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Book Review: The Food Journal of Lewis and Clark: Recipes for an Expedition

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The Food Journal of Lewis and Clark: Recipes for an Expedition. By Mary Gunderson. Yankton, SD: History Cooks, 2003. vii + 166 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography and further reading, mail-order sources, recipe index, historical index. \$19.95 paper.

This well-designed and appealing book, combining history with useable recipes reminiscent of the times and places the expedition traveled, looks as though it might have been published early in the nineteenth century. Gunderson uses the term “paleocuisineology,” which she defines as bringing history alive through cooking. If one merely thumbs through the volume, finding recipes for ice cream and lemon meringue pie can be a bit startling. Obviously, these foods could not have been prepared in the wilderness. Reading, however, tells us that the story begins with the employment of Meriwether Lewis as President Thomas Jefferson’s private secretary in 1801 and continues with the appointment of Lewis to head the expedition to explore the territory known as the Louisiana Purchase and beyond. Lewis was sent to Philadelphia to meet with scientists in order to increase his knowledge of botany, anatomy, fossils, and so forth. There he purchased much equipment for the trip and a few provisions, including 193 pounds of portable soup. Continuing to Pittsburgh, he waited for his keelboat to be built, then began the journey down the Ohio River to the Mississippi. The early recipes in the book are for foods that Lewis may have eaten in Washington, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh.

The volume’s format itself is eye-catching. There are sidebars containing direct quotes from the Lewis and Clark journals, comments by Gunderson about the trip and the recipes, and the recipes themselves.

Outfitting the expedition for a trip into unknown territory planned to take two years was a logistical challenge. Gunderson offers a partial list of supplies and equipment purchased, including almost two tons of pork sealed into fifty kegs, and six brass kettles for cooking over open fires as was done in homes at the time.

The recipes, using foods popular and available in the parts of the country the Corps was traveling through, follow the order of the trip. For example, a recipe for catfish with bacon and grilled mussels shows up in the “Upstream on the Missouri” section, and hominy with sunflower cakes appears in connection with the Great Plains winter camp at Fort Mandan. Recipes are practical and plausible. Gunderson has thoroughly researched the foods and cooking methods of the times. Much of the food the men needed during the trip would be hunted and gathered as they traveled. In addition, foods such as corn, beans, squashes, nuts, and berries were obtained from Native Americans by trade. Reports of the men gathering berries, grapes, plums, and cherries are found early in the journals.

Because of their great expenditure of energy, the crew required an immense number of calories. The journals report that each man may have consumed up to nine pounds of meat at a meal, making for a gargantuan task of hunting. One adult buffalo yielded about four-hundred pounds of meat. One beaver would feed two men. Fish and freshwater shellfish were also caught. When no game was available, the pork supply was issued until it was gone. Then the portable soup was reconstituted and supplemented with whatever vegetables were on hand.

The more than five-month stay at the Great Plains winter camp yields many recipes, including one for Fort Mandan pemmican and two for parched corn. By this time, the supply of

beads and other goods brought to trade with Native people had been depleted. Corn meal was paid for through the efforts of the Corps blacksmiths, who were able to make and mend axes and other equipment for the tribes.

Gunderson's book is an enjoyable, indeed delectable, way to read history.

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