Food for Thought:
CLARK COUNTY’S FOOD HISTORY

Food offers an intriguing window on the history of a place. The foods we produce and consume reflect the interplay of both local and global historical forces. Meals are moments in which cultural traditions are transmitted across generations, from hand to mouth. Tracing their movement across space and time weaves unique perspectives on the past of ordinary people, one meal at a time.

The topics in this exhibit reflect the research interests of undergraduate history students at Washington State University Vancouver. Two food related courses ("Cultural Appetites: Food in World History" and "Senior Seminar") gave the students an opportunity to explore and analyze Clark County food history resulting in this exhibit. Even the most consumable of cultural encounters with the past remind us how history is created every day in the embrace of familiar and exotic flavors.

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The bounty of the Pacific Northwest attracted people for thousands of years. First Families gathered, fished, and hunted a variety of local foods, categorizing them as male (for example, salmon and meat) or female (various berries and other wild plants). Gendered food associations interacted with all aspects of life:

The huckleberries and chokecherries are sisters. Chokecherry is the oldest sister. She is given great power here in this lower country. The younger sister has power in the mountains...Chokecherries watch the same as a good dog. They watch people. If anybody gets sick, give them chokecherries and they will have a good life, that is, if they are honest people. These sisters keep track of each day and each night. They keep track of all that is done, even to the sun. In the next world we will know and see it all. We will then understand everything.¹

Nutritious roots and berries, fish and abundant game were seasonal foods whose transport and preservation were key to survival. Basket weavers created boxes and baskets from materials such as cedar roots, bark, and bear grass. Basketry is a craft still practiced today. Women were at the core of basket production and use; in this way, their roles in food production were tied to religious beliefs:

He [Whe-me-me-ow-ah] taught the man how to hunt and fish. The man was missing something, so Whe-me-me-ow-ah made a woman to be with him. He taught her how to make baskets and how to collect and prepare food.²

Established in 1824-25, Fort Vancouver’s early operations included a dairy, distillery, bakery, orchards, gardens and multiple kitchens. Soon after its establishment the fort’s crop yield began to supply most of the operation’s needs. In 1825, 900 barrels of potatoes, more than nine bushels of peas, and other vegetables were produced by the fort.

By 1828, a strong wheat crop had been established. As a result, the fort was able to produce sufficient grain and flour to “have a years stock…in advance,” as noted by Chief Factor John McLoughlin in the summer of 1828. To refine the wheat crop into flour, McLoughlin soon oversaw the construction of a series of gristmills. Horses and oxen powered an early mill. Eventually, the animal powered mill was closed and a new water powered operation was established on Mill Creek near the Columbia River.

Until the late 1820s, many foods were difficult to produce locally. Often imported corn and salted meat were required. Eventually, orchards began to produce fruits such as apples and grapes. The operation edged toward self-sufficiency with significant numbers of cattle, goats, and hogs being kept at the Fort.
Fort Vancouver
Global Crossroads

Just beyond the stockade walls of Fort Vancouver sat Kanaka Village, which housed sawyers (sawmills), coopers (barrel makers), servants, and farmers employed by the worldwide fur trading operation, the Hudson’s Bay Company. Village residents included Native peoples, Métis, and transported Hawaiian laborers, among many others. Food traditions were altered as a result of this multicultural contact. Salmon, a local staple, was used to create culturally blended dishes, such as Lomi-lomi salmon, which eventually found its way back across the Pacific to the lu’au (traditional feast) of the Hawaiian Islands.

By the mid-19th century, Americans from the east were arriving in Southwest Washington, often relying on the generosity and knowledge of indigenous peoples. Yet, they also brought new foods to the area introducing wheat and cattle, importing sugar and coffee from the tropics, and planting fruit trees and herbs native to their European homelands.
Brewing Local Flavor in Clark County

From the beginning of European settlement, brewing has been an important industry in Vancouver and Clark County. In 1857, John Meunch, a German immigrant, established Vancouver’s first brewery, the Vancouver brewery. He sold the business two years later to Henry Weinhard, who marketed his lager to troops at Fort Vancouver in the early 1860s. Weinhard’s operations moved to Portland, but the Vancouver brewing site was sold to Anton Young, who turned the company into the successful Star Brewing Company using local hops and barley for his drink. In 1894, Louis Gerlinger Sr. purchased the brewery and produced the internationally recognized brew Hops Gold.

After a brief hiatus in the 1920s when Prohibition shut down the operations, the old Star Brewery eventually became Lucky Lager, part of a large-scale brewing monopoly when the General Brewing Company purchased it in 1971. However, Lager’s days were numbered. By 1985, the brewery had laid off large portions of its workforce. In August of that year, the order was given to close the Vancouver plant. For the next few decades the brewing industry in Clark County was nearly non-existent. However, in recent years, microbreweries have proliferated and resurrected Clark County’s brewing heritage.
Prune Capital of the World

Among the early fruits planted in the Pacific Northwest, the plum grew into a major regional industry. With their exceptionally high sugar content, dried plums (known as "prunes") were a sought-after breakfast staple. Arthur W. Hidden is remembered for having operated the first commercial plum orchard in Vancouver at 26th and Main Street. By about 1888, when investors began to construct a railroad to connect Vancouver with the world, Clark County was producing approximately 200,000 pounds of prunes. Moreover, the industry was profitable. A single acre cost about $27 to plant and yielded nearly $1,000 worth of dried fruit, much of which could be sold to European markets.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the global export business faced a slump. Clark County orchardists organized themselves as members of a cooperative known as the "Prunarians," whose mission was to promote and market the dried fruit. They even held annual Prune Harvest Festivals between 1919 and 1929, when they crowned the Vancouver Prune Queen. The fledgling industry was served a death blow by the global economic depression of the 1930s and the changing patterns of American exports. Clark County orchardists would continue to produce prunes into the 1960s. However, the impact of the industry on the Clark County economy was negligible. Today, California reigns as the largest prune producer in the nation and China is the largest prune producer in the world.
The Clark County Poor Farm

Prior to the era of federal assistance with the Social Security Act of 1935, "poor farms" were county or city-operated institutions where the poor, elderly, or disabled were housed and sometimes worked as laborers in fields or servants in public housing. In 1873, the Clark County Poor Farm began operating near what is now 78th Street in Vancouver. The farm worked in conjunction with the Clark County Hospital and was a place for those in need of food and healthcare assistance. Yet, the operation was merely a stopgap, as the farm was never self-sustaining. The farm continued to operate for the purpose of public assistance until the early 1940s.

Many who applied for assistance would receive letters allowing them to procure goods from local businesses or explaining the circumstances of the help they received.

In 1949, Washington State College (Washington State University) was deeded the land and took control of 79 acres of the 100-acre property on which they operated an experimental agricultural station until 2008. In that year Clark County and Washington State University forged a partnership and continue to operate the farm today.
Driving Food Home

The Model T was the first mass-produced American automobile manufactured by Henry Ford. Made between 1908 and 1927, its moving assembly-line style of production used standard interchangeable parts and greatly reduced costs of production and maintenance. The assembly line model proliferated into nearly every facet of American industry. This factory line concept was also applied to foods, which were canned and produced in ever-larger quantities. Food shipped globally by sea, land, and rail began to replace the local seasonal bounty once celebrated.

Alongside the introduction of assembly lines came other technological developments. Mass produced foodstuffs had to be kept from spoiling. The invention of railways, electricity, refrigeration, and the automobile (used to truck food between farms and towns) were the new technologies that offered solutions to this problem. Daily home delivery of milk by a milkman disappeared in the second half of the 20th century because of home access to electricity and refrigeration.
Time for Lunch

The imposition of train schedules and factory time-keeping meant meals in the twentieth century occurred at more regular intervals. Parents punched the clock at work and their children experienced school days punctuated by snacks and lunches. In the early 1900s, philanthropic organizations and school associations largely undertook responsibility for food services. By the 1930s, Congress had enacted the laws to enable schools to provide lunch service. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) became an important part of the school experience, fueling the ability to attend school regularly and learn. Schools provided not only meals, but also vehicles for teaching proper nutrition.

Before 1938, Vancouver High School records are silent regarding cafeteria staff. However, in that year, Lavell A. Chesnworth was listed as cafeteria manager in the faculty section of the yearbooks.

Schools were not the only place where cafeterias were sprouting up. In the mid-twentieth century, hospitals were establishing cafeterias for their employees, such as this one at the Kaisen Permanente Hospital in Vancouver.
Fast Foods: The Story of Burgerville

Immigrant Jacob Propstra began operating the Holland Creamery in 1922. The original location in downtown Vancouver was at 3rd and Main Street. In 1928, Propstra relocated to 18th and Main, where it remained for several decades. Propstra’s business worked with local dairy farms and grocery stores, building community relationships that his son George Propstra would later continue. Gradually Holland expanded to include a series of family-style restaurants.

When the fast food craze hit in the 1960s, George Propstra jumped in with a Vancouver version of the new concept. Borrowing plans from Robert Corey, owner of Bob’s Burgers in Eugene, Oregon, Propstra opened the first “Burgerville” in 1961. Unlike McDonald’s, whose operations went global, Burgerville relied on fresh, local, and sustainably produced foods.

The Holland Inc.’s steady growth and quality commitment to the local community make it a symbol of the Pacific Northwest’s unique relationship to the global and local forces that impact food and business.
Imagine Italian cuisine without tomatoes! Mexican food without beef, pork, chicken, cheese, or sour cream! Asian foods without the peanut or chili pepper! No “French fries” outside the Americas!

What historians have called the “Columbian Exchange” is actually the interplay of connections and trade networks that began to globalize the world’s foods beginning with the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Foods native to one continent were traded to new shores, where diets and cuisines were awash in borrowed flavors and exotic tastes.

The Columbia River and overland routes brought people and their foods from around the globe. Among the early imports to Southwest Washington were wheat from Europe, apples from Central Asia via the Persians and Europeans, curry powder and other spices from Asia, and coffee and sugar grown in the Caribbean. Globalization was and continues to be experienced by the world’s peoples in every meal they consume.