

“Buckeyes, Corncrackers, and Suckers: Culinary Episodes in Ohio History”

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The title of my paper is taken from the title of what is said to have been the first cookbook published west of the Alleghenies that was more than just a knock-off of earlier East Coast or British recipe collections. The author was the otherwise completely unknown Mrs. Philomelia Ann Maria Antoinette Hardin, it was published in Cleveland in 1842, and the full title was: *Every Body's Cook and Receipt Book: But More Particularly Designed for Buckeyes, Hoosiers, Wolverines, Corncrackers, Suckers, and All Epicures Who Wish to Live with Present Times.*<sup>1</sup> Of course, we know that Buckeyes, Hoosiers, and Wolverines were the names applied to inhabitants of the Old Northwest states of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan, respectively, though the origins of these nicknames are still uncertain. Corncrackers and Suckers are even more obscure. The best evidence seems to favor the identification of Corncrackers with Kentucky, and Suckers with Illinois, though these nicknames are no longer used (thankfully, I have to say, since I was born and raised in Illinois). Literally speaking, corncrackers were actually preparers of corn mash whisky, and suckers were a kind of river fish. The first known reference to the word “sucker” as a gullible fool dates to 1836, and by this date, “cracker” was an uncomplimentary epithet referring to what some today inappropriately call “poor white trash.” It is not surprising that these geographic nicknames then quickly fell out of currency, at least as self-referential monikers.

Hardin's recipe book makes interesting reading. It starts on page one without ceremony, enumerating some “valuable rules” in no perceivable order. Further reading reveals interesting recipes for beer (“a good family drink”) made without the benefit of barley, wheat, or any other

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<sup>1</sup> P. Hardin, *Every Body's Cook and Receipt Book: But More Particularly Designed for Buckeyes, Hoosiers, Wolverines, Corncrackers, Suckers, and All Epicures Who Wish to Live with Present Times* (Cleveland, 1842).

grain, and “buckeye pudding” which seems very much like a renamed version of Indian pudding. There are additional recipes for “buckeye dumplings,” for “corncracker’s pudding,” and for “wolverine pudding” using currants.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the most popular American cookbook of the nineteenth century was also published in Ohio. The *Centennial Buckeye Cook Book* appeared first in our nation’s centennial year, 1876, as a fundraiser for the First Congregational Church of Marysville. (The epigraph on the title page reads: “Bad dinners go hand in hand with total depravity, while a properly fed man is already half saved.”) But this was no mere ring-bound assortment of Aunt Mabel’s favorite sauces. The first edition was over 300 pages, filled not only with the most varied recipes, but also with advice about marketing, medicines, housekeeping, laundry, and gardening. After thirty-two editions, the book had not only left all competitor cookbooks in the dust, but with a million copies sold, it may have been, next to the Bible, the most widely distributed and respected book in nineteenth-century America.<sup>3</sup>

Is there a characteristic cuisine, or a characteristic food history, for the Buckeye State? Even well-informed people might guess not, but they would be wrong. I want to argue that Ohio has been more important in the culinary history of the United States than one could well imagine. After a brief general introduction to the subject, I will examine five episodes, mostly centered on the first half of the nineteenth century. The first is a famous lengthy description of Cincinnati, and certain other American towns and cities, by an upper-crust British woman ca. 1828. The second will focus on pork and corn, two of the chief agricultural products of antebellum Ohio. The third part will examine some interesting history connected with apples, the fourth looks at tomatoes, and then

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 1, 32-37.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Smith, ed., *Centennial Buckeye Cook Book* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000). The book first appeared with the imprint Marysville: Shearer, 1876. The information on editions and sales is taken from Smith’s informative introduction.

finally we will spend a few minutes with Ohio grapes and wine production. In the process, we will find that the contemporary “high-culinary” emphasis on local, seasonal, fresh ingredients was by no means the *historical* reality that most people think it was.

As far as the eastern settlers were concerned, Ohio history began when control of the old Northwest passed from French to British control about 1760, when the Americans took over in the 1780s, and when the Indian question was more or less settled in the 1790s. The first permanent settlement in the Ohio Territory was Marietta, named for Marie Antoinette, who at the time was still in possession of her head. Forty-eight Revolutionary officers, an advance party of settlers, celebrated the founding on July 4, 1788, with a feast of venison, turkey, roast pork, and a six-foot pike speared from the river, all washed down with wine and punch. A few months later a similar band established the future site of Cincinnati. What the French had called La Belle Rivière, “the beautiful river,” a (probably poor) translation into French of the Iroquois name “Ohio”, was now part of the American language.

Immigration across the Alleghenies was brisk, to say the least. New Englanders came preferentially to the Western Reserve in the north, while Virginians and Carolinians came to central and southern Ohio. In 1803 Ohio became the first state of the Old Northwest, and land offices were doing their eponymous business (it is an Ohio expression). By 1830, Cincinnati was a bustling city of 25,000, while Cleveland, Canton, and Wooster were struggling with a mere thousand residents each, hampered by the lack of transportation arteries. But the arrival of the new National Road through Wheeling, Zanesville, and Columbus, and, even more important, of the Ohio & Erie Canal, dramatically improved the economics of the new state.

To this new state came Mrs. Frances (Fanny) Trollope, a 48-year-old Englishwoman of good breeding but whose finances were in a precarious condition. After three years in America she returned to England, and made her fortune with a runaway best-seller called *Domestic Manners of*

*the Americans*.<sup>4</sup> (Anthony Trollope would later follow in his mother's literary footsteps.) The tenor of her book can be sampled by citing her description of a meal taken aboard a riverboat traveling up the Mississippi, soon after arriving in the new country. "The total want of all the usual courtesies of the table, the voracious rapidity with which the viands were seized and devoured, the strange uncouth phrases and pronunciation; the loathsome spitting, for the contamination of which it was absolutely impossible to protect our dresses; the frightful manner of feeding with their knives, till the whole blade seemed to enter into the mouth; and the still more frightful manner of cleaning the teeth afterwards with a pocket knife, soon forced us to feel ... that the dinner hour was to be any thing rather than an hour of enjoyment." To borrow an appropriate phrase, the English public ate this kind of material up; Americans, by contrast, were appalled, horrified, and irate.

Having arrived at Memphis, Mrs. Trollope's party ate in a hotel dining room, and had a similar experience as on the riverboat. "[The Americans] ate in perfect silence, and with such astonishing rapidity that their dinner was over literally before our's was begun ... The only sounds heard were those produced by the knives and forks, with the unceasing chorus of coughing, &c. No women were present except ourselves and the hostess; the good women of Memphis being well content to let their lords partake of [the landlady's] turkeys and venison ... while they regale themselves on mush and milk at home."

Mrs. Trollope landed in Cincinnati on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1828, where she was to spend two years. "We had heard so much of Cincinnati, its beauty, wealth, and unequalled prosperity ... this 'wonder of the West,' this 'prophet's gourd of magic growth,' this 'infant Hercules'," she wrote. "I hardly know what I expected to find in this city, fresh risen from the bosom of the wilderness, but certainly it was not a little town, about the size of Salisbury, without even an

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<sup>4</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Whittaker, 1832). I have used the edition by Pamela Neville-Sington (Penguin Classics, 1997).

attempt at beauty in any of its edifices, and with only just enough of the air of a city to make it noisy and bustling.” She concluded, with forced charity, “Though I do not quite sympathise with those who consider Cincinnati as one of the wonders of the world, I certainly think it a city of extraordinary size and importance, when it is remembered that thirty years ago the aboriginal forest occupied the ground where it stands; and every month appears to extend its limits and its wealth.”<sup>5</sup>

She had much to say about the food, most of it bad. “Perhaps the most advantageous feature in Cincinnati is its market, which, for excellence, abundance, and cheapness, can hardly, I should think, be surpassed in any part of the world, if I except the luxury of fruits, which are very inferior to any I have seen in Europe. . . . All the fruit I saw exposed for sale in Cincinnati was most miserable. I passed two summers there, but never tasted a peach worth eating. Of apricots and nectarines I saw none; strawberries very small, raspberries much worse; gooseberries very few, and quite uneatable; currants about half the size of ours, and about double the price; grapes too sour for tarts; apples abundant, but very indifferent, none that would be thought good enough for an English table; pears, cherries, and plums most miserably bad. The flowers of these regions were at least equally inferior; whether this proceeds from want of cultivation or from peculiarity of soil I know not, but after leaving Cincinnati, I was told by a gentleman who appeared to understand the subject, that the state of Ohio had no indigenous flowers or fruits.”<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Trollope was dumbfounded by the enormous quantity of bacon, ham, and beef which appeared on American tables for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. “It seems hardly fair to quarrel with a place because its staple commodity is not pretty,” she wrote, “but I am sure I should have liked Cincinnati much better if the people had not dealt so very largely in hogs. The immense quantity of business done in this line would hardly be believed by those who had not witnessed it. I never saw

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 20, 25, 35, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

a newspaper without remarking such advertisements as the following: ‘Wanted, immediately, 4000 fat hogs.’ ‘For sale, 2000 barrels of prime pork.’ But the annoyance came nearer than this; if I determined upon a walk up Main-street, the chances were five hundred to one against my reaching the shady side without brushing by a snout fresh dripping from the kennel; when we had screwed our courage to the enterprise of mounting a certain noble-looking sugar-loaf hill, that promised pure air and a fine view, we found the brook we had to cross, at its foot, red with the stream from a pig slaughter-house; while our noses, instead of meeting ‘the thyme that loves the green hill’s breast,’ were greeted by odours that I will not describe, and which I heartily hope my readers cannot imagine ...”<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Trollope’s experience was by no means unique. In 1842 Charles Dickens visited the United States, and was much in Ohio. Although he had words of praise for Cincinnati and Columbus, he was not pleased by his reception in Cleveland. He appears to have agreed with much of what Mrs. Trollope observed, for in his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, published shortly after his return and some of which takes place in a Ohio River village ironically misnamed “Eden,” can be found passages that seem to be lifted directly from *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. And regarding the pork industry, in 1845 Sir Charles Lyell, the most famous geologist in the world, traveled up the Ohio and spoke with a resident of Cincinnati. “How many hogs do you think I killed last season?” the man asked him. Lyell guessed high, at 300. “Eighteen thousand,” the man replied, “and all of them dispatched in thirty-five days.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not well appreciated how thoroughly antebellum Americans were fixed on meat-eating, to what extent stock-raising was centered on hogs, and how little of it was eaten fresh. Pigs take beautifully to forest land, where they can find nuts, acorns, beechnuts, insect grubs and other small

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Walter Havighurst, *Ohio: A History* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 67.

creatures—and yes, even buckeyes. Consequently, pig farming was pursued avidly especially in central and southern Ohio (in the less forested and more Yankee north, by contrast, dairy farming was more common). One of the great advantages of raising pigs is that they will eat virtually anything. As the forests near the pig-farming towns diminished, many raised their animals on refuse and waste. Mrs. Trollope related that there was only porcine garbage collection in the city of Cincinnati; trash was routinely thrown into the center of the streets, and “the pigs are constantly seen doing Herculean service in this way through every quarter of the city.”<sup>9</sup>

But to go “whole hog” (another Ohio expression), one had best use corn. “The wedding of pigs and corn,” wrote Marvin Harris, “was made in heaven. Pigs can convert corn to meat about five times more efficiently than cattle” can.<sup>10</sup> In warm and moist central and southern Ohio, corn grew magnificently in the virgin soils, and farmers could harvest far more than they could sell. By 1850, Ohio was the country’s leading corn producer. One strategy to use the poorly-marketable excess crop was to feed the corn to the growing hordes of hogs, then butcher and pack the hogs in salt. Pigs in the barrel—lard, bacon, hams, and salt pork—were then something like condensed and concentrated corn, in a form that was both nutritious and stable. The combination of forests, corn, a meat-eating culture, and excellent transportation on rivers and canals made Cincinnati “Porkopolis,” but other Ohio and Mississippi River communities shared in the wealth, too.<sup>11</sup>

By 1848 Cincinnati pork merchants were packing a half million hogs per year, more by far than any other city in the nation, and they could only have done so by mechanization. The assembly line was not first applied by automobile manufacturers, as is commonly believed, but by these innovative Ohio hog processors. Of course, it was more of a *disassembly* line, but the principle is the same. The pigs were funneled into the line, throats cut, hind foot attached to a great

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<sup>9</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Marvin Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (Waveland Press, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Walsh, *The Rise of the Midwestern Meat Packing Industry* (University Press of Kentucky, 1982).

hook, hoisted aloft, disemboweled, and then systematically disassembled by workers manning specialist stations as the line moved along. By this means it was not difficult for an establishment to process 500 pigs in a day, which over 35 days equals the 18,000 of Sir Charles' acquaintance. Just 25 or 30 of such processors in the city would account for the half million hogs. Only the more affluent consumers could eat fresh meat "high on the hog" (that is, the loins and the chops), but everyone ate the bellies and legs, in the form of salted bacon and ham. And the barrels of salt meat were so ubiquitous that "pork-barrel" legislation became a shorthand expression for excessively local political patronage.

As the railroad network expanded in the 1840s and 1850s, then as the chilled meat trade took off after the Civil War (first using natural ice, later using mechanical refrigeration), the importance of the Ohio River diminished. Animals could be shipped on the hoof to the processing center, and their meat shipped to consumers, all by rail. Moreover, more of the meat could now be sold fresh or frozen. As a consequence, Chicago gradually became the nation's great meat-packing center, both for hogs and for cattle. The scenes of mechanized, brutal, unsanitary slaughterhouses that are so graphically depicted in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* became commonplace by the end of the century. But it should be remembered, not necessarily with pride, that the beginnings of this story were in Ohio.

I characterized bacon, ham, and salt pork as a kind of condensed corn. Another way to condense the corn into a form that was highly valued and *infinitely* stable was to distill it into whiskey. Colonial Americans drank truly impressive quantities of whiskey, and this pattern continued in the early Republic. Unlike British whisky that was based on malted barley, the Americans quickly adapted to corn, which grew easily and provided high sugar content for fermentation, even without the need to sprout the grain, as was the case for malting. The entire process, including distillation, was a simple one, and could be performed on the micro or the macro

scale. Consequently, American corn whisky was cheap, “fatally cheap” in Mrs. Trollope’s opinion: ten or twenty cents per gallon. Taverns often advertised, “Drunk for a penny; dead drunk for two.” Public and private drunkenness was a serious and continuing problem.

In a highly religious country like the United States, alcoholism produced a logical response in the temperance movement, which gained momentum especially after the Civil War. Other responses may not have been quite so obvious. One of the clichés of American food history—I do not know if it is true or not—is that the Colonial Scotch-Irish addiction to distilled alcohol was ameliorated, if not cured, by the wave of German immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s, who brought beer with them. Less well known is the role of apples.

Let it first be understood that apples were not native to the Americas; the best the native Americans could do was to eat crabapples.<sup>12</sup> Introduced by colonists, apples were bred mostly as grafted trees, rather than grown from seeds. A grafted apple tree grows true to its genetic source, as it is in fact a clone of the parent. If you try to reproduce a fine apple tree by seed, however, it doesn’t work. The best tree will produce unpredictable seedling offspring, frequently bearing fruit that is small, misshapen, unattractive, and too sour to eat (sour enough, as Thoreau wrote, to “set a squirrel’s teeth on edge and make a jay scream”).<sup>13</sup> All that said, grafting of selected desirable trees was well understood and intensively practiced in Colonial days, for apples were highly valued, in America as in Britain.

It is would be hard to overemphasize how important apples were to the early settlers. In fact, land grants in the Northwest Territory actually required the applicant to plant at least fifty apple or pear trees as a condition of the deed. The purpose of this provision was to discourage speculative cycles of buying and selling, but those who truly intended to settle permanently needed

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<sup>12</sup> The following section relies heavily on Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 3-58, and Robert Price, *Johnny Appleseed: Man and Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Pollan, *Botany*, p. 9

no coaxing to plant their orchard. It was not just for eating the fresh fruit or baking it into pies—those were actually minor uses, partly because they were limited by the season. Nor was it for the various preserved forms, including long-stored apples, apple butter, apple sugar, and apple vinegar. Settlers grew apples above all for the cider that one could easily prepare with a simple press and a few barrels. As anyone knows who has tried to keep unpasteurized fresh-pressed apple juice from fermenting, it is a losing battle—moreover, a battle that was never fought before the late nineteenth century. The settlers *wanted* the natural fermentation process to transform the raw juice into cider.

The result is a mildly alcoholic beverage with about half the strength of wine, and high nutritive value. It was a preferred beverage, and decidedly *not* regarded as an inebriating or strictly adult drink. Apple cider (the modern expression “hard cider” is redundant, since unfermented apple juice was virtually never consumed) took the place not only of whiskey, wine, and beer, but also of other “soft” drinks, including water, which all too often was contaminated. Cider was regarded by many as a natural organic and healthful food substance that nourished and invigorated. Whiskey, by contrast, was a manufactured, artificial, concentrated product that violated natural limits, had no nutritive value, and produced drunkenness, ill health, and disorder. In this sense, the spread of apples and cider could be, and often was, regarded as the *cure* for the disease of addiction to alcohol.

Why am I telling you all this, and what does it have to do with Ohio? The answer is in two words: Johnny Appleseed. Two important and little-known facts about John Chapman, a.k.a. Johnny Appleseed, are that he spent most of his life planting apple trees *in Ohio*, and that he did it not for fruit eaten out of hand or for pies, but so that settlers could make cider.

As Michael Pollan has written, “the apples and the man have suffered a similar fate in the years since they [first] journeyed down the Ohio [River] together ... Both then had the tang of strangeness about them, and both have long since been sweetened beyond recognition. Figures of

tart wildness, both have been thoroughly domesticated—Chapman transformed into a benign Saint Francis of the American Frontier, the apple into a blemish-free plastic-red saccharine orb.”<sup>14</sup> Here is the real story. The Massachusetts-born Chapman first arrived in Ohio (near Steubenville, on the Ohio River) in 1801, when he was 27; for the next thirty years he spent most of his time in the state, planting seedling apple trees just ahead of the expanding frontier, just when they were most needed by the earliest settlers. His travels carried him as far north as Sandusky, Ashland, Wooster, and Mansfield, and as far south as Cincinnati. By the 1830s he was operating a chain of nurseries stretching from western Pennsylvania, through a huge swath of central Ohio, into eastern Indiana.

The real Johnny Appleseed of antebellum Ohio was an itinerant orchardist and an evangelist. His business was not to make money, but to spread the delight of apples and apple trees to the frontier, while also ministering to the settler’s spiritual needs. He was an ardent apostle of the Church of the New Jerusalem, also known as the Swedenborgian Church, which taught a pietistic Biblical literalism and which deified nature. Even in the earliest days, there were always plenty of fruit trees for sale in settlements like Marietta and Cincinnati, but they were mostly more expensive grafted specimens of proven eastern varieties. This wasn’t Johnny’s thing. Quixotically, he always planted apple trees from seeds obtained from cider mills; he did not believe in grafting trees. “They can improve the apple in that way,” he said, “but that is only a device of man, and it is wicked to cut up trees that way. The correct method is to select good seeds and plant them in good ground and God only can improve the apples.”<sup>15</sup> “Chapman saw himself as a bumblebee on the frontier, bringer of both the seeds and the word of God—that is, of both sweetness and light.”<sup>16</sup>

There were three possible justifications for raising and selling exclusively seedling apple trees. One, which he always stated when asked, was purely religious: it was “wicked” to graft, that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Price, *Appleseed*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Pollan, *Botany*, p. 27.

is, to reproduce seedling trees asexually and artificially, when the natural sexual process utilizes seeds from which new life arises. A second hidden reason that Chapman may have preferred seedling trees was for the long-term benefit of the plant, and its usefulness to humans. Although the vast majority of seedling apple trees produce inedibly sour fruit, accidental hybrids sometimes produce outstandingly good specimens—well adapted to local conditions and bearing highly desirable fruit. Only the vast random experiment of planting thousands of seedlings, with empirical exploration of the results, succeeds in unearthing these new varieties. Most commercially successful apple varieties were discovered in exactly this way, and many of the most popular are American-born. Speaking of Ohio, the Rome Beauty was developed in Rome Township, Ashtabula County, from a chance seedling. Michael Pollan summarizes the situation: “In effect, the apple, like the settlers themselves, had to forsake its former domestic life and return to the wild before it could be reborn as an American. ... Thanks to the species’ inherent prodigality, coupled with the work of individuals like John Chapman, in a remarkably short period of time the New World had its own apples, adapted to the soil and climate and day length of North America, apples that were as distinct from the old European stock as the Americans themselves.”<sup>17</sup>

And then there was the third reason. In the immediate practical context of first-generation Ohioans, the best reason a settler would have for planting a seedling orchard would be for the cider. Chapman was bringing alcohol to the frontier, but alcohol in the organic, natural, God-given form of pure, wholesome apple cider—a beverage that not only nourishes, but weans the soul addicted to spirits away from its own destruction. By selling cider apple trees, Chapman was, in effect, preaching a form of temperance. But you will not find this version of Johnny Appleseed in the Disneyfied Golden Books literature, nor will you see it when you visit the Johnny Appleseed Heritage Center in Mansfield, Ohio. You’ll just have to know this in your heart.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

Let us now continue the “red fruit” theme, and look for a few minutes at one of the most delightful of American food plants, the tomato. The tomato was domesticated by the Aztecs, and spread by the Spanish to its various colonies and to Europe. Culinary adoption was slow, however, partly because the plant was known to be closely related to nightshade, belladonna, henbane, and mandrake, all poisonous (curiously, however, this did not prevent the closely related potato from rapid adoption). In seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe, only the Spanish and Italians ate tomatoes. However, in Florida, Louisiana, and the Carolinas, tomatoes appear to have maintained a tenuous existence as a garden vegetable, derived from Spanish traditions. In the early nineteenth century, tomatoes began rapidly to win friends.

The tomato plant is hardy and vigorous when it is given warmth, sun, and water; America had all of these factors in abundance, and so it is not surprising that the crop was eventually adopted here in great volume. However, it tends to come in a large time-limited harvest, and the fruit is fragile. One response to the feast-or-famine problem was to can them. Another was the invention of tomato ketchup. To make ketchup, tomatoes are cooked, concentrated, and bottled, and treated with salt, sugar, vinegar, and spices; all seven of these procedures are preservative in their action. In the 1830s and 1840s, the American ketchup industry took off.

By around 1800, tomatoes were being grown in abundance in certain parts of the United States, including and especially Ohio.<sup>18</sup> The earliest such reference was by Thomas Ewing, a U.S. senator from the state, who recollected that in the summer of 1800, when he was eleven, a friend of his named Apphiah Brown ate a love apple, an early synonym for the tomato. His parents, however, did not seem as alarmed as he and his playmates were. By 1813 tomatoes were being sold

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<sup>18</sup> The following section draws heavily from Andrew F. Smith, *The Tomato in America: Early History, Culture, and Cookery* (University of Illinois Press, 2001). See also idem, *Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), and A. W. Livingston, ed. A. F. Smith, *Livingston and the Tomato* (Ohio University Press, 1998).

in Cincinnati markets. Mrs. Trollope remarked fifteen years later that “from June till December tomatoes (the great luxury of the American table in the opinion of most Europeans) may be found in the highest perfection in the [Cincinnati] market for about sixpence the peck.” This is one of the earliest substantive indications of the culinary acceptance of the tomato in America.<sup>19</sup>

As late as 1845, many Americans still exhibited a prejudice against tomatoes. The editor of the *Boston Courier* wrote in that year that he regarded tomatoes as “the mere fungus of an offensive plant, which one cannot touch without an immediate application of soap and water with an infusion of eau de cologne ... deliver us, O ye caterers of luxuries, ye gods and goddesses of the science of cookery! deliver us from tomatoes!”<sup>20</sup> But by this time the war for acceptance was essentially over, and largely due to the proselytizing of an Ohio huckster and quack physician named John Cook Bennett.

The Massachusetts-born Bennett spent most of his early life in central and southern Ohio, and learned the physician’s trade through apprenticeship (the usual route in that day). He had a checkered career, to say the least. After being expelled from a medical society and from the Masons, he conducted the first diploma mill in the United States, a short-lived institution named variously Christian College and Indiana University. He hastened to give himself the same M.D. degree that he sold to others by mail. He married, but deserted both his family and his diploma mill after having the great idea of his life. In July 1834 he read a story in the *Cincinnati Farmer and Mechanic* that suggested that tomatoes were uniquely wholesome. A few weeks later, by means that are not at all clear, he was elected president of the faculty of medicine of a newly created institution called Willoughby University of Lake Erie. This institution was founded in Chagrin, Ohio, at the confluence of the east branch of the river of the same name; a few weeks later the

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Tomato in America*, p. 35; Trollope, *Manners*, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Smith, *Tomato in America*, p. 42

town's name was changed to Willoughby, after its namesake university. Willoughby University survived fourteen years, and then vanished without a trace; the women's seminary that later became Lake Erie College took over the building that had served as its home.<sup>21</sup>

Bennett lasted only one year at the new university before being fired, but he spent that year promoting tomatoes as a medicine. In particular, he was convinced that tomatoes were a valuable diuretic and laxative, and could replace the dangerous and toxic inorganic substance calomel, which was much used for this purpose. In his inaugural lecture in Willoughby, Bennett promoted the tomato as "the most healthy article of the *Materia Alimentaria*;" he claimed that extract pills could prevent cholera, and cure diarrhea, dyspepsia, and bilious attacks. He had this lecture printed in the *Painesville Telegraph*, and then the *Ohio Farmer and Horticulturist* reprinted it. He wrote the *Daily Cleveland Herald*, reporting that his article was "going the general round of publication, ... awaken[ing] the public mind to an investigation of the merits of this invaluable exotic."<sup>22</sup>

Go the general round it certainly did. Andrew Smith, who wrote an excellent monograph entitled *The Tomato in America*, has located over 200 newspaper and magazine articles in the United States and abroad that reprinted or paraphrased Bennett's preposterous claims, and over 6000 subsequent advertisements for tomato extract pills hawked by him and others. For example, a British gardening journal published a paraphrase in 1889, characterizing Bennett as an eminent American physician; European journals carried such stories as late as 1900. And Bennett didn't stop after getting sacked at Willoughby University. He moved to Erie, Pa., where he attempted to found a new institution named the Sylvania Medical School. When that failed, he moved to Hocking City, Ohio, and continued to write. A series of his articles on the history, culture, and medical value of the tomato appeared in the *Hocking Valley Gazette* and in the *Columbus Botanical*

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick C. Waite, *Western Reserve University Centennial History of the School of Medicine* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1946), pp. 44-47; Smith, *Tomato in America*, pp. 102-3.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Tomato in America*, pp. 102-37.

*Medical Recorder*. He reported, after claiming to have carried out a thorough examination of ancient texts (plentifully available, it would seem, in Hocking City), that tomatoes were indigenous to all parts of the globe, and added that they were also known to be an aphrodisiac. In 1838 Bennett moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, joined the Mormons, and became a close associate of the prophet Joseph Smith. But Smith soon excommunicated him, and Bennett left the church in a cloud of scandal. His campaign for the tomato ended in 1841, and events in his later life are not known.<sup>23</sup>

The story is actually more complicated, and has more leading characters, than I have indicated; those interested in the subject will find Smith's monograph enlightening. Smith summarizes the situation as follows: "Bennett's claims for the medicinal virtues of the tomato, first published in the fall of 1834, galvanized attention, generated excitement, and rapidly accelerated the acceptance of the tomato as a culinary vegetable. ... Though he failed to credit others for their ideas, Bennett was an effective promoter and deserves credit for popularizing the edible tomato in America. ... Eating raw tomatoes, as Bennett recommended, was ... healthier than eating tomatoes cooked for long periods as recommended by many cookbook authors. ... As Americans in general were vitamin deficient at the time, Bennett's tomato campaign could only have improved the health of those who took his advice."<sup>24</sup>

There is no question that Americans took to tomatoes in a big way, and not just in Ohio. A British journalist traveling through Madison, Wisconsin in 1841 described his reactions to the hotel food: "Tomato was the word—the theme—the song, from morning till night—from night till morning. ... never having tasted [the vegetable<sup>25</sup>] even as a pickle with much gusto, I was not

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<sup>23</sup> This paragraph summarizes material in both Smith and Waite.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Tomato in America*, pp. 106, 133.

<sup>25</sup> Botanically, the tomato is a fruit, but in a culinary context there can be no doubt that it is classed among the vegetables. The old conundrum, "Is the tomato a fruit or a vegetable?" can be answered unequivocally: "It is a vegetable." The reason I can say this without equivocation is that the wording clearly poses a *culinary* question, rather than a *botanical* one. Cucumbers, beans, and many other culinary vegetables are fruits in a botanical sense, and no one seems to find the question relevant for anything other than the tomato. Think about if the question were rephrased: "Is

prepared to enjoy the tomato feast, at the capital of Wisconsin. The garden at the rear of the house seemed to produce no other fruit or vegetable. At breakfast we had five or six plates of the scarlet fruit pompously paraded and eagerly devoured, with hearty commendations, by the guests. Some eat them with milk, others with vinegar and mustard, some with sugar and molasses. I essayed to follow suit, and was very near refunding the rest of my breakfast upon the table. ... At dinner, tomatoes encore, in pies and patties, mashed in side dishes, then dried in the sun like figs; at tea, tomato conserves, and preserved in maple sugar; and to crown the whole, the good lady of the hostel launched forth at night into the praise of tomato pills.”<sup>26</sup>

Just as a concluding observation, our love of tomatoes continues today. Contrary to what you may have heard, ketchup is still our favorite condiment, at least measured by volume rather than retail price. We eat the equivalent of nearly 100 pounds of tomatoes per year, each; the U.S. is second only to China in annual tomato production, and among the states, Ohio is second only to California.

My final episode in Ohio culinary history centers on grapes and wine.<sup>27</sup> Just as there were no apples when the first colonists arrived in the New World, so also there were no palatable grapes. To be sure, America had grape vines in abundance, but they were all “foxy,” as they say in the trade—sour, rank, and musky in flavor when eaten off the vine, and even more unpleasant when made into wine. (These were Mrs. Trollope’s “grapes too sour for tarts.”) For the colonists, the solution was to import European grape vines such as riesling, chardonnay, cabernet, or pinot noir (which are all varieties of the single species *Vitis vinifera*) and transplant them into New World soils. But here the problem was that the European grapes did not like the American climate or the

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the tomato a fruit or a leaf?” Then the question is obviously a botanical rather than a culinary one, and the answer would be: “The tomato is a fruit.”

<sup>26</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>27</sup> This section relies heavily on Paul Lukacs, *American Vintage: The Rise of American Wine* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000), pp. 10-50.

American pathogens. Sometimes the vines lasted a season or two, but they always died, no matter where they were planted or how they were tended—it was either too cold, or they suffered a black rot and mildew, or the roots were eaten by the phylloxera plant louse. Thomas Jefferson, who had expensive tastes, tried many times to grow vinifera grapes in Virginia, but never succeeded. Many others tried, as well.

What all these unsuccessful attempts inadvertently did was to create the conditions whereby the European vinifera grapes could accidentally hybridize with native vines. Many of the American grapes later put into production—varieties with such names as catawba, concord, muscadine, scuppernong, isabel, norton, and mission—have at least some genetic content derived from Europe. This means that they taste less foxy than the original American grapes, but have greater vigor and resistance to native pests than the pure-bred vinifera grapes.

The first commercial success in creating American wine that people actually liked to drink occurred in Ohio, and Ohio quickly became by far the largest wine-producing state in the nation. It was all due to the extraordinary entrepreneurial activity of a man named Nicholas Longworth. Born in New Jersey of Tory parents, Longworth arrived in Cincinnati in 1803, virtually penniless, to escape his tainted family name. Trained in the law, he made money hand over fist in real estate. He became the wealthiest man in Ohio and one of the wealthiest in the country, but always maintained a spartan existence. Shrewd, eccentric, barely five feet in stature, and possessed of powerful philanthropic tendencies, “Old Nick,” as he was known, was the most famous and admired man in Cincinnati.

And then he decided to tackle the problem that no one had yet succeeded in solving: viticulture in America. It was not to make money—by 1820, he had more of that than he knew what to do with. Rather, it was from the cultural conviction that wine was a Good Thing, a civilizing influence in pioneer society. Taking a page from Jefferson’s book, he believed deeply in

agrarian republican ideals. Wine was an integral part of Longworth's vision. Like Johnny Appleseed's attitude toward cider, he did not regard it as an inebriating potion. Instead, wine was a wholesome agricultural product, safer than drinking water or milk, and moreover it was a beverage that also characterized gentle, elevated society. He was aware that in Europe there was an inverse relation between wine drinking and alcoholism, and thought that there must be a causal relation there; if Americans could be introduced to wine, they would abandon their poisonous distilled alcohol. In short, like Johnny Appleseed, he wanted to create an American wine industry to combat demon rum, gin, brandy, and especially whiskey. In addition, he regarded it as a mark of high civilization. And there is little doubt that he did it simply because *he* wanted to have wine available to him. Incidentally, wine can be considered a kind of preserved grape juice, just as cider is a stabler form of apple juice; grapes are of course a particularly fragile crop, impossible to preserve except by adding excess sugar or allowing the fruit to ferment naturally.

Longworth began growing grapes seriously about 1820, and he put his heart and his considerable fortune into the effort. He did not care about losing money, he simply wanted the highest quality product that he could achieve. He had modest success with the catawba grape, producing a dry or off-dry wine that was popular among the city's large German immigrant community. But he didn't stop there, experimenting with literally hundreds of varieties, on hundreds of acres near Cincinnati. However, for many years his market was very local: his experiments with European grapes all failed, as they always had in America, and the American varieties were able to produce wine that was only satisfactory at best.

That is, until a fortuitous accident occurred. In 1842 a batch of wine inadvertently fermented a second time, creating a sparkling wine. Longworth, who now thought he was on to something, sought and found some expert French winemakers in Champagne who were persuaded, with appropriate remuneration, to help him produce a champagne-like product from American

grapes. He sank another large fortune into the effort, and this time succeeded. The result was a lovely, tasty, semi-dry pink sparkling catawba, produced by the traditional French méthode champenoise. Like some of his bottles, this wine exploded commercially. He shipped some bottles to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Cambridge Massachusetts, who loved it, and in gratitude penned his “Ode to Catawba Wine:”

This song of mine  
Is a song of the Vine  
To be sung by the glowing embers  
Of wayside inns,  
When the rain begins  
To darken the drear Novembers.

It is not a song  
Of the Scuppernong,  
From warm Carolinian valleys,  
Nor the Isabel  
And the Muscadel  
That bask in our garden alleys. ...

For the richest and best  
Is the wine of the West,  
That grows by the Beautiful River,  
Whose sweet perfume  
Fills all the room  
With a benison on the giver. ...

Very good in its way  
Is the Verzenay,  
Or the Sillery soft and creamy;  
But Catawba wine  
has a taste more divine,  
More dulcet, delicious and dreamy.

There grows no vine  
By the haunted Rhine,  
By Danube or Guadalquivir,  
Nor on island or cape,  
That bears such a grape  
As grows by the Beautiful River.

Drugged is their juice  
For foreign use,

When shipped o'er the reeling Atlantic,  
To rack our brains  
With the fever pains,  
That have driven the Old World frantic.

To the sewers and sinks  
With all such drinks,  
And after them tumble the mixer,  
For a poison malign  
Is such Borgia wine,  
Or at best but a Devil's elixir. ...

And this Song of the Vine,  
This greeting of mine,  
The winds and the birds shall deliver  
To the Queen of the West,  
In her garlands dressed,  
On the banks of the Beautiful River.

After two hundred years and thousands of failed attempts, someone had finally succeeded in creating a truly good wine in America. Longworth's wine sold so well that he could not help but make money from it, and others quickly copied his success. By the late 1850s, the region was producing 600,000 gallons a year—Longworth's production alone was 100,000 gallons—and Ohio was by far the nation's leading wine state (New York had barely begun to attempt what the Ohioans were doing so well, and California was only starting to produce other than local mission-style wine). The great majority of the wine was from the catawba grape, though by no means all of it was sparkling, and many other American varieties were represented. And the wine was genuinely good. It received high praise from Eastern epicures, as well as from astonished critics at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Southwestern Ohio became known as "America's Rhineland," and catawba wine was proclaimed as "Cincinnati Hock."<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the bane of American viticulture, black spot and downy mildew, reappeared with a vengeance in the 1850s. The vines across the entire region began to decline. By 1870,

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<sup>28</sup> "Hock" is an archaic English word indicating a German Rhine wine (from, e.g., Hochheim).

Longworth was dead, the vines were too, and there was no more wine being produced along the banks of the Ohio. After this catastrophe, some Cincinnatians moved north, and by 1870 they were producing large amounts of high-quality wines along the shores of Lake Erie, and on some of the islands, especially Middle Bass Island. Due partly to the moderating effect of the lake, this proved to be a surprisingly favorable combination of soil and climate for viticulture. One South Bass Island winery quickly grew to the astounding capacity of a half million gallons a year. Again, most of the wine was based on the catawba grape, but others were used as well. One of these alternate varieties was the delaware grape, first developed in Delaware, Ohio. Curiously, the delaware is the most-planted grape vine in Japan today.

The success story of Ohio wines soon spread. In Missouri, New York, and Virginia came new and often successful startups. By the turn of the century, California wine began to come on strong. This was also the time when the phylloxera infestation destroyed nearly all of the vines in France. To solve this devastating problem, the French came to the United States for phylloxera-resistant rootstocks. And then American viticulturists learned from the French example, and began to experiment with European vinifera varieties on American rootstocks. Using this strategem, as well as new chemical fungicides to combat mildew, they could now finally grow cabernets, pinot noirs, rieslings, and other fine wine grapes in their own country.

I have tried to sketch the later history of American viticulture so that I can conclude this episode with an appropriate happy ending. In the 1960s and 1970s, with the support of the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in Wooster, French-American hybrids and genuine vinifera grape varieties began to replace catawba vineyards, here in our own backyard. The great secret that the Ohio Wine Producers Association has been trying hard NOT to keep is that many of these wines have been extraordinarily good; for example, in the early 1990s an Ohio riesling won Best of Show at the prestigious San Francisco State Fair Wine Competition. And we now have an

official Lake Erie Appellation, certified by the BATF. There are now no fewer than 73 wineries in Ohio, twice the number of just seven years ago. Longworth's dream is alive and well.

I have attempted to argue for the surprising importance, even the centrality, of Ohio history for understanding the development of the culinary history of the United States in the nineteenth century. In conclusion, let me try to remove a doubt that may nagging in some of your minds, namely that this may be simply a variety of local boosterism, and that an advocate of any state might easily be able to string together surprising stories and amusing anecdotes to make that state's history seem more important than it really was.

I don't think this is the case, and I would wager that any number of parallel episodes further supporting my thesis are out there, waiting to be developed. Ohio was important culinarily, because Ohio was important culturally, economically, and agriculturally. It was the first and the largest state of the old Northwest, the first to experience massive pioneer immigration, and it was immensely fertile and productive. For much of the nineteenth century, Ohio was surpassed only by New York and Pennsylvania in both population and in economic output. The surprise would be if we were to look and *fail* to find such episodes. And, as we have seen, these stories still continue to develop today.