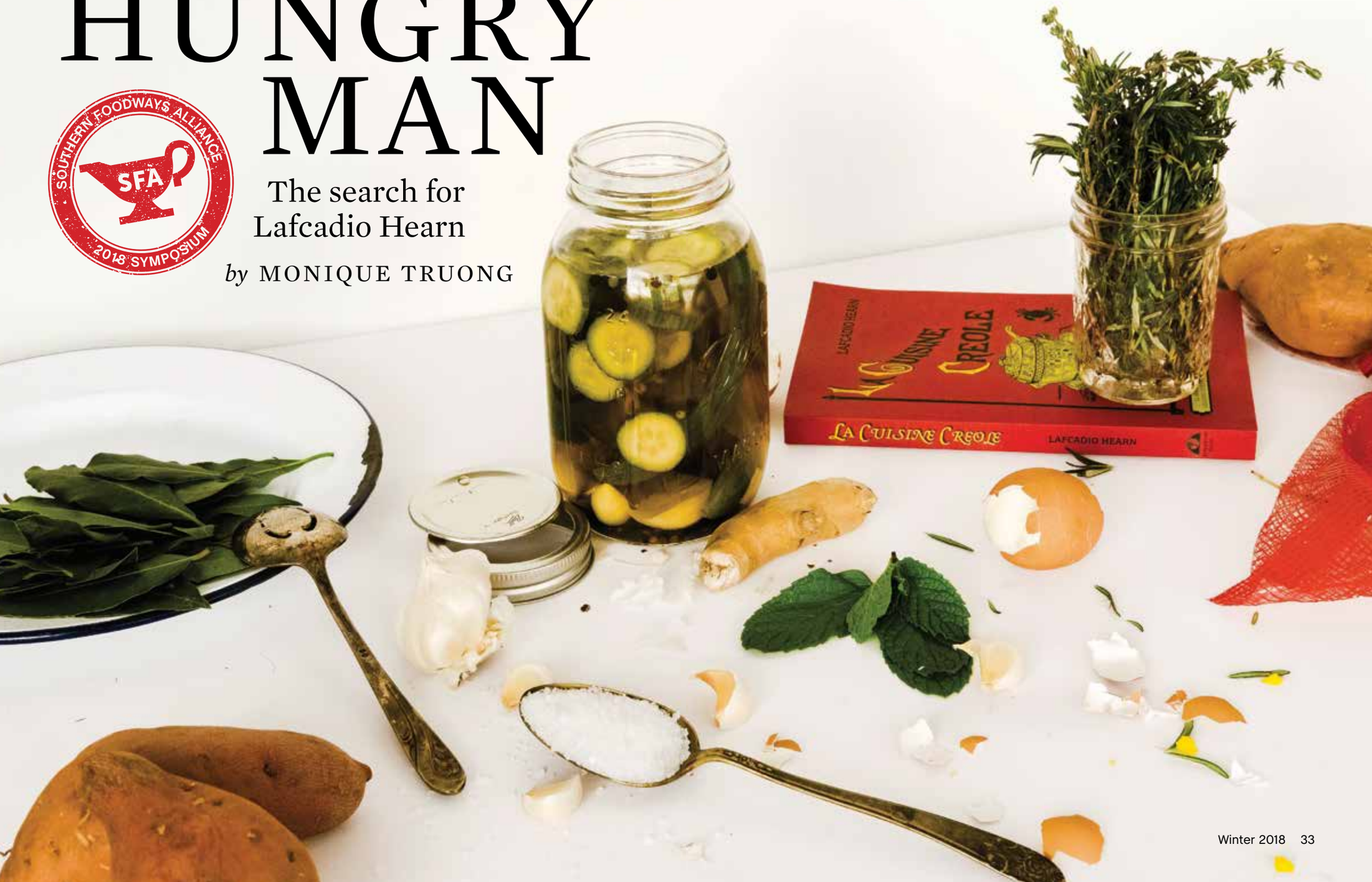
Recipes from a HUNGRY MAN

The search for Lafcadio Hearn

by MONIQUE TRUONG



In 2009, SUGAR *and* CORNBREAD *led me to* LAFCADIO HEARN.

My second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, set in the small North Carolina town where I grew up, was coming out the following year, and it would include this passage:

> My great-grandfather Graven Hammerick, upon his return from New Haven, [Connecticut,] was said to have refused the cornbreads served to him by his mother because they weren't sweet enough for his northern-influenced palate. Because she couldn't stand the sight of him not eating, his mother always had a batch made just for him with heaping spoonfuls of sugar added to the batter, but she also made it a point to wrap...[them in] a black cloth before bringing them to the table. She wanted to remind her son that something inside of him had died.

As the author of a previous food-centric novel—*The Book of Salt*, about a young Vietnamese man who worked as a live-in cook in the Paris home of the American authors Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas—as well as articles for *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, and the *New York Times*, I knew that a surprising number of my readers would have deep historical knowledge of regional cornbread recipes. They would agitate and foment if my assertion, vis-à-vis the sugar distinction, were made in error. I also knew that, to some readers, I, oddly, wouldn't appear to be a credible font of Southern food lore. I needed to have a published citation from a trusted source. I needed cornbread corroboration.

In my small but well-stocked kitchen in Brooklyn, I had culinary reference books of all kinds. Among them was *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 7: Foodways*, edited by John T. Edge. As I flipped through its pages, tucked between the entries for "hash, South Carolina," and "Hill, Annabella Powell," an unusual, geographically difficult-to-pinpoint name caught my eye: "Hearn, Lafcadio (1850–1904)," identified as a "journalist, author, and illustrator."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Oriana Koren

The entry, written by Scott R. Simmons, began with Lafcadio Hearn's birth on the Greek island of Lefkada; went on to describe a lonely childhood in Dublin, Ireland; followed by an emigration to Cincinnati, Ohio, as a young man; and a subsequent migration to New Orleans, where the entry revealed this Greek-Irishman's contribution to the history of Southern food:

[Lafcadio Hearn]...opened the short-lived 5-Cent Restaurant and collected recipes of local dishes. Hearn published these recipes in 1885 as La Cuisine Créole*, which became the earliest published collection of New Orleans and Louisiana recipes...[, which] continues to serve as an invaluable record of the history of Creole food, New Orleans, and Louisiana.*

The entry then served up Hearn's second act, or second course as it were, which was entirely unexpected:

Hearn moved to Japan, taught English, changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo, married a Japanese woman who was the daughter of a samurai...and continued his voluminous writing.... Hearn secured a place in history after publishing numerous volumes...particularly Japanese fairy tales.

The entry concluded with the barest facts of this man's passing: Japan, September 26, 1904.

I reread the apocryphal-seeming nub of a biography. Little of it made sense to me, the sentences harboring a random collection of facts and locales. Also, I sensed that all the good bits—the crackling in the cornbread, if you will—were missing.

What I had before me was an outline of a man—described in the entry as "romantic" and "imaginative"—seated in front of a very full plate. Greek, Irish, Creole, and Japanese? That was an overly ambitious buffet, a quarrel of flavors.

On the second reading, slower this time and considering the magnitude of his travels, I recognized Lafcadio Hearn as a writer who had made the reverse migration that I'd made in my own life. Hearn went from West to East. More significantly, he *chose* East.

When I came to the United States with my family as refugees from the Vietnam War, I was six years old, and the decision to leave all that we knew behind—our extended family, our first language, all of the physical and emotional assemblage of home—wasn't mine to make. It was a journey that changed the course of our lives and, as my father would have told you, a journey that allowed us to continue living. For him, it was a clear-cut decision. Because of my father's position in an international oil company and because the U.S. government wanted to ensure that the South Vietnamese forces would have no disruptions in their fuel supply, he was able to bargain his safety and life for that of his young family's. In exchange for my mother's and my departure in the safety of a U.S. military cargo plane, he stayed behind until the day Saigon fell. He then left by boat, joining the flotilla that would be known as "the Boat people."

The Vietnamese word for "country" is "nuoc." "Nuoc" also means water, and the open water of the South China Sea became the only country my father and so many others had left. As an adult, I've asked myself many times if I would have made the same choice. Would I have been so clear-headed, mentally tough, optimistic, and brave? To me, these are the necessary traits that all immigrants must posses.

I wanted to know what had propelled Lafcadio Hearn, and whether he, after circumnavigating the globe, had found what he was looking for. My gut told me that Hearn was hungry: for love, family, for a sense of belonging, for a daily meal that fed body and soul. A cookbook author, same as a food writer, was always hungry; an immigrant one was even more so, I knew.

We, who make it our business to know the minutiae of the kitchen and the table, often carry within us an obsession: the keen desire not for the next filling meal but for the next fulfilling meal. The difference, we know, is not dependent upon the recipes but upon the cooks. We, who have immigrated to other shores, find that the pivotal ingredients—caring, empathy, affinity, communion, and love—can be scarce and difficult to source in our new home. We often find ourselves ravenous in a land of plenty.

Because I understand the world best through the language of food, I began my engagement with Hearn by reading his cookbook. From *La Cuisine Créole*, I learned why he was enamored with New Orleans. In his brief introduction, he enthused that the city was "cosmopolitan in its nature, blending the characteristics of the American, French, Spanish, Italian, West Indian and Mexican."

I learned that his recipes were sourced from "leading chefs and noted Creole housewives," though none of these chefs were indentified by name. As for the housewives, I found the names of six women identified with their recipes—a Miss Beecher, Miss Shattuck, Miss Lester, Jenny, Haly, and Little Jessie—but there wasn't a "Mrs." in sight.

I learned that Hearn clearly shared the same worldview as these otherwise unidentified housewives, as the only time he included the word "servant" in the cookbook, it was followed by criticism. Hearn wrote about the "extravagant" servant who threw away foods that the "Creole housewife" would save and transform into delicious morsels. I learned that he professed to value "economy and simplicity," and yet a couple of pages later he included a recipe for soup that began, "Take 100 oysters with their juice, and one large onion..." I'm assuming that the one onion here was his nod to economy and simplicity.

I learned that the intended readers were young housewives who could ensure "domestic contentment" by learning the "art of cooking" from his book. I learned that, if these young housewives failed to do so, then the fault was theirs and by no means his. This, for instance, was how Hearn ended the recipe for Mississippi Cornbread: "If it is not nice, it will be because you have put in too much meal, and made the batter too thick. But try again, and you will succeed."

I also learned what Hearn thought of women in general:

> [T]he ingredients of certain dishes should be carefully weighed and tested as though emanating from a laboratory. Few female cooks think of this, but men with their superior instinctive reasoning power are more governed by law and abide more closely to rule; therefore are better cooks and command higher prices for services.

On the pages of *La Cuisine Créole*, I got to know a Lafcadio Hearn who was an exceptional man for his time, who reveled in the heady, exuberant admixture of peoples and flavors that greeted him in his city of choice, New Orleans. I also met a Lafcadio Hearn who was a man *of* his time, limited by late-nineteenth-century biases and blinders, a

Arnold Genthe/Library of Congress

The courtyard of Lafcadio Hearn's former home on St. Louis Street in New Orleans

man who—two decades after the end of the Civil War—did not include one word about slavery nor the labor of the enslaved people who had made it possible for a household recipe to begin with a directive such as "take 100 oysters." I found a man who had no qualms about profiting from the work products and creativity of others with little or no attribution; a man who appreciated the company of women, in particular the single ones or the servant ones. In other words, I found a man who was a complicated piece of work, whom I wanted to grab by his starched white collar and shake some sense into.

Some cookbooks make me want to cook. Lafcadio Hearn's made me want to get into a fight. Do you know how novelists fight? We write a novel about you.

Nine years later, my Lafcadio Hearn novel is done. My argument with him took a while; arguments worth having often do. I've entitled it *The Sweetest Fruits*, and now you know where this motif of sweetness originated. The novel is told from the points of view of three women in Hearn's life: his Greek mother, Rosa Cassimati; his African American wife, Alethea Foley, who was born into slavery in Kentucky and who, after the Civil War, was employed as a cook at his boarding house in Cincinnati, Ohio; and his Japanese wife, Koizumi Setsu. She was, as the foodways encyclopedia entry noted, the daughter of a former samurai, but was destitute when she came to work for Hearn as a housemaid. In my novel, I also include excerpts written by Hearn's first biographer, Elizabeth Bisland, a young woman whom he met in New Orleans and who went on to become a renowned journalist, editor, and writer in New York City.

Here's what Alethea Foley thought of the twenty-two-year-old Lafcadio Hearn when she first set eyes on him in 1872. In *The Sweetest Fruits*, we find her still in Cincinnati, but it's 1905, thirty-three years after the fact. She's giving an interview to a newspaper reporter about the now-deceased author, whom she referred to as "Pat."

> Pat wasn't from here.
>
> That was my first thought when I saw him at Mrs. Haslam's boarding house. I didn't know his name right then, but that hunch would prove to be more than true.
>
> While I was in the kitchen, Mrs. Haslam's was always full. If you were the kind who were only passing through, you might not give much thought to the supper table, but if you were a stayer—the spinsters and the widowers—then a fruit pie every other night and a roast on Sundays were sought-after fare.
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> Faces like Pat's were the ones that I'd learned not to get attached to. I didn't even bother with their names. Same as horses on a farm, the color of their hair was enough to identify them. Chestnut, bay, blond, or black as coal in Pat's case. If they were male and young, they were soon headed elsewhere. Out West, down South, back East, wherever the trains and steamboats could take them.
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> Before the war, when we heard "Cincinnati," we thought of the Promised Land, the Ohio our River Jordan. Who knew that the Promised Land would be full of young white men itching to go elsewhere?
>
> Mr. Bean, the printing house man with the gray hair and gray fingernails, was introducing Pat to the other boarders seated at the table, and I was placing a tureen down on the sideboard. It was the middle of summer, but Mrs. Haslam always had me prepare a soup because she said it filled people up, and they would eat less of the pies and the roasts, which were more costly for her to provide. Mr. Bean liked a nip of gin before and after supper, so I thought that he was already slurring his words when he said, "This young fellow is named Laf-ca-di-o Hearn."
>
> My ears couldn't recognize "Lafcadio" as a man's name back then. I'd never met another.

According to newspaper accounts, after Hearn's passing Foley had to file a suit against his estate in order to claim that she was his first and only lawful wife. She lost and would be written out of his official biography for decades thereafter.

In my version of Hearn's life, I imagine the possibilities, impulses, and desires that kept this man in motion. His answers, awash in wanderlust and transformations, are not the same as my own, but I have felt an insatiable pull and even an affection toward this literary wanderer as I've traveled with him for nearly a decade, getting lost in locales and languages, and finding for my Lafcadio a home, not again, but for the very first time.

Some cookbooks make me want to cook. Lafcadio Hearn's made me want to fight. Do you know how novelists fight? We write a novel about you.

If I were to add to the encyclopedia entry for Hearn, it would read as follows:

An immigrant thrice over, Lafcadio Hearn was known by different names wherever he landed. Whether he was Patricio (on Lefkada), Patrick (in Ireland), Lafcadio (in the United States) or Yakumo (in Japan), he remained a consummate outsider, an awkward introvert, short, and blind in one eye. Hearn's prolific body of work was animated by his travels, self-inventions and reinventions, obdurate search for belonging, attraction to the "exotic" and "the Other," and a belief in the transformative power of a good meal. His life and his writing stand as testament to the unexpected and the life changing that necessarily occur, when disparate peoples, cultures, and appetites meet.

Plus—apologies to the author and the editor—one erratum:

Hearn's 5-Cent Restaurant was so "short-lived" that it, in fact, never opened under that name. Located at 160 Dryades Street, the advertised "cheapest eating house in the South" was renamed The Hard Times, prior to its opening on March 2, 1879. The Hard Times closed on March 22, 1879, leaving Lafcadio Hearn broke and still hungry.

It seems fitting to invite Alethea Foley, a cook by profession, to have the last words. Here's what she, in *The Sweetest Fruits,* has to say about this café.

> I'm not surprised that you hadn't heard...[of it]. I wouldn't have thought that such a place would last long. I don't know who came up with the scheme, but I'm guessing it was Pat, who came to Cincinnati with nothing, who shoveled dirt and dung for his suppers, who never forgot how much he had to pay for so little on his plate.

Monique Truong's third novel, The Sweetest Fruits*, is forthcoming from Viking Books.*