

Sheila Hibben

Eating American

Born Cecile Craik in Montgomery, Alabama, Sheila Hibben (1888–1964) originated the restaurant column for *The New Yorker*. She was also among the first to seriously catalog and appreciate American regional cooking, in articles such as the one that follows, and in landmark collections like *The National Cookbook* (1932) and *American Regional Cookery* (1946). Eleanor Roosevelt tapped her as a food consultant for White House menus; unofficially, she was also an adviser to mystery novelist Rex Stout, providing menus to satisfy the capacious appetite of his gourmand detective Nero Wolfe, along with recipes (see page 204) for his readers.



Regional cooking has struck New York. And with such a bang that soon nobody will be left to say, when the subject is brought up: “You mean regional *planning*?” Not since Messrs. Babbitt and More first handed around the undiluted milk of the Word in re Humanism, have so many of us got all mixed up at the start of what shows every sign of rapidly becoming a movement.

Of course, every traveler knows those delightful little Parisian restaurants where *la cuisine régionale* can be had: *beurre blanc* from Nantes, *bouillabaisse* from Marseilles or *garbure béarnaise*. As we sat at Roziers’ on the Place St. Michel, have we not often thought how nice it would be if only we got regional dishes in New York? But only a few of us ever realized that our own *plats régionaux* would turn out to be codfish balls and broiled spareribs!

It is the Waldorf-Astoria which has set its sign and seal on our local cooking. And although the result may be highly satisfactory to amateurs of traditional American food, it is doubtless bound to bewilder those of us who have not heard the news of how smart it is to be regional. Upset indeed the ladies from Urbana, Illinois, or Montgomery, Alabama, are likely to be, when, arriving at the Waldorf, reverently expecting lobster *Thermidor* and baked Alaska, they discover that the resident rich and great of New York are demanding, as the last word in culinary effort, a little potlikker and corn pone!

In some of the Waldorf's luxurious modernistic apartments smells are rising that haven't been smelled for thirty years! The housekeeper from Easton, Pennsylvania, may well be edified to see how steamed up Park Avenue is about meat dumplings and corned beef and cabbage. A fine thing it is to know that even the biggest circles lead back home sooner or later, and that, traveling via *crêpes Suzettes* and Peach Melba, you come to rest at corned-beef hash. There is even "picked-up codfish," just as my Aunt Sally has had it every Sunday morning for the last forty years. And wouldn't it give Aunt Sally a turn to see a young man in evening clothes serving her very own codfish out of a silver dish!

Do you know what pan dowdy is? Maybe not if you happen to have been born in New England or Alabama, but certainly you must know if your mother was Pennsylvania Dutch. Wisconsin chicken cake is another one that I never heard of. So lost to a patriotic pride in victuals has America become, that I venture to bet the hotelkeepers of Madison never heard of it either, and when the good news reaches Wisconsin of the national importance of its chicken cake, I can see them all reaching for their hats and dashing out to get the recipe from the nearest farmer's wife. Or maybe they will just wire New York for it.

Smartness aside, this revival of native specialties is altogether good, for if anything is going to save our old-fashioned American cooking from going on the rocks, it has got to be a movement. How people could actually get themselves all worked up about saving the grizzly bear of the Rockies, and sit calmly by while such a magnificent dish as South Carolina Hoppin' John faces extinction, was more than I could ever understand! True, New England mutton dumpling at first thought moves me to action no more than Rocky Mountain grizzlies, but to know something about making it is on a par with discovering how the Declaration of Independence starts off. For this country was largely settled on dumplings—Puritan housewives of New England bringing the dumpling tradition across the Atlantic, and nearly a century later, the pioneers taking it with them in the covered wagons. There is even a legend that once when an extra-big train of wagons was crossing the plains back in the thirties, it was found expedient to separate it into two sections, which, for lack of any better basis of division, was done by counting off those who liked boiled dumplings into one group, and those who preferred

a crusty ash cake into the other. That plan not only divided the pioneers themselves satisfactorily, but took care of the equipment, too—the pot going along with the dumpling contingent and the ashcake members getting the skillet.

It may already be too late to stem the rising tide of bunk in radio broadcasting about food these days. After listening in on one “food program” last week, I am inclined to think nothing can be done. Moreover, I resent the phrase “listening in” as applied to the entirely unavoidable accident of having a radio turned on me in the office of an advertising agency. What was going on in this particular food hour was what is technically known as a “skit,” and portrayed the very voluble agonies of a young housekeeper whose husband has asked a friend in for a little home cooking. Naturally enough, the young housekeeper is telling the grocer all about it, and confiding in him that she can’t make a decent pie and that her mayonnaise always curdles. The grocer is a completely broken reed in such a crisis, as all he can offer is: “Well, of course the gentleman *would* expect a nice pie.”

Why he would so confidently expect a nice pie is never explained, for, just at that moment, a male customer in the grocery store, of whose presence we have been made aware by a series of radio coughs, gives one special introductory cough and urges the young housekeeper to let him help her out of her difficulties. And does he beg her to give up the pie and mayonnaise fixation and search her heart for something on God’s earth that she *does* know how to make? Maybe a baked apple or a French dressing for her salad? Not he! He suggests a PIE MADE BY MAGIC! For he, too, assumes at once that the gentleman would expect a pie—only by this time there is no more talk on anybody’s part of its being a *nice* pie. And then, believe it or not, that dreadful man goes on to tell the young housekeeper how to make a pie that requires no cooking—just stirring together Screech Owl Condensed Milk and lemon juice poured over a pie plate lined with graham crackers! Of course, my first instinct was, just as yours undoubtedly is, to warn the husband’s friend. But that turns out all right, too, for (would you believe it?) it is the friend who has been giving all this advice in the grocery store—that’s what makes it a skit—and if there ever was anybody whom I would like to see confronted with an uncooked condensed-milk graham-cracker magic pie, it is that same advice-bestower!

With such atrocities going on in the name of prosperity and salesmanship, what hope is there for posterity and food in this country unless we rush to the colors of back-to-the-country cooking? Do you remember those entrancing little maps that used to be (and probably are still) in all French geographies? The *Départements* of France with the picture of a cheese in the Seine et Marne, a neat collection of bottles in the Gironde, a jar labeled “Confiture” in the Meuse and a calculating-looking sardine taking up nearly the whole of Finisterre. A wonderfully impressive lesson they were in *gourmandise* as well as geography, but no more edifying picture than could be presented of this country, if an able cartographer and a discriminating glutton would set to work in intelligent coöperation. Our map could have stars to the North for baked beans and pie for breakfast, and double stars to the South for crab gumbo and shrimp jumbalaya. It could be captioned EAT AMERICA FIRST, and would be worth studying.