

Baked Beans

by David Ackley

Why do we like what we like?

I've always liked baked beans; probably you did too. Perhaps it began with our mothers, Lela—my grandmother--in your case, Dot in mine, putting spoon to our curious infant lips. A scent rounded and rich, a malty, deep smell that went with the nameless color and these pebbly but soft, easily gummed objects, that mashed on the tongue gave up the sweet of molasses, edged with the slight tang of mustard and the viscous scent-taste-feel of stewed salt pork all melted together in its six hours or more in the oven... But what did we know or care about any of that? We tasted and found it good! And that was that forever.

The recipe was passed down to Lela by her mother, and its ingredients, cooking, timing and usual accompaniments convey something of our history-- back at least to Cutler, Maine on the North Atlantic coast, and who knows how many generations of word of mouth or handwritten recipes descending mother to daughter, among Lela's Dennisons. The white beans, so easily grown, dried, stored, transported that miles and years at sea, my seaman forebears might have nearly mutinied when, boiled, they surfaced yet again from the galley pots.

Molasses aside from rum, was the preferred medium for shipping sugar in centuries past: almost black, barely pourable, malty in great wooden barrels. In 1919 such quantities were still in use that when a giant vat burst in Boston, twenty one people were killed along with several horses in the river of sweet goop down the streets of the North end. For years after, on hot summer days residents could still smell molasses bubbling up from the substrata. The event doesn't appear to have suppressed the taste for baked beans. Back in Cutler the salt pork would have come from hogs fattened and slaughtered by George Ackley, whenever he was ashore on the saltwater farm where his son, my grandfather Fred, was raised.

And so Friday nights, in 1920's Nashua with Lela at the far end of the table and Fred at the head; you (my uncle Philip) at age six; my father Harry, eleven; and the full grown aunts, Olive, Jeanette along either side. In front of Fred would be a brown earthenware pot with two rudimentary handles, the lower half dark brown the upper beige, with a small brown lid, which when lifted, released a steam of the rich compounded smells. And on the table, a platter of cod cakes, crusted and golden; and dark brown bread steamed in its own can. Back in Cutler, the cod, fresh or salted, would have come ashore in wooden dories manned by George, or his father James, or other Ackley seamen going all the way back to Benajah Ackley Jr. in 1751 the first of our line to settle beside the Gulf of Maine where Cod was so plentiful it was called the fish that built New England.

Friday night : Boston baked beans.

Maybe all of this is why we liked it, or maybe it's only the bland biology of taste buds, the salivation prompted by the redolence as Fred spoons the beans and their brown liquid onto each plate, Lela serves up a slice of brown bread with a dab of melting butter, your favorite as mine, bready rich with more molasses; then the cod cakes. You spooned the beans into your mouth, tasted, chewed, swallowed. So do we imbibe our own history and taste its spirit; it becomes who we are.

You perhaps only dimly sense : *When my own children sit along the table, I at the head and she at the other end, on Fridays she will bake beans which I will serve up like my father Fred, spooning from this same brown pot.* The familiar tastes and smells meld; the family carries them on.

