

# ALIMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON

by Nelson W. Polsby

**The Nero Wolfe Cook Book**, by Rex Stout and the Editors of the Viking Press. Viking, \$7.95.

**I**N THE CARTOON-LIKE WORLD of detective fiction, mannerisms maketh the man. What is Sherlock Holmes without his calabash, his deerstalker, his opium, and his violin? What is Sergeant Cuff without his obsession for roses? What is James Bond but a creature slightly less than the sum of his various props and—need I add—tools? Into such a company, a compulsive misogynist of West 35th Street, New York City, nestles the bulk of his seventh of a ton with comfort. Through more than fifty chronicles, Nero Wolfe has refused to leave his house on business, tended with scrupulous regularity (daily from 9:00 to 11:00 A.M. and from 4:00 to 6:00 P.M.) to his fabulous rooftop collection of orchids, and solved innumerable baffling crimes while seated in the outsize chair behind his outsize desk, performing no exercise more strenuous than a silent in-and-out motion of his lips.

When not thus gainfully employed, Wolfe's lips—and indeed the rest of his formidable alimentary tract—have busied themselves in various other ways. Mouth-watering hints, and more than hints, of glorious meals, snacks, banquets, and even barbecues occur throughout the Wolfe hors d'oeuvre. These are occasionally executed by the hand of the master himself, sometimes by the chefs at Rusterman's, the Manhattan restaurant founded by his beloved countryman Marko Vukcic, but most often by Fritz Brenner, the cook Wolfe employs at West 35th Street. So far, however, only Wolfe, an occasional guest, and his amanuensis and chief assistant, Archie Goodwin, have managed to slake their appetites on his reportedly magnificent fare. For

years readers have suffered pangs of regret and envy as well as hunger as they contemplated the gap in the literature created by the lack of a Nero Wolfe cookbook. Now, at last, for those who want to reach a new level of understanding of Wolfe and his milieu, as well as for those who merely wish to gorge themselves, this gap has been bridged, or, more accurately, plugged. Two hundred and twenty-five recipes, meticulously cross-referenced to their appearance in the chronicles of Wolfe's famous cases, are now available at a popular price. Only an equally scholarly manual of James Bond's female companions would fill a comparable need.

The recipes themselves are an eminently satisfactory and quite splendidly eclectic selection, conveniently organized by occasion. The emphasis is understandably French, with a few bows to the cuisines of Italy, Russia, the Iberian peninsula, and points east. In addition, there is considerable attention to American regional specialties and to the preparation of lamb, no doubt a concession to Wolfe's Montenegrin origin.

It is food for thought to speculate on how Wolfe gained his evident attachment to New England cooking. There is a superb recipe for pumpkin pie, and another for clam cakes with sour sauce. Shad is given loving attention, and the elegant simplicity of the sauce in Fritz's blueberry grunt combines happily with the elegant complexity of the accompanying sponge cake.

In certain respects, however, Wolfe's understanding of the New England vernacular is limited. For a fussy eater, who insists on the superiority of Puerto Rican molasses and Syrian thyme honey, it seems incred-

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ible that for his Brazilian lobster salad he would neglect to specify whether by "lobster meat" he means—as I devoutly hope he does not—the crustacean marketed under the description "Brazilian" lobster tails, or whether he means the real article, which the French call "homard," to distinguish it from "langouste," the oversized crayfish that is sold in the United States as "lobster tails" and "rock lobster." Likewise, I should have expected to see in the various clam recipes distinctions made among the varieties of bivalve sold under this name.

We had a happy surprise in our house when we pursued Wolfe's preferred method for cooking corn on the cob, to wit: "roasted in husk in the hottest possible oven for forty minutes." Although we fully expected cremated corn, what we got was a pleasant enough version, having a faint flavor of charred husk. This alternative is not, however, clearly superior to the traditional method of boiling (for about ten minutes), which Wolfe reviles. As a matter of fact, the key variable that determines more than anything else how sweet corn will taste is how long ago it was picked, and Wolfe's rule, "not more than three hours before it reaches me," is a sound one.

**W**OLFE'S AFFECTION FOR New England food apparently does not extend to maple syrup. Although there is an excellent recipe for corn fritters (evidently Wolfe's favorite food) and one for griddle cakes, for a sweet accompaniment we are offered blackberry jam, brown sugar, the aforementioned Puerto Rican molasses, Syrian or Greek wild thyme honey, even guava jelly, for heaven's sake, but not maple syrup. Wolfe does mention maple syrup in connec-

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tion with rice fritters, but only as a second choice to black currant jam.

This is a puzzling idiosyncrasy. Wolfe doesn't eat out enough to know that the term "maple syrup" on restaurant menus in the United States is usually a fraudulent description of a cane syrup concoction with a little fake maple flavoring added. This, however, has nothing to do with the pure and unadulterated reduced sap of the maple tree, which at its best is nothing short of ambrosial. People differ as to when maple syrup is at its best. Many prefer the light-colored and delicately flavored fancy grade of syrup. My own preference is for the darker, more robust, so-called "grade B." This is hard to find except up in the north woods, but a little inconvenience should hardly daunt a man like Wolfe who sends all the way to Mr. Howie in New Jersey for sausage and insists that his fowl be fed on blueberries.

Next to New England, the region that seems to have found its way from Wolfe's stomach to his heart is the American South. There is a recipe for a splendid New Orleans dish, creole curds and cream, although variations on the basic theme are not explored. Broiled Georgia ham, topped by a sweet sauce, is given a relatively simple treatment, as are terrapin Maryland (first you catch a terrapin) and beaten biscuits. Creole tripe and bouillabaisse of New Orleans, on the other hand, are difficult and complex. The spoon bread recipe falls somewhere between. The recipe for corned beef hash includes approximately equal parts corned beef and chitlins, and, considering the unpretentiousness of the ingredients, is incredibly elaborate.

This all shows a commendable adventurousness. What are we to think, on the other hand, of Wolfe's insensitivity to his immediate environment? There must be half a dozen places within waddling distance of West 35th Street where a decent corned beef sandwich is available, and surely some place in New York City, even today, where an exemplary specimen can be located. What, then, are we to make of the utter contempt which Wolfe shows for this noblest expression of the culinary culture of his home city? "Butter [!] toasted [!] slices of bread," his recipe begins. White bread, no doubt. Wolfe is mercifully silent on the issue of the removal of crusts. He specifies Dijon

mustard and cooly allows "tomatoes and lettuce if desired." The whole sorry mess simply runs athwart the genius of corned beef, which is salty, sour, and pungent in character, and not meant for the namby-pamby treatment Wolfe accords it.

Obviously there is more here than meets the eye. As I have already shown, it cannot be the parochialism of the native European that blinds Wolfe to this example of the cuisine of New York. His repertoire begins as near to the city limits as Long Island duckling. There is an excellent scrapple recipe as well as Philadelphia snapper, and, in the other direction on the Penn Central, several splendid treatments of shad and shad roe, available nearest to Wolfe in the Connecticut River.

Regrettably, one must conclude that Wolfe suffers from a mild case of culinary anti-Semitism. This is truly anomalous in the palate of a practicing liberal of the heart and head, as Wolfe clearly is. Avoidance of heartburn can hardly suffice as an explanation: Wolfe's fondness for the heavy sauces of New Orleans, his fricassee with gravy and dumplings, his squirrel stew, all weigh heavily in the balance against this hypothesis. Perhaps someday soon Wolfe will see the light, or, heaven forbid, a misfortune will strike that will bring to him at long last the solace of a bowl of simple chicken soup, with perhaps one humble matzoh ball floating in it.

Although Wolfe is a man of strong preferences and not a few mannerisms, his culinary parochialisms and affectations are gratifyingly few. Perhaps the most famous of these is an odd propensity to drop the name of the garden herb chervil into otherwise straightforward conversation much in the way today's teenagers drop the names of rock musicians and contraceptive devices. It was, at any rate, something of a relief to me to note that chervil turns up in only sixteen recipes in this book and mercifully absent from the baked goods, the desserts, and a fair number of other items.

Far from being a perfunctory exploitive adjunct to the annals of Nero Wolfe, this cookbook marches on its own stomach. It contains many useful ideas; numerous recipes stretch the mind, and only a few stretch the pocketbook. Altogether still another satisfying visit with the great detective.