

# Ain't That Weird?

## Something Different from Something Different

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

We admittedly do strange and unexpected things with food at Something Different. In fact, we are rather proud that we cook for those who understand and appreciate subtle flavor nuances. We have created and now prepare many things not found elsewhere, such as Jalapeño Hoecakes and *The* Virginia Sandwich. I delight in seeing the somewhat incredulous reactions of most people when I describe some obscure or anachronistic technique or ingredient such as buttermilk brine for chicken, beef tallow for deep fat fryers (actually healthier than vegetable fats when heated) or whey to enhance texture in breads. I love to watch customer's faces as I describe the pairing of apple butter with hot dogs or talk about including Balsamic vinegar in strawberry ice cream or our use of kelp and fish sauce in soups, sauces and seasonings. As incongruous as these things may sound, one taste is all it takes to convince customers that these combinations may *sound* weird but are actually compatible and harmonious.

### The Applechain

I have no idea what inspired me to put apple butter on a hot dog way back when I was a child. My older sisters plead innocence and decline any credit. I have found no references to this particular combination in the literature or on the Internet. When left to fend for myself, I would often split a hot dog and sandwich it between two pieces of squishy white bread slathered with apple butter. Somewhere along the line I added some ordinary yellow mustard. A little mustard is the catalyst that makes the marriage work between the cool sweetness of apple butter and the juicy meatiness of a hot dog.



When the hot dog halves are alternated up and down on bread and then cut across, the result resembles a chain and thus suggests the name “Applechain”. This deliberate corruption of Appalachian is apropos since most commercial apple orchards are in the hills and mountains of the Eastern states. The name is not original – I pilfered it from the Smothers Brothers first album, *Live at the Purple Onion*, released in 1961. In the introduction to *Dance, Boatman, Dance*, Tom referred to our hearty forefathers, with "pioneer blood coursing through their veins", who came over the "Applechain Mountains" to settle the frontier. In those days, freight was moved up and down rivers on barges powered by boatmen with long poles. Sometimes the water was deep and the boatmen wanted to row their boats, but they were just issued longer poles. Whenever they got the chance they would "go into town to pick up their oars."

At the store we use quarter-pound Kosher all-beef hot dogs served in a “snuggle-bun” (half of a partially hollowed homemade sub roll) nestled on a bed of apple butter and topped with squiggles of mustard. It has become so popular

that loyal customers have even created the “I Love Apple Chains!” fan club on Facebook. All apple butters are not created equal, so we use an artisanal version made without High Fructose Corn Syrup and boiled down in copper kettles like it is supposed to be.

### Unique Ice Creams

We make our own “super premium” French-style ice creams with all-natural dairy products from cows that do not receive antibiotics or hormones. Ice cream quality is classified by butterfat content and by how much air is incorporated during churning. Legally, ice cream must contain at least 10% butterfat and no more than 50% air. Super premium is over 15% butterfat and less than 25% air; thus more ice cream per scoop. We make the standards (Vanilla, Chocolate, Strawberry, White Peach and Cappalottachinamocha) and have recently added some new flavors – Mint Chocolate Chocolate Chip, Buttered Pecan and **HOT** Chocolate with chili peppers. The pairing of chocolate with hot peppers is not new – Spanish Conquistadors learned of it from the Aztecs and it is a key characteristic of many authentic mole sauces. Chocolate is a secret ingredient often included in award-winning chili recipes, but spicy ice cream comes as a surprise to many. It is really interesting to watch people’s reaction when offered a sample. It does not taste hot or spicy in the mouth, but then a gentle warmth starts to build in the back of the throat and soon there is a nice glow on the face followed by a glistening on the forehead. When I give samples, I am always standing by with the antidote – a spoonful of *real* Buttered Pecan (no artificial flavors; we caramelize the pecans with butter and organic sugar).

Only one customer has ever guessed the unexpected ingredient in our strawberry ice cream. Strawberries with balsamic vinegar is not a new idea, nor is balsamic vinegar on vanilla ice cream, so it seemed only natural to combine the three. You can’t taste the vinegar unless you really concentrate, but it enhances the strawberry flavor. A little kelp powder is included to round everything out.

### Natural Flavor Enhancers

There is now a whole industry dedicated to developing artificial flavors and flavor enhancers for food manufacturers, fast-food chains and consumers. It all started over a century ago when a Japanese biochemist analyzed his wife’s kelp soup and discovered that the “savory” qualities were due to free glutamates, a natural by-product of protein metabolism. This discovery led to the industrial production of MSG and eventually to the recognition of umami as the fifth taste. The problem is that MSG is not a natural substance and many individuals are sensitive to it. We use kelp powder and fish sauce (Nuok Mam) to naturally enhance the flavors of our soups, sauces and many other things that we prepare. They both taste pretty disgusting or even revolting by themselves, but used judiciously they work magic.

When the weather cools, we make a lot of gumbo and, if we remember, serve it with a shaker of filé powder (ground sassafras leaves). Filé thickens gumbo and enhances the flavor. Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana learned about filé from the Choctaw Indians, but the use of sassafras leaves for flavor, sustenance and healing goes back much further. Explorers sent by Sir Walter Raleigh to what is now North Carolina reported that Indians boiled their meat in clay pots and seasoned it with sassafras leaves, herbs and vegetables.

### Further Reading

All of my writings previously published in Pleasant Living are available on our website: [www.pine3.info](http://www.pine3.info) under the heading of “Blurbs”. Referenced in this article are *Praise the Lard and Pass the Scrapple*, *How Sweet Fat it is (HFCS)*, *The Magic of Umami*, *The Great Cornbread Conundrum* and *Re-Inventing the Hoecake*, *The Magic of Buttermilk*, *The Pinetree – New Orleans Connection* and *Gumbo*, and *The Virginia Sandwich*.

