

Getting to the bottom of booyah

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For Monette Bebow-Reinhard, one recipe in a recent regional cookbook was a shot across the booyah bow.



Kyle Gerend ladles booyah into smaller containers to be served during Belgian Days in Brussels.

“Cabbage? Rutabaga? No! Chicken thighs? Idiots! It’s a whole chicken!” she told Press-Gazette Media.

The recently published “Cook’s Country Eats Local” included a recipe for what it called “Green Bay Chicken Booyah.” Publishers recently promoted the book at an event in Kohler, covered by Gannett Media foody Dan Higgins, who also reprinted the recipe.

It filled Bebow-Reinhard with outrage, flavored with a teaspoon of disgust, a dash of contempt and a pinch of nausea.

“Tomatoes? If they put tomatoes in it, I won’t try it. Rice or noodles? Yuck!”

Bebow-Reinhard claims she’s kidding, that she just wants to generate spirited debate over the best booyah recipe. But she seems more than ready to fan the flames of war, pitting grandfather’s recipe against grandfather’s recipe, parish picnic favorite against parish picnic favorite.

Check out her scathing review of “Cook’s Country Eats Local” on amazon.com: “I don’t know where the publishers got this recipe from, but they should do their research. This is more like chicken cabbage soup and is nothing like what REAL Chicken Booyah is like in Green Bay. I should know. My great-grandfather invented it.”



Chicken booyah.

Wait, what? A direct bloodline to the inventor of booyah?

Yep, Bebow-Reinhard proclaims. A Madison resident but a Green Bay native, Bebow-Reinhard claims her grandfather, Alex Hannon, actually invented booyah when he was 12 years old. He was trying to replicate his Belgian immigrant mother's chicken soup, so he killed and gutted a chicken and roasted it all night, according to family legend. He couldn't figure out how to make dumplings, so he did without them, and he gathered everything from the garden that he liked and threw it in the pot: Peas, beans, potatoes — no rice, no tomatoes.

The beef came later, as he tweaked the recipe. But the basic booyah? He came up with it in 1893, and “we haven't found anyone claiming an older date,” Bebow-Reinhard says. “It's all for fun, but if anyone comes up with an older story, let's hear it.”

Hmm. Wait just a Belgian minute.



Kyle Gerend, left, and Matthew Marchant prepare booyah during Belgian Days at Brussels Town Park.

“Saying someone invented booyah is like saying someone invented chili,” says Mary Jane Herber, head of the Brown County Library’s History and Genealogy Department.

In other words, the line between folklore and history may well have been blurred or obliterated altogether by a heavy spill of hot chicken broth flavored with a bit of oxtail.

“I always tell my genealogists they can’t trust anything they’ve heard if it’s older than 85 years,” Herber says. “If it’s older than that, you’re not hearing it first-hand. Somebody just told somebody that.”

Well, Lester Rentmeester of Howard is 96 years old, which puts him beyond Herber’s statute of limitations, and he has a claim to stake in this argument. Rentmeester doesn’t claim that his dad, Andrew Rentmeester, invented booyah, just that he invented the word. And he invented the practice of using mass quantities of the magical soup as the main attraction in local fundraisers.

Andrew, a lumberjack-turned-schoolteacher, planned to brew a gargantuan vat of booyah as a fundraiser for Finger Road School, which, “I think is out of business now,” says Lester. This would’ve been around 1906, Lester figures. Andrew went to the Press-Gazette to publicize the event and, when asked how to spell the name of the soup his fundraiser would feature, he came up with b-o-o-y-a-h — as close as he could come phonetically to the French word “bouillon,” by which the soup was known by him and other Walloon Belgians.

“Pretty soon everybody started calling it that,” Lester says.

And it made some serious cash for the one-room school, so it evolved from there into a pretty effective fundraiser for other schools and churches, he says.

Lester is less particular about the ingredients than Bebow-Reinhard is. But the Rentmeester family tradition now calls for cooking the stuff over a wood fire, preferably in a stainless steel tub made from an old washing machine, and stirred with a canoe paddle.

“Now you’re getting into it!” says Terese Allen, an author and food historian. “Even the pots are fascinating. It used to be everything from old oil drums to cast iron ... and now people are even manufacturing special booyah kettles.”

Allen, a long-time booyah eater, Green Bay native, and co-author of “The Flavor of Wisconsin,” has done lots of research for articles and columns she’s written for regional magazines and newspapers on the topic of “foodways,” the term folklorists use for food traditions that follow settlements of different ethnic groups.



A fresh batch of booyah.

Booyah and all of its traditions, legends and claims, is a fascinating topic, she says. But as a researcher, Allen falls more into Herber’s camp: Take any claims about its origins with a grain of poultry seasoning.

It probably never was actually “invented,” as such, and it might not even have come over as a Belgian tradition as some claim, Allen says.

Allen won’t claim to be a booyah expert and says much research remains to be done. But as part of research she did a few years ago, “I did call out to the Green Bay area, Kewaunee County and lower Door County, for recipes and anecdotes, and I got no fewer than three families saying they were the originators of booyah as it is today,” she says. “I know the claims are out there, several claims are out there, and it makes me very hesitant to believe it was a single family that invented it.”

Allen says she grew up believing the soup was old-country, coming directly from Belgium, but since then, she has combed countless actual Belgian cookbooks and has never found anything that quite matches Northeastern Wisconsin booyah.

“I’ve never found anything that looks or sounds very close to what we call ‘booyah,’” she says. “There are traditions in Belgium involving simmering broth, adding things to it so it’s a mini-vegetable soup. But nothing in Belgian cookbooks say ‘booyah’ and involve cooking outdoors and all of that.”

That lends credence to the notion someone here actually invented it, but those traditions seem to have sprung up

in a variety of places, all at once, Allen says.

“I’m inclined to believe it was more evolutionary,” she says. “I wouldn’t use the word ‘invented.’ I think of it more as an evolved tradition.”

More likely than not, it developed spontaneously from people making soup somewhat as their European forebears had, and in this region, it just came out a certain way, with people using chicken and throwing in every vegetable they had on hand, Allen says.

People make and eat variations of the Green Bay area booyah all along the northern shores of Lake Michigan and as far west as St. Paul, Allen says. Ingredients vary by region, and it’s not always even made with chicken in other locales.

“We refer to chicken booyah, but there used to be turtle booyah, fish booyah, wild game booyah,” Allen says.

It became a perfect food for serving a large number of people at a time.

“I think booyah and fishboils are related in style and meaning,” Allen says. “One pot, feeds a lot of people, it’s cheap.”



Volunteers serve take-out booyah at Ss. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Green Bay.

That makes it a great dish for fundraising, and that easily could have erupted as a tradition in multiple places at once, she says.

As for Rentmeester’s claim about the origins of the word, how, then, would you explain that there is also booya, boulli and boojah to be found all around the Upper Midwest? They all appear to be attempts to phonetically manage the hard-to-spell word “bouillon,” and they all are pronounced roughly the same.

Recipe variations by region or by family are to be expected, and people tend to prefer what they grew up with, she says. Allen disagrees with Bebow-Reinhard that tomatoes don’t belong.

“We always put them in ours,” she says. “I personally don’t like that, but that’s what we did. Peas, corn, beans,

cabbage, onions, carrots, celery, potatoes — they're all common. I've never seen Brussels sprouts in booyah, which is interesting — that's a Belgian vegetable.”

All of the claims for the rightness or wrongness of a recipe and multiple claims for the origins of the soup itself fit right in with the idea that booyah developed spontaneously in multiple areas and in multiple versions. That's the way folklore tends to work, Allen says.

So should we call a booyah truce? Even Allen doesn't think so.

“I could be wrong,” she says.

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Get in on the booyah war before it cools to a simmer.

Send us your recipes. Send us your anecdotes. Let's see if we can't come up with the best recipe as well as the definitively first booyah known to man.

Send it to psrubas@greenbaypressgazette.com by Dec. 11. We'll report back.