

Cleveland Ethnic Eats: A Culinary Road Map

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Ethnic eating is one of the hottest new food trends in the country. Bon Appetit Magazine devoted its entire September, 2001 issue to the subject. Here in northeast Ohio we are very lucky because this is a region that values its ethnic heritage and that continues to attract immigrants from all over the world who share their food traditions with the rest of us. I've identified 60 different countries and food cultures in this area. We are home to more than 300 restaurants, bakeries, and markets offering ethnic foods, made just as they would be "back home," wherever home once was.

Some of what's happening here reflects larger, nationwide trends. In 1990, there were 500 Thai restaurants in this country. Now, with hot spicy food becoming more and more popular, there are an estimated 2000, and eight of them are in Greater Cleveland.

Other immigrant groups, and the food traditions they brought with them, have been a part of the community for more than a century. In the years between 1800 and 1850, most newcomers were from northern and western Europe and in the second half of the century, from southern and eastern Europe. There were Germans and Irish and Italians in large numbers. Some restaurants and markets are as much historical markers as places to buy food. Guarino's, located in the neighborhood known as Little Italy, is the oldest continually operating restaurant in town. It is still run by descendants of Vincenzo Guarino, the man who opened the restaurant in 1918. In the courtyard where diners eat in warm weather, the grape vines and trumpet flowers that Vincenzo planted from seeds he brought with him from Sicily offer shade and privacy. Gallucci's is an Italian import market that has been in business since 1912, and it too is still run by the same family. We have eight German markets and butchers and many of their customers trace their roots back to those early German immigrants. Cleveland still has the largest mix of Eastern European ethnic groups in the country, and the largest concentration of Slovenes, Slovaks, and Hungarians. Sokolowski's, built on a bluff overlooking the smokestacks of the Flats, offers Polish food. It opened in 1923 as a tavern offering home cooked meals to the steelworkers- the two brothers who run it now are the grandsons of the couple that came here from the old country and started the business. The Hungarian Business and Tradesman's Club on Libby Road in Maple Heights was formed in the 1920s. It was a social center and support group, a place for meetings and parties, drinking, dining, and dancing. Eating food "from home" was an essential part of the ambience and still is. Open to the public for lunch, they serve Hungarian fare such as liver dumpling soup, veal paprikash, or beef goulash at rock bottom prices. The New Era Cafe in Akron opened its doors in 1937 and has been dishing up Slovenian versions of paprikash, stuffed cabbage, and strudel ever since.

When restrictive federal immigration laws created a labor shortage in the years between World War I and II, African-Americans from the south began arriving here in large numbers to fill the void. The Lancer Steakhouse on Carnegie is the oldest black owned and operated restaurant in town. In the 50's and 60's Cleveland attracted immigrants from the countries of the Middle

East, China, Japan, Korea, and India. Vietnamese refugees came following the American withdrawal from that country in the '70's. In the past few decades, people from Latin America and the former Soviet Union have found a home in Cleveland. And we have a wealth of markets and restaurants representing all of these cultures. One of the newest is Lelolai Bakery & Cafe on West 25th Street. The two sisters who opened it are from Puerto Rico and they make traditional Caribbean desserts- pastelillos (fruit filled turnovers), mallorcas (sweet bread), flan, and cheesecake topped with tropical fruits like mango, pineapple, and guava. Marta Alicia is running the kitchen at her new restaurant called Cecilita's on Lorain and West 105th. It's a tiny, unadorned place, only 32 seats. She's not a professional chef, just a woman who longed for the foods of her home country, El Salvador. The place is usually filled with her countrymen- people who, like her, yearn for familiar comfort foods, but she is thrilled when her customers are Americans, happy to have an opportunity to share the cuisine of her native land.

I've spent much of my professional career, and the past 20 years, thinking and writing and talking to people about food. I've written articles about food for magazines and newspapers. The fourth edition of my book, Cleveland Ethnic Eats, has just been published. It's a guidebook to the authentic ethnic restaurants and markets in northeast Ohio. What I call my fork-in-hand research for this book spans seven years. Much of my personal life, as a wife and the mother of three astonishingly large and perennially hungry sons, aged 24-17, has also been wrapped up with food. In all that time, one thing that I have learned is that food fills up more than your stomach; it's about much more than what's on the plate and the simple act of eating it. Food feeds the heart. It speaks of family, memory, home and love. It's a way people share their past and pass on their heritage. Specific foods are tied up with events, holidays, and celebrations. My book is filled with stories about people for whom food, made traditionally, is a business. But it is, at the same time, much more than a business- it's a way of communicating what is meaningful to them.

Karen O'Malley is the young woman who owns The Harp, an Irish pub and restaurant on Cleveland's near west side. She's wanted to have a place like this ever since she was a little girl, though she can't tell you why. Perhaps it came from listening to the stories her father Mike, who was born in a small village in County Mayo, would tell about life back home. He came to America in the '50s, and worked construction, so it was natural that he'd build the stucco, brick, and timber building for her with his own two hands. It was designed by an Irish architect, one of the leading designers of pubs and all the fittings and furnishings were imported from Ireland. There's a mural painted on one wall that shows the view from the cottage where Mike O'Malley grew up. There's hand-clapping, foot-stomping Irish music two nights a week, an incredible selection of Scotch whiskeys, Guinness on tap, and traditional dishes like shepherds pie, smoked salmon, boxty, and colcannon. The place was a labor of love and you feel it the minute you walk in.

Marcella Hazan, one of the most famous Italian cooks and cookbook authors, believes that recipes passed down from one generation to the next arouse memories, establish identities, and represent an oral legacy. This food, she has said, becomes a kind of spirited, direct, colloquial and earthy language. Food tells us about ourselves, where we come from, and how we are connected to others.

Most of the people I met while gathering information for Cleveland Ethnic Eats, told me that they use old family recipes, handed down for generations. And they are deeply, profoundly proud of that fact. Robert Kaczur is the proprietor of a Hungarian butcher shop in Bedford. His father and uncle had opened the shop and growing up, he was obliged to help in the store. By his own account, he hated it and he swore to himself he wouldn't go into the business. He went away to college. He prepared for another career. Meanwhile his uncle and his father reached retirement age. They could no longer manage the business on their own but they couldn't find anyone who wanted to take it over. As Robert tells the story one day he realized if young people like him didn't learn to make the foods that the old people did, all those traditions would disappear. Now he's a man with a mission. The following is an excerpt from Cleveland Ethnic Eats.

Robert Kaczur's has customers from all around the state and the country, and he's even had some international visitors from as far away as Australia. They come for the Hungarian meat products he makes on the premises, using traditional techniques and ingredients. He makes his own cottage hams using a dry cure method with no water added; fresh 100% pork Hungarian kolbasz sausage, a smoked version and another spicy hot variety; hurka, a rice and liver sausage; and blood sausage; and head cheese. In Hungarian szalonna means bacon and Kaczur prepares a number of different kinds: garlic flavored; garlic and paprika; a fattier version used in a Hungarian specialty made with drippings, bread, and grilled vegetables; and abalt szalonna, a boiled bacon with the rib bones attached that can be sliced and used without further cooking. He also makes his own cracklings, some of which go into the pogacs (buns) he sells. Robert learned his trade from his uncle and his father "The Hungarian 'old-timers' like what I do," says Kaczur, "and they've given me their seal of approval. To them, I'm a person who's keeping alive a dying art and even though making things the way I do is time consuming and labor intensive, I won't compromise because I don't want these traditions to be lost" (page 159).

The Palazzo on Detroit is owned by two sisters, Gilda and Carla Carnecelli. Their grandmother and their mother ran the restaurant before them. They grew up in the apartment upstairs, helping out. Palma Carnecelli Di Filippo, a divorcee, opened her restaurant in 1948. It was called Palmina's and it was a place where working people from the neighborhood came seven days a week to get simple, hearty, inexpensive Italian food. Customers called Palma Mama, and she obliged by hovering over them to make sure they got enough to eat, or bossing them around.

Her daughter Gerry worked with her and kept the place going after her mother died in 1972. But then Gerry died suddenly, in 1981, at age 51. The girls were going to close the restaurant but didn't have the heart to shut down the family business, the place they'd grown up in, and an important landmark for their remaining regulars.

The decision to stay in business was not made objectively. "This was the only kind of work we knew how to do, but it was about much more than money," Carla explains. "Our grandmother and our mother had died running this restaurant. It was a part of us, filled with memories and our sense of home and family. It's who we are. And we also knew it was a special place for many other people, people who had been eating here for twenty or thirty years. We just couldn't let all that go."

Tom Canavan of Lakewood is one of those with deep emotional ties to the restaurant. "My parents met there in 1948. I grew up in the neighborhood, playing with Carla, eating Palmina's food. Gerry was like another mother to me and my mother used to take care of Gilda after school. I started as a busboy for Palmina when I was eleven and worked there part-time all through high school, washing dishes, waiting tables, helping in the kitchen. When I started dating my wife Terry I brought her to the restaurant. I have two grown daughters and I've taken them there. This place is a piece of my life" (Cleveland Magazine, "Non Arrendete" by Laura Taxel, August, 2001, 187).

They redecorated, renamed the restaurant, and added new dishes to the menu. But they still make sauce and soup the way their grandmother did, use her pots and pans, her cutting board.

Rey Galindo who cooks at Luchita's, the Mexican restaurant started by his mother in 1981 on West 117th, uses not only her recipes but those that he gathers during his annual trips back to Mexico. He scours the country, working in the kitchens of small, one-of-a-kind restaurants without pay, in exchange for learning how to make traditional regional specialties. He brings the knowledge back to Cleveland and changes the menu at Luchita's every three months to feature the distinctive foods of each part of Mexico. He promises his customers it will be a party in the mouth. He takes great pride and pleasure in the fact that he's not only introducing Ohioans to the little known tastes of Mexico but also helping in his own way to preserve those recipes and techniques.

But places like this and many of the other small owner-operated markets and restaurants in my book are endangered species, at risk of extinction as Corporate America gobbles up the food industry and most of the food dollars people spend. Big conglomerates are not just taking over the production of our food and driving the small independent farmer out of business in the process. They are also accelerating the disappearance of small independent owner-operated restaurants and markets like those in my book. These are places that can't afford big, glitzy advertising campaigns to lure customers and brand themselves. And what they have to offer may be comfort food to those accustomed to it but utterly strange to those who are not. Normal is, after all a relative term. But they are places where quality matters just as much, maybe more, than the bottom line- so things are done in the labor intensive way they always have been, using only the best ingredients. That's because they are not in business merely to make money. They are giving you a piece of themselves when they serve you the food of their country; they are talking to each customer, telling them this is from my people, this is about who I am.

Lucy's Sweet Surrender is a Hungarian bakery that's been at the same location on Buckeye Road where Cleveland meets Shaker Heights for 42 years. It's now owned by Michael Feigenbaum who used to go there as a kid with his father. Michael bought it from Lucy Ortelekon. Although she wanted to retire, she was very particular about who she'd sell it to. She insisted that the person who took over her bakery would have to promise, in writing, to make strudel the same traditional way she did. That meant that in the sale contract that Michael signed there was a provision that the elderly ladies who had been hand stretching the dough for Lucy for years, could keep their jobs for as long as they wanted them or until they died.

Of course it may be more convenient to shop in a supermarket, where you can get everything in one place, or to go to a fast food restaurant around the corner instead of a place across town. But mass-produced, packaged food products, meals that are micro-waved and kept under heat lamps, and dishes that rely on salt, sugar, and fat for flavor and chemical preservatives for a long shelf-life are neither good or good for you. Handmade, homemade, traditionally made foods taste different, and better, much better. They're healthier and more satisfying. And they are interesting. I tell consumers that if we don't support the kinds of businesses that make this kind of food they will disappear and we'll lose something precious, something that makes this region such an exciting and unique place to live. That's part of the reason I wrote Cleveland Ethnic Eats. It is a celebration of craft and artistry, and at the same time, a plea for people to recognize and help preserve this valuable cultural resource.

The book makes it easy, with all the information a guidebook should have, and in so doing I hope it does its own small part to protect these resources by encouraging people to explore and experiment. The aim is to get people excited about trying new foods; to help them feel comfortable venturing out of familiar neighborhoods; and to make what's different seem interesting, and worth a trip. And I believe it's working. People tell me over and over when I go out to speak or sign books, that because of Cleveland Ethnic Eats, they are going into areas of the city they've never been to, visiting restaurants that they'd normally write-off as too crummy looking, tasting types of food they were too timid or intimidated to try. Used in this way, the book serves as a sort of culinary road map, showing the way to what I call food adventures.

Seoul Hot Pot, a Korean restaurant on Payne is a case in point. It's an older urban neighborhood. Many of the buildings around it are empty or in poor condition. The facade of the restaurant offers little inducement to step inside.

This small restaurant, (it seats about 40) was once the only place around where one person could order a meatball sub and the other jaeyook bokum (marinated pork) and twikim mandu (fried dumpling). When the owners, who came here from Korea, went into business they thought success was to be found in pizzas and subs, so they bought a downtown pizzeria, kept the name, and learned to cook Italian-style. But their Korean friends, including homesick exchange students, kept asking them to use the restaurant kitchen to make traditional Korean dishes. Fearing that Clevelanders would never take to Korean food, they decided the best business would be both businesses and for years served pizzas and naeng myun (noodles). But I'm pleased to report that since the publication of Cleveland Ethnic Eats there's been so much interest in the Korean half of the menu (which does a good job of explaining what goes into all the dishes so unfamiliar to most Americans), that the family has chosen to focus strictly on their native cuisine (Cleveland Ethnic Eats, 44).

Now the pizza is gone, although the sign out front advertising it remains, and they've put in traditional grill tables for cooking thin, buttery soft slices of beef. It's served with a variety of condiments and a platter of lettuce leaves. The first time I had this dish I had no idea how to eat it and was acutely aware that my place setting did not include a knife to cut it into bite-size pieces. I watched the Korean families at other tables and learned that it's eaten like a burrito- the cooked meat and toppings are wrapped in the leaves of lettuce and the tidy package is easy to pick up.

Something wonderful happens when you patronize these kinds of local, owner operated places like those I describe in my book. It used to be more common 40 or fifty years ago, but not anymore. There is a kind of personalized, friendly service, a trust and a warmth that just can't be found in mega-stores, and chain places that do business by the book.

Let me offer two examples. I was out on the road, visiting some restaurants and markets for a new edition of my book. I realized I was near Giganti's, an Italian import store on Broadview Road in Broadview Heights, and decided to stop in and pick up some grocery items I needed- a gallon can of olive oil and a couple of pounds of Romano cheese, plus some of their prepared foods for dinner. I filled my cart with what ended up being about \$60.00 worth of stuff. The cashier rang me up and I handed her a credit card. She spent 15 minutes trying to get their machine to work but she failed. She asked me if I had cash or a check. I told her I didn't. To my complete surprise her response was, "Just take your stuff and come back another day to pay for it." This is amazing when you realize I'm not a regular there and she had no idea who I was. When I told her that I didn't live in the neighborhood and explained that it would be hard to come back any time soon, she suggested I mail her a check.

The second story is also about mailing a check. A man, his wife, and their teenage daughter went to eat at a charming little Italian place called Aldo's on Memphis on the near west side of Cleveland. The food is outstanding and the atmosphere is very homey. There are pictures of Aldo's family on the walls as well as the members of the soccer team he played on back home in Italy. In fact you do feel like a guest in his house, especially when he comes to your table and asks you if you're enjoying yourself. These people had never eaten here before. They were unaware that the restaurant, unlike most places in this price range, did not accept credit cards.

The three ate and drank well, from appetizers to dessert and cappuccino. When the bill came it was hefty and the guy handed his server his American Express card. "We don't take these," she told him. He assumed she meant American Express and reached into his wallet for another piece of plastic, but she explained that they didn't accept any of them, payment in cash or check only. Unfortunately he did not have enough cash with him to cover the bill or a check, and with much embarrassment he told this to his waitress. She of course went to get Aldo. There was some anxious waiting. But then Aldo came over, looked at the bill, looked at the guy and his family, gave him a friendly pat on the back and said, "No problem, just send me the check. I know you will do it. Another cappuccino for you?" And that was the end of it. Can you imagine that happening at Max and Erma's. They'd probably want to keep a member of your family hostage til you came back with the money or at least hold onto to some important stuff from your wallet.

My work and my curiosity have taken me to neighborhoods I might never have gone to, and restaurants that appear to have little to recommend them. Rachel's Caribbean is in an ugly little strip mall in South Euclid. Nothing interesting or inviting about it. But the food is another story. Chef and owner David Sterling is an extraordinary cook and his jerked chicken, and halibut with mango salsa is not to be found anywhere else in town. La Tortilla Feliz offers dishes from the many cuisines of Central and South America. It's in Tremont, not an area I usually frequent because it's on the west side and I live on the east but I know how wonderful the food and the atmosphere and so I make time to go there.

One of the things I love is finding great food in unlikely places. Hunan East, on Richmond Road in Richmond Heights is downright ugly from the outside, in a strip mall, and it looks like any typical cheap fast-food type Chinese restaurant. But they have two menus- one is in English and the food is pretty standard stuff. The other is in Chinese. This is the real thing, authentic Shanghai style Chinese dishes made as they would be in China, for Chinese people. Servers will help you translate, or you can employ the time-honored technique of pointing to dishes on other people's tables and saying simple "I'll have some of that."

Food is a language that transcends all barriers. It provides a way for people to speak to each other within a culture, and also across cultures. The evocation of home through food depends on where home is...or was. What's important is that the meaning of the food, the message of love, family, the security of the familiar, and pride in self and heritage is the same. Each authentic traditional dish, whether it is Vietnamese, Lebanese, Ethiopian, or Greek is, if you will, a different sign for the same idea. It's not so easy to read unfamiliar signs but it is not impossible either and the effort is infinitely rewarding.

When you visit the ethnic restaurants I've written about, you can expect to find tables filled with people from that country, speaking in their own language, laughing at jokes you don't understand, eating things you don't recognize. You'll

also see people like you, people from this country and other countries, a veritable United Nations of diners. And what you'll have in

common is the pleasure you all take in the good food you're eating. Like me, you will always feel welcome, and can expect to be treated in a friendly way. I never felt unsafe or out of place. Especially in the small, unpretentious neighborhood places people are consistently gracious. Often staff are family members and treat you as an honored and welcome guest. They don't tell you their name, an overly-friendly, slightly obsequious, and stylish practice in high end restaurants, but they want everything to be just right for you and try hard because they are pleased that you are interested in their food and their culture.

A fact that I am sure you are all well aware of is that the face of America is changing. According to demographic predictions, minorities in this country will soon be the majority. We continue to be the final destination for many of the world's immigrant peoples. Getting comfortable with difference is essential, perhaps now more than ever. That process certainly doesn't begin or end with food, but surprisingly food can play a meaningful role. Because as you expand your palate you also increase your ability to relate to people and feel at home anywhere in the world.

Eating is quite ordinary. We all do it everyday. But what you eat and where you eat is quite significant. Eating authentic traditional ethnic foods can be an adventure, a personal pleasure, and an act of social consciousness. And so I encourage each of you to go forth with open mind and open mouth. Bon Appétit!