Gravy

ABOUT GRAVY

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Fabulous FAT

by Gillian Clark

HEALTH WARNINGS have done plenty for our biomedical awareness, but little to improve the taste of our food. The army of finger-wagging plate snatchers is like a UN Peacekeeping Force, dedicated to making us eat healthy, whether we want to or not.

They came after palm oil, a staple in Asian, African, and Caribbean cooking. The rust-colored fat—used for seasoning not frying—was labeled an artery-clogging extravagance. The Center for Science in the Public Interest said palm oil, which is high in saturated fat and low in polyunsaturated fat, promotes heart disease. CSPI, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other health authorities have urged reduced consumption of palm oil.

And then it was coconut oil, the high-smoke-point fat behind the great taste of movie theatre popcorn. According to CSPI, coconut oil is a highly saturated fat. After an intense campaign, the oil was banned from theater popcorn and denounced by the CSPI. Foods that contain coconut oil are disparaged in the CSPI newsletter alongside the likes of Domino's Pasta Bread Bowl and Hardee's Thickburger.

I keep a greasy jar of palm oil in my cupboard, and I miss the way movie theatre popcorn used to smell and taste. But I grew up in a household that appreciated the flavor of fats.

That can of bacon fat was a symbol. It meant that my father, who did most of the cooking in our house, cared what our food tasted like.

When I was growing up, a Chock Full of Nuts coffee can, into which my father tipped the bacon fat from the pan, sat on our Formica counter. The drippings from Sunday morning's bacon collected over the weeks. A cloudy, schmaltzy solid filled the can that stood ready by the stove. My father reheated leftover dumplings in this smoky "butter." He added it soups. He used it to sauté green beans and to cook cabbage. It supplemented the Wesson oil in which the fish burbled.

That can of bacon fat was a symbol. It meant that my father, who did most of the cooking in our house, cared what our food tasted like. We did not suffer on the nights bacon fat was absent from our meals. There were times when bacon fat was required. And there were times it was the lagniappe. No matter, when that aroma wafted through the house, day or night, it was Sunday morning again.

But then came the fateful news: Reserved bacon grease had been linked to gastro-intestinal cancers. My father, a two-time cancer survivor, did not hesitate to trash his coffee can, heavy with months of drippings. Bacon fat was reserved no longer in the Clark household.

I was the chubby kid in a household of seven. I cleaned my plate. I craved the fatty rim of the pork chop. I could not choke down brisket unless each bite was accompanied by that strip of fat. I pulled on chicken legs as if I were starving, delighting in the skin and the edible plastic that covered the bone at the joint.

As a chef, I feel bound to take liberties. I put taste over what the food police consider healthy.

Bacon fat is a precious commodity in my kitchen. I render it from applewood-smoked bacon and store it in canning jars. I save chicken fat, too. It takes two pounds of chicken fat and one pound of bacon fat to cook the collard greens. Butter is everywhere in my kitchen. I use it for mounting the sauce, binding the gravy.

When Passover comes around I need the chicken fat for my matzoh balls. How else do you hold them together? Chicken fat replaces butter when I cook kosher. And it sweetens the frying oil for the latkes.

As cooks and eaters interested in the culture and history of our larder, we put faith in the time-worn ways we've long prepared things. We understand that there is more to sustenance than a full belly. Eating has to be more than the intake of calories.

We were meant to enjoy food. We could survive on baked sweet potato and water. Nutritionally, both have all our bodies need to survive. When the first cook put heat to the kill over the first fire, it became apparent that there was more to satisfying hunger than stuffing a hole.

As an evolving species, it is our responsibility to do things just for the taste of it. It is our duty to resist the fat thieves as if their threat were the burning of books.

Gillian Clark, Washington D.C.-based chef and owner of The General Store and Post Office Tavern*, is at work on a second book,* The Colorado Kitchen Cookbook*, and a collection of short pieces and recipes based upon her radio essays on NPR's* Weekend Edition. *Photo by Thomas Head.*