

# Real slow food

If you find yesterday's leftovers unappetising, how about last century's?



THE next time you mourn a forgotten morsel that's slipped past its use-by date, remember that things could always be worse. Take the case of Fidelia Bates of Tecumseh, Michigan: after baking a fruit cake for Thanksgiving in November 1877, the unfortunate Mrs Bates promptly expired. This presented a rather delicate question at the family farmhouse: who would be the first to eat a piece of the dead woman's cake?

As it turned out, nobody was. Mrs Bates's family has resisted temptation for 129 years, and counting. "It's hard, it's crystallised, it's fossilised," says her 86-year-old great-grandson Morgan Ford. "Nobody wanted to eat it after she passed away, and so now I have it." Kept under a glass lid and stored high up ("to keep it away from the kids", he explains) in a cupboard for 75 years, the cake moved over to Ford's house in 1952 and has stayed there ever since, save for the occasional appearance on TV or at his grandchildren's show-and-tell. The fruit cake has attracted a few daredevil gourmards over the years. "My uncle was the first to try a tiny piece off it, about 25 years ago," says Ford. A few more crumbs have been sampled recently, though Ford judges the veteran confection to be not quite its old self. Maybe it needs more time to mature.

"My mother used to be afraid to take the lid off, worried that it'd fall apart," he says. "We did lift the lid off when it turned 100 and for a moment we could smell rum. But you can't smell anything now."

Such wizened leftovers have long been a staple of local newspaper reports. In 1951, Mrs E. Burt Phillips of West Hanover, Massachusetts, returned a 56-year-old can of clams to the manufacturer ("still edible", the press duly reported). A year later a 70-year-old crock of butter ("still white and sweet") was retrieved from an abandoned well in Illinois. In 1968 Sylvia Rapson of Cowley, UK, found a loaf of bread baked in 1896, still edible, tightly wrapped in table linen in an attic trunk ("I'm keeping it for sentimental reasons," she informed *The Times*), and when a house in Grimsby was razed to the ground in 1970, the ruins miraculously yielded up a 1928 packet of breakfast cereal – a find that was declared, inevitably, "still edible".

Conspicuously present in such dispatches are old military rations, including a 1900 box of chocolates donated to the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum in York, UK, in 1991. Sent to British troops serving in the Boer war as part of a special ration from Queen Victoria, they still taste of chocolate.

**OK, so fruit cake takes a little time to mature, but this is ridiculous**





TONY ROGERS

**One of these apple pies is 8 years old, the other a few days – but which is which?**

More unusual is an original owner of ancient grub who's actually willing to eat it. In 1969, one George Lambert turned up at the New Mexico state fair wearing his uniform from the 1898 Spanish-American war. Inside his mess kit he found a piece of hard tack and to the crowd's awe he bit a piece off and ate it. "Tastes just like it did then," the grizzled veteran announced. "Wasn't any good then and it isn't now."

Oscar Pike, a food scientist at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, would probably not have been surprised. "Food quality is always declining," he says. Just how quickly it declines, though, remained anecdotal until Pike and colleagues put out a call to local households: bring us your tired, your stale, your undusted masses of tins and sacks. In short, empty those basement pantries.

Utah was a good place to try this. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for many years has counselled church members to store a one-year supply of food," Pike explains. The inevitable result: absent-minded Mormons with basements full of wheat and instant potatoes that date back to the era of... well, *Brown Sugar* and Meat Loaf. Having conducted taste and odour tests on everything from 30-year-old dried milk to oatmeal, Pike's results are in: the oatmeal's not all that good, but not all that bad either. At a pinch – and with perhaps more than a

pinch of sugar – 30-year-old oatmeal will do for breakfast. It helps that the fats in quick-cooking oats do not readily oxidise into hexanal, the unpleasant-smelling fatty acid that serves as an off-putting indicator of rancidity.

Mindful that their food-storage work may prove useful both for humanitarian aid agencies and long-term space flight, Pike's team has conducted further studies of old rice, beans and wheat. Although the results have not yet been published, a hint emerges when Pike is asked which old food he would eat himself. "Thirty-year-old wheat," he tells *New Scientist*. "Baked into wholewheat bread [it] has practically the same sensory quality as bread made from freshly grown wheat."

Hulled grains last remarkably well over the years, and this gives old food a political dimension: during 1992 talks to negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, the prospect was raised that the US government could flood markets with wheat surpluses dating back to the Cuban missile crisis. Nor was this the only legacy of the cold war, as every decade uncovers more US civil defence caches of vitamin-fortified survival crackers. Though they are veritable museum pieces now, in the 1970s local governments struggled to decide what to do with their vast stores of still-edible crackers. The Hawaiian island of Oahu puzzled over how to dispose of a staggering 505 tons of the stuff, and Baltimore residents tried to convince farmers to take their supply as hog feed. Though some crackers were donated to Bangladesh, most

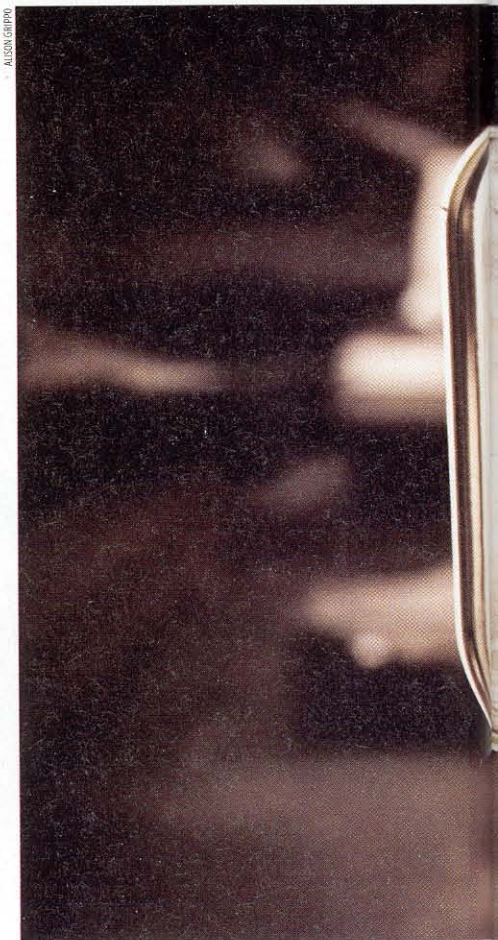
cities eventually tossed them out. "Detroit to Dump Crummy Crackers", one unsentimental headline announced in 1977.

There may well be millions more "servings" still secreted around the US; just this March another 352,000 crackers turned up in a forgotten vault below the Brooklyn Bridge. A New York bridge inspector, sampling one, charitably described it as having "a unique flavour".

Vintage food discoveries may also become widely known thanks to the web. In 1997 Tony Rogers, a former employee at a Wisconsin-based chemical company, cleaned out his office desk to discover a Dolly Madison apple pie he had purchased at a gas station eight years earlier. Rogers's fruit pie autopsy, immortalised in photographs on his website ([www.tonyrogers.com/humor/applepie/index.htm](http://www.tonyrogers.com/humor/applepie/index.htm)), has received some 245,000 visitors, thanks in no small part to his deliberately ludicrous correspondence with a hapless Interstate Brands customer care representative.

His exploits did not end there. "Before I wrapped it all up," he says, "I did pick up a

**These cold war crackers are just as awful as they were when fresh**



AUSEN GRIPPO

**"We did take the lid off when the cake turned 100 and for a moment you could smell rum. You can't smell it now"**



# "My immediate reaction was that it was somewhat caramelised and somewhat chewy, but it was the same taste"

piece of the pie, and I actually ate some of it. My immediate reaction was that it was somewhat caramelised and somewhat chewy. But... it was the same taste." For the past few years Rogers has also occasionally sampled ready meals of scalloped potatoes and ham he bought in 1994: "They still look, smell and taste exactly as they did," he says. Such old foods might even hold up well enough to fool an unwary diner. "I honestly think that if my pie was put back on a shelf in a gas station," he says, "someone would purchase it and consume it and not ask any questions."

If they did eat it, though, wouldn't they get sick? Rogers hasn't, and in the case of dried foods the answer generally seems to be no. "When stored at room temperature in an oxygen-free atmosphere, there is no reason to believe dried food would not be safe," says Pike. "Microbiologically, low-moisture food that is safe when packaged is still safe after storage." Low temperature and darkness also

help, he notes, and improvements in modern food processing may well also improve the odds of long-term food safety.

Those looking for a traditional way to preserve their food, however, can also avail themselves of a low-tech option: toss it into a peat bog.

For centuries antiquarians and scientists have puzzled over the hundreds of ancient wooden casks of rancid whitish-grey fat discovered in the bogs of Ireland and Scotland. Just what the contents of these "bog butter" casks had originally been remained unclear until 2004, when a research team led by the biogeochemist Richard Evershed of the University of Bristol confirmed that the mysterious barrels had indeed stored butter. "Other than crude oil, they are the largest deposits of lipids anywhere in nature," Evershed says. "Some of the casks are huge, up to 50 kilograms – they're absolutely massive." Their remarkable survival – fingerprints can



If it's grey, fatty, rancid and hundreds of years old, it can only be bog butter

still be seen on the old butter – is a testament to the antibiotic properties of sphagnum moss and the preservative quality of the cool temperatures and darkness that come with being buried 3 metres down in a bog.

It has been suggested that the casks were precious high-calorie supplies hidden from marauding invaders, or that being buried in a bog may have improved the butter's flavour. Since they now range from a few centuries to 2000 years in age, it's safe to say that any such ripening has gone much too far for even the most hardcore gourmet: they smell strongly of butyric acid, a malodorous fatty acid whose manifold unpleasant associations include vomit. Newly unearthed casks are the worst offenders: "When I visited the Museum of Scotland they had just taken delivery of some that had been recently excavated," says Evershed. "There was a powerful smell in that building's vault."

Butyric acid serves as old food's shot across the bows, a warning that it is long past its use-by date. It does not actually render food inedible, though, and there have been anecdotal reports over the years of dogs lapping up bog butter with no apparent ill-effect. Evershed says he hasn't tried eating any himself, but if the whim caught him indeed he could – perhaps as a fitting topping for some old civil defence crackers. "You bring it up to room temperature," he says, "spread it on a cracker, have a bottle of port and... maybe that doesn't seem like a good idea." Not, at least, before having plenty of that port first. ●

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