room as I walk away from the table almost always improves my mood.

So I wasn't blind to the difficulty I'd have serving this course for what felt like the final time. But I wasn't yet ready at that moment in the garage, so instead my mind went down a darker alleyway. As the liquid was dispensing and the weed sidetracked my thoughts away from the sadness of closing, I began to think of what it would take to protect my wife, kids, business, and home if things got totally out of hand.

Back in pre-pandemic times, my fellow chefs and I had been joking about what we would do in the case of a zombie apocalypse. The thought was that we'd rendezvous at the restaurant and then travel up to Michigan, hitting up a cache of guns one of our chefs knew of. I'd never shot a gun before in my life, but having them seemed like an important step in protecting my family if things really went haywire. So this playful exchange felt real as I walked back from the garage and into the kitchen.

As I began dispensing the ice cream base into the liquid nitrogen, I casually asked one of the chefs if he was still game to get the guns.

He stopped in his tracks, looked me in the eyes, as if *he* were the chef and *I* the *commis*, and said, "Chef, what do you need a gun for?"

"To protect my family," I replied, defensively and immediately. I felt the weight of the implication, but said nothing more as we were now carrying the course out to the dining room.

Once each guest had a glass in front of them, I stood at the partition that divides the dining room from the kitchen, and explained the course for what felt like the final time.

"This course in front of you is inspired by my two daughters..." I began.

My voice cracked and I gagged on the next words, engulfed by my somber reality. I looked back at the chefs in the kitchen to see if someone could throw me a lifeline, but looking to chefs for emotional understanding in the middle of a service is like asking a hungry pit bull to let go of a bone, so all I received were incredulous looks.

I turned back to the room, and without air in my lungs, managed to hastily whimper out the rest of the description.

"Super crunchy French fries at the bottom of the glass... hot potato-leek soup over the top... and liquid nitrogen poached vanilla ice cream on top of that."

I mimicked the motion and told the guests to dip their spoons to the bottom of the glass.

The guests obeyed, and the steam and sound filled the room as it had so many times before. It felt like a knife lodging deep in my back as I walked away from the room, not bothering or caring to look back for the smiling faces. But as the show must always go on in a restaurant, I composed myself the best I could as the other chefs were putting away the ingredients and getting ready for the next course. I calmly walked over to the young chef I was speaking with before.

"On second thought, maybe we don't need any guns around here."



Illustration by Timothy Foss

"I think that's a really good decision, Chef!" The betrayal of Covid had only begun.

Having just self-published a culinary graphic novel in late 2019 with my cousin, comic artist Timothy Foss, I had been publishing some freelance writing as an abstract means of marketing the book. I had just switched gears from writing on the dismal state of self help amongst chefs to making some dire predictions about what the arrival of Covid might do to the restaurant industry. What seemed most obvious at the time was that those of us who'd turned our noses up at doing takeout food were about to be served up a big ol' slice of humble pie... in a to go container. Like it or not, we would need to trade in our Michelin starred plate-ups on fine porcelain for soup hall-style rationing in cardboard boxes.

Nearly a decade ago, EL Ideas came to life in the commissary kitchen I had been renting for a food truck called the Meatyballs Mobile. So when Covid shut down the restaurant, returning to driving meatballs around town seemed logical. It emboldened me to know that I had already gone from low end cooking to high end once, so big deal if I have to go back. Besides, if there was ever a time that the world needed 'Meatyballs,' it was now. My two chefs and I took Monday off to recharge, and on Tuesday we met back at the restaurant. With only a little over 24 hours to close our restaurant, one of the unsung early challenges of the lockdown was that many of us were left with large and perishable inventories in our refrigerators. Hoping as much of it would find its way into bellies as possible, I instructed the chefs to come up with possibilities for an opening menu, and to freeze, preserve, or donate the rest. While they took care of that, I went to Restaurant Depot to buy to go containers for the truck.

As soon as I had paid for the supplies and pulled back out onto Division Street, I realized there was an inherent problem with my idea: people would surely congregate around the truck for their orders, and this would put myself and others at risk for getting sick. I arrived back at the restaurant deflated; this new thing called 'curbside takeout' would be our only means to generate revenue. Dylan Edwards, the chef who performed my mini-intervention during our last service, informed me after the shift that he was leaving to spend the lockdown with his family.

After the realization that the food truck would not be seeing the road, I went into an emotional cubby hole as a shell shocked soldier

might. The battle plans had gone to hell and I felt clueless. Our first menus were prepared mostly by Chef Josh Mutchnick, and I served more as his sous chef than the other way around. My wife and partner, Akiko Moorman, was not only deep into her second term in the nursing program at Rush University, now she was also taxed with restructuring the reservation and financial models for our business. Our dining room manager, Bill Talbott, now had to figure out the complicated logistics for doing takeout. If not for their support and others, I likely would have closed up shop immediately. As our guests pay before they dine with us, watching the bank account hemorrhage from tens of thousands of dollars in refunds added to the suffering.

But having a very small business allowed us to pivot quickly, and I am proud to say we didn't miss a single day of service or lay off a single employee. I felt a sort of survivor's guilt as I watched the pleas of my friends, colleagues, and suppliers posting gofundme pages for their teams and businesses, but what could I really do with that other than deal with it in therapy?

Long ago, my father shared a useful anecdote that breathes new life into the 'ready, aim, fire' mantra. Unlike firing a gun, when launching a business, it is more wise to have a 'ready, fire, aim' approach. The success of EL was not because I envisioned what it became, but more because I listened to what it wanted to become. The same rang true for curbside dining.

We had long been charging \$155/person for our tasting menu, so we were truly clueless on how to value our new to-go style cooking. We randomly priced our first curbside takeout menu at \$42 for three courses. And though we did okay, the entire team agreed we'd increase sales if we lowered our price. So after a good deal of back and forth and some hurt egos, we finally agreed that we would instead charge \$24 for two courses.

Business increased dramatically, and in juxtaposition to most everyone else I knew, I found myself working much more once the lockdown began. Side by side with the fear and trepidation within, a more courageous inner voice told me it was better to work harder and make less than to not work at all and make nothing.

Though our Michelin starred yacht may have capsized, the liferaft of takeout business appeared to be enough to keep us

afloat. Cooking big batch food in army pans brought me on a nostalgic trip back to my food truck days, and it also felt good to not have to perfectly dice all of my vegetables. At its height, we were serving about 160 guests on a weekend night. And though we were immensely relieved to be approved for the PPP (Payroll Protection Program), more restaurants were about to get into the takeout game. With their arrival on the scene, sales decreased dramatically.

And while the waves of returning competition may have wet the deck of our curbside liferaft, the murder of George Floyd hit with the force of a tsunami. Sales disappeared, but silly things like restaurants didn't matter anymore. A day of reckoning felt like it had arrived for centuries of injustice, and I did my best to listen.

Adding to the deafening roar of public outrage and helplessness, Abe Conlon, a very good friend and James Beard Award winning chef/owner of Fat Rice here in Chicago, wound up closing his restaurant after some accusations of racism came down on him through social media. His ex-wife and business partner, Adrienne Lo, who is also a very good friend of ours, was taken down with him. Finding a place of balance between not simply dismissing the allegations together with genuine compassion for our friends, only tightened the already suffocating emotional tightrope. On a personal level, the closeness of the matter resulted in a more in depth effort to learn from their experience.

My hometown of Milwaukee is one of the most segregated in the country. Just like my mom before me, I was a child of a family that moved out to the suburbs when African-Americans moved in. I'm embarrassed to say that even as a young adult, I couldn't understand how NWA and Ice Cube could feel so much anger toward those who've sworn an oath *'to serve and protect'*. I would soon develop an appreciation for the musical genre, and the Rodney King tragedy began the long process of becoming more aware. Still, my restaurant has been guilty of the cultural appropriation of hip hop music since day one.

EL is located on a nondescript, dead end street in a little-known part of Chicago, and our setting is about as urban as fine dining gets. We're not far at all from downtown, but to dine with us is the only reason most of our guests would ever venture into our part of town. Playing off of this vibe, we became well known for playing loud hip-hop during the dining experience. So filtering through our many playlists during prep days was sobering. And even though I've concluded that almost every song in our popular songbook has been appropriated from Black music in one way or another, I had to draw the line somewhere. To make sure guests were always served fresh ingredients, I used to tell an impressionable rhyme to young cooks, *'when in doubt, throw it out.'* This became the mantra for which songs to remove from the playlist.

So while chaos rippled through the streets around us, sales dropped to only a single handful of takeout orders per night. But as much bigger things were at play, it would've been hard for me to care less about business. And though it was a very sad time, there was something cathartic about being powerless.

Up until this point, I had been highly proactive in publishing articles and connecting with our client base on social media and our email blast. I would write personal and heartfelt snippets about what we were going through, and how we were going to keep changing and persevere. Now, very much on account of the social media nightmare our friends went through, feelings of fear and trepidation overtook my marketing sensibilities, and I went into a state of depression and a prolonged period of silence.

About a month later, another colleague and friend - Ryan McCaskey of Michelin two-star Acadia - had a much different, yet equally damning set of circumstances drag him into the tar and feather pit as well. He's actually facing legal allegations, and his restaurant has yet to reopen.

Though we should be well aware by now of white privilege and how that oppression has benefitted so many of us, there is also a very real *'chef privilege'* my colleagues and I have also known. There is no excuse for acting poorly, and we are all a product of our choices, not our circumstances. Still, it's a real conundrum that those of us who cook good food have been given a free pass for acting like assholes for so long. As I've learned from years of therapy, hours of daily meditation, and satirizing my own out of control ego by writing the aforementioned graphic novel, learning to be okay with not being okay is way more daunting of a task than it sounds. Adding to the challenge, most of us who make careers and thrive in the chaos of kitchens, found ourselves there in the first place because we were a legitimate mess as kids.

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Guest Artist:

Laura Letinsky

Silver sparks dull on the wrinkly belly of an overripe apricot's skin molting visually into the mottled edge of the tablecloth. Eliding the lens' single point perspective with contradicting spatial cues, I aim to unsettle the picture's authority. Not the usual temptation of a cornucopia awaiting consumption, my still life photographs are of what is left over just as the photograph itself is always after. My subject is this resist - what is held on to, and what can't be gotten rid of?

Seeing isn't flat except for in rare, sometimes unfortunate conditions such as for Cyclops. Also unlike a picture, seeing is not still. We are bodies perambulating alongside other bodies, buildings, and things. Seeing is not touching but is from the same part of the brain. Yet, knowing through experience is not to be trusted; "Seeing touching tasting are in the deceived," wrote St. Thomas Aquinas. Seeing is apprehension both in the sense of taking in as well as its anxieties and, the photograph, like Lot's wife who can't resist looking back, or the recipient of Medusa's gaze, a sight transfixed.



Truth was in God's whisperings but with Catholicism's Latin falling on illiterate ears, the turn to the visual was necessary even as it was suspect. Picturing, like sight itself, is not neutral or natural. Don't look now. Don't look away. Who you lookin' at? In love and all I've got is a photograph. Photographs are the apotheosis of a long trajectory of image-making to seduce and cajole. From biblical doctrine to how to make food/bodies/home that look good on Instagram, images tell us, sell us, how to see, how to be.

Mama told me not to look into the eyes of the sun. Even when the moon is blocking out almost all but a tiny sliver of the sun it's still bright enough to carve out pieces of your retina but too small to cause pain.



Word on the Street: The hand-lettered art of Southwest Signs

An interview with Chuck Wilmarth by Eric May



Alberto Aguilar "Traducción/ Translation", 2020

The fine folks at Southwest Signs, a 58 year old shop in Chicago's Clearing neighborhood, specialize in hand painted paper signs. Over the past ten years, I've developed a warm relationship with owners, Carol and Dan Kamba, and Carol's brother, Chuck Wilmarth, who does most of the painting. We speak a shared language of streets and neighborhoods: Kedzie, Pulaski, Beverly, Morgan Park, in appropriate Sout' Side Chicago accents, of course. I grew up on the Southwest side and have memories of gazing out the car window at the calligraphic rhythm of hand painted signage, cruising down Cicero and Harlem Avenues.

I started to pay closer attention to the artform of these signs as I developed my art practice, which explores the culture, celebration, and politics of food. I tried my hand at painting a few signs myself, but I had a really hard time with the spacing and now I know I didn't have the right brushes. My friend, Southwest Side artist Alberto Aguilar, was making dazzling artworks in the style of hand painted signs with bi-lingual puns and abstract splashes of color. It turned out that he was outsourcing the work to a sign shop on 63rd street and he was generous enough to share their number. I was thrilled to find a master to paint the lettering for my projects.

Chuck Wilmarth has been painting in what is referred to as the "Chicago style" of hand lettering for nearly four decades. The style is fluid and lyrical, though bold and eye-catching, with a neat and organized layout. If you ever have the pleasure of watching Chuck paint, his technique flows from his brush with finesse and confidence. Although he is shy to admit as much, Chuck truly is an artist.

Eric May: How did you get your start? How and when did you learn how to hand letter?

Chuck Wilmarth: Well it was in 1971, I was a senior in high school. We had a family friend who had a sign shop. I needed some cash, being a senior. I was just like a gofer, cleaning up and doing this and that. And they asked if I wanted to learn how to paint a sign. It was Mr. Petrizzo and Don Miller, they were the two [owners]. At that time, it was hand lettered stuff and also silk screening. They had me learning silk screening first and then we went on to lettering. I had never thought I would do this. I liked a couple things about it – I liked that everyday was something different and I liked the thought of creating something. And I just liked the atmosphere in the sign shop – we're goofing around, talking. People would come in and

talk to us as we're working. Like sitting in a barbershop, Bob always said. I don't think of myself as artistic, I think of myself mainly doing letters. As I started progressing, I just tried to pay attention to what they were doing – these are guys that were painting so long and were so good. And they each had their different style. Don was a real artist – he also painted beautiful paintings, still does. Bob was mainly a letterer.

EM: When did the shop, Southwest Signs, open?

CW: Well at that time when I was working for them, they called it Sign Center. And then Don moved out of state and Bob moved the shop over to, was it 65th and Kedzie?

Dan Kamba: No, we still were working out of his garage for a while.

CW: And then he changed the name to Southwest Signs, because we were on the Southwest Side of Chicago. He had a converted garage that he turned into a sign shop. But that was too small and we were getting more accounts so we moved to 65th and Kedzie and we were officially Southwest Signs.

DK: That was 32 years ago.

CW: I think it was longer than that.

EM: So when I started to get interested in producing these signs for my artwork, there was a grocery on Western in the Bucktown area that had the signs and I got the number for their guy. He was a nice guy who worked out of his van, cranking them out. His style was quick, he had a touch, but they weren't as neat and refined as yours. I see a lot of that

of these guys who do it from their garage or their van, I can tell they're not using sign painter brushes, they're using foam brushes or something like that. At our old shop, other sign painters would come in and we'd talk shop. Because of the economy back then, nobody was afraid that someone was gonna take someone else's store. It was a lot of collaboration and a style did evolve back then. The style here in Chicago is the color scheme first – the basic purple, bright red. And black, we used to do a lot of black lettering and that was mainly for the Greeks and the Italians who had the grocery stores. But when other nationalities started having grocery stores, or the younger generations, they didn't want black lettering. You know the purple and the red and that chrome yellow look. When I first started, we never used fluorescent colors. Until finally we just realized, to keep up with the different nationalities that like brighter signs, we started incorporating that. And then what's prominent on the sign – you know if I'm doing a sign for government-inspected assorted pork chops, I know the thing that I'm gonna make big is the pork chops. I've seen new sign painters, they'll highlight words that I wouldn't have highlighted – they only put "US government inspected" because the city requires you to put that. And also the little flourishments, I had to learn about that. I used to see signs with little stars or something, you take a brush and do an asterisk thing. I learned working with Don, we used to work on upright boards – the easels were at a slight angle but everything was upright. And the consistency of the paint was different. Don would always drip and he'd always hide it with a little flourishment, a little star or something. Bob would say you could always tell Don's signs because they had stars. If I dripped on a sign, I would some-

ALL THE LETTERING OF THE CHICAGO FOODCULTURA CLARION HAS BEEN DONE BY CHUCK WILMARTH

DK: It's dropped way down because all the mom and pop grocery stores have basically disappeared. You know the larger grocery stores are not into that. If they're independent we still do them, but corporations, we don't do so much.

CW: Do you know Pete's Produce? I did Pete's Produce when they started, they were a little fruit stand on North Avenue in a converted gas station. And now they're big. I do grocery stores. We do a lot of real estate – if they don't need a permanent sign: for lease, for rent, for sale signs, I do a lot of that. And a lot of fast food restaurants.

EM: I know you do digital printing too, would you say that the printing is replacing the painted signs?

CW: To a big degree, yeah.

DK: What happens here is a dilemma – you can hand letter just about anything, however the cost at a certain point becomes cheaper to print than it is to hand letter. You're talking about labor costs. If Chuck is going to hand letter a menu board with a hundred items, that's going to take him days to do, but I can design it and print it in an hour. The printing comes in cheaper than doing it by hand. It's a labor cost.

EM: I've noticed there's younger creative types who like handcrafted stuff, so it seems like there's a new appreciation for the work you do. I was introduced to you by Alberto, who's an artist, but I've noticed lately a few



Eric May "Hot Mix: An Exploration of South Side Foodways", Ground Floor exhibition at Hyde Park Art Center, 2012



Alberto Aguilar "Call to Awareness", 2016

quicker, messier style around town. I'm wondering if you could talk about your style and the Chicago style of sign painting.

CW: I remember both Don and Bob would tell me with paper signs there is the quick lettering, but the key was layout and readability. Sometimes guys get so sloppy or wacky with their letters that it's not really quickly readable. So they taught me a technique where you crisp up your letters. I'd do a sign and they'd say, "Yeah, but look at the edge here, you want to sharpen that up a little bit." The problem today is that a lot

times redo it. Don wouldn't, he'd just keep going like a madman. That's the Chicago look. Other cities, I've seen signs from New York on Pinterest and the lettering is a little more script type. And I don't do that too much. They always put the main item on an angle – they'll put "pork chops" going that way. That's their style.

EM: Are most of your clients grocery stores?

CW: It used to be, I'd say, about 80% when I first started, now it's much less. What would you say 20%? 10%?

folks I know who are art world-adjacent, but are actually more in food and hospitality, businesses like Marz Brewing and Michael and Penny at The Storehouse [in Galien, Michigan]. I wonder if those folks saw your work through Alberto and me. And I know that you've worked with other creative clients out of state. Is that kind of business growing?

CW: I would say yeah, in a way, it's growing – it's not that they give us big jobs but they're happy to have a source for hand-lettered things

(continued on p.12)



ConstructLab "How Together" Chicago Architectural Biennial, Chicago Cultural Center, 2019. Photo credit: Peter Engler



Chuck Wilmarth painting in the shop

TAMALE GUYS

by Peter Engler

For some twenty years, until Chicago's bars were closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, drinkers in the gentrified neighborhoods of Ukrainian Village, Wicker Park, and Bucktown eagerly anticipated the late-night visits of Claudio Velez. Carrying his trademark red Igloo cooler and softly calling out, "Tamales, tamales," he was almost universally known as the Tamale Guy. At some taverns, his arrival was greeted with cheers from drinkers looking for sustenance without having to leave their barstools. Most of his customers probably didn't realize the Tamale Guy was carrying on a nocturnal Chicago tradition over a century old. Perhaps surprisingly, the story of tamales in Chicago begins in the 1890s, well before the city had a sizable Mexican population.



Claudio "Tamale Guy" Velez in action at the Map Room in September 2006. PHOTO CREDIT: Oscar Arriola



Claudio "Tamale Guy" Velez in action at the Map Room in September 2006. PHOTO CREDIT: Oscar Arriola

tamales, but selling home-made tamales has long been a common route for the city's new arrivals to get started in business, even to this day. For well over a century, vendors of tamales have been a common sight on the streets and in the taverns of Chicago.

Claudio Velez got his start apprenticing to an older tamalero in Acapulco and came to Chicago in the late 1990s where he resumed the business he knew. Tamaleros have long been fixtures in diverse Chicago neighborhoods, but Claudio was among the first to effectively target bars catering to a young and affluent non-Hispanic clientele. This was greatly facilitated by the emerging social media platforms. In the early days of Twitter, I remember thinking the TamaleTracker was one of the few worthwhile uses of the new medium. Even without his direct involvement, the Tamale Guy became something of a social media star in Chicago.

Year after year he continued his business, enlisting more family members to make tamales during the day, while he followed and expanded his route at night. This suddenly came to a halt in mid-March 2020 when Governor Pritzker mandated closing all Illinois bars and restaurants because of the escalating coronavirus crisis. With his usual workplaces gone, Claudio turned to home delivery and selling at pop-up events. Some of these pop-ups in the West Loop led to a series of anonymous complaints which in turn led to a number of cease-and-desist orders from the city, in part because he was operating without proper licenses.

Word of the Tamale Guy's plight spread on social media leading one of his admirers to set up a GoFundMe page which attracted nearly \$35,000 in donations, over three times the initial goal. This outpouring of support allowed Claudio to think more seriously about opening a restaurant, long a goal of his. He had been considering opening in one of the western suburbs with a large Mexican population (and with lower rents), but now turned his sights to more expensive neighborhoods where his usual customers are. Wasting no time, he and his new partners, Pierre and Kristin Vega, settled on a recently-closed restaurant in Ukrainian Village. Tamale Guy Chicago opened on August 13 and quickly sold out of their first batches. Claudio realizing his life's dream was a truly heartwarming story, so welcome amid the year's steady stream of dismal news for Chicago restaurants.

Within two weeks of opening, however, Claudio was stricken with a serious case of COVID-19 and required hospitalization. Another GoFundMe campaign was established to help with his medical expenses and the restaurant closed for precautionary quarantine. The restaurant has reopened and Claudio is recuperating. One can only hope it won't be too long before he makes a full recovery and puts in occasional late-night appearances at Chicago's taverns, just as generations of tamaleros before him.



TAMALES AND TAMALEROS IN CHICAGO, FROM 1893 TO 2020

Before the World's Columbian Exposition opened in May 1893, José María Velasco, celebrated Mexican artist, arrived to supervise the hanging of some paintings. During his two-month stay, he sent many letters back home with his observations on Chicago ("a dirty and lathsome dunghill") as well as the United States in general ("nothing exists for these people except money"). One day while strolling down a Chicago street he found a familiar taste of home:

When passing through these streets, we ran into a man who had a tin box and a white cloth in front of it that said "Mexican Tamales"; we got closer and asked him if he was Mexican and he answered that he was; I bought ten cents worth of tamales which he sold to me at one cent a piece. We went to a place where they sold beer, and had three glasses poured for us; all of this to accompany the tamales. I only had one to taste the flavor; you know that I fear them and therefore I did not have more than one. They were delicious, a bit small and with too much aniseed.

These *tamales de anís* were undoubtedly in the Mexican style, and are served to this day especially in the states of Central Mexico. Chicago's Mexican population in the 1890s was quite small; even as late as 1910, fewer than 500 Mexicans called the city home. The major influx, attracted by jobs in the railroad and steel industries, did not begin until around the middle of World War I. It is unclear who comprised the audience for these anise-scented tamales.

Over its six months, the World's Columbian Exposition attracted more than 25 million visitors eager to see and eat new things. Of course it also attracted many vendors hoping to cash in on this large new market. One notable group came from San Francisco to sell tamales to the crowds. Even before 1893, tamales were becoming popular throughout the West, particularly in San Antonio and San Francisco. The exotic food sold by the Chicken Tamale Company was a big hit in Chicago and spawned a host of imitators. It's not an exaggeration to say Chicago enjoyed a true tamale craze in the late 19th and early 20th century.

In 1909, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran an 1100-word story, "Feeding Night Crowds of Slums; Hot Tamale Man Chief Caterer," profiling the tamaleros and their customers. "More than a hundred hot tamale men in Chicago," the reporter estimated, "lead the restless life of a traveling slum restaurateur. ... From street corner to street corner, from saloon to saloon the hot tamale man makes his rounds from early in the evening until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning." Sound familiar?

Chicago's tamaleros in the late 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century were likely a diverse lot. It was an easy business to get started in, requiring minimal capital, so was attractive to new immigrants. New arrivals from southern Europe probably contributed significantly to the ranks of the early tamaleros, as did African Americans from the rural South and

TAMALES DE GUAJOLOTE DEL DÍA DE ACCIÓN DE GRACIAS

INGREDIENTES

Para la masa
Medio kilo de manteca de cerdo
3 tazas de masa de maíz nixtamalizado
2 tazas de caldo de pollo
Un poco más de agua fría
2 cucharaditas de sal
2 cucharaditas de polvo para hornear

Para el relleno
2 tazas de sobras del pavo asado de Thanksgiving
4 tazas de caldo de pollo o agua
1 taza de pasta de mole (salsa artesanal mexicana que mezcla varios chiles, chocolate, frutos secos y otros ingredientes)

Para armar el tamal
20 Hojas de maíz (deberán tenerse cuando menos 30 hojas por las que vengan rotas)

Tiempos
Toma 1 hora la preparación de los tamales.
4 horas la cocción y
1 hora de reposo antes de servirlos

INSTRUCCIONES

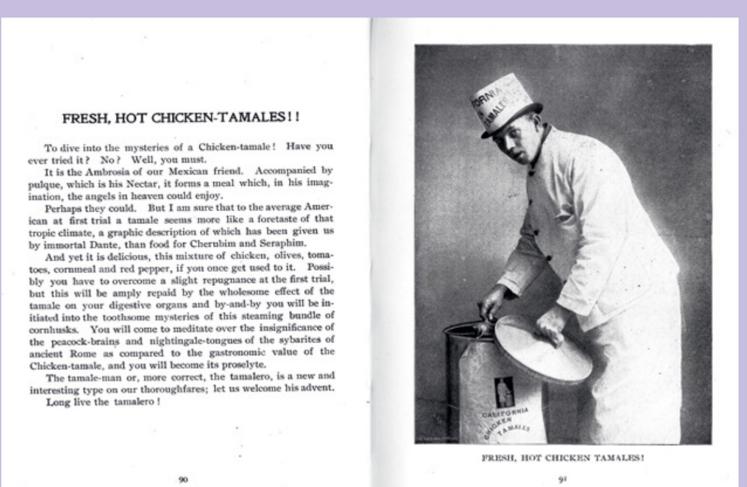
1. Remoje las hojas de maíz en agua fría y déjelas reposar en el agua mientras prepara la masa y el relleno.

Para la masa
2. En un bowl grande, bata la manteca hasta que quede muy esponjosa. Verifique si la manteca está lista tomando una cucharadita pequeña de manteca y colócala dentro de un bowl con agua; si la bolita flota a la superficie es que ya está lista, si no flota, continúe batiendo y haga nuevamente esta prueba.
3. Agregue la masa de maíz nixtamalizado en pequeñas porciones, poco a poco, hasta que se mezcle con la manteca esponjosa.
4. Agregue el caldo de pollo poco a poco hasta que se integre bien, si es necesario, agregue un poquito más de agua.
5. Agregue la sal y el polvo de hornear y mezcle bien hasta que esté esponjoso

Para el relleno
7. Vacía la pasta de mole en una olla y déjala calentarse unos minutos
8. Agregue el caldo de pollo (o agua) poco a poco incorporando la pasta y el caldo hasta que se haya homogenizado toda la pasta con todo el caldo y se forme una salsa espesa
9. Agregue las sobras del pavo asado de Thanksgiving en trozos

Para armar los tamales
10. Retire las hojas de maíz del agua y escúrralas
11. Extienda un par de cucharadas de masa sobre un par de hojas de maíz, aproximadamente 1/4 o 1/2 pulgada de grosor, a formar una coma de masa
12. Coloque una cucharada del pavo con mole en el centro de la masa
13. Coloque otra cucharada de masa para cubrir el pavo
14. Doble las puntas y lados de las hojas de maíz hacia el centro hasta formar un paquetito bien cerrado
15. Coloque los tamales en una vaporera, verticalmente, cuidando que los paquetitos queden con las puntas de las hojas de tamal hacia arriba (OJO: nunca se ponen en horizontal porque no se cocerán.
16. Póngalos a cocer al vapor, a fuego medio, durante cuatro horas, rellenando cada tanto el agua de la vaporera con agua caliente.
17. Pruebe el tamal pasadas las 4 horas para ver si ya está cocido. Deje cocer un poco más si la masa aún le sabe a crudo.
18. Deje reposar una hora después de sacarlos del fuego
19. Desmenuvaba el tamal y disfrútalo. La salsa de arándanos, típica de Thanksgiving puede ser un complemento.

Mexicans from the Southwest and Mexico (the latter two migrations surged around 1916). These groups, all facing serious employment discrimination, likely found selling tamales preferable to many other job opportunities. Early on, Chicago's large-scale industrial food producers began canning and marketing



A vendor from the Chicken Tamale Company who came from San Francisco to Chicago for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Photo and text from *Street Types of Great American Cities* (1896) by Sigmund Krausz, a Chicago photographer. "I was compelled for weeks and months to haunt the crowded thoroughfares, the fashionable avenues and the dingy alleys for such characters as seemed to suit my purpose; and when I had found them, persuasion, appeals to their vanity and very frequently pecuniary considerations had to be resorted to in order to induce them to visit a studio in the garb and equipments of their daily vocation."

BEWARE THE IDEAS OF MARCH

(continued from p.8)

I became a chef in large part because it was a way for a troubled guy with low self esteem to feel accepted. Kitchens gave me a longed for sense of belonging. I then became a good chef by having my ego crushed by chefs who not only yelled and hurled belittling insults, but also plates of food that did not meet their exacting standards. I recall becoming a sous chef at Le Cirque in the mid-nineties and how much I looked forward to unleashing my anger and belittling the next wave of young culinarians. It's been a sad circle of chef life, and society itself has also served the role of enabler by exalting raging egomaniacs like Gordon Ramsey, and depressed geniuses like my hero, Anthony Bourdain. Not that many of us will be left with restaurants by the time Covid's said and done, but real change, as is the case with Black Lives Matters, Me Too, and LGBTQ rights, takes a long time and will be riddled with confounding failures along the way.

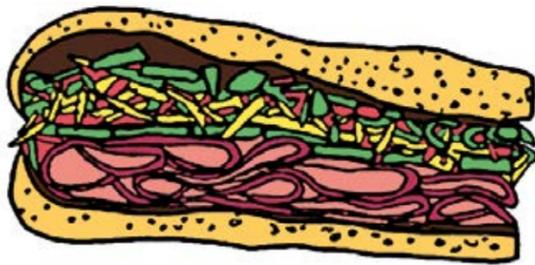
The collective suffering of watching wildfires, hurricanes, and politics raging out of control this year has done nothing but add to the overwhelm. Dwarfing it all, however, this summer my wife and I became full-time parents to my 11 and 13 year old girls. And though it'd be quite generous to say the circumstances were less than ideal and the challenges in front of us formidable, parenting my kids every day of the week has filled me with needed resolve and an immense sense of purpose.

Long ago I realized that cooking and serving others has been like a bridge over life's raging river of sadness and anger. And though more confounding than ever before, this remains true today. Whether it was on a food truck, in a Michelin-starred restaurant, or doing curbside takeout, being appreciated for cooking food well has always felt good when I've felt my worst. As with being a good father, being a good chef fills me with purpose.

My last chef left on his own volition in late July, so there's nobody left to playfully banter about the zombie apocalypse or state of the world while I do my prepwork. And though I am still making a lot less and working a lot harder than before, we're reopened (for now) and are once again serving our Fries and Frostee. And though there aren't nearly as many faces sitting in the seats as before, I'm once again turning around to see the smiles and surprise that washes over the faces when the hot and the cold meet in the milkshake glass. In fact, I appreciate the smiles much more than ever before. Apparently it took the ongoing tragedy of Covid along with an unusual intervention with a young chef - to gain this new perspective.

The Soothsayer's foreboding about the Ides of March played itself out in both the murder of Julius Caesar, and it's reincarnated itself once again in 2020. The election will be over by the time this is read, and I'd be shocked if our restaurant ambitions won't be kicked back to the curbside by then too. I recall hearing from somewhere that if there was one thing we humans have learned from history, it's that we don't learn from our history. So in an attempt to thwart that undeniable aspect of our species, this time we're not going to allow ourselves to be backstabbed by Covid once again. Akiko recently shared an epiphany about launching a new barbecue concept called Boxcar Barbecue. I for one am a believer in visions.

Taking your SANDWHICH on the go?



1 Lay sandwich diagonally on the top left corner of the paper. Wrap that corner over the sandwich. Roll sandwich and paper diagonally towards the center.

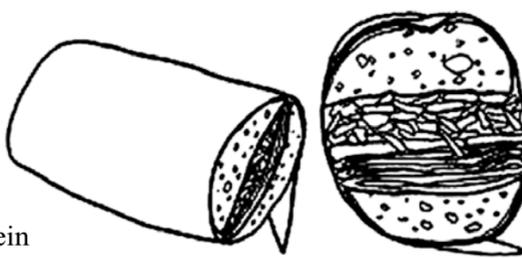


2 Fold the two adjacent ends of the paper over the sandwich towards the center.



3 Continue rolling the sandwich towards the final corner, and use a small piece of tape to secure it in place.

4



Cut sandwich in half crosswise and enjoy!

CS

by Cleo Schoepfle

Word on the Street: The hand-lettered art of Southwest Signs

(continued from p.10)

DK: You know what our dilemma is, Eric, is they're ordering stuff for art, but the problem is when we do paper signs for grocery stores they are done in quantity - so it's hard to price them. And they get a little more specific on what they want, so it creates a dilemma for us - do we charge them triple the price we charge a grocery store with the time involved and what they're using it for? Take for instance, in San Francisco, a designer, they ordered signs from us and we charged them grocery store prices and it was like \$20 a sign and then we saw on the internet they were charging \$150 a sign.

CW: And that's the problem, with small businesses, I never want to cheat somebody. And not really appreciating myself as an artist, I have a grocery store mentality with signs and prices. I remember when Marz came in he goes, "You guys aren't charging enough."

EM: I think you could triple the prices for the hipsters, easy!

CW: The thing with artists like Alberto, they have a vision. Now it's my responsibility, am I getting their vision right? I'm always worried. I send out something for Alberto or those German guys that came in with the production down at the Cultural Center. I was tense the whole time, I kept asking Carol did we get an email, was it okay, was it bad? One thing I can't believe - in the last couple years, we've gotten so many requests, clients from New York, or California, Florida, where they say - I want a regular grocery store sign and I'm gonna frame it and put it up in my living room. Really? I don't know if I'd put that up in my living room! That's something I never thought in a million years would ever happen.

EM: That Cultural Center project was pretty large scale wasn't it? What was that experience like?

CW: Yeah, that was real big. I loved working with those guys, it was really neat. A couple of them came in from Germany and a friend from Italy came in and also Great Britain and Denmark. That was another case where I had to figure out - is this their vision? And then there was the issue of applying it - he gave me the specs on his design for the room and what he was going to build. In one way the lettering wasn't difficult, he kept to basic colors and I think it had a real impact. But the hard part for me was the different languages. Especially Arabic, although I was sort of proud of myself. I told him, "Listen, talk to somebody that speaks Arabic and give me feedback if I did it right." And he got back to me and said I did. There was Arabic, Portuguese, German, English and South African, Afrikaner. It was a daunting thing, you're dealing with people in another land and language, but it was sort of exciting - it is something I will always remember, I had a part in that.

EM: Wrapping up, to talk about some of the anxiety you feel about getting things right for folks. A lot of us come to you for your skill, how you do it. You're the maestro.

CW: I always respect creative types because I appreciate what they do. Maybe because what I do, on my end, it entails creativity. It's just that sometimes I don't have the self confidence I should have. Like Dan, he comes from a family of fantastic artists and Dan can draw something out so easy. But I really appreciate art. With Alberto, sometimes I shake my head, I don't know what I just did. There was something he did where he stretched it [the signs] out in this park area and I still didn't understand it, but I thought that's cool, that's actually cool!

CHICAGO FOODCULTURA CLARION 1
Chicago, November 25, 2020

Editor in Chief: **Stephan Palmie**
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GUESTS

David Sutton is Professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University. He has conducted over 30 years of research on the island of Kalymnos, Greece, and continues to explore food and related topics in Greece and elsewhere.

Phillip Foss is the chef and co-owner of Michelin starred EL Ideas and the brand new concept, Boxcar Barbecue. In late 2019, he self-published Life in EL, a genre bending graphic novel with his cousin and comic artist, Timothy Foss.

Timothy Foss is an award-winning artist, illustrator, and author whose most recent project is the culinary graphic novel, Life in EL, that he wrote with his cousin, Chef Phillip Foss. Timothy lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his wife and two children, two cats, one dog, seven fish, and one-and-a-half cars.

Laura Letinsky, an artist and Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, works in photography, textiles, ceramics and words to explore aspects of the everyday and its portrayal through the still life, and its components.

Eric May is a Chicagoland-based parent, chef, and recovering artist. Eric is the founder and director of Roots & Culture, a nonprofit visual arts center in Chicago's Noble Square neighborhood.

Peter Engler worked at the University of Chicago carrying out basic research in mammalian genetics. A South Side resident for over forty years, he took an interest in the often-overlooked cuisine of the area. He has written and lectured on topics such as soul food, barbecue, and bean pie, as well local oddities such as the jim shoe, big baby, and mother in law.

Photos: **Peter Engler, Eric May** and **Miralda**
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FOR ARTS AND INQUIRY

GOYA FOODS EL SABOR LATINO POR EXCELENCIA



De tu casa a la Casa Blanca