
LIGHTER MINDS

TOWARD A MORMON CUISINE

A LIGHT-HEARTED ENQUIRY INTO
THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD

By James M. Hill and Richard L. Popp

“THOU SHALT EAT,
BUT NOT BE SATISFIED”

MICAH 6:14

SUCH TIME AND thought have been given to discussing the proper relationship between Mormonism and the arts. Is there such a thing as Mormon art? Should there be Mormon art? Do Mormon art, literature, and music reflect distinctive characteristics of the Mormon way of life? Should Mormon artists strive to create forms that are uniquely Mormon, or should they work for excellence in established modes?

One of the problems with many of these discussions is that they rarely touch on issues that are relevant for the Church membership as a whole. Painting, sculpture, fiction, poetry, drama, and dance, while they may have legitimate places in Mormon culture, remain largely peripheral to the daily lives of most Mormons. However, no Mormon can go without food. Though not usually considered in this sort of

JAMES M. HILL, a pioneer of the potato-based revolution, is a founding member of the Orange Chiffon Pie Coalition, a lunch club compiling a review of tacky restaurants in San Francisco, to be entitled *High Diving on a Low Budget*.

RICHARD L. POPP enjoys exploring ethnic storefront restaurants, dabbles in Thai cooking, and is researching the impact of American canned milk imports on the economy of the Chao Phraya River Basin in the 19th century.

This paper was presented at the 1985 Washington Sunstone Symposium.

context, food does have its creative aspects, and more importantly, reflects larger cultural patterns and attitudes.

Mormon writers and artists sometimes use canned peaches or loaves of bread to symbolize deeper Mormon values and social structures, but rarely go beyond the superficial images. Other students and critics of Mormon culture smugly poke fun at lime sherbet punch and jello salads, but do not stop to think about the profound social and religious implications that food takes on in particular contexts. We hope through this presentation to show that fundamental issues are involved that cannot afford to be neglected any longer by those who claim to be concerned about the direction the Church and its people are heading. Do Mormons take their potential for godhood seriously when eating main dishes made from canned cream of mushroom soup or desserts made with marshmallow creme? Will their children learn correct principles if they are fed on chili mac and gelatin products? Is a gift of tuna casserole the ultimate expression of compassionate service? Can Mormons remain unspotted from the world when Relief Society cookbooks are filled with recipes for “Tater Tot Surprise” and “Instant Pumpkin Pie?”

The importance of food in the study of culture and myths was established by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of structuralist anthropology. In his seminal work, *The Raw and the*

Cooked, he pointed to the connection between food categories and parallel realms of culture and nature, showing the linguistic relationships of cooking metaphors with processes of socialization.² Explaining the “culinary triangle” proposed by Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach agreed that food is an especially appropriate “mediator,” for eating establishes “a direct identity between ourselves and our food.” Cooking universally becomes a means of transforming nature into culture.³

In another context, Louis Dumont has shown how food is inherently connected to and defines a complex array of social relationships.⁴ The anthropologist Mary Douglas has also noted that a meal can be treated as a code, which contains messages about the degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries. “Like sex,” she says, “the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one.”⁵

Discussing the eating patterns of the ancient Israelites, Douglas shows that the orthodox meal can be interpreted as a poem, and that dietary rules celebrate themes that have been “celebrated in the temple cult and the whole history of Israel.” “The rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse to which a poet submits.”⁶

Food is present in many of the crucial scenes in the unfolding plan of salvation, from the Garden of Eden to the Last Supper. Scriptural references to food range from the symbolism of the fruit of the tree of life, to the meals miraculously provided for the prophet Elijah, to Christ’s parables which often use food imagery to make his concepts understandable to the widest possible audience. The implicit analogies between dietary laws and holiness found in the Pentateuch are made explicit in the New Testament, where, in the body and blood of Christ, “the meal and the sacrificial victim, the table and the altar, are made—to stand for one another.”⁷

Certainly Mormons understand the importance of food in social gatherings; a ward social must have a potluck dinner or, at the very least, punch and cookies. Meals have an undisputed place in such rites of passage as weddings and funerals, and are the climax of family gatherings ranging from weekly home evenings to large annual reunions. In a church where family is so important and liturgical ritual relatively scarce, the dinner table may become the focal point of ritual in the home. We take blessings on the food for granted because they are often mechanical and repetitious, but still a meal is not sanctified until everyone stops and an invocation is voiced.

Snacks, take-out food, even sumptuous restaurant fare cannot attain the status of macaroni and cheese which has been tersely blessed by a barely articulate two-year-old.

In an urban and industrialized society where the production of food is separated by multiple steps from its consumption, the Church welfare program takes on increasing significance in making people aware of the important role of food in God's plan. Church farms and canneries provide opportunities for members to experience growing, tending, and processing food together for the good of the community of Saints. While some see these projects as an inefficient use of time and resources, the stress on the commodities themselves over monetary value may alleviate some of the alienation that results from a money economy.

The importance of food to the divine plan is obvious; the kinds of food we eat, and the way they are presented, influence and reflect our attitudes about life in this world and in the world to come. But despite the large part that food plays in our lives, it has been sadly neglected in gospel discussions. Beyond superficial aspects covered in talks on the Word of Wisdom or fasting, its role is often completely ignored.

While the authors recall fondly many memories of quality food both at home and at church gatherings, still we feel that Mormons as a group have become lazy and complacent about their food. One would have expected the dialectic between gospel principles and cuisine to produce a great flowering, but it simply has not happened. This is not a question of preparing exotic or fancy dishes that use expensive ingredients and require large amounts of time. Obviously the worldly standards of food are often in direct contradiction to the Mormon belief that food should be prepared with "singleness of heart" (D&C 59:13), an attitude that chef James Beard expressed when he said, "I approach a plain baked potato reverently. Maybe I've been missing the truth—the nutty, delicate earthiness of a perfect baked potato."⁸ Instead, there seems to be a great tendency to opt for the convenient, the quick, the mass-marketed. Relief Society cookbooks become free advertising for certain brands of whipped toppings and processed cereals. Instead of using their individual skills to create fresh combinations of flavors, textures, and colors in their meals, Mormons tacitly accept the easy solutions offered in *Reader's Digest* inserts paid for by corporations whose only goal is higher profits.

Voltaire once said that France was a land of forty-two sauces and one religion, whereas

Britain was a land of one sauce and forty-two religions.⁹ Is Utah a land of one religion, hold the sauce?

Relief Society cookbooks serve several essential functions to disseminate basic information about cooking, to share ideas among members, and to honor and reward those who have created or collected good recipes. While much is undeniably accomplished by these publications, they reflect not only the best but also the worst of trends in Mormon food. The list of ingredients for "Magic Cookie Bars" is a case in point:

- 1 1/2 cups graham cracker crumbs
- 1 cup chopped nuts
- 6 ounces (1 small package) chocolate chips
- 1 1/3 cups flaked coconut
- 1 can sweetened condensed milk¹⁰

Nearly every item has been preprocessed before even being purchased. Most are purely commercial products, simply recombined to make something that is supposed to be "homemade" We do not deny that "Magic Cookie Bars" are probably quite tasty. But this recipe indicates a complete lack of respect for food and its origin, that is, as a product of nature, a gift from God.

With little guidance or support from Church councils, even cooks who are sincerely concerned about quality food are easily led astray. Lack of direction leads some to search for the perfect casserole or the complete ooey-goey bar, rather than face the ambiguities and contrasts that are necessary to a great meal. Others expend their efforts on creating "new" dishes such as "taco salad," refusing to confront larger culinary issues. They are left vulnerable to the changing winds of fashion which dictate bean sprouts one year, nachos the next. Forced to rely on books written by non-Mormons if they wish to use fresh ingredients, they may also start cooking with wine. They may be tempted into the narcissistic excesses of "nouvelle cuisine," eating food for food's sake, instead of catching the higher vision of food as an avenue for magnifying our talents and glorifying God. Although Mormons have mounted defenses against secularization in other aspects of their lives, the complete neglect of their food allows the standards of the world to encroach into the very heart of their homes and churches.

Perhaps the problems with Mormon cuisine follow from our blind acceptance of American middle-class values and the pre-packaged, franchised products offered by our host culture. Our food might only represent the deplorable state of American cuisine in general.¹¹

As Paul Fussell notes in his book *Class*:

The middle-class fear of ideology we noticed in their home decor has its counterpart in their flight from sharp flavors in food. This is where meals are fashioned out of the bland and the soft ;and the blah, and where the very mention of garlic causes the eyeballs to roll back. Even onions are used sparingly, and canned fruits (or fruit cocktail) are preferred to the real thing both because they are sweeter and because they are more tasteless Soon there will be a whole generation, sprung from middle-class loins and feeding largely out of freezers, which will assume that "fish" is white mushy stuff, very like bread¹²

Mormons who do seek to create a "style of their own" often get caught in the trap of didacticism. A good case in point is the whole wheat and honey movement, which produced some solid works and showed promise of becoming a cuisine which could flow naturally out of Church programs and Christian teachings. Industrious Mormons not only revived old recipes from their pioneer forebears but developed breads which capitalized on modern advances in kitchen technology such as new types of wheat grinders. Faced with 50-gallon cans of the stuff in the basement, and not content to rest with old standbys like wheat mush or using it as a "stretcher" TVP-style, Mormon cooks devised recipes and new forms of food which took advantage of wheat's innate characteristics.

Whole wheat and honey cuisine was bold, imaginative, and original. At the same time, it took Mormons back to their pioneer roots and tied them into Biblical traditions as well. The new foods exemplified simplicity, purity, and health. And they confirmed once and for all the divine origin of the food storage program—yes, whole wheat could be eaten. Although somewhat limited by the constraints of texture and flavor, there were strong signs that a cuisine was developing that could embody basic Mormon values and bring people closer to God.

Unfortunately the movement got carried away. Fanatics began to construct entire diets from nothing but whole wheat, honey, and dried milk. They narrowed their vision to disallow anything else, teaching that all foods which could not be stored safely for a minimum of two years were sinful. This eventually led to absurdities such as whole wheat cake (which is tasty but definitely not cake), and complete perversions such as "gluten steaks." Much contention resulted as the moderates who had only recently been converted to

whole wheat were now being accused of lack of faith if they ever indulged in bleached flour or refined sugar.

An example from a recently compiled cookbook describes another common problem among Mormons: size without knowledge. A graduate student in one ward experimented for years and finally came up with what he thought was the perfect chocolate chip cookie. Loyalties in the ward divided, however, between his new invention and the time-tested version of a mother of three from a long line of Utah homemakers. The strife was ended only when the two cooks agreed to divulge their recipes for the new Relief Society cookbook. It was found that not only were they identical, but they differed only slightly from the recipe on the back of the chocolate chip package. Because of their ignorance of textual traditions, both cooks wasted their considerable talents "reinventing the wheel" when they could have been expanding their horizons and enriching their fellow ward members with new creations.¹³

We commend those who have committed themselves to learning, refining, and passing on the art of preparing such classic foods as canned peaches and whole wheat bread. These are fine examples of foods which, while not uniquely Mormon, embrace the whole of Mormon principle and tradition. Another good example is chocolate, which is fully a part of Mormon folkways although not yet accepted theologically. A tolerable but somewhat suspect replacement for the prohibited items in the Word of Wisdom, it is for some too closely associated with worldly desire. But to Mormons who are denied alcohol, caffeine, and pleasurable sex, chocolate may come to represent the totality of happiness achievable in the temporal world. Although their worthiness is never specifically questioned in temple recommend interviews, Mormon chocolate-lovers feel considerable anxiety over the proper role of chocolate in their lives. Taught from childhood that those who are addicted to tobacco and other worldly pleasures will suffer eternal torment by not being able to satisfy their cravings, they wonder if chocolate will also be absent from the mansions prepared for them above. The ambivalence on the part of the Church toward this important issue causes unnecessary guilt and pain.

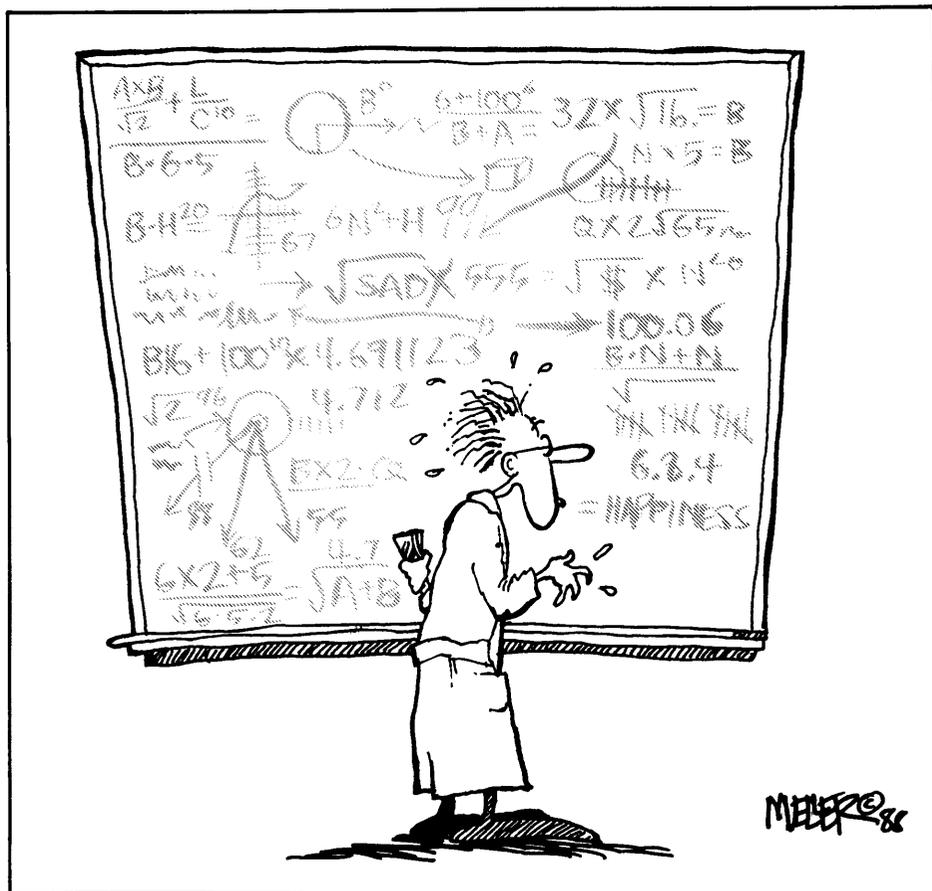
So far we have not touched on the question that looms large for the future: can we develop a cuisine which is uniquely Mormon, which magnifies the best traditions and talents of the members of the western United States, which can also incorporate the diverse cultures and foods of Saints in other lands? Mormon

cuisine, if it is to remain in touch with the expanding church, must be able to accommodate the needs of the world church, without losing its pioneer heritage. This is a great challenge, which will require the best efforts of our cooks and the constant encouragement of all those who enjoy fine food and the spiritual edification that should accompany its consumption.

The subject of a Mormon food aesthetic cannot be fully treated here. Clearly there is a need for further study and discussion, as well as serious research by our best gourmands. The problem of developing a Mormon cuisine fully consonant with gospel principle and ideals goes beyond avoiding the tacky and the trendy. Only when we can approach each meal sacramentally, as an offering of our best fruits and talents, in thankfulness for the gifts of nature, can we hope to see a blossoming of truly great Mormon food. We look forward to the day when, as Brigham Young was once quoted as saying, "we will have James Beards and Julia Childs of our own."

NOTES

1. See Lori Boyer, "Compassionate Service with or without the Casserole," *Ensign* 15 (January 1985): 68-70.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).
3. See chapter 2, "Oysters, Smoked Salmon, and Stilton Cheese," in Edmund Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, rev. ed. (London: Fontana, 1974).
4. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 137-151.
5. Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Myth Symbol and Culture*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: WW. Norton & Company, 1971), pp. 61-81. For a comprehensive introductory survey of food and its social, cultural, and religious contexts, see Miniam W. Lowenberg et al., *Food & Man* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), esp. chapter 4, "Food Habits and Foodways," pp. 85-124, and chapter 5, "Food, Man, and Religion," pp. 125-158.
6. Douglas, pp. 77, 80.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.
8. James Beard, *The New James Beard* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1981), p. ix.
9. Irma S. Rombauer and Marion R. Becker, *The Joy of Cooking*, rev. ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1975), p. 336.
10. Chantell Reilly, comp., *74th Ward Relief Society Cookbook*, n.p., n.d.
11. See Waverley Root and Richard de Rochement, *Eating in America: A History* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976).
12. Paul Fussell, *Class* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), p. 115.
13. *Thymes and Seasonings: Favorite Recipes of the Hyde Park Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Chicago, ca. 1982), pp. 103-105.



Wendell wondered what he would do about his Sunday School Lesson, as he discovered money can buy happiness.