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# GO BACK TO SCHOOL BY TAKING A BITE OUT OF HISTORY

BY MICHAEL KNOCK

History sometimes can taste pretty good. Sometimes the flavor is like freshly baked bread or sweet churned butter. At other times, it can taste a lot like chicken.

At least a seventh grader in Michael Zahs' Iowa history class at Washington Junior High might think so. Zahs, who also teaches Iowa history at Mt. Pleasant's Iowa Wesleyan, wants his students to understand that taste buds can help them connect with their past just as effectively as textbooks. It's a tactic he's employed since he started teaching 37 years ago.

"I became addicted to food when I was quite young," Zahs said. "I just wouldn't consider separating it from other forms of education."

Thus, in Zahs' classroom, junior high students get to press their own apple cider using his 120-year-old apple press and make sour dough starter by capturing wild yeast from the air.

They also are required to select a project such as sewing a quilt or interviewing relatives that teaches them something about their family history. Many students opt for projects that involve food. Once, a student brought in bread, butter and grape jam to share with the class. Zahs said that few of her classmates were impressed until they learned that she had worked with her grandmother to bake the bread, had picked the grapes for the jam herself, milked the cow, skimmed the cream and churned the butter.

Zahs said that through these projects the students not only learn about food, but also about the family stories that go along with the things they eat.

"I encourage them to collect recipes or stories," Zahs said. "Who is it connected with? Where did that recipe come from? If it came from the *Better Homes and Gardens* cookbook, we're not as interested as we would be if we found out that your great great grandmother brought it over from Germany and that many of the measurements are in half-eggshells."

Last fall, one of Zahs' students, Ella Peterson, put together such a recipe collection. Ella's mother, Tallulah, helped her get started. "We figured we'd better write some of these recipes down because the people who make these things are getting older," Tallulah said.

To put together her collection, Ella sat down and talked with some of her relatives. Especially helpful was her Grandmother Peterson, a woman, Ella says, "Knows everything," including a recipe for homemade noodles that has long been a family favorite.

One of the recipes was for her Great Great Grandmother Peterson's vinegar candy. Zahs said that single recipe says a lot about the lives Ella's ancestors lived. "This was a candy that was fixed around Christmas time... It didn't taste like vinegar; it tastes like taffy." Ella wrote in the cookbook. "But this is easier to make (than taffy)...We would love to have (Great Great Grandmother

Peterson) make it again."

Food also figures prominently in Zahs' classes at Iowa Wesleyan, which consist of seven different bus tours around the state. One, which he led this past July, covered northeast Iowa and southwest Wisconsin, exploring the area that was settled by lead miners.

The point of these classes is to study the things that go into making up a culture, with subjects ranging from architecture to music to food. Zahs arranges meals with people he knows around the state to ensure that students get to taste the cultures they are studying. Usually, he said, the cooks are proud to show off a bit of their heritage.

"One of the last things to leave from a culture or a society is food," Zahs said. "We adapt to many things, but we still keep many of our food habits."

For example, in the lead mining district, which Cornish immigrants settled 175 years ago, the foods like *pasties* (meat pies filled with potatoes, onions, beef, and rutabagas) and *figgy hobbin* (a pastry stuffed with raisins or other dried fruits) were made to be eaten in the mines. Each was self-contained, fit inside a pocket and could be eaten without silverware.

Occasionally, the menu can be a little exotic. During a trip to the Marshallese community in Dubuque, for example, Zahs' students were served fish that their hosts brought with them from the Marshall Islands.

"[In the Marshall Islands], the guests are given the choicest parts," Zahs said. "And the choice part of the fish is the head. So you would eat the head and the eyes, which is a stretch for Iowa people."

Zahs said he encourages his students to try everything, but no one is forced to eat anything they don't want to.

But the culinary lessons go beyond simply trying new and different foods. Another lesson Zahs likes his students—both in Washington and at Iowa Wesleyan—to learn is how important the simple act of eating is to a culture. Sometimes, that means sitting down with family and enjoying a meal without distraction or rush. One such meal is served by a Lebanese family in Cedar Rapids.

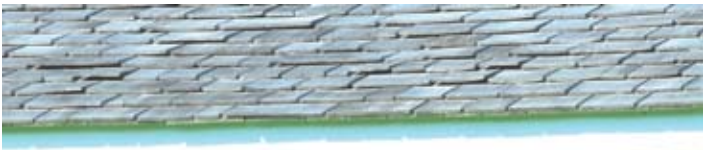
"It takes four hours to eat," Zahs said. "That's how people should eat, but we don't usually. It just makes such a big difference if you add time to food. The social part of it... it's wonderful."

His junior high students get a similar lesson during a field trip to an old order Amish home. There, the students eat a traditional meal with their host family including fried chicken, roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, etc. The 12-year-olds, Zahs said, are sometimes surprised by the act of enjoying food as a group. One told him it was the first time he'd ever eaten without watching television.

“I’ve had students say after the Amish meal, ‘We had chicken that had the bone in it.’ They don’t ever have that,” Zahs said. “Or, ‘We had a meal where we had to use silverware.’ You know, there are just things that some of us take for granted that aren’t part of ordinary experiences for a lot of people.”

Zahs knows these experiences will stick with his students more than the things they read in a textbook or on their computer.

“There are lots of very simple things you can do without playing with the Internet,” Zahs said. “Most really neat things in education don’t plug in.”



**GREAT GREAT GRANDMOTHER PETERSON’S  
RECIPE FOR VINEGAR CANDY**  
*(from Ella Peterson’s family cookbook)*

3 cups of sugar  
1 ½ cups vinegar

Stir sugar and vinegar together on low heat until candy reaches the hardball stage (290 degrees). Pour onto a buttered plate.

When cool enough to handle, pull until the candy is white and firm. Snip into pieces.

Photo by Carole Topalian

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