Capturing Campus Cuisine: An 1860s Luncheon Reconstruction at MSU

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Introduction

The Campus Archaeology Program (CAP) was established in 2005 to document the history of Michigan State University, which continues to do through archaeological excavation and archival and documentary research. In 2015, CAP discovered a brick-lined privy near the MSU Museum. Excavation of the privy, which dates to the 1860s, uncovered a wide variety of artifacts, including food remains such as fish bones and raspberry seeds. Campus Archaeologist Lisa Bright came up with the idea to re-create a historic MSU meal based on these food remains from the privy, and it was the culmination of this author year-long study of historic foodways on the MSU campus.

Multidimensional Approach

CAP employed a combination of zooarchaeological analysis, archaeobotanical analysis, and archival research to inform our reconstruction of the historic meal.

Archival Research

Accounting books from 1866-1874, housed at the MSU Archives, were used to determine the types of food purchased by the early MSU boarding hall. While extremely useful, these did not detail recipes or food preparations methods. Historic banquet menus provided some of this missing information, detailing the types of dishes served during special events.

Archaeological Analysis

While we can refer to archival documents to determine what foods were purchased, we can use direct evidence from floral and faunal remains.

Floral Remains

During Campus Archaeology excavations we have uncovered floral remains. Some of these remainswere recovered from the Saint's Rest Privy, the toilet associated with the first dormitory on campus. These remains were identified by Dr. Katie Egan-Bruhy as raspberry seeds, shown to the right under magnification (Image courtesy of Amy Michael).

Faunal Remains

In addition to floral remains, campus excavations have also recovered vast quantities of faunal bone remains. The images to the left shows several butchered animal remains and other faunal material recovered on campus (Images courtesy of Campus Archaeology Program). It is possible by examining these remains through careful analysis and comparison to identify not only the bone element it represents (remur, humerus, tibia, etc.), but the species it came from.

To date, the focus on the faunal material by CAP Fellow Autumn Painter has been on the bones recovered from the Saint’s Rest privy. When the privy was excavated, an immense amount of bone was recovered from the southwest corner. Using comparative collection skeletons from the MSU Museum and loan skeletons from the Field Museum, it was possible to identify the fish bones as walleye. The image to the right shows the identification of a walleye dentary (Image courtesy of Autumn Painter). Through this analysis, Autumn was able to determine that at least seventeen different walleye were thrown away in the privy. Walleyes are the largest member of the perch family and can be caught in shallow bays and inland lakes. As there are plenty of inland lakes surrounding East Lansing, it is possible that these fish were caught locally and served on campus.

The Meal

Campus Archaeology worked closely with Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski and Chef Jay Makowski of MSU Culinary Services and Cindy Baswell of MSU Bakers to develop a menu that reflected MSU cuisine from the 1860s.

Menu

Appetizer

Crepes (Cooked Belts)

Main Entrees

Walleye

Side Dishes

Charlotte Russe with Raspberries

Desserts

Appetizer

Crepes (Cooked Belts)

Main Entrees

Walleye – Identified in the zooarchaeological remains from the privy

Sides

Chee-chow – A vegetable relish featured on the 1884 banquet menu and in many cookbooks of the time.

Desserts

Ginger Cake – A popular recipe in cookbooks of the era. Student diaries record consumption of ginger snaps.

Public Outreach

Since food is inherently social, we felt this project would provide a great outreach opportunity to engage the public and connect them to the past through their stomachs. This consisted of three components:

Luncheon Reconstruction: People from across MSU were invited to our historic luncheon. The meal was a great success, and fan favorites were the beef tongue, chow chow, and ginger cake. The event was featured across multiple social media platforms, including the MSU Snapchat story. The luncheon may serve as a prototype for a larger, public event in the future.

Blogs: a series of blogs documented the findings as we proceeded with our archaeological and archival research was posted to the CAP website (http://campusarch.msu.edu)

Website: Autumn Painter developed the Capturing Campus Cuisine website as her MSU Cultural Heritage Informatics (CHI) Initiative fellowship. The site contains information about historical-foodway foodways, chronicles the meal reconstruction, and provides an interactive map of historic food-related locales across campus. Visit the website at earlyfood.campusarch.msu.edu and check out several short videos documenting the meal reconstruction event.

Ultimately, this project has connected archaeologists and the public alike to past MSU students and faculty, emphasizing both changes in and continuity of behaviors that characterize human interactions with food and each other.

Acknowledgements

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References

Flower Cook Book, compiled from recipes provided by the ladies of St. Joseph and other cities and towns originally published for the benefit of Shrieking Chins, 1869.

Jno. Makowski [and others], Selection of Choice Receipts: a series of blogs documented the findings as we proceeded with our archaeological and archival research was posted to the CAP website (http://campusarch.msu.edu)

Mac Class of 1858 banquet menu (courtesy of MSU Archives and Special Collections).

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Images to the left shows several butchered animal remains and other faunal material recovered on campus (Images courtesy of Campus Archaeology Program). It is possible by examining these remains through careful analysis and comparison to identify not only the bone element it represents (remur, humerus, tibia, etc.), but the species it came from.

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