



## IN THE KITCHEN: 'Key Ingredients' delights at Historic Walnford

By Pat Tanner Special Writer

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A special traveling exhibition of the Smithsonian Institution called "Key Ingredients: America By Food" is currently ensconced at Historic Walnford, the 19th-century gristmill and beautiful 18th-century country estate in Upper Freehold, just outside Allentown. A delicious, easy-to-take treat for anyone even remotely interested in the history and sociology of American food, the exhibit has been on the road since 2003 and will pause at 165 venues by the time it finishes up in 2010. Walnford is the first of six New Jersey stops, the others being in Woodbine, Tuckerton, Woodbury, Morristown, and Trenton, where it will be at the State Museum in early 2009.

The interactive exhibit is part of the Smithsonian's "Museum on Main Street," which targets small town museums. Partners include the Federation of State Humanities Councils — including New Jersey's — and small museums such as Walnford. The Smithsonian portion of the exhibit tells the national story, to which each state and each community add their own unique food contributions and history. The Garden State display, for example, spotlights taylor ham/pork roll, tomato pie and salt water taffy.

Historic Walnford, which is located just down the road from Cream Ridge Winery and is operated by the Monmouth County Parks system, picks up the local story. Park representative Sarah Bent says, "Here it's the history of family farming. We have a small exhibit in the cow barn focusing on dairy products from Walnford and this region in the 19th- and early 20th-centuries." A roster of special programs and activities in conjunction with "Key Ingredients" is on tap, including a dairy weekend on June 28 and 29 that includes "hands-on learning with cows" as well as making butter and ice cream. Every weekend from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., visitors can watch corn be ground into cornmeal in the gristmill. The exhibit and all activities are free.

The Smithsonian portion of the exhibit explores connections between Americans and the foods they have produced, prepared, preserved and presented at table over the past 500 years through artifacts, photographs and illustrations. It starts with traditions of Native Americans before European colonization and takes visitors through the technology that revolutionized food storage and preparation at home.

I particularly like the section called "Local Flavors," which covers regional dishes like New England clambakes, Louisiana gumbo, Texas chili and Memphis barbecue. Local products, it points out, help give a community identity. Think Boston baked beans, Georgia peaches, Dungeness crabs — even Wisconsin cheeseheads.

"The Preservation Revolution" includes photographs showing the evolution of those highly recognizable cans of Campbell's soups (a New Jersey company) through the years, while "Dynamic Delivery" takes on the subject of building brands, personified by the likes of Betty Crocker, the Jolly Green Giant and the Campbell Kids.

A lot of this same territory has been covered in recent years — especially since 2003, when the exhibition began its road trip — by such Food Network shows as "All American Festivals" and "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives." Yet even I found things that were new to me. Among them is the history of community canneries, which thrived particularly during World War II when they were subsidized by the government. Some were mobile, and all allowed civilians to can the food they grew under sanitary conditions — an important crusade at the time.

The exhibit also introduced me to The Goops — chubby cartoonish characters in a series of books about manners and etiquette from the early 1900s that were aimed at children and written by Gelett Burgess. One poem from the first book, "Goops and How To Be Them" goes, "The Goops they lick their fingers,/ and the Goops they lick their knives,/ They spill their broth on the tablecloth — /Oh, they lead disgusting lives!"

At times the exhibit seems a bit nostalgic and boosterish — America as "the Land of Plenty"; the Midwest as "America's Breadbasket" — but it is also thought-provoking in a meaningful way. I particularly like the section called "Festival of Feasts," which ends with that most American and food-centric of holidays, Thanksgiving. Since I am a restaurant reviewer, I enjoyed the section on eating out, starting with Harvey House restaurants (remember Judy Garland in "The Harvey Girls?"), then moving on to the heyday of American diners, and ending with such 1950s icons as drive-ups and car-hops, which heralded the onslaught of fast food.

"The story ends on the very personal level," says the Smithsonian representative Carol Hersh, who oversaw the installation at Walnford. "It has to do with who you are and where your ancestors came from." In the section on how family recipes are handed down, I smiled at a handwritten recipe for Special K cookies. The recipe, below, is from the folks at Historic Walnford and employs their signature product, cornmeal, to add an unexpected, delightful crunch to rich chocolate cookies.

“Key Ingredients: America by Food” is free and on display at Historic Walnford, Walnford Road, Upper Freehold, through July 13. Walnford is open every day from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. For directions and information on special programs and events in connection with “Key Ingredients” visit [www.monmouthcountyparks.com](http://www.monmouthcountyparks.com) or call (609) 259-6275.

For information on the dates and locations of all New Jersey venues hosting “Key Ingredients: America By Food” visit [www.njch.org/keyingredients](http://www.njch.org/keyingredients).

#### HISTORIC WALNFORD

#### CHOCOLATE CORNMEAL COOKIES

adapted from [www.njch.org](http://www.njch.org)

1 stick butter

4 ounces semisweet chocolate, or a mix of semisweet and bittersweet

2/3 cup brown sugar

1 egg

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup flour

¼ cup cornmeal

¼ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon baking soda

2 tablespoons cocoa powder

Chopped nuts (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small saucepan, melt the butter and chocolate over low heat, stirring, until just melted. Remove from heat, cool, and stir in brown sugar, egg, and vanilla, mixing well. Set aside.

2. In a bowl combine flour, cornmeal, salt, baking soda, and cocoa powder. Add the chocolate mixture and the chopped nuts, if using, and mix until a soft dough forms. Chill the dough for at least one hour.

3. Grease a cookie sheet. Tear off pieces of chilled dough to form 1-inch balls and place on prepared cookie sheet. Bake in oven until barely firm, about 12 minutes. Cool on the sheet a few minutes, then remove cookies to a cooling rack.

Makes approximately 3 dozen small cookies.

Pat Tanner is the restaurant critic for New Jersey Life and writes a biweekly food column for The Princeton Packet. A former caterer and corporate trainer, Ms. Tanner is a founding member of the Central New Jersey Chapter of Slow Food and is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the James Beard Foundation and the Association of Food Journalists.

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