

# An Interview

with

## Terese Allen



## THE FLAVOR of WISCONSIN

AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF FOOD AND EATING IN THE BADGER STATE

REVISED AND EXPANDED • WITH 450 RECIPES

HARVA HACHTEN *and* TERESE ALLEN • FOREWORD by ODESSA PIPER



WISCONSIN  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



**WHS Press** This book has been a staple in many Wisconsin homes for decades. Now as it comes out in paperback, what can you tell us about how this project impacted you looking back to 2004 when you first started working on it?

I've been writing about Wisconsin's food history and culture since the early '90s, and I can't tell you how useful Harva Hachten's first edition of the book was to me during those first 10, 15 years. There was so little else

published about the state's foodways—all the fascination for food in the media, literature, history, science, and other fields that we have now was just beginning to blossom back then. I often looked to *Flavor* for historical context for the topics I was covering—really, the book was more than a go-to resource, it was a beloved companion. So being asked to do its second edition was a very special honor—and, of course, a behemoth task. I wasn't trained as a historian, but I had to become one fast. I don't think I've ever worked harder, before or since.



**WHS Press** It's safe to say that the average Wisconsinite is not going to know every detail shared in this book. When you joined the project in 2004 and added to the foundational work of Harva Hachten, what surprised you most about the state's food history?

The remarkable richness of Wisconsin's foodways. When I started on the 2nd edition of *Flavor*, I'd already written several books and done columns about various aspects of our culinary culture—farmers' markets, cheese

factories, butcher shops, food festivals, supper clubs, restaurants, bakeries, and lots more—so you'd think I wouldn't have been that surprised about how diverse our food culture is. But it wasn't until I had done *Flavor* that I really understood the breadth and depth of it, both historically and in the present. Wisconsin's foodways come from many sources—geography, agriculture, immigration, industry, religion, etc.—and get expressed in innumerable delicious ways. I feel very lucky to live here.





**WHS Press** Speaking of Harva, this book carries on her legacy. What was it like for you to work with an author, even for a short amount of time, of her caliber and with her deep knowledge of food in the state? How did those interactions influence your professional life?

Sadly, I only met with Harva once—she died unexpectedly some months after our initial meeting, before the “meat” of the work had begun. I had the notes she had been keeping, and those helped give me direction and food for thought. Having appreciated her work for so long, I was determined to live up to her caliber and knowledge.



**WHS Press** If readers could take only one thing away from this book, what would you want it to be?

That when it comes to food, Wisconsin is not just a “meat and potatoes” place, not just about cheese and beer. It has a long and storied food history and a vibrantly important culture of food.



**WHS Press** Some folks will come to this book thinking “there’s no way Wisconsin was a driving force in foodie culture today.” How often do you find people surprised by the depth of Wisconsin’s food history and how it directly influenced many current food trends?

Yeah, a lot of people still don’t get it. I think that has a lot to do with this being a largely rural state. People think that “food culture” means big city restaurants and chefs and sleight-of-hand cooking techniques, and that we’re just stuck here with our Holsteins and our Northwoods and our beer and brats. But those cows give us world-class cheeses

that chefs drool over, and the woods yield trendy ramps and morels . . . and it isn’t just bratwurst, is it? It’s chorizo, kielbasa, spicy Italian, Belgian trippe, bison sausage, venison sausage, and so much more. And don’t get me started about our beer scene. I’ve been doing presentations around the state about Wisconsin foodways for a long time, and I still just love seeing the look of pride and recognition on people’s faces when they realize what’s really going on here in their home state. As for “outsiders,” I also love taking people to the Dane County Farmers’ Market, with its mind-boggling array of every kind of crop and product imaginable. That never fails to convince them.





**WHS Press** Is there a recipe found in the pages of *The Flavor of Wisconsin* that stands out to you as especially interesting or representative of Wisconsin food culture? Is there one you still make regularly today?

I'm going to say Friday Night Fish Fry as a dish that reflects so very much about our state. It's more than a recipe or a meal, it's an institution, "one in which food, history, geography, ethnicity, and religion intertwine in

a unique expression of regional culture," as I wrote in the book. Meals of fried fish certainly happen elsewhere, but "rarely are they as widespread, habitual, and communal, and nowhere are they as closely identified with a people and its state."

As for what I cook: I am a Wisconsinite, therefore I fry fish! There is truly nothing I love more than a plateful of fresh-caught, pan-fried bluegill or yellow perch. (Unless there's some sauteed morels to go with that.)



**WHS Press** You've met and spoken to many readers over the lifetime of this book—is there an encounter or conversation that has stayed with you?

It's not so much one encounter. It's that no matter where I go for presentations on *The Flavor of Wisconsin*, there's always a lively

Q and A. People get up and talk about their family and community food customs, their childhood food memories, their favorite supper club or holiday dish. Food just really gets people excited. It gets them sharing, connecting. I think that's because when we talk about what we eat, we're talking about who we are, where we come from, and what we value.

