

DESPITE RECENT BAD RAP, BUTTER PROVIDES GREAT JOY

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As we get older one tends to be reminded of our past by subtle items that ordinarily are not expected to evoke such thoughts. My most recent object was butter and I cannot recall how I came to dwell on it. Perhaps because it was an early bane of my Saturday mornings.

We had a single family cow that provided us with milk, butter and meat. The milk and butter on a daily and weekly basis, the meat once a year with her annual offering. The weekly chore of churning the butter fell on my brother Cliff and myself.

It was stored in individual crocks with a thin layer of salt over the top on the cellar floor, the coolest place available. When it ran out up in the pantry one of us was sent to retrieve a replacement. I well remember my brother Cliff stomping down the stairs shouting out his protestations of, "Butter on the cellar bottom, " with each and every step.

We may have complained about the work involved in its creation, but not in its consumption. It was slathered over our homemade bread, toast, pancakes, fried bread dough and a liberal dab graced the top of the hot oatmeal. A favorite Sunday night meal of fresh baked oversize hot biscuits covered with melted butter enhanced our strawberry shortcake. I never thought of frying my eggs in anything except butter.

For those who have never had homemade butter it may be hard to appreciate what I am talking about. Not that today's real butter is anything to sneeze at, but it is not in a class with the butter I grew up with. Much of our butter was sour cream butter. The cream was saved all week before it was churned and at times began to turn slightly, imparting a special flavor to the butter. Butter we know today was referred to then as sweet cream butter.

When our cow dried up we could afford butter and it was an annual low in our life style. My mother bought oleo or as we know it today, margarine. It was a white lard appearing substance and came with a small packet of powder used to color it yellow. You may have been able to make it look presentable, but it has never been able to duplicate the taste of the real thing. The only joy we got from it was mixing the coloring in.

We were told for a while butter was bad for you, like many other food items that taste better than their substitutes. I think I heard somewhere that finding has been rescinded or at least amended. I really could care less one way or the other. I plan to eat as much of it as I want so long as it tastes good.

In the early years of our marriage, butter became one of our early executive decisions. I, in one of my usual flawed aberrant conclusions, decided we, for the sake of economic stability, should use margarine. It was one of my shortest of many imperfect resolutions.

There are few food items that are not improved with a liberal application of this, delightful dairy food. It has to be one of the most unappreciated real joys of human existence. A quick check of the per capita consumption of same reveals that not everyone shares my enthusiasm. In 1998 it was 4.2 pounds of butter versus 8.6 pounds of margarine. In 1909 it was 17.9 pounds of butter was opposed to only 1.2 pounds of the alternate spread.

There are many other life experiences that are brought to mind whenever butter crosses my thought train.

One was an incident that happened during my army days. A big sign prominently displayed over the serving line in one mess hall bore the words, "Take what you want, but eat what you take." As we passed through the kitchen to stack our trays one guy learned it meant what it said. He was about to dump two patties of butter in the can when the mess sergeant changed his mind.

An early picture of two occupying German soldiers in Denmark during WWII showed them relishing butter from cones much the same as ice cream. A commodity that was in short supply at the time.

I recall this year's traditional butter sculpture in the dairy building at the New York State Fair as weighing in at over eleven hundred pounds, a news item that commanded my particular attention.

One place where there was never any shortage or lack of appreciation for the golden spread was in the early Adirondack lumber camps. One local guy who availed himself of the bounty was Old Forge's Chick McLmyond. He topped off his breakfast with three or four huge butter cookies. Topped with guess what?

