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Green Bean Casserole and Midwestern Identity: A Regional Foodways Aesthetic and Ethos

Introduction

Mass-produced, factory-processed, commercial foods have been a significant part of American food culture since industrialization allowed their development in the 1800s.[1] Many of these foods have been incorporated into family, community, and national traditions: for example, ramen noodles, Rice Krispies treats, gelatin salads, popcorn and Cracker Jacks, candy canes at Christmas and marshmallow bunnies at Easter.[2] Adoption of such foods is frequently interpreted as resulting from skillful marketing, capitalist hegemony, class envy, ignorance, or poor taste.[3] Regardless of the motivations behind their initial acceptance, however, such foods can become surprisingly meaningful carriers of identity and memory. An exploration of these food traditions raises questions about the nature of food and identity: Why do we eat what we eat?[4] How do some foods take on special meanings for particular cultures, individuals, or meals? Furthermore, some of these commercial foods also seem to represent regional identities and appear to reflect an attachment to place, for example, Spam in Hawaii, Cincinnati chili, California or Chicago pizza, and hot dogs and hamburgers throughout the nation. In some cases, the food originated in a place and spread nationally from there; in others, the food was commercially distributed but became localized, taking on local ingredients, forms, uses, or meanings.[5] What does it then say about a region to have such foods as a significant part of its identity?

Much contemporary exploration of regional foods focuses on the presence of *terroir*—the French concept of the "taste of the soil," also translated as "taste of place"—embodied through food. For example, the crops grown, the animals raised in a particular locale have a distinctive flavor and quality due to the physical characteristics of that place—the type of soil, the quantity of rainfall, the types of flora and fauna, and so on. The food, then, literally represents place and is intrinsically attached to place as an objective reality. Commercial mass-produced and mass-distributed foods defy such geographic boundaries and blur the distinctions between regions. Do regions that embrace those foods call into question their own attachment to place?

Green bean casserole is an example of such a food. Officially a baked mixture of green beans, cream of mushroom soup, and canned fried onions or some substitute that adds "crunch" to the dish,[6] it was invented in 1955 by the Campbell Soup Company. Since then it has been marketed nationally with the recipe printed on the labels of its canned ingredients; the recipe has been reproduced in women's magazines and, today, on the Internet. The dish is the epitome of a mass-produced, processed, commercial food, yet it seems to have become a common, even expected, part of family meals, community potlucks, and holiday dinners throughout the nation.

The dish seems to hold a special place in foodways of the Midwest. Judging from informal ethnographic research I have conducted in northwest Ohio, an area representative of the larger region, green bean casserole is ubiquitous there, showing up in public and private, in everyday as well as celebratory meals, crossing ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic differences. Every November local supermarkets display cans of fried onions, mushroom soup, and green beans in a sort of holiday assemblage,[7] foreshadowing the Thanksgiving meal and suggesting that this dish is part of the "proper" national meal. The typical regional attitude is expressed in the tagline with which one middle-aged woman ended her response to a query about her Thanksgiving dinner menu: "And, of course, green bean casserole!" This area of the Midwest seems to have embraced the dish wholeheartedly and enthusiastically. Considering the strong, ongoing agricultural heritage of the area and its emphasis on family values, why is this so? And how does a recipe that involves little more culinary skill than opening cans purchased from any food retailer make sense in the context of the down-home, Mom-and-apple-pie image of midwestern cooking?

As anyone who has grown up in the Midwest knows, the common answer to these questions in the midwestern context would be a humorous and self-deprecating comment on the lack of taste and culinary refinement stereotypical of the region. However, such foods have a logic specific to the culture using them, and they reflect an aesthetic and ethos essential to that culture's foodways. "Foodways aesthetic" refers to the system for evaluating the quality, the pleasingness (or tastiness) of a food and the activities surrounding the preparation and consumption of that food, while "foodways ethos" refers to the moral and social values attached to food and eating.[8] The term "foodways" rather than "food" emphasizes that food is more than just "stuff we eat." Borrowing from folklorist Don Yoder's definition of foodways as "the total cookery complex, including attitudes, taboos, and meal systems—the whole range of cookery and food habits in a society . . . " (Yoder 1972:325), I use the concept to refer to the network of activities, habits, and conceptualizations surrounding food and eating (Long 1999:33). As a concept, foodways emphasizes the systemic nature of food activities as well as the ways in which memories and meanings get attached to food, oftentimes through seemingly trivial activities.[9] "Foodways" also implies that identity is expressed through food; that the choices we make concerning food activities are performances negotiating our pasts with our present identities and contexts. Although some eating occasions and foods are intentional articulations of identity, many are not. We choose foods out of hunger, curiosity, social etiquette, health concerns, and for many other reasons. Identity seeps through anyway.[10] Green bean casserole in the Midwest seems to be in many contexts an unintentional performance of identity, but at other times a very purposeful expression of local identity. If we extend Pierre Bourdieu's observation that "the style of a meal people offer is a good indication of the image they wish to give or avoid giving to others" (quoted in Bentley 2002:179) to particular foods, then what exactly is the image intended by serving and eating green bean casserole? And since the Midwest tends to be a region defined by a historical connection to the land, does that identity have any connection to region or place?

Green Bean Casserole in Northwest Ohio

I first realized that green bean casserole holds a special place in midwestern foodways when I noticed that it frequently showed up in menus of family dinners, particularly Thanksgiving meals, that I collected from my students at a state university in northwestern Ohio, an area that seems to typify midwestern physical and cultural landscapes. Most of these students were middle-class to lower-middle-class, with a number coming from blue-collar backgrounds and the first in their families to enter college. Farming was also in the heritage and experiences of many of them.[11] Coming from a different regional heritage and from a family that emphasized homegrown and homemade foods, I was struck that something so commercial, so easy to make, and so everyday was a significant part of holiday meals and family traditions. Initially I wondered if it represented a generation that is characterized by a family life disrupted by extracurricular activities and career obligations, with food being eaten on the go and valued for efficiency, low price, homogeneity, and quantity over quality.

I then began informally surveying people from the local community, asking them whether or not green bean casserole was a part of their own family traditions, and asking their own response to the dish.[12] I found that it was a well-known favorite not only at many everyday family meals but also at potlucks and holiday meals, including Thanksgiving dinner. In many cases, it seemed to be the very characteristics that could be considered as diminishing its culinary and cultural value that were being praised in its favor: it was inexpensive and quick to make, it always turned out as expected, and it was easy to transport. It was a dependable dish, one that cooks could rely upon and that consumers almost always liked.

Personal reactions to the casserole varied. In many families it was the favorite dish, the one item that was never turned into leftovers. In some cases, it was a favorite of an individual family member. For example, during one interchange I had with local residents, a wife discovered that her husband liked green bean casserole. After listening to her describe her mother's recipe, he asked: "Why don't we have that? I like it. At church potlucks, it's always the first thing I get." She responded in surprise: "Really? I guess we'll have it at Thanksgiving then!"

Those who liked the dish pointed to its aesthetic qualities. They liked the saltiness of the canned soup and the crunchiness of the onions. Thick and fattening, it reminded them of home, "Mom's cooking," and comforting, familiar tastes.

Not everyone I interviewed appreciated green bean casserole, and reasons ranged from personal aesthetics and taste to health concerns, as seen in some of these representative responses:

> We always have green beans—fresh green beans. But green bean casserole? My mother used to . . . it just doesn't seem healthy—all the salt in the canned stuff . . . [Fortyish woman, midwestern born and bred]

> He's always hated that canned soup [he interjected, "glop"], so I never made it, but I remember it in my family. [Thirtyish woman, midwestern born and bred, who usually purchases organic foods]

Well, I never really liked green beans . . . [Forty-year-old man, a newcomer to northwest Ohio]

Green bean casserole? Yuck. It always looked gross, kind of congealed, with things sticking out of it. [Fifty-year-old man, midwestern born and bred]

Even if they did not eat the food themselves, these individuals recognized it as a part of their local culinary universe. Green bean casserole was considered a normal, standard component of both everyday and ritual meals. Many people were aware of its commercial origins, but that did not deter its integration into family foodways. In fact, the dish was often mentioned with affectionate irony because of its commercial character. Most individuals, however, had never thought about the dish and assumed it was just one of those foods that, as one person stated, "had always been there." They did not think of it as a tradition because they did not consciously and intentionally prepare and consume it as an expression of identity or heritage.

The Midwest as Region, Northwest Ohio as Subregion

Like every region, the Midwest is both a physical, objective space and a cultural mindset, an imagined community (Anderson 1983) of shared values, experiences, and expressive forms. Ranging from Ohio in the east westward and north to Minnesota and Wisconsin, it also includes Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. It represents both the Hinterland, a backwater of social conservatism and pragmatism, and the Heartland, the physical, land center of America as well as the bastion of the nation's "family values" and pioneer spirit (Lee 2004:xvii–xxvi; Fertig 2003). Although there is wide diversity within the region, particularly in urban centers such as Cleveland, St. Louis, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Chicago, there tend to be overarching cultural patterns that are recognizable to both insiders and outsiders. Several university towns—Ann Arbor, Michigan; Madison, Wisconsin; and Antioch and Oberlin in Ohio—stand out as oases of artistic creativity, social progressivism, and political liberalism—demonstrating by contrast a recognizable midwestern identity. Frequently, residents think of themselves as representing a mythical Middle America with straightforward, all-American cultural traditions. Ironically, this also translates into a perception of lacking a specific regional identity.

Analyses of the region's foodways affirm that representation of Middle America. Geographer Richard Pillsbury states that "the cuisine of the Midwest is mostly a product of the Industrial Revolution" and that "the region's consumption patterns clearly reflect the conservative character of the population" (1998:220, 221). Other scholars have described midwestern food as "plain and straightforward, hearty and wholesome, food that sticks to your ribs to get you through the day" (Long 2004:281; see also Prosterman 2005 and Shortridge 2003). The public image of midwestern food is meat and potatoes, home cooking, basic ingredients, and few spices or surprises. Other than a few ethnic dishes, it is not seen as having an actual cuisine, the perception being that people just cook and eat traditional, wholesome American food without thinking too much about it.

My research focused on the northwest corner of Ohio, solidly within the physical and cultural boundaries of the Midwest. Encompassing an area known as the Great Black Swamp, this subregion of the Midwest is on the eastern edge of the Great Plains, so is defined by a flat landscape, and what used to be swamps and oak forests before drainage systems were developed and the trees were cut for lumber in the mid-1800s. The earliest settlers tended to be Anglo-Americans and German immigrants looking for farmland. Nestled at the southern tip of Lake Erie, the largest city, Toledo, was anticipated in the mid-1800s to become one of the great interior ports and conduits for trade; highly urban and industrial, Toledo attracted immigrants to its factories, while the rest of the area remained agricultural. Bowling Green, where I teach, is a city of approximately thirty thousand (with another twenty thousand students); home to a state university, Bowling Green is surrounded by farmland and small towns. Since the mid-1990s, the farmland has been rapidly turning into housing developments, and the area between Bowling Green and Toledo is now full of bedroom communities for commuters.

Northwest Ohio's population today is a mix of urban and rural. It has wide variation in socioeconomic class and is largely European, with pockets of African American and Hispanic settlement. Although seemingly homogeneous, the subregion has wide diversity in that there are numerous European ancestries represented, from descendents of early Anglo-American colonists to nineteenth-century Germans and Irish to later immigrants from eastern Europe.

The culture tends to be a pragmatic and practical one, with a conservatism shaped by a trust in hands-on experience. Its people generally do not romanticize the past or nature. The past is to be learned from, and nature is there to be tamed and made useful—or at least, not dangerous—to humans. It also tends to be economically conservative, fully supportive of capitalism and commercialization. At the same time, it has always embraced technology, concentrating on developing machinery to improve work and living conditions.[13] Outside of Toledo, northwest Ohio is agricultural, but the agriculture is a highly industrialized and commercialized one. Along with large corporate farms producing corn and soybeans, the area is home to major processing plants and canning factories, including such well-established national companies as Heinz and Campbell Soup.

Within this cultural context, food is fuel and is often evaluated by its energy-giving qualities rather than by aesthetic ones related to refined tastes. Heavy on carbohydrates and starches, local foodways also reflect the German and British settlement heritage, as seen in dishes such as roast beef, potatoes, meat loaf, sausages, cream sauces, blends of sweet and sour flavors, and a heavy use of sugar. Even though most families raised garden vegetables, these tended to be preserved by canning, so that using canned goods, albeit commercially processed ones, is a part of traditional preparation methods. Tastes have been trained to accommodate the preserved and processed foods. This is a culture, then, that accepts commercial and processed foods as the normal and "right" way for food to be. Consistent with this ethos, the recipe for green bean casserole—open cans, mix, bake—can be read as a celebration of technology.

Green Bean Casserole: The Corporate Identity

The green bean casserole's commercial identity is well established and its origination in the food industry is in no way hidden. Campbell Soup's official histories and promotional materials proudly claim it as its own invention, stating that the green bean casserole is both one of the company's "top ranked" and "most recommended" recipes.

The official recipe, as given on the company's Web site, begins as follows:

Green Bean Casserole

From: Campbell's Kitchen
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Bake Time: 30 minutes
Serves: 6

Ingredients:
1 can (10 3/4 oz.) Campbell's® Condensed Cream of Mushroom Soup OR Campbell's® Condensed 98% Fat Free Cream of Mushroom Soup
1/2 cup milk
1 tsp. soy sauce
dash ground black pepper
4 cups cooked cut green beans
1 1/3 cups French's® French Fried Onions

(Campbell Soup Company 2005a)

Campbell's claims of the popularity of the casserole are not hyperbole, as is proven by the inclusion of the recipe in most popular American cookbooks and by references to it in the mass media. It is marketed nationally for Thanksgiving meals and seems to have become an accepted part of the holiday within mass-mediated culture. For example, in a *Cincinnati Post* column in 2001, a food reviewer gave these suggestions for a successful Thanksgiving: "First, there's Green Bean Bake, which is made of canned cream-of-mushroom soup and canned French-fried onions. Countless families count on this particular dish being among the dishes of stuffing, cranberries, mashed potatoes and turkey gravy." She presented the recipe, "in case it's not embedded in your brain," and contrasted the recipe from Durkee with that of Campbell's Soup, the differences being minor: the amount of milk, pepper (one-eighth teaspoon as opposed to a "dash"), and the inclusion of soy sauce by Campbell's. Another Web site lists a recipe for green bean casserole, asking, "What would the fall season be without the traditional American favorite?" (Chiff Directory 2007). The site also includes links to "Thanksgiving Recipes" and "Delicious Casserole Recipes for your Holiday Season." Other Web sites and published recipes describe the casserole as "classic," "traditional," "a Thanksgiving standard." These references in popular culture both assume and affirm the place of green bean casserole in the public consciousness as a traditional dish and as a traditional component of Thanksgiving dinner.[14]

Part of this sense of traditionality attached to the dish may come from the long history of the company that invented it and from that organization's place in American popular culture. According to its Web site, the Campbell Soup Company was founded in 1869 in New Jersey by Joseph Campbell, a "fruit merchant," and Abraham Anderson, an "icebox manufacturer." In 1897, the company invented condensed soups, selling them for a dime for a ten-ounce can. This condensed soup was displayed at the Paris Exhibition of 1900, where it won a gold medal—an image of which is still shown today on the can labels. In 1916, the company published a cookbook, *Helps for the Hostess*, that suggested ways to incorporate condensed soups into cooking. In 1931, they began radio ads, including the saying "M'm! M'm! Good!" which then entered into popular culture. In 1934, cream of mushroom soup was invented and was the first of Campbell's soups to be promoted as a sauce as well as a soup. In 1955, the green bean casserole was invented by "Campbell home economists." Today, more than one million cans of soup are used everyday and the green bean casserole is "one of the most popular and most requested recipes" from the company (Campbell Soup Company 2005b).

Originally, the Campbell Soup Company demonstrated modernity through its factory production, marketing, and emphasis on convenience. Its products, however, have been incorporated into the home cooking of many families to the point that their use has become traditional. The canned soups have been attached to people's memories of their childhood and to family lunches.[15] Canned tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich, for example, is still a popular lunch for wintry days.

Casseroles in American Culture

Another factor in understanding the acceptance of the green bean casserole into tradition is its categorization as a casserole. Casseroles have a special place in American identity. They connote communal eating, sharing, and generosity. At office potlucks, church suppers, and community picnics, casseroles are a staple. This is partly due to their convenience—they are easy to transport, their ingredients are readily available and relatively inexpensive, and they are quick to prepare—but it is also due to their dependability—they require little culinary skill. Referred to as "hot dishes" in the upper Midwest or "bakes" in northwest Ohio, casseroles actually represent a departure from the usual British-based *A+2B* meal structure (featuring a piece of meat with two accompaniments) that underlies the American meal. In fact, nutritionists originally discouraged such mixing of ingredients since it was considered an obstacle to digestion (Bentley 2002:179). According to Sarah Rath, however, the casserole became integrated into American foodways during the depressions of the 1890s and the 1930s, when "the economical casserole provided a welcome way to stretch meat, fish, and poultry." Rationing during World War I required cooks to rely on leftovers, often recycling them into casseroles. Rath also points out that casseroles originally "denoted culinary sophistication to American cooks, but immigrants brought their own casserole recipes to the New World in the nineteenth century, and favorite ethnic and regional classics evolved" (2004:194).

Like many foods that started out as high-class, then, the casserole filtered down to the middle and lower classes. According to Jack Goody (1997), this process occurred throughout Europe, where the adoption of new foods was a search for status, a form of social climbing by emulating the eating habits of the upper classes. In the United States, the process may have taken a different turn in that the casserole seems to have been adopted out of convenience rather than status-seeking. It was then democratized, used for everyday as well as festive meals, and turned into a familiar comfort food.

Ironically, the green bean casserole does not satisfy the definition of the standard casserole, which is a mixture of a protein source—meat or fish—with a starch and, usually, some chopped vegetables, all bound together with a sauce. The tuna-noodle casserole, also invented by the Campbell Company (in 1934), better fits the expectation. (Like the green bean bake, the tuna-noodle casserole uses a can of cream of mushroom soup and was invented purposely to expand the market for Campbell's soups; at the same time, it modernized the American casserole more generally by specifying a topping of potato chips rather than the more traditional breadcrumbs.) Although the green bean concoction is not, strictly speaking, a casserole, the fact that Campbell's marketed it as one in 1955 suggests that the images of casseroles as traditional and homey were already implanted in the national American consciousness.

Variations on the Recipe

One of the primary ways in which new materials, whether mass-produced or handmade, are incorporated into existing cultural systems is through variations. These variations represent performances of identities and circumstances of the individuals and communities adapting those materials. This process of folklorization (Dégh:1994:23), akin to traditionalization (Hymes 1975), then allows new materials to carry memories and meanings specific to those performers. While this is a naturally occurring process, successful marketing recognizes its usefulness and nudges consumers to feel that they are personalizing a recipe through variations.

The current Web site for Campbell Soup includes a number of alternatives to the original, basic recipe. For example, a can of "Condensed 98% Fat Free Cream of Mushroom Soup" can replace the regular soup. The basic recipe then uses one-half cup of milk flavored with one teaspoon of soy sauce and a "dash" of ground black pepper. Four cups of "cooked cut green beans" are called for, but the type of cut is not specified. In a list of preparation tips, variations on the beans are suggested: frozen green beans (one bag or two packages), canned green beans (two sixteen-ounce cans), or fresh green beans (one and one-half pounds). It is interesting to note these as variations, since many cooks would consider them obvious substitutions rather than creative alternatives. French's french-fried onions are also said to be essential. Everything except half of the onions is mixed together and baked for twenty-five minutes in a 350-degree oven. The remaining onions are then sprinkled over the top, and the casserole is baked for five more minutes. Campbell's tips suggest variations "for a change of pace," "for a creative twist," "for a festive touch," and "for a heartier mushroom flavor." Again these variations seem minor:

substituting "broccoli flowerets" for green beans, substituting "Campbell's Condensed Golden Mushroom Soup" for "Cream of Mushroom Soup," and adding chopped red pepper (the assumption being that this is red sweet pepper, not red chili pepper). A note from a Web site member states that she used slivered almonds to replace the fried onions since she is allergic to onions—"and it tastes really good" (Campbell Soup Company 2005a).

Campbell's recipe is written in such a way as to make it sound more sophisticated and requiring a bit more skill than the recipe in oral tradition, which, to quote an informant, is: "Open a can a mushroom soup, two cans of green beans, and a can of fried onions, mix together in a pan, and bake in the oven."

Although suggesting the personalization of commercial products is a common marketing strategy, it is also a way of encouraging individuals to attach their own identities to the product, which can result in developing individual meanings. It encourages people to participate in recipe alteration, thus creating a sense of ownership of the resulting variant recipe. That personal variations fit into the standard practices of cooks and meet the artistic needs of individuals to experiment is suggested by the numerous alternative recipes given in magazines and cookbooks. For example, in a column for the *Cincinnati Post* in 2001, the writer offered her own variations for green bean casserole:

> I can't resist an addition or two, such as chopped water chestnuts or diced jicama for more crunch than the fried onions give; a cupful of fresh mushrooms sliced and sautéed over high heat to make the mushroom soup more mushroom; fresh green beans, well cooked, in place of canned or frozen french-cut beans; sour cream and a tot of dry sherry to jazz up the soupy sauce.

While particular brands of ingredients are frequently specified by cookbooks and published recipes—such as Campbell's soup or French's (previously Durkee) french-fried onions—in actual practice any number of variations are possible. None of them challenge the basic paradigm. The beans can be fresh or frozen; they can be french-cut (i.e., in thin strips) or regular. The soup can be replaced with a homemade white sauce (very daring!) and sautéed fresh mushrooms; the canned onions can be substituted with potato sticks, crumbled potato chips, or toasted slivered almonds. These variations give individual cooks the sense of personal ownership of the recipe, and in fact, people discussing the casserole frequently refer to the recipes of specific individuals.

Similarly, in my research I found that people in my area of the Midwest often discussed the variations of the casserole, arguing, for instance, the merits of toasted slivered almonds over those of canned fried onions, the "best" amounts of salt and pepper or of soy sauce, or the use of frozen green beans rather than canned ones (or home canned rather than commercially canned). Interestingly, there did not seem to be variations that were unique to northwest Ohio—a regional oikotype of green bean casserole, so to speak.[16] However, the variant ingredients often carried personalized memories. For example, the canned green beans had been bought at the favorite grocery store, or the home canned ones had been canned by a relative. Similarly, the arrangement and presentation of the ingredients were often personalized. One family had a white ceramic

dish that was always the green bean casserole dish. Another had to have the fried onions sprinkled on top in a particular pattern.

This critiquing of variations suggests, first of all, the existence of an aesthetic system, a system for the evaluation of tastiness and satisfaction. In my research sample, it was common for individuals to have a favorite version of the recipe or to prefer one maker—usually a grandmother—over another. The evaluation also frequently included the merits of different brands of commercial goods, and there tended to be a high degree of brand loyalty. Ironically, the ingredients were not specific to the Midwest, but attention to the identity of commercial products seemed to be common. It may represent a local ethos that embraces the industrial, incorporating it into personal tradition. Brand loyalty was evident in other dishes—chili had to be made with a certain brand of beans and sauce; and hot chicken sandwiches, another local tradition, had to be made with Roots canned shredded chicken.

Familiarity and Ritual

One point that repondents consistently bought up as an advantage of green bean casserole was its familiarity. Midwesterners, particularly, find the ingredients, preparation, and form of the casserole familiar. One woman, in describing its success, suggested: "It's at every potluck and it's always popular. It's so quick to make—perfect for the office potluck—and I guess people like the familiar."

This aura of familiarity seemed to lend itself to the dish being perceived as common and "normal." Its presence was assumed at group events, and while that presence usually wasn't celebrated, the casserole's absence would be noticed and commented upon. Furthermore, the casserole may appeal by virtue of its ability to neatly synthesize apparent oppositions. It represents the familiar, mundane, and everyday in that it is thought of as an everyday convenience food, yet it also represents the festive in that it is closely associated with potlucks and holiday meals. Those festive events can be both semipublic, involving members of occupational, recreational, or religious communities, and private, within the family. At such events, the casserole acts as a bridge between two realms, connecting public and private domains, making coworkers like family, and making family relationships somewhat more formal and ceremonial than they might otherwise be.

Green bean casserole also utilizes ingredients that are generally familiar, but in a more "worked" fashion that can connote festivity.[17] In northwest Ohio, green beans are a common vegetable, often cooked and canned and served alongside meat and potatoes; they are also made into a salad with a sweet-and-sour dressing. Casseroles are a familiar form here, connoting comforting sociability, and canned cream soups are common for lunchtime meals. Dressing up familiar foods like these for holiday and special occasion meals lends itself to ritualization. A recurring symbolic event (Santino1994:11), the special dinner relies on stable components to ground it in people's experiences as a ritual celebration. Highlighting components that are familiar allows for more individuals to participate in the ritual and to create a greater sense of unity through it. In my study, I found that this sense that green bean casserole had been ritualized was part of what people

seemed to like about it. Like the turkey, dressing, and mashed potatoes for Thanksgiving dinner, the casserole appeared every year, comforting in its reliability and consistency, and connoting family tradition and stability. The fact that it was also found at other festive occasions and was not exclusive to Thanksgiving underscored its air of familiarity.

I also found a ludic or playful quality to many discussions of green bean casserole. Most of the individuals with whom I spoke were aware of the stereotypes of midwestern culture and cuisine, and the ways in which the casserole fed into those stereotypes. They discussed the dish with a trace of sarcasm in their voices, laughingly recounting the recipe: Open cans, mix, and bake. They also recognized the apparent irony of this highly processed food being a family tradition. One informant describing her family's traditional dinner rolled her eyes and recalled:

> Well, let me tell you how my mother made it. She opened a can of Campbell's mushroom soup, and a can of Del Monte's green beans [her husband interjected, "and those onion things"]. Yeah, canned fried onions, but she used potato sticks . . . I think that's the way . . . Sometimes she used almonds, slivered almonds.

Such playfulness suggests that, for at least some individuals, the casserole was a ritual turning-upside-down of more elite assumptions about festive food and good food. The dish defies the usual qualities of fine cuisine and gourmet cooking and eating. By celebrating such food, the culture surrounding it is also celebrated and affirmed.[18]

The Meanings of Green Bean Casserole

The meanings surrounding green bean casserole in northwest Ohio are multiple and surprisingly complex, often representing conflicting oppositions. These meanings are an interplay of public, commercially motivated meanings presented through marketing and advertising, and private meanings developed through informal use and experiences with the dish. On one hand, the casserole seems to represent the traditional, but it also represents the modern, an embracing of technology and corporate America. It represents the familiar and mundane, yet also represents the festive and celebratory. Likewise the casserole is simultaneously "fancy," in that green beans have been "worked" into a more cultural product, and "plain," in that the ingredients are familiar and available and the techniques for preparation are minimal, requiring no culinary skills other than wielding a can opener. Artistry, however, can be displayed in the casserole's presentation—as in the choice of a casserole dish and the arrangement of the onions on top—and personal taste and identity can be expressed through variations in ingredients and preparation. Finally, the casserole is simultaneously national and regional. While it is perceived as common across the U.S., it seems to resonate with midwestern eaters, logically fitting into their family and community traditions.

The casserole, then, suggests a regional foodways aesthetic in several ways: a reliance on canned, processed foods; a lack of spices other than pepper (the salt is built into the canned soup and onions); an emphasis on hearty and filling foods; a conservative

approach to new tastes and ingredients; and a pride in well-crafted, functional dishes that are economical and efficient. Green bean casserole embodies and celebrates that aesthetic.

These meanings of the casserole also suggest a regional foodways ethos, a system for valuing food and the activities surrounding it. Dishes such as the green bean casserole lend themselves to *communitas*, the feeling of belonging to a community in which members are bound in nonhierarchical relationships (Turner 1969). No one is superior; no one is more of a gourmet. In a sense the dish cuts across class, in that it is available to all and draws from national rather than elite culture, although it would probably be scorned at gourmet meals. For those concerned with status, however, it is easily available for manipulation to perform class. Homemade white sauce, fresh green beans, almonds instead of canned fried onions, and the addition of little extras—capers, pimento, green pepper—can all denote wealth and more refined tastes. In fact, the ingredients and preparation methods of this dish are accessible to all regardless of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. The cans of green beans, cream of mushroom soup, and french-fried onions are distributed nationally; they are inexpensive and available at almost any grocery store. We can all enjoy green bean casserole and we can even develop a connoisseurship of the subtle variations available.

The meanings associated with the casserole suggest that, in midwestern culture, food functions not so much as cultural capital but as social capital (Bourdieu 1984). It is used to build and affirm relationships in the family or community rather than to demonstrate status. In this culture, valued foods and valued eating experiences are those that bring people together and that erase the social distinctions of class, gourmet tastes, and individualistic preferences. Green bean casserole does just that.

Corresponding with this finding, personal taste seems to play a secondary role to the inclusionary function of the dish. In some of the families I interviewed, the casserole was an obligatory, ritual part of a ritual meal, a dish that had to be included but that no one actually liked or ate.[19] In some cases, it was the contribution of an extended family member, and it was considered more important to accept the contribution—and by implication the family member—than it was to have all the foods be well liked.

Conclusions

The folklorization, traditionalization, and ritualization of green bean casserole suggest that it is possible for a commercial, processed food to be broadly representational and also to carry the emotional attachment that a group may have to its region, an attachment that geographer Yi-Fu Tuan refers to as local patriotism (1974:101). Such patriotism might well be displayed throughout the Midwest whenever green bean casserole is served.

Green bean casserole, then, rather than reflecting a lack of taste, a lack of culinary skill and sophistication, or, perhaps worse, a passive acceptance of mass-produced, commercial foods and meanings, represents a regional foodways aesthetic and ethos. The popular stereotype of the Midwest as having no distinctive identity is well known by midwesterners and comes into play whenever the region is discussed. Their awareness suggests that their playfulness with green bean casserole is a rhetorical strategy

acknowledging and celebrating this representation of midwestern identity (see also Kalcik 1984). Furthermore, the dish is used by its midwestern consumers, in their own understanding of their region, as a performative discourse (Bourdieu 1991:223) that not only claims the Midwest as an identity but also helps to construct a sense of the character of that identity. Such performativity was evident in many of the interviews and informal discussions of green bean casserole. Initially, individuals responding to my questions about the casserole often displayed surprise at the idea that this dish could be taken seriously as a food and as a tradition. They often considered it a tasty food and a part of their family customs, but since it did not qualify as "fine cuisine" or as publicly celebrated symbol, they did not associate a meaningful significance with it.[20] That surprise then turned to acknowledgment, almost a sense of discovery, that there is indeed a distinctive midwestern regional identity and that foods having commercial origins can hold meaningful places in individuals' memories and foodways. The very qualities of green bean casserole that might seem to work against it as a meaningful regional tradition—mass-production and factory-processing of ingredients, ease of preparation, mundaneness, heaviness in calories and carbohydrates—are the very ones that make it a logical representation of local identity.

Notes

1. For more discussions of the history of the industrialization of food in the U.S., see Levenstein 1988 and 2003; Grabaccia 1998; Pillsbury 1998; and Counihan 2002. Scathing critiques of the impact of industrialization of food on American eating habits are offered by Nestle 2002 and Pollan 2006. For the acceptance, by women in particular, of "progress" in cooking, see Inness 2001 and Shapiro 2004.

2. For a discussion of the adoption of commercially produced, mass-mediated products into contemporary tradition, see Santino 1996.

3. Most analyses of contemporary American food habits conclude that Americans lack an appreciation for refined cooking because our national culture has emphasized quantity over quality, packaging over content, and speed and size as measures of value. Capitalism is usually blamed, and while I agree that the capitalist system has encouraged such values, I think we also need to look at the ethos and historical conditions that allowed Americans to embrace such a worldview. An excellent analysis of the philosophical foundations of Western thought can be found in Barndt 2004, which explores how the reductionist philosophy of Descartes and the anti-nature theologizing of Bacon created a mindset that allowed North Americans (she includes Canadians in her indictment) to sever their connections with nature and the natural through food.

4. I am not looking here at why people think something tastes good or at how particular tastes develop. The psychology of taste is a field in itself and addresses the biological, physiological, and psychological factors in taste. My focus is on how a dish comes to "make sense" as part of a meal to a group of people. For psychological approaches, see Macbeth 1997. Taste as a philosophical issue is discussed in Korsmeyer 1999 and Curtin and Heldke 1992.

5. I could also use "glocalized" here, since the spread of dishes such as green bean casserole is due partially to successful marketing as well as to a hegemonic power of such companies as Campbell Soup to define what is considered the norm of American food. The term glocalization comes from sociologist Roland Robertson (1992). For a comprehensive discussion of theories of the relationship of food to place, see Bell and Valentine 1997.

6. Roland Barthes identified "crisp" as a basic American food aesthetic and as the binary opposite of "sweet" ([1961]1997:23).

7. In a holiday assemblage various items are artfully arranged to signify the holiday. The individual items may have publicly established symbolism—such as a pumpkin carved into a jack-o'-lantern or a baby in a manger—but the items may also have either no or too many meanings on their own: in this case, a can of cream of mushroom soup does not represent Thanksgiving until it is juxtaposed with a can of fried onions and cans of green beans. For holiday assemblage, see Santino 1994:34–41.

8. These are my own terms, although the ideas are explored and discussed by philosophers and anthropologists of food, for example, Deane Curtin and Lisa Heldke (1992). My use of the word foodways is specific to folklore in that it refers to a network of activities and meanings surrounding food.

9. For more explanation of "foodways," see Yoder 1972 and Long 1999.

10. For more discussion of identity being expressed in food, see articles in the volume edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, particularly one by Susan Kalcik (1984). My own approach to the expression of identity through food draws heavily from performance theory in folklore, as articulated by Richard Bauman ([1977] 1984) and Dell Hymes (1974): see Long 1999:33–35.

11. This collecting was not done as a statistical survey, although that kind of information would be helpful. The focus in these classes was on the basic concepts of how food traditions carry and construct identity. I also collected information from graduate students, but they tended to have more varied backgrounds and were not representative of the region.

12. While this ethnography was not systematic, I did make sure that I talked to both longtime residents of the area and newcomers. Social distinctions in this area tend to be along occupational and political lines rather than racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic ones, so I attended potlucks at community events, observed reactions to a "culinary expo" at a local mall, and gave workshops and talks in the area on a variety of food-related topics. Judging from responses to my tentative conclusions, I feel that I accurately assessed the uses and meanings of green bean casserole across town-gown lines as well as the spectrum of political beliefs.

13. In the late 1980s, I conducted fieldwork for an exhibit on folk art in this region. Instead of the expected paintings, sculptures, and textile arts, I found that the artistic impulse tended to be expressed through pragmatic forms, such as farm implements and machinery, neatly aligned tree rows and yards, and well-organized larders (Long 1990).

14. A recent advertisement suggesting green bean casserole for Easter plays upon this idea, stating that the dish is not only for Thanksgiving anymore. The advertisement, which was copyrighted in 2006, has appeared in women's magazines such as *Family Circle*.

15. Longtime Bowling Green resident Tom McLaughlin recalled that the local diners and hamburger joints served canned soups in the 1940s and 1950s. When soup was ordered, the cook would simply open a can of Campbell's soup (interview, 6/26/2007).

16. "Oikotype" is more commonly used to refer to narrative variants that are found in a particular locale and that display some aspect of local culture (Brunvand 1998:197).

17. Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests that humans have to act upon the raw ingredients in order to turn them into a cultural item known as food ([1968]1997).

18. Such rites of reversal are significant ways in which dominated cultures maintain a sense of identity as well as vent anger at oppression. While the American Midwest is in no way an oppressed culture, its residents often express frustration at the lack of awareness and appreciation of their region by other areas of the country, particularly the coasts.

19. Cranberry sauce held a similar place, particularly in its canned, jellied form. Students expressed disgust with both these qualities and wondered why such sauce was part of the national paradigm.

20. This reflects common misperceptions of the nature of these phenomena, rather than a lack of meaning of green bean casserole itself. Dishes to be celebrated tend to be thought of as either gourmet (representing evidence of the mastery of specific culinary arts and usually displaying a higher socioeconomic status) or as having a long history, even though that history may be a mythical one (e.g., turkey for Thanksgiving, apple pie, or certain ethnic dishes). Similarly, many informants seemed to think of the casserole's ritual place in their family as due to inertia and lack of curiosity, so that it could be a tradition, but not one to be celebrated. (See Pillsbury 1998, pp. 11–13, for a discussion of tradition as inertia.) In either case, informants did not consider themselves arbiters of what defines Food and Tradition.

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