

The Bird

I can hear those Betz cells dancing like sugar plums inside your heads. “What is he going to talk about this year” ---- obscene gestures, turkeys, some other fowl? But it’s the holiday season again. Time to drag out those old traditions in decorations, last years left over wrapping paper, and, of course, food and drink. At this time of the year, mentioning “The Bird” will for 95.5% of you conjure up the image of a roasted turkey. For 2.5 % a goose and an occasional duck may fly in. A few curmudgeons in the audience will see a succulent rare roast beef or a piece of fish, and, God forgive us, there may be a Vegan in the house – summer squash and beans – come on, it’s the holidays.

I’m willing to wager a large sum of money that none of you would think of Swan, but if this were Tudor England, during the reign of King Henry VIII, our kitchen master, Carl, would now be scurrying about the countryside looking for enough Swans and Peacocks, besides other culinary delights, in preparation for a Christmas Feast fit for the King (I guess that would be our esteemed president Fred McGavran). My dear wife, in particular, has long struggled, occasionally loosing sleep over the question --- why isn’t roast Swan ever on the menu? Is it forbidden? No. Does it taste bad? Depends. Can we buy it? Yes. Can we hunt it? Depends. So why not? That is the subject of my Holiday paper, so lets take a stroll through the fog of legend and myth and into the kitchen and at long last the dining room. I can see several of you drooling in anticipation.

The first stop on our gastronomic sojourn is The Cornell Lab of Ornithology (1) in Ithaca, New York where I spoke with a delightful lady by the name of Anne Hobbs. Anne is a treat to chat with and easy to get to like --- we’re trading recipes now. She is a

wonderful guide to the world of Swans. There are three common Swans in North America. The Tundra Swan and the Trumpeter Swan are native to this continent and the Mute Swan was introduced from England and is actually considered an invasive species. The Trumpeter is a protected species having been almost decimated by over hunting and pollution, but is now making a remarkable recovery in the upper United States, especially the Great Lakes region. The Mute Swan is considered an exotic species, but I'm not sure why. There was a large picture of one in last Thursday's New York Times (2) in an article about the hazards to all types of birds including Swans, Ducks, and Geese from fishing line and lead weights in park lakes around the city. The Tundra Swan is hunted extensively during the migration season on both the Atlantic and Pacific flyways, so there is a pretty good chance that some of them are being eaten.

Before we set out for the grocery store, let's deal with some legends and myths. Swans, no doubt because of their stately beauty, have a long history in mythology, art, folklore, and literature. There are drawings of swans over 1000 years old. In Greek mythology Leda and the Swan is a motif describing Zeus coming to Leda in the form of a Swan shortly after she had made love to her husband Tyndareus, King of Sparta. Randy bunch those gods. The result was Helen and Polydeuces, children of Zeus and Castor and Clytemnestra, children of her husband. Those folks put the **fun** in dysfunctional. In the 16th Century, the earliest portrayals of erotic art used Zeus, the Swan, and Leda in some pretty racy paintings - many of which were either kept in very private collections, or, in Michelangelo's case, probably destroyed. In 1924, the Nobel Prize winning laureate William Butler Yeats published **Leda and the Swan** which has been called one of most

technically masterful poems ever written in English. I won't read the whole thing just one line:

**A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof, and tower
And Agamemnon dead. (4)**

It's not clear whose loins shuddered - either the Swan, Leda, or both. (3, 4, 5) In 1844, Hans Christian Anderson published his classic fable **The Ugly Duckling** which he had begun two years earlier. He had been in a blue funk about the poor reviews of a new play and initial work on this story began to restore his mood. Scholars recognize that this is one of his best and possibly the most biographical of any of his work. It is rife with symbolism in the story of a rough dirty gray looking cygnet, a baby swan, hatched among cute little yellow ducklings by an unsuspecting mother duck. It is a thinly disguised retelling of many of the events in Anderson's life and his mistreatment by other children. The ending, with the metamorphosis into a beautiful and stately white swan, is Anderson's vision of the homage paid to him by the establishment. (6, 7)

A multitude of myths surround the long history of swans. Rick Newrock in his January 2, 2009 paper to the club entitled "Black Swans" gave us a very cogent explanation of Black Swan Theory. (8, 9) The term Black Swan is used to describe an event of extremely low probability. Naturalists in the 15th, 16th, and early 17th Century thought that there was no such thing as a Black Swan because none existed in Europe or the New World. That was until some hardy scientific type sailed to Australia and discovered there were a hell of a lot of them. Currently, one of the larger populations of Black Swans is in England where most of the doubting Thomas's once lived. (10)

The term Swan Song refers to the ancient belief that the Mute Swan does not have a voice until just before its death when it sings one beautiful song. In the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, Clytemnestra compares the dead Cassandra to a swan who has “sung her last final lament” (11). By the 3rd Century BC it had become a proverb. However, the ancient Romans knew this to be false and it was refuted by Pliny the Elder in his book *Natural History* in 77 AD. (12) Folklore and poetic imagery have over ruled reality since the concept is so appealing and it continues to appear in many artistic works. In fact, the Mute Swan is not mute at all, although less vocal than most other Swans. They make a variety of grunting, hoarse whistling, and snorting noises (very similar to some evenings here at the club), especially in communicating with their cygnets, and usually hiss at predators trying to enter their territory. Birders know that the most familiar sound made by the Mute Swan is the vibrant throbbing of the wings in flight that can be heard up to a half mile away. (13)

Another myth is that the Crown claims all the Swans in England. Edward IV approved the Act for Swans in 1482 which set out that only the King or wealthy land owners could own Swans and appointed the Master of Swans to enforce it. (14) This reinforced the Swan Upping Ceremony, allegedly begun in the 12th Century, that is simply the annual census of the Swan population on stretches of the Thames in the counties of Middlesex, Surry, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire. There the Company of Vintners and The Company of the Dyers could own Swans if they were marked on the bill with one nick for the Vintners and two for the Dyers. The rest were the Kings. Technically the Queen owns all unmarked Swans, but today it is only enforced on those stretches of the

Thames. Now the Swan Upping Ceremony is a colorful pageant of conservation during the third week of July. (15, 16)

Christmas is almost here! We need to go a hunting for our Christmas Swan. Where to? Well, we could start at Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum. Swans were first introduced to this region in 1857 when George W. Selves, a native of England, presented 6 Swans brought from his homeland to Spring Grove in honor of his son who died at 19 the year before. (17, 18, 19) George was the owner of the St.Charles Restaurant and the Bank Exchange Building on 3rd Street near Sycamore. Should you decide you want to skulk around the lakes at the cemetery with a burlap bag in hand, I suggest you come armed. Swans are mean little bastards, monogamous, very territorial, and not necessarily little. The upper normal weight for an adult cob, the male, Mute Swan is 33 pounds, standing 47 in. on land. The record is held by one from Poland at 51 pounds. (No laughing, this is true, this is serious business here) but it was unclear if it could still get off the ground. (13) A thirty pound bird flying at you at about 10 or 15 miles per hour can do some serious damage, especially if it knocks you in the lake. Mute Swans are among the fastest flying waterfowl, and flying in migration formation have been clocked at 100 mph with a tail wind. Their normal top speed is claimed to be about 50mph. (20) Some of you will of course like to spare the pen, a female Swan, and limit your quest to the cob. Unfortunately, this will require you to bring a companion, perhaps your wife or a very close friend, to help tackle the Swan, flip it over, and separate the feathers in a procedure called venting to determine the sex. Even in a bird who is cooperating, this is a difficult procedure, so in all the hustle, bustle, hissing, and honking you might just have to take a guess. Some of you are saying this is tedious; let's just go to Kroger's or Piggly Wiggly.

The day I checked at Kroger's they were out of Swan and Peacocks, so I spoke with Tom Sargent, Sales Planning & Assortment Coordinator – Meat/Seafood Merchandising at the Kroger Company Headquarters here in Cincinnati. When he stopped laughing, he said he would get back to me and actually did. He suggested that I contact Exotic Meat Market in Las Vegas, Nevada. (21.22) I don't have time to tell you about this company but please visit their web site to see what they offer. You won't be surprised to read their statement about PETA. Long story short, I called, and they do have Swan, but live ones, not butchered like the camel, emu, etc. and at \$1000 dollars a pop. Our meal had just gotten a whole lot more expensive. I wondered how I was going to get them out of the box.

Remember that old Christmas favorite The Twelve days of Christmas? On the seventh day of Christmas my true love sent to me seven Swans a swimming. Why would you do that to somebody? (23)

Ok, I've tackled the Swan, gotten it drunk with 12 year old Scotch, and quickly dispatched it. Now what? Fortunately, for us there is something called Historic Cooking. The Thanksgiving issue of The New Yorker this year had a marvelous article entitled The King's Meal that discusses Lucy Worsley, chief curator at Historic Royal Palaces --- the Tower of London, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court, etc., in her quest to actually live, dress, and eat like a 15th century woman. These folks are like Civil War Reenactors, only with better food. The thrust of the article is Lucy and her confederates, poor choice of words, on a quest to whip up a dinner served to King George the III, but it also discusses Henry the VIII's dietary delights. (24) The English are superb record keepers and mulling around in their dark, cold dungeons can come up with recipes and directions on preparing Swan, Peacock, and live birds in a meat pie. The web site www.godecookery.com (20)

provides English translations of Old English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century, and there I found specific directions “for to prepare a Swan” followed by the requisite Chaudon Sauce that goes with it: Swan GIBLETS, salt, broth, unseasoned bread crumbs, ginger, galingale (a spice made from the root of the Cypress tree), and red wine vinegar. For the purist, the unseasoned bread crumbs are a substitute for blood. (25) To get me more in the mood, I watched some wonderful videos at the web site The Tudors Wiki (26), and learned how to make a meat pie with live birds, four and twenty black birds, and how to redress my roasted swan in its skin and feathers with a gold crown on its head.

How do they taste? Cathy Kaufman, who teaches culinary history at the Institute of Culinary Education, ICE, in New York City, one of the finest culinary schools in the nation, notes that while wildly popular by nobility in the medieval period Swans began to fall out of favor, or should we say flavor, with the introduction of the new world turkey (more flavorful and tender) to England in the 16th Century. (27) Anne Hobbs at Cornell found two guys in the lab who split a Swan they found, probably new road kill. One roasted it and thought it was delicious, and the other marinated it in a crock pot and found it inedible. The final judgement comes from Super Chef Mario Batali who, along with friends, prepared a Swan on a hunting trip and found “it was delicious – deep red, lean, lightly gamey, moist, and succulent”. (27)

After all this research, I was keen to plow on, but my dear wife called a halt. Our fireplace was way too small to accommodate the cast iron spit, and various large pots. At Hampton Court, Henry VIII’s great roasting fireplace requires a quarter ton of seasoned

beech to prepare the Christmas Feast. (19) Seasoned Beech is harder to get than Swan.
Maybe next year.

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