

'A gourmet who thinks about calories is like a tart who looks at her watch.' —JAMES BEARD

Why Do We Need James Beard?

The Man Who Ate Too Much

By John Birdsall
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By RIEN FERTEL

DOES ANYONE read James Beard any more? Do home cooks still crack open one of his many voluminous recipe collections in search of how to prepare a roast chicken or design a dinner-party menu? Beard's contemporaries—Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher, Edna Lewis—we still delight in, reading their prose, cooking their food and suffering through that blasted recipe for beef bourguignon. But the man once dubbed the dean of American cookery, the culinary personality whose name graces the "Oscars of the food world"—his books survive as fussy old-fashioned mementoes of a gastronomic era gone by. Why do we need James Beard?

In "The Man Who Ate Too Much: The Life of James Beard," John Birdsall makes the case that though perhaps we shouldn't rescue Beard's books from the dollar bin, we should honor the debt we owe him for making us a nation of smarter, savvier, more adventurous eaters. Mr. Birdsall's book builds on "America, Your Food Is So Gay," which won a James Beard Award in 2014. That essay—part memoir, part rallying cry—argued that homosexual men, notably Beard, New York Times food editor Craig Claiborne and Francophile gastronome Richard Olney, transformed our bland, postwar national palate into one that was "unflinchingly, unapologetically, magnificently queer."

A precocious boy born in Portland, Ore., in 1903, Beard was a big kid with "a face as plump and pale as milk-poached meringue," according to Mr. Birdsall, who paints his subject's early years with similar Proustian flourishes. Beard's memories contained countless madeleines: his father's skillet-fried, gravy-smothered chicken; the golden chicken jelly sublimated by his family's Chinese-born cook; and especially his mother's smoked ham, soaked for days then simmered for hours in a baby's tin bathtub.

Born in Wiltshire, England, the future Elizabeth Beard stowed away aboard a steamer to Canada when she was 17, working as a governess before settling in Portland at 21. Like her only child, Elizabeth loved food more than anything else. James Beard later came to understand that his mother, too, was queer. Separately, unconsciously, mother and son learned "how to ascribe to food all the thoughts and feelings too dangerous for one to avow openly." In a nation hostile to homosexuals, Oregon ranked among the most savage. A 1917 state eugenics law forced sterilization upon men convicted of sodomy (the law was not abolished until 1983). Less than six



TASTE MAKER James Beard outside the Seagram Building, 1980.

months into his freshman year, Beard would be kicked out of Reed College for being caught in *flagrante delicto* with a professor.

In 1922, Beard fled to London, then Paris, where he trained for the operatic stage. He returned to the U.S. to tour with a theater troupe and landed gigs as an extra in Hollywood productions—he played a Roman soldier in the crucifixion scene of Cecil B. DeMille's "King of Kings" (1927). In 1937, he relocated to New York, where his theatrical dreams fizzled out.

Beard couldn't sing and he couldn't much act, but he knew how to entertain. "Papa," as his acquaintances called him then, quickly developed a reputation for the "boutique cocktail parties" he gave the city's affluent—and often gay—high society. His hors d'oeuvres came with a story, real or invented: the Duchess of Windsor's fried corned-beef-hash balls, say, or the same vichyssoise first prepared for the Sun King himself, Louis XIV. Beard for-

aged through the city, sniffing out the finest, then-unheralded ingredients—German sourdoughs, Genoa salamis, creamy Roquefort. Nearing the age of 40, his life suddenly fell into place: The city hungered for what James Beard could provide.

Cookbook contracts swiftly followed. In the 1940s, he published books on appetizers, outdoor grilling, fowl and game, as well as a collection of 1,200 recipes called "The Fireside Cook Book." Books on Paris, economizing, fish, casseroles, barbecuing and another titanic compendium, which included a recipe on how to boil water, appeared the following decade. He possessed an uncanny ability to recollect most any "taste memory," as he called it in his 1964 memoir, "Delights and Prejudices," arguably his only title still worth reading for its twinning of recipes and reminiscences. Forget Falstaffian: Beard's breadth of knowledge, like his appetite, was, well, nothing but Beardian.

That knowledge, Mr. Birdsall reveals, was often called into question. Beard frequently printed unattributed recipes purloined from associates and plagiarized from other cookbooks. He cannibalized his own recipes throughout his career, sometimes publishing the same recipe in two different cookbooks, for two different publishers, in the same year. He squandered friends and exploited business partners, occasionally wrote dreadful cookbooks and sexually harassed subordinates. But the public trusted James Beard when it came to culinary matters.

There were no national celebrity chefs pre-Beard, no American food gurus—Child's "The French Chef" wouldn't air until 1963. Beard had to invent the role from scratch. He premiered the nation's first television-network cooking show, NBC's "I Love to Eat," in 1946. He penned columns for several magazines. And he shilled for most any brand name that would have him: Pernod, O'Quin's Charcoal Sauce, Benson & Hedges.

All the while, the food world forced Beard to tip-toe around his sexuality. His books were campy, maybe even queer-signifying, but only if one read closely between the lines. His byline in the pulpy men's magazine *Argosy* read "Jim Beard," the nickname a low-key concession to all-American masculinity. This came soon after *Gourmet's* founder, Earle MacAusland, banished Beard from the magazine's pages after the writer openly discussed his homosexuality with the editorial staff over martinis. Beard hosted cooking classes in his Greenwich Village home, where he and his longtime partner, the pastry chef Gino Cofacci, kept separate apart-

He made America a nation of smarter, savvier, more adventurous eaters.

ments. When the time came to draw up a will, Beard stipulated that Cofacci keep his apartment, along with a monthly stipend. But most everything else—liquidated assets, rights and royalties—went to Reed College, the same institution that had expelled him for being queer.

Beard publicly came out in 1990: "By the time I was seven, I knew that I was gay. I think it's time to talk about that now." Those words appeared in a posthumously published cookbook. He had been dead for five years.

Even in death, Beard's life remained what Mr. Birdsall calls an "open secret." Previous biographers have mentioned Beard's queerness as an afterthought, if at all. In his final days, Beard confided his desire to vanish—sell everything, destroy any incriminating papers, with no celebration of life and certainly nothing resembling the James Beard Foundation, established by admirers months after his passing. And yet his name remains most associated with the foundation's annual restaurant and media gala awards, with his face "fixed on a medal," Mr. Birdsall writes, "like a soul trapped in a mirror, restless to be freed."

"The Man Who Ate Too Much" is more than a story of one man's existence; it is a portrait of 20th-century gay life and aesthetics. "So much of the public face of American culture," Mr. Birdsall writes—our literature, music, movies, television and, especially, food—"was shaped by those compelled to live behind walls, nursing half-open secrets." Like the life of James Beard, this biography is big and beautiful, heartbreaking and true. It is the celebration that Beard deserves.

Mr. Fertil is the author of three books, including "The One True Barbecue."

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