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Spiedies, Grape Pies, and Garbage Plates (Oh My!):

A Serious Look at Upstate New York's Silly-Sounding Foods

BY HANNAH DAVIS

Rochesterians are up in arms about news that “smash plates” are now on the menu at the Bridgestone Arena in Nashville, Tennessee. Eager to set the record straight, they took to the Internet to provide context that the menu had excluded. “Native to Rochester, the garbage

plate has been a staple of the community for around 100 years. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” one local tweeted (Shaw 2018). Most feedback has been less kind. Nashvillians just want to know what a garbage plate is and why it exists. “Why are human beings eating something called

a garbage plate, let alone feeling territorial about it?” Brad Schmidt, columnist for the *Tennessean*, writes (Peace and Greenwood 2018; Schmitt 2018).

Folklorists and food scholars know why. “A cohesive group in which people feel a sense of belonging makes up a



Members of St. Mary of the Assumption in Binghamton sell a selection of traditional Italian foods at the city's annual Columbus Day parade. Here, spiedie meat—already grilled and removed from skewers—waits to be made into sandwiches. *All photos by author.*



The Rob Salamida Company sells spiedies at many Broome County events and is best known for their nationally available spiedie marinade. This employee's shirt, spied at the Gusto! Italian Festival in Endicott, succinctly explains what a spiedie is: "It's a tasty treat of marinated meat, charbroiled and fed on Italian sliced bread."

community, and food oftentimes acts as a tool for creating that feeling as well as for drawing boundaries for those not sharing such a feeling," Lucy Long wrote in *Food and Folklore Reader* (Long 2015, 3). Especially in places with changing economies and populations, communities use food-related traditions to reinforce a sense of regional identity. Stripped of their regional context and named something new, "smash plates" are something of an affront.

As a folklorist, I am interested in more than individual food items. Rather, I'm interested in "foodways": the whole process of production and consumption, including the events and occasions during which food is consumed or otherwise utilized. While giving a talk about these ideas in the

Catskills, I was surprised to learn that attendees were almost entirely unaware of my favorite fieldwork finds: spiedies, grape pies, and garbage plates.

Spiedies Binghamton, Broome County

These hearty sandwiches are more functional than fun; the quirkiest thing about spiedies might just be their name. "Spiedie" (pronounced *speedy*) comes from the Italian word *spiedo*, meaning spit, or *spiedini*, referring to cubes or balls of meat cooked on a skewer. Cubed lamb, pork, or chicken is marinated in what is essentially Italian dressing (usually olive oil, lemon juice, red wine vinegar, sugar, garlic, bay leaf, cay-

enne pepper, thyme, basil, oregano, salt, and pepper), then skewered and grilled. The preparer wraps Italian bread or a hoagie roll around the skewer and uses it like a mitt to make the sandwich.

Spiedies caught on, appropriately enough, because they were speedy. First sold outside local bars and grocery stores to Endicott Johnson factory workers for lunch, they're now available across the tri-city area (Binghamton, Endicott, and Johnson City). Spiedies' portability make them ideal for vending for events and fairs, so much that commercialization is very much part of their traditionality. Rival businesses have created intense local competition for each other, and commercially manufactured marinade is available nationwide, but spiedies' simplicity makes them easily replicable at home, too. And every fan has their own preferred recipe. Some use venison instead of lamb, for example, or add a handful of mint to the marinade.

Binghamton celebrates the sandwich during the annual Spiedie Fest and Balloon Rally. Although the event began as a cook-off, it's now a nationally known draw for balloon enthusiasts, and spiedies only play a supporting role.

A recipe for chicken spiedies was included in the Foodways column by Lynn Ekfelt in *Voices* 30-1-2, Spring-Summer 2004.

Grape Pies Naples, Ontario County

Grape pies originated in Naples, New York, south of Rochester in the Bristol Valley. As the town's name might suggest, there is a long tradition of grape growing and wine making here. Route 21, which dips in and out of town, is lined with vineyards. Until its closure in 2009, Widmer Wine Cellars employed community members and attracted a considerable number of tourists (Sherwood 2009). Hazlitt 1852 Vineyards bought the complex soon thereafter and made it home to their Red Cat Cellars, bolstering the town's grape-centric identity.

The Naples Grape Festival celebrates that identity every September. Grape-



Competitors in the Naples Grape Festival Grape Pie Contest enter their pies anonymously, and a panel of judges rank each based on taste, texture, appearance, and flavor. Winners earn the right to officially call their version the “World’s Greatest Grape Pie.”

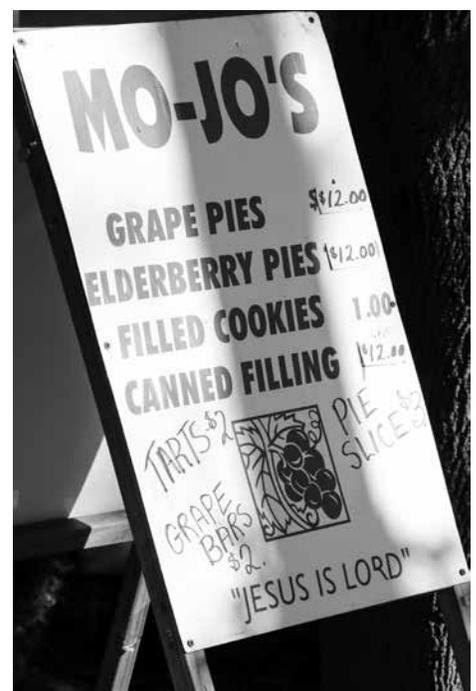
themed crafts and foods, the most famous of which is grape pie, attract thousands of visitors. Locals, including many past winners of the festival’s annual pie competition, hawk their own versions of the Finger Lakes delicacy from their front yards.

The pie’s jammy filling is traditionally made with Concord grapes, which must be carefully peeled, boiled, and deseeded (Ekfelt 2002). Each maker has their own preferences, though, and the number of sellers at the festival forces bakers to innovate and offer something unique: hand pies, for example, or decorated crusts. Despite not being particularly easy to make, the pies are popular throughout the Finger Lakes.

A recipe for grape pie was included in the Foodways column by Lynn Ekfelt in *Voices* 28-3-4, Fall-Winter 2002.

Garbage Plates Rochester, Monroe County

As the story goes, the name for this one-plate meal caught on when a late-night reveler asked for a “garbage plate,” trying (and failing) to remember the name of a meal that piled on everything that the kitchen at Alex Tahou’s Hots and Potatoes could make. After Alex’s son, Nick, took over the restaurant in the mid-1940s, the sloppy neologism was made official. Now, Nick Tahou Hots is home of the uncontested ur-form of garbage plates, which contains some combination of the following: fries or home fries, beans, macaroni salad, white or red hots (pork- or beef-based hot dogs), a hamburger or cheeseburger, a grilled cheese, a fried egg, spiced meat sauce, mustard, and onions.



Hoping to attract customers, festival vendors offer fun, portable variants of grape pies. Mo-Jo’s sells these filled sugar cookies.



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A hundred years after Alex opened Hots and Potatoes, garbage plates of all kinds are on menus across the city. Dogtown offers a vegetarian version, and The Red Fern offers a vegan version. The Cub Room even offers an upmarket version that includes pancetta and a duck egg. Mark's Texas Hots, Tom Wahl's, and Bill Gray's offer more straightforward interpretations that have won over most locals. Few Rochesterians name Nick's as their favorite.

A recipe for the meat sauce for a Garbage Plate was included in the Foodways column by Lynn Ekfelt in *Voices* 33-1-2, Spring-Summer 2007.



As a newcomer to New York, I assumed that attendees at my talk would have at least heard of these oddities. Weird and wonderful foods usually attract outside



Nick Tahou Hots offers the most traditional version of Rochester's infamous garbage plates—not for the faint of heart.



Nick Tahou Hots offers the most traditional version of Rochester's infamous garbage plates—not for the faint of heart.

interest exactly because they're a little weird. Sometimes their otherness appeals to tourists, or even actively increases tourism. If a community attracts few visitors, though, their local delicacies won't attract new fans.

Grape pies are the most well known of the foods discussed here, but if you live outside of the Finger Lakes and have not been to the Grape Festival, you might not know about them. The Grape Festival attracts regional visitors, and although Naples brings in tourists from elsewhere for other reasons, they're not there for the food. The same is true in Binghamton. Spiedie Fest attendees are regional, too, and the ones who come from a distance are more interested in balloons than big sandwiches.

Garbage plates don't have their own festival yet, but they do have a certain pride

of place in the hearts of Rochesterians. The city's minor league baseball team, the Red Wings, becomes the Garbage Plates for every Thursday night home game. If nothing else, the frequency with which they appear on menus suggests they are more than a novelty. Rochester's particularly thick upper crust might discourage garbage plates' broader popularity. After decades of sustained economic difficulty, Rochester is fighting for a cultural and economic revival, and garbage plates neither look nor sound like anything that belong front and center on a tourism website. If seen there, they might accidentally encourage the idea that upstate New York is, well, garbage. "Both perceived images, or people's perceptions about a particular place, and projected images, those images created by

media and other information sources, are important for destinations that are trying to utilize gastronomy as a tourist attraction," according to Dallen Timothy and Amos Ron (2013, 281) in "Heritage Cuisines, Regional Identity, and Sustainable Tourism." It makes sense, then, that Rochester is better known for its craft beverages and high-end restaurants.

Because of the aforementioned economic difficulty, upstate New Yorkers often don't move to other parts of the state when they pursue a career, start a family, or retire. They move to other states altogether. One works as the general manager of Nashville's Bridgestone Arena's food service (Peace and Greenwood 2018). Buffalo wings, upstate New York's most famous export, made it big when a Buffalonian who

relocated to Florida opened a small chain of restaurants. By 1980, recipes and articles appeared in national publications, and in 1983, Hooters adopted one of those recipes and opened their doors. The rest is history.

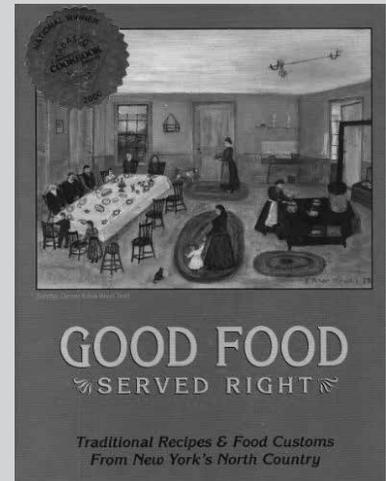
Foods inevitably change when they are shared between generations, communities, or individuals. Even when—sometimes, especially when—regional specialties don't make it far from home, they will always reflect class, gender, ethnic, and local identities. By proverbially peeking over the neighbors' fence and learning about what they eat, we can better understand the complicated places we live. ▼

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Voices Foodways

Lynn Case Eckfelt authored a popular *Voices* "Foodways" column from the inception of *Voices* through the Fall–Winter 2008 issue. Her column on the "World's Greatest Grape Pie" is one of the most requested from our back articles. Retired from her position as a special collections librarian and university archivist at St. Lawrence University, Lynn is the author of *Good Food Served Right: Traditional Recipes and Food Customs from New York's North Country* (Canton, New York: Traditional Arts in Upstate New York, 2000), available in our Gallery.



Hannah Davis, the Upstate New York Regional Representative for Folk Arts for NYFS, in partnership with the New York State Council

on the Arts, expands on Lynn's work and recipes in reviewing the grape pie, and the two other food items spotlighted, the "Garbage Plate," and the Spiedie. This article draws from Hannah's research and presentations on upstate food traditions, including "Spiedies, Grape Pies, and Garbage Plates (Oh My!): A Serious Look at Upstate New York's Silly-Sounding Foods," presented at the Catskills Folk Lyceum, supported by the Roxbury Arts Group, on October 14, 2017.



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Catskills Folk Connection is supported by the Roxbury Arts Group and is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, Folk Art Program, by Gen. Cosimo and the NYS Legislature, by an Action Grant from Ithaca/Tioga, and by the O'Connor Foundation.

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Hannah Davis, Upstate Regional Representative for the New York Folklore Society, holds an MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University and a BA in Folklore and Ethnomusicology from Indiana University. She previously worked as a program coordinator at Traditional Arts Indiana.



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