WHAT IS NORTHERN FOOD?

WRITER STEVE HOFFMAN EXPLORES.
ARTWORK BY MARY JO HOFFMAN
We dry sausage and jerky and wild mushrooms. We smoke pork and venison and salmon and lake trout. We pickle cucumbers and beans and onions and turnips and beets, not to mention Northern pike and whitefish and herring. We ferment cabbages and peppers separately (saucerkot and hot sauce) and together (kimchi). We ferment cider and beer. For much of the history, there was no other way to eat all year long. And then gradually, those flavors born of necessity — the acidity of pickling, the tang of fermentation, the salt and smoke of smoking — became signatures of Northern cuisine and part of what we craved in what we ate. They became our bacalao, our duck confit, our misers, counting pennies of summer sunshine we have saved and stored away. What we thought we were preserving was food. But what we really preserving was sunlight, captured in the cells of living things.

For three months in the North, we are royally spoiled by an opulence of golden light. For the rest of the year, we are misers, counting pennies of summer sunshine we have saved and stored away.

At some point when you get far enough north, there is a circumpolar sameness to the landscape and the food. The subarctic taiga looks the same in Alaska, Canada, Scandinavia and Siberia, and it always looks more like taiga than any of the more southerly parts of any of those regions. In the same way, cooks in Minneapolis, Milwaukee or Fargo, North Dakota, will often have to solve problems closer to the problems of Swedes, Ukrainians or Mongolians than to the problems of Texans or Floridians — or even, to make an important point, the problems of the Kansans and Missourians with whom we Northerners are so often lumped under the misguided term “Midwestern.”

We don’t go peas here, much less oranges and lemons. Our soil can grow almost anything. But Northern food is still limited, and to that degree defined, by what this latitude can bring to ripeness.

Soil and fertility

St Paul Farmers’ Market, St Paul, August. On an airless summer day, everyone’s skin around me has a damp, satin sheen. We slide past each other in sundals and flip-flops in a two-way human current to the sound of happiness at one corner of the block and some folky six-string picking at the other. The flat music of mid-continent English mingles with a little Russian, an occasional drawl and the sounds of children. All of it is accompanied by a persistent melody whose measures sometimes end on notes between that sing of Southeast Asia. August is the month when the cycles of ripeness of Northern produce must thoroughly and exuberantly overlap, and the tables we walk past are heaped with an almost unrelentfully profusion. A Teutonic-looking blond farm kid shucks sweet corn from the back of a pickup. A Warm, Minnesota woman kneads over a basket of Thai chilies to a bearded guy in cargo shorts and pocket a $5 bill. We walk past mound after mound of cauliflower, tomatoes, kohlrabi, zucchini, eggplant, carrots, broccoli, sweet peppers, cucumbers, potatoes, onions, shallots, scallions, fennel, radishes, melons, blueberries, lemongrass, Thai basil, sweet basil, mint, mustard greens, collards, kale and chard.

The soil has given this to us. There are only four regions in the world this rich in soil. Eastern Europe, northern China, the Argentine Pampas and here, where glaciers like the monumental bulldozers Canada took down to shield rock, pushed millennia worth of Boreal forest biomass southward and left behind a thick mattress of silt hundreds of feet thick in places that then drifted all around the North on the wind.

It’s called loess (from the German word for “loose,” and it’s full of food, but kitchen food, laying closer to the peasant cuisines of Northern food, as I think of it, is not primarily restaurant food, but kitchen food, lying closer to the peasant cuisines of Nordic cuisine, which is a very refined, hyper-local, mostly Artful Living...
He has published a cookbook, and I’ll be opening a restaurant eventually. It’s called The North. But what’s really nice is doing it using our own food. It’s funny because I think I really like doing it with the same exact thing.

I’m thinking this as I stand in the barely knee-deep current of a tiny ribbon of water in western Wisconsin. The water, that sometime after it passes me, will make up part of an enormous muddy blob that will be part of the Great Lakes, built by stubborn loggers and iron miners — Swedes, Finlanders and Cornish — who went to work with hot meat pies and walleye and cold, white casseroles in the basements or wrapped in plaid flannel or talking like characters from the film Fargo. We sometimes ascribe to ourselves locally (and that, to our shame, is often ascribed to us nationally (and that, to our shame, is far too often ascribed to us). We don’t actually live here. We’re halfway through 125 raw oysters and some eight-hour pork shoulder with Caribbean mojo sauce prepared by the chef. We’re drinking some of the editor’s favorite Minnesota beer, some给自己一个高分，自己给自己一个高分，自己给自己一个高分。
spring Morels, earthy autumn Boletes, delicate Oyster Mushrooms, fruity Chanterelles
Today and Tomorrow

Northern food is glacial till. Northern food is what can grow between the 42nd and 49th parallels. Northern food is who has come here and stayed: Anishinaabe, Lakota, Northern and Central European, African American, Somali, Latino, Hmong, Southeast Asian. My children’s comfort food is pasta and pizza. But it’s also spring rolls, sushi, tacos, tamales, salsa, hummus and tandoori chicken. The next generation will grow up on all of that, plus who knows? Korean kimchi and gochujang? Ethiopian roast goat and injera bread? Moroccan couscous and harira soup? Alex Roberts of Alma, one of the Twin Cities’ foundational chefs, says that as food cultures move from scarcity to abundance, they also gravitate toward stronger flavors. So it’s natural that Southeast Asian and Central and South American food cultures are considered less and less someone else’s food and more and more our food, not just because the people who have come from those regions have swiftly become an integral part of the overall culture but because, with abundance, all of us have begun to crave food like that. James Beard winner Gavin Kaysen’s Spoon and Stable, named a global dining destination, sells out of late-night Ramen every Saturday. Eddie Wu’s most popular breakfast dish at Cook St. Paul is eggs Benedict with Korean short ribs. James Beard semifinalist Jorge Guzman plans to incorporate more of his native Yucatán into his next Twin Cities eatery. Yia Vang has created the Minnesota Hmong hotdish using braised pork, Northern Thai curry and tater tots. James Beard semifinalist Thomas Boemer is experimenting with yakitori-style snapping turtle. James Beard semifinalist Ann Kim's Young Joni finds itself among the most admired restaurants in the country. Its most-served pizza is Korean barbecue. James Beard semifinalist Christina Nguyen is serving Southeast Asian street food in Northeast Minneapolis. Right now, this is what the future of Northern food looks like. It looks more flavorful, more inventive, more open to the world. It looks, on the surface, like a departure. But winter still comes early here. The soil is a primeval gift. Morels start showing up in May. And people come from other places and consent to stay. This is the future. This is how it has always been. This is the story we are writing, in the alphabet of climate, of soil, of landscape, of people. Let’s tell it well.