

Food Chain

From back-to-the-landers to fondue to canned cuisine, a 1970s food scrapbook.

Land Rovers

In 1973 my mother discovered brown rice. Or, I should say, in 1973 she met a man who was young and bearded and sensitive who introduced her to brown rice. He stoked her love for poetry and natural foods. Together they dreamed up an escape from the city to a better life. Green pastures beckoned them, and so did self-sufficiency. They left America behind and went to his native Ireland, and back to the land.

With their love, they created a small farm on an overgrown hillside. They believed that if they grew and made what we ate, we would never want for anything. They purchased a cow they named Bluebell. She was a Jersey, a breed famous for the richness of their cream. My mother's happiest years were the early ones, when Bluebell was in her prime and she was milking her every day. Buckets of creamy milk sloshed as she carried them across the farmyard. Sometimes the milk spilled onto the cool kitchen tiles when she poured it through cheesecloth into bottles and bowls. This wasn't a sterile environment; it was a home that a band of hippies had pieced together on top of the ruined walls of an old farmhouse. In the kitchen those walls were white-washed, and the irregular shapes of the stones caught dust and spiders. There my mother would stir the rennet she had bought from the village chemist into Bluebell's milk, and then hang the curds over the sink to drain. A few steps away, in a stairwell made from salvaged windows, rain would drip down into the buckets and pots we placed on the floor on days when the weather was heavier than the usual, soft drizzle.

In fact, it did get heavy, and one by one they had to let the dreams go. Now when mother mentions those days, it's Bluebell's milk she remembers. Making creamy, rich cheese was one thing she could do to feed us all and make her dreams come true, if only for a little while. ANNA KOVEL

POT LUCK

Clockwise, chunks of crusty bread are impaled, plunged into bubbling cheese, and pirouetted around. Every now and then, one breaks off and is engulfed. If a woman is to blame, she is obliged to kiss the man to her left; if a man, then a bottle of wine is in order. And so went a fondue fête in the '70s: It was an intimate gathering of middle-class baby boomers swilling sherry and hovering over a mustard-colored cauldron of Swiss. In the '30s, the Swiss Cheese Union embarked on a campaign to increase cheese consumption with ads of Fair Isle-clad après-skiers enjoying the national dish. Fondue soon reached American soil. There's even an episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in which the dizzy Georgette exasperatingly drops piece after piece of bread into the fondue pot. (When Mary asks her if she would like some more, she mews, "No thanks, Mary, I've lost enough.") Born a decade later, the closest I got to a fondue party was The Melting Pot, my go-to venue for birthdays, good grades, and everything in between. It wasn't poaching butterfly shrimp in broth, or even drenching strawberries in chocolate, that was so nonpareil to me. It was the cheese—as far as I could tell, a fathomless pool of cheese. In retrospect, what this mall dining experience lacked in bohemian panache, it made up for in the abandonment of etiquette. That is to say, when a chunk of bread vanished beneath the cheesy surface, I leisurely fished it out so as to sop up as much sauce as possible. SAMANTHA GURRIE



Photograph by Stephen Kent Johnson