

On Becoming an Ethno-Gastronomist

By Dan Gill

Customers often ask me, “What is an Ethno-Gastronomist and why do you consider yourself to be one?” I respond with a trite but accurate explanation: “An Ethno-Gastronomist is one who knows enough about the foods of different cultures to make stuff up and it sounds (or tastes) good.” *Ethno-Gastronomy* is the study of the foods and food heritage of an ethnic group or a number of ethnic groups. It implies the basic foods of the people; the comfort foods that define a culture, as opposed to the foods of kings and courts. I am not a gourmet, epicure, chef or (God forbid!) a foodie. Though self-proclaimed, the term ethno-gastronomist most accurately describes who I am and what I do.

I was raised on a farm in Tidewater Virginia and from an early age was exposed to all aspects of food production, processing and preparation. Things were different then, especially in the country. We had three homemade sit-down meals a day. Mealtime was family time, and we talked – often about what we were eating and how it was prepared. Mother was an accomplished and knowledgeable cook who had learned from her mother. My father was brought up in a large self-sufficient family during the Depression when nothing was taken for granted. We ate critically and analytically, discussing why one technique, variety, brand or ingredient was better than another; I listened and paid attention.

We always had a large garden. Mother canned the excess for winter and put up jams, jellies and preserves. We killed hogs and cured the hams and bacon and made sausage and scrapple. We also had a small feedlot and had our own beef in the freezer. In the spring, we salted down kegs of herring using the same procedure that my father was taught when he was a boy: a layer of fish, a layer of salt, some pepper and paprika and all topped with a drizzle of molasses. Farmers always seemed to be short on cash, but we lived and ate well.

Though interested in food, I never did much cooking when I was coming along. With a mother, grandmother, two sisters and a maid, it was hard for me to get into the kitchen without being in the way. I did manage to come up with the Applechain hot dog, made a lot of milk shakes using cream fresh from the cow, and baked peanut butter cookies and soda cracker pie on occasion. Once, when I had just finished a batch of cookies, our maid tasted one and said, “My, my mister Dan! When you grows up, you gonna be a chef-cook.”

When I was young, we did quite a bit of traveling around the country – mostly to turkey conventions, as we were industry leaders at the time. It was then that I learned that the more *Michelin stars* a restaurant had, the less satisfying the food was. In my limited experience, you paid more for presentation than for the entrée, which was often disguised with exotic sauces and seasonings that overpowered and failed to complement the main ingredient. I would go around the corner and down the alley to find the little ethnic

neighborhood gems that made authentic local fare – and talked to the people to find out what made their food special.

I went on to travel and experience foods from around the country and around the world and to learn more about the science of food. I hold an advanced degree in poultry science from Virginia Tech. The poultry program included quite a bit of technical and practical information concerning meat and egg products. My graduate studies involved research in the field of environmental physiology and was heavy on food science. Virginia Tech didn't offer a degree in ethno-gastronomy, but if they had, I would have qualified.

After graduate school, my wife, Barbara, and I returned to operate the farm and broaden our culinary backgrounds. I am a consummate dabbler and always need some project or challenge to research and master before moving on to a new interest. In addition to running the farm, we learned beekeeping, collected and grafted heritage fruit trees, shed soft crabs, cured hams and aged beef. Though always interested in food, I never did much cooking until I attempted to barbecue a pig and failed miserably (see the story “The Cremation of Ethyl A. Pigg” published in the November-December '06 issue of *Pleasant Living* magazine and available on our website). Since we had built a large barbecue pit in the middle of our house, I figured that I needed to learn how to use it properly. I joined an e-mail barbecue discussion group and was soon hooked on the art and science of cooking and food preparation in general and on barbecue specifically. Soon I was hanging out in local restaurants – watching, listening and learning.

Although I was interested, I never seriously considered going into the food business until the nearby country store, turned convenience store and deli, came up for sale. Our daughter, Sarah, wanted to run it and we naively thought it would be a good investment and a new challenge. I was intrigued by the idea of cooking barbecue and smoking meats and salmon professionally. When the convenience store idea failed, we decided to rip everything out, revamp and reopen as a specialty food store serving mostly meals to go as we were limited by regulation to only a few seats. Our menu consisted primarily of deli sandwiches and barbecue to begin with, but with a personal twist that elevated them above the industry norms. We named the new store “Something Different” to let folks know that we were no longer a convenience store and that we offered homemade food of a quality not readily available elsewhere.

Being “off of the beaten path,” we needed to develop a food philosophy to attract visitors and customers from other areas. When we travel, we always look for something interesting, a little place known only to an initiated minority that makes good authentic food, whether it be local, ethnic or foreign. If one menu item is outstanding, I consider the visit to be successful. I always judge a new restaurant on their soups; soup has to be made with love, and it reflects the care that goes into everything else. I know that good food is not that difficult to make, but it is hard to find and always in demand. We knew that we had to be good in order to survive because practically everyone has to go out of their way to find us. Over the past ten years our unique offerings and specialties have evolved and matured and we have truly become “Something Different”.

This is where ethno-gastronomy fits in. Everything that we prepare is the result of in-depth research with a strong dose of the local, southern and eclectic food traditions that I have been exposed to and absorbed over a lifetime. Since I am not a chef, and barely qualify as a cook, I have to experiment and write everything down, or as my father would say, I have to “make a study of it.” In developing a new recipe I first check the old editions of *Joy of Cooking* and *The Fanny Farmer Cookbook* for the basics. Next I find out if Christopher Kimball (*Cooks Illustrated Magazine* and several cookbooks) has studied the subject and I consult Harold McGee (*On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*) for the technical aspects. Then I search the Internet to see what others are doing and if they are using any unusual ingredients that may add interest without compromising the integrity of the dish. I get ideas from any other sources available, including staff, family and friends, and incorporate only what I think will work, always keeping the main theme and star ingredient in mind. I seem to have a special gift when it comes to formulating and evaluating flavors; I can visualize or imagine what an ingredient will contribute to the end product and usually come close to the final recipe on the first try. Though we specialize in heritage foods, I have no qualms about taking certain untraditional liberties to achieve a balanced flavor union. For example, yellow mustard contributes a “bridge” between the meatiness of a hot dog and the sweet-sour of apple butter in our Applechains; we use kelp as a natural flavor enhancer and to provide the “Umami” in She-Crab soup and many of our other dishes, including some ice creams; we add jalapeños to our hoe cakes and use chili peppers in our Hot Chocolate Ice Cream. After a recipe is created to my satisfaction, it is peer reviewed by staff and customers before it is finalized and added to the “Top Secret Recipe” book. Finally, I write about what I have learned and publish it in *Pleasant Living*.

It has taken ten years of effort and development, but we are finally being recognized regionally and nationally as “Something Different” in the food world, and people are driving hundreds of miles for the experience. We were recently featured in the *Washington Post Magazine* and we are scheduled to be included in *Southern Living’s* next travel/cookbook *Off the Eaten Path, Second Servings* by Morgan Murphy due out next May. We are also the only eatery within fifty miles to earn a five star rating from *Talk of the Town News* for customer satisfaction based on reviews and comments from around the Internet. Though I initially had the inspiration and vision, execution has depended upon a competent staff led by our daughter, Sarah. An ethno-gastronomist in training, she has developed the deli specialties and most of the side dishes and desserts and manages the team. She, in turn, depends upon her staff to ensure that our customers receive personal service and consistent, properly prepared and interesting food so that they will return and tell others.

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Something Different Country Store and Deli www.pine3.info

Definitions of things that I am not

quoted and/or paraphrased from wikipedia.org

“**Gastronomy** is the art and science of food eating. Also, it can be defined as the study of food and culture, with a particular focus on gourmet cuisine...The term is purposely all-encompassing: it subsumes all of cooking technique, nutritional facts, food science and everything that has to do with palatability, plus applications of taste and smell as human ingestion of foodstuffs goes. Gastronomy involves discovering, tasting, experiencing, researching, understanding and writing about food preparation and the sensory qualities of human nutrition as a whole.” A **gastronomist**, therefore, is “one who unites theory and practice in the study of gastronomy.”

A **gastronome** is similar to a **gourmet**: a connoisseur of fine foods and “a person with refined or discriminating taste who is knowledgeable in the craft and art of food and food preparation.” A **gourmand** enjoys and appreciates fine foods in great quantities. Most gourmands tend to be somewhat rotund as a result of practicing their art. **Epicures** and **bon vivants** are more concerned with sensual pleasures including, but not limited to, food and wine. An **ethno-gastronomist** may also be any of the above, but is more concerned with the traditional foods of a culture.

“A **chef** is a person who cooks professionally for other people. Although over time the term has come to describe any person who cooks for a living, traditionally it refers to a highly skilled professional who is proficient in all aspects of food preparation.” As the term “chef” also implies classical training and adherence to certain established rules, I do not consider myself to be a chef.

Foodie is an all-encompassing fad term combining the attributes of gourmets and gastronomists, but on an informal, amateurish level. Foodies eat *veggies* and do strange things to them to make them “yumm-o”. Ethno-Gastronomists eat *vegetables*, because they are nutritious, and they employ traditional cooking techniques to make them taste good. Not that I am a food snob – far from it – but I have no use for people who cute-sify and trivialize serious subjects. In my world, food is serious.