

The Rockford Files

by Scott P. Richert

Ethnic Cleansing

Family traditions often get started by accident—especially, perhaps, those that center on food. On the second New Year's Eve after we were married, my wife and I found ourselves trapped in our apartment in Vienna, Virginia, victims of a freak snow and ice storm that made the Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., streets downright dangerous, especially since no one in the area knew how to drive in such conditions. While we both had weathered far worse growing up in Michigan, we decided not to risk our lives but someone else's, and so we ordered Chinese delivery. (To salve our consciences, we tipped very well.) At the end of the meal, one of us conceived the sappy idea of breaking our fortune cookies open at midnight, and by 12:01 A.M. (disappointing fortunes notwithstanding), it was probably inevitable that we would do it all again the next year.

And so, when we arrived in Rockford two years later, on December 27, 1995, one of my first tasks was to locate a Chinese restaurant. In a dingy strip mall on North Main Street, around the corner from our apartment, I found a little hole in the wall with six or seven tables. *I guess it will do*, I thought. *By next year, we'll have located the best Chinese restaurant in town.* Little did I know that we already had.

The food we ate that New Year's Eve—crab rangoon, fried rice, and black bean and garlic chicken with green peppers and onions—was not the best Chinese I have ever had, but few restaurants I have dined at have ever topped it (most notably, a Chinese restaurant on Long Island whose name I can't recall, where I first enjoyed General Tso's chicken—delightfully crunchy-chewy, with fiery little peppers and the lightest of sauces—and my personal favorite, the Sichuan Pavilion, on K Street in Washington, D.C.). Over the next five or so years, I enjoyed innumerable lunches and dinners with family and colleagues at the place we all came to know simply as "Mrs. Lee's"—Lee's Chinese Restaurant, immortalized in the small ads that we placed in *Chronicles* as a token of our gratitude for the many kindnesses that Mrs. Lee and her husband, Al, bestowed upon us.

A decade earlier, Tom Fleming had also eaten one of his first meals in Rockford at Mrs. Lee's, when *Chronicles'* founding editor Leopold Tyrmand took him there to sample the wonton soup—the best in Rockford, Tyrmand claimed. And it was, though I always preferred the hot and sour. (If you're ever in D.C., try the best of both worlds: Sichuan Pavilion's hot and sour wonton soup, a sublime—and spicy—dish I have never seen anywhere else.) My children always said that no one could make white rice quite like Mrs. Lee—whose real name was Ann Wang and whose unrelenting cheerfulness and good nature are reflected in the fact that it took her almost five years to correct us.

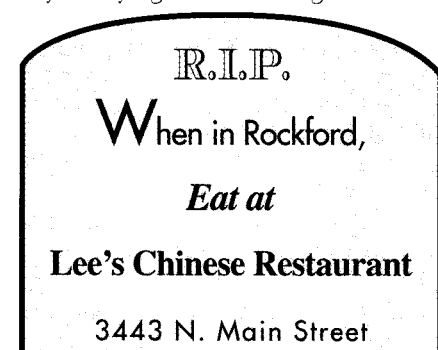
In mid-size Midwestern towns such as Rockford, small ethnic restaurants come and go, which made Mrs. Lee's 20-some-year run little short of a miracle. While such places might survive for generations in New York City or San Francisco, the normal pattern here is for small restaurants (often run by first- or second-generation immigrants) to blaze the way, introducing adventurous Midwesterners to an interesting new cuisine, which is then picked up by a larger restaurant (often a chain), which ditches all of the sparkle and originality of the cuisine in order to make it more palatable to a broader range of American diners. And, of course, it never hurts to make up for the loss of quality by increasing the quantity, preferably by putting the food on an all-you-can-eat buffet. (Rockford now has a Chinese-Japanese-American buffet featuring sushi—a risky proposition if ever there was one. Nine eighty-nine, no doggie bags—something for which Rover can be thankful.)

This dynamic is more proof that, to the extent that any assimilation has actually occurred in the "Great Melting Pot," it has largely been destructive, stripping immigrants and their food of their distinctiveness and reducing them to the lowest common denominator. If there were still a true American cuisine, it could adopt the best foods and techniques and spices from other cultures and make them its own, the way that, say, Poles, Lebanese, and Vietnamese did with French cui-



sine. Instead, American chain restaurants and agribusiness conglomerates take other cultures' food and try to make it taste like a TV dinner. And, unfortunately, they usually succeed.

Mrs. Lee's has been gone for almost two years now, and with it not only the crab rangoon, wonton soup, and beef kow but Mrs. Lee's insights into the local public schools and the mayor and her tips about Brazilian telephone stocks. Ann and Al were not forced out of business by their competition but chose to retire rather than battle their landlord, who wanted them to make thousands of dollars worth of improvements to their space before he would offer them another lease. The forces of homogenization, however, were closing in—a local Chinese restaurant chain, predictably named "Happy Wok," had opened on the corner, and a Chinese buffet, predictably named "China Buffet" and featuring such traditional Asian dishes as frozen pizza and boxed mashed potatoes with canned gravy, had taken up residence in the next mall to the north. Still, I'd like to think that Mrs. Lee could have withstood the competition, perhaps less because of the quality of her food than the loyalty of her patrons and her loyalty to them—though, in the end, "the quality of her food" and "her loyalty to her patrons" may simply be different ways of saying the same thing. <c



Letter From the Upper Midwest

by Sean Scallan

Micro-Farming



Last year, I wrote in favor of establishing a Midwestern dairy cartel (“One Man’s Idea is Another’s . . .,” *Vital Signs*, August 2001). As a call for controlling one’s regional, economic, and cultural destiny, it was well received. As a matter of economics, however, it was not a very practical idea. A man can dream of establishing an OPEC in the heartland, but there are certain dreams that are better left unfulfilled.

In reality, bigness and corporatization—if not downright Stalinist collectivism—are already happening in the Midwest farm culture, particularly in dairying. Everything that is anti-free market takes place when a small farm goes under or gets swallowed up by a giant agribusiness, cartels notwithstanding. At least my OPEC was made up of hard-working small businessmen and their families—hardly lazy sheiks or corrupt generals and politicians living off their oil wealth.

If the answer is not a cartel or some regional price compact, however, then what can turn the tide in favor of family farms and the structures they support, economically and culturally? And not just for dairy but for all of agriculture and agrarian life as well?

Larry Swain doesn’t seem like a rebel. There’s no James Dean cool or Marlon Brando sneer in him, just the look of a rumpled, portly college professor. But in the ag world, Swain is definitely a rebel—and, potentially, one who represents a danger to the pervading “Get big, or get out” mindset. This agriculture professor at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls is thinking big by thinking small.

“To many Americans, cheap food has become our birthright as much as cheap oil is,” Swain said as I interviewed him while we traveled in his van on I-94 through the Twin Cities. “That’s the way

American agriculture is geared and that’s where world agriculture is headed—towards big farms, mass production and mass marketing, to which the products are sold to big grocery store and restaurant chains. It’s like a shark that has to keep swimming in order to stay alive. Well, agriculture and food production on this scale have to keep getting bigger in order to survive.”

Swain, who grew up on a South Dakota farm, believes the whole rotten structure is not only killing itself by getting too big, it’s killing real people in the process.

“There was a farmer near Wausau who recently died of a heart attack. He owned a large dairy farm, and he won awards, too, for being a model farmer. Now, he drops dead just like that, only in his mid-50’s. How does that happen? Lots of farmers have been sold on the idea that, if they just expand their operations, they can put their worries on the shelf. They can just hire out for labor, have everything run by computer, be more efficient, cost effective, no sweat at all. Instead of being stuck on their farms all the time, they can take vacations once in a while. Then they find out, [with] a farm that size, you have to worry [about] zoning ordinances from the county and the townships, manure storage and all the environmental regulations that come from it, supply issues, equipment maintenance, animal health, some of the same problems smaller units deal with, only on an even larger scale. The stress doesn’t go away; it just gets worse.”

From this anecdote, Swain launches an attack on those he thinks responsible for corrupting, if not killing, what he once held sacred: the federal government, for policies that encourage expansion; the banks, which provide the money for it; the land-grant universities and their extension agents, which provide the rationale; and chain stores and fast-food joints, which provide the skewed market. He saves his heaviest artillery for the farmers’ cooperatives that, instead of protecting their clients, join in on the fun. His screed against the co-ops comes as we pass the headquarters of Land O’ Lakes, a big Upper Midwestern co-op located in one of the glass towers that makes up St. Paul’s skyline.

“We’ve got to get the big cooperatives back in the hands of ordinary farmers,”

Swain muses as we turn south, away from the urban core. “The suits have taken over in the boardroom. They only know one business model: Get big, or get out.”

Whether it’s “Get big, or get out” or “Fence row to fence row,” as former agriculture secretary Earl Butz used to say while he and Richard Nixon gave away our grain to the communists, such phrases have all too often summarized how American agriculture (and, really, the whole economy) has operated in the last 30 years. Swain wants to fight back, and he has a plan to do it—a free-market plan that, unlike my own fantasy, has a shot at succeeding.

We are back in the countryside west of I-35, near the town of New Prague, in Scott County, Minnesota. Here, on the small farm owned by the Minar family, is Swain’s counterattack: a farm, dairy, and processing plant all in one. The Minars are marketing, selling, and distributing all by themselves. No middlemen allowed. Over a bountiful farmers’ supper, Dave and Florence Minar, with children Mike, Dan, and Laura, plus spouses and neighbors and friends, brainstormed this idea of producing and selling their own dairy products in order to keep their 150-cow operation from becoming just another failed farm. They are now Cedar Summit Farms, Inc.

The Minars turned to Swain, who is retiring from teaching to work full-time at his own consulting company, which draws up business plans for small farms. He helped the family get loans to invest in state-of-the-art processing and packaging equipment built by Israeli companies for *kibbutzes*, plus computers and software that will help Cedar Summit directly market its soft dairy products of milk, ice cream, and yogurt.

“Right now, conditions are ripe for these kinds of operations to succeed and establish a market share,” Swain said. “The technology is now available for small farms to be able to process and package and distribute products directly from the farm. There is a growing consumer demand for food that is seen as both safe and familiar, particularly after the anthrax scare last fall and all the disease scares in Europe. The cost is less, and the profits, greater in these kinds of operations. Big farms, by contrast, have to keep expanding their operations just to