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SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY MUSEUM

FEAST FOR THE EYES

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DINING BY DECADES

A Feast for the Eyes is more than soup bowls and silverware. Artifacts and objects from the museum's permanent collections in history and archives offer viewers a tangible connection of an era undergoing profound and rapid social, political, and technological changes. "We will look at everything from table manners to food ways over the years," said Michele Nielsen, the museum's curator of history. "Room settings and exhibit cases will help visitors imagine life a century or more ago – and will bring back memories of tuna casseroles of the not-so-distant past."

Until the late 19th century, American food was based mainly on English traditions. In the New England states before the Civil War, plain cooking was associated with religious piety and the diet stressed boiled and baked meats, boiled vegetables, and baked breads and pies. The Southern tradition was an amalgam of African, English, French, Spanish, and Indian food ways, emphasizing frying and simmering and highly seasoned food. The diet in the middle Atlantic areas, with a Quaker influence, tended to be plain and simple with an emphasis on boiling. In the frontier areas, the diet included many ingredients that others used as animal feed, such potatoes, corn, and greens. But from an early period, all American diets were typified by an abundance of meat and distilled liquor. Widely available land allowed settlers to raise corn for livestock fodder, and to convert much of the rest to whiskey.

The Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century had a profound effect upon food ways in America. Cookware, once made by hand one kettle at a time, was standardized through mass production. Factories processed, preserved, canned, and packaged a wide variety of foods that could be shipped great distances. At the same time, factory jobs became available to an increasingly urban population that was less dependent upon servants to run the household and farming to supply family needs.

By the 1920s, freezing emerged for food processing. Cafeterias, lunch counters, and even fast food establishments began to appear. With increasing standardization and production, advertising stepped in to build demand for products, and consumerism was born.

There was an ample, inexpensive food supply in the United States during the 1930s. People struggling during the Great Depression had the option of purchasing lesser grades of meat (chuck instead of sirloin beef), cheaper cuts of animal (heart, brains, feet), and manufactured substitutes (Crisco instead of butter). Sugar prices were low, and in the 30s Americans consumed more sugar per capita than they have before or since. Poor workers averaged 2470 calories per day and were living on the margin of hunger, but still ate better than their counterparts of twenty years earlier. If fresh meat and vegetables were too costly, there was ample supply of canned goods. Typical recipes included baked bean sandwiches (mashed and served on brown bread), beef loaf, fresh beef tongue, liver and bacon, ox tail stew, and scalloped cabbage and apples.

The war years of the 1940s were all about rationing, protein stretching, and substitutions: sugarless cookies, eggless cakes, and meatless meals. Food shortages were caused because food

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A FEAST FOR THE EYES continues

was needed to feed soldiers. Farmers and food manufacturers were tapped to supply military needs, creating domestic shortages. Rationing was introduced to equitably distribute diminishing food supplies. Homeowners grew Victory Gardens to supplement food supplies with fruits and vegetables. After the war, convenience foods were introduced to the American public, the result of military research, but many homemakers preferred to cook the "old fashioned way" once rationed ingredients became available.

Filling meals prepared from pre-packaged goods were popular in the 1950s. Advertisers tried to convince the homemaker to purchase time-saving appliances and convenience foods. At the same time, new flavors and recipes were introduced by returning soldiers. Tuna noodle casserole, frosted meatloaf (frosted with mashed potatoes), grilled red meat on the barbecue, frozen vegetables with lots of butter or sauce, canned soup, and three-bean salad were popular, as were Americanized versions of sukiyaki, egg foo yung, chow mein, enchiladas, pizza, lasagna, and Polynesian sauces at "Hawaiian" luau parties.

"A Feast for the Eyes" will also include menus, cookbooks, and "receipts" from the museum archives, offering a regional flavor to dining in style through the decades.

