

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



20 / Joke Mammen, historian, curator and librarian, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

In the row of Dutch dishes, “hutspot”, a stew of potatoes, carrots, onions, meat, and parsnips, is highly noted. Its recipe must be some 500 years old. History tells us that in 1574, in the night of October 3, this stew was brewing in the cauldrons of the Spanish occupation forces near the town of Leyden when they came under attack from Dutch rebellion troops, which the Spanish Crown would have called terrorists if the word had yet existed. The Spanish army fled in disorder thus ending an “80 Year War” and leaving the Dutch their stew. It became a Dutch tradition to eat “hutspot” each year on October 3 in remembrance of the rout of the Spanish. The stew remained a preferred winter dish ever after.

The potato in the stew was a newcomer; it was discovered by the Spanish *conquistadores* on their trek along the Andes and brought to Spain around 1550. Soon after, the potato was grown in Spain and Italy, and also planted in the Netherlands, by professor Carolus Clusius in his Leyden ‘Hortus Botanicus’. He was one of the first who came with a recipe for its preparation: peel it, stew it in a greasy sauce with sheep meat. He did not manage to end the initial distrust of the newfangled plant whose flowers and leaves were considered toxic until rising grain prices helped the potato to push bread to second place as a popular nutrition; it lasted until the end of the 18th century, though, before the potato was accepted as an edible vegetable by the more affluent Dutch and new recipes appeared in which the potato was a main ingredient. These recipes were published in cook books that are now part of the University of Amsterdam library’s special collection ‘History of nutrition from 1552 till today’. The library sits smack in the lively heart of the city, on Oude Turfmarkt, one of the old canals. Started in 1578, the library is an

immeasurable treasure trove; its shelves carry hundreds of thousands of books and documents. The special collection on nutrition and nourishment alone consists of 5,000 printed works. The oldest object in this “bibliotheca gastronomica” is a Dutch cook book dating from 1552. Then there are thousands of historic, printed menus – they fill many yards of shelves.

The collection’s curator is Joke Mammen, a historian educated at the University of Utrecht, the city not far from Amsterdam where she still lives in a simple and small apartment. I have never visited her in her home, because I first met Joke six years ago when a friend introduced us in New Mexico. Later I met her and her husband Francois Caron, a software architect, again in Kansas, where they came to explore the prairie; they stayed for ten days in Matfield Green. “That’s why our apartment is so small,” Joke told me. “We are travelers. We prefer to live rather simply and save up for long journeys to far-away destinations. We are explorers and always anxious to discover new beauty spots and cultures, to experience new adventures, and meet new friends.” The Caribbean, The American West, most European countries and a few Asian ones – they were all investigated.

Making new friends is easy. Because Joke is not just a devoted academic authority on everything that has to do with food, drink, nutrition, table etiquette, restaurant and hotel management and such, she is a wonderful raconteur also, as well as a devoted cook herself. She came to visit in the U.S. twice, and twice she took two days off from her vacation to prepare the most delicious of Indonesian “rice-table” meals for us and a few of our friends. The Indonesian cuisine is almost more Dutch than that potato stew the Spanish left behind more than 400 years ago; it was introduced by the colonists who resettled in the Netherlands after having managed the plantations in Indonesia for years, and couldn’t live without the spicy dishes they’d grown so fond of. It’s what “curry” is to the English – an inheritance from colonial times long past which will survive all times and last into the far future.

“Cook books have been around almost forever,” says Joke (her name is no *joke*, but short for Johanna). “In the past they were produced in small numbers and the recipes were rather short descriptions. I am not just a librarian; I am in the lucky position to have the opportunity to put the spotlights on extraordinary cook books and to organize exhibitions. For instance: our department put together ‘Chefs and Kitchen Maids’, the history of cooking and cook books in the Netherlands. A beautiful presentation. Cook books, even the old ones, are often so well designed and illustrated. The gourmet library is appetizing to all who love food and drink. The exhibition’s themes included: ‘Cooking in Crisis Time and War’ and ‘The Vegetarian Kitchen’. The cook book ‘Aaltje, the Perfect Kitchen Maid’ turned out to be the culinary bestseller of the 19th century.”

The University of Amsterdam collects not only Dutch cook books, but historic gastronomy publications from around the world, including the U.S. I myself was able to donate one of my own recent finds, the ‘Mexican Cook Book devoted to American Homes’ written by Josefina Velazquez de Leon in 1947. Very primitive of illustration and print, it is written in both Spanish and English. Its cover was badly damaged, but the content as such is an eternal treasure.