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Interview with Margaret Turgeon

Molly McNamara

Margaret Turgeon

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Accession Number: ELFS-MAM-A020701.B
Researcher's Name: Molly McNamara
Event: Interview with Margaret Turgeon
Place: Turgeons' home at 20739 Newcastle Road, Gambier, OH 43022
Co-workers present: none

Margaret Turgeon: Are we on the air?

Molly McNamara: Yeah we're on the air

MT: OK.

MM: This is Molly McNamara interviewing, um, Margaret Turgeon in her house on February seventh at...

MT: Two o'clock.

MM: ...two o'clock. Um, (page turning), actually do you mind if I take this? (Indicating the interview schedule). Um, how long have you been cooking and baking?

MT: Gosh, probably since I was about thirteen. Um, but I started with piecrusts. I didn't start with cakes.

MM: How did you become interested?

MT: Um, well I grew up in a family that enjoyed food, and I remember I started making pies because my father once complimented me on my pie crusts and so I got...that became my specialty. Then it, then it also became a strength when I married into the Turgeon family where there's a lot of attention paid to food because my mother-in-law doesn't like making pastry so that became my forte. (Laughs. At this point we start hearing the sound of her peeling the carrots for minestrone soup). But I think, I think I became interested because I, I loved food myself, and I became interested in cooking because I like to recreate the kinds of recipes that I got from other family members that I would have when we were...the different foods that I would have when we were traveling. So it's kind of something that's evolved over a long period of time. (Bag rustling.)

MM: And uh what are you...what did you say we were making today?

MT: Right now I'm peeling a number of carrots for the minestrone soup for the café on Friday. And then I'll be peeling turnips and potatoes. (Laughs).

MM: That's a lot of peeling.

MT: Yeah.

MM: Could you explain a little about the Friday café? I talked with Mrs. Klein, but I was interested in your opinion on it as well.

MT: Um-hmm.

MM: How did it get started?

MT: Well, it, it evolved out of an effort, oh golly, over twenty years ago.

Thomas Turgeon: (From the staircase,) A lot more than that.

MT: Well Michael is, Michael is twenty-two, so it might have been twenty-three years ago.

TT: You started doing cakes before that...

MT: Well, right.

TT: ...on the steps of Farr Hall.

MT: Joyce and I and a number of other faculty women decided to try to raise money for the student, Kenyon Student Scholarship Fund, and we thought it would be fun to do a dessert café on Farr Hall. So we started doing that in the Spring, and we did about two or three of them, and they were very successful. And Joyce and I were also interested in cooking for the community and providing a kind of nice quiet place to have lunch. (Clears her throat). It certainly isn't that now, but it, that is, that was our thought. It was an opportunity for townspeople and college students to get together. So after we did the dessert cafes, we decided we would try some lunch, Friday luncheon cafés. And we, at that point we were raising money for the Student Scholarship Fund as well but decided that it was quite a bit of work and that we might as well do it to raise money for ourselves. (Laughs) So it evolved into a business for us. And we really enjoy doing it. We started out doing them and they...where the coffeehouse is now.

TT: The Red Door Café.

MT: The Red Door Café. And we used to offer lots of different entrees. We would have different kinds of quiche. We did pates with French bread. We had different choices of soups and choices of dessert. But over the years, we've figured out how to make it more focused and, and somewhat easier on ourselves and just offer one entrée and, and, you know, one dessert.

MM: And in your opinion, why do people come to the café?
(Page turning).

MT: Oh, I think they come partly because it's Friday. (Laughs) They're starting to celebrate the weekend. I think they find the food attractive. There's a nice kind of ambiance there. It's fun and jolly, and you get to meet friends. If you have somebody visiting, a student friend visiting or if you've got family visiting, it's a nice place to take people to lunch. It's also a place to see other people if you have business to do. So, I think there are a lot of reasons people come. Largely because of the, the food and because it's kind of attractive and fun.

MM: What significance do you think it has for the community?

MT: Oh, gosh.

TT: I think it's a break in routine. Students who are eating at the food service...

MT: Food service.

TT: ...It's a chance to break that pattern...

MT: Mm-hmm.

TT: ...(undecipherable)...like to break from time to time.

MT: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and it's a, it's an alternative place to eat. Just, it's only once a week, so it's alternative to the deli and the other places that are...that serve lunches. But again I think it also is a way of starting the weekend. (Laughs) You know, everybody's kind of cheerful because it's Friday. And I think it, it's also a place to meet people. Oftentimes it's interesting, students who have been away and traveling in Europe or been abroad come back and say that it's reminiscent of the kinds of food...I'm not... not that we do European food, but, but the, the feeling of the café is reminiscent of, of the kinds of food they would have had in...when they were traveling in Europe. So I think that it, it's kind of fun in that way for some folks. Another thing, occasionally we'll have, you know, a student who will come in sort of toward the end of the café. I can remember over the years, I can't remember their names, but they would come in with the New York Times and sit off in a room by themselves and have lunch and read the Times and, and I think that, that makes it a different kind of interesting setting to, to enjoy a lunch. I especially think too when the weather's nice it, it becomes very attractive because a lot of people can sit outside.

MM: Do you, so do you set up tables outside?

MT: Mm-hmm. Yeah, in the spring and the fall we set up... Last year I think the weather was so warm into the winter that we were able to set up until the end of November outside. And it's, it's more fun I think when it can be outside because it's usually a sunny day and people can...it's not as crowded and people kind of spread out and enjoy it... the food outside as well as the sunshine.

MM: I know that you cater for other events on campus. How do you decide what you're going to make?

MT: Well, that depends on what the occasion is. It depends on, you know, if it's, if it's a large dinner we might choose to do things that are more manageable for us. Um, but it depends on who is asking us to do it and what they're interested in having. So it just, it has a lot of components that go into the decision. It also depends on the price. (Laughs) If people are willing to spend a lot of money then we do things that cost more.

MM: If you need to like keep doing what you're doing...

MT: No it's OK. I can't do, I don't know that I can think and do it at the same time. (Both laugh). I'll try. OK.

MM: I just didn't want to...

MT; No, no that's OK.

MM: ...keep you from doing what you needed to do.

MT: No, no that's okay. I'm okay. [Begins peeling again].

MM: How often do you change the things that you make for your dinners?

MT: Well...

MM: Or for the Friday café?

MT: Oh, well the Friday café, we look at the menus we did about this time last year, and we, we base the menus sort of on the season. And, you know, we get ideas from that, but throughout the year, no matter where we are, I'm always kind of looking for new, new ideas about things that would be attractive and, and somewhat different. So, we, I mean, we have the basic standard things that we do like quiche and Georgian cheese bread and crepes and chili and fecoccia [sp?], but then we, you know, pick up new ideas other times either from magazines or from eating out that, that we think that would be kind of new and different. So we do try to vary it some, but we also know that there are favorite standbys that the kids are used to, to having. The, the clients. What do we call them? The pa...we're the...the patrons [She laughs, and Tom says something undecipherable]. The attendees.

TT: The crowd.

MT: The crowd.

MM: Do you often cook for your own family?

MT: Um, I do like to cook for my own family. Of course, it's only for Tom and me now. When the kids were growing up I did, I think I did most of the cooking.

TT: When the kids were growing up you did.

MT: Yeah, and in the summers I love cooking. We summer in Maine, and we have a lot of family that comes over the different parts of the summer, and, and you know I love to cook for, for gatherings there too. We have a big Fourth of July party and, and, you know, it's fun to, to prepare dinners for family that are, that revolve around the kinds of things that you can find up in Maine. You know, fresh seafood and lobster and that kind of thing. But now, Tom, as I was telling you before, Tom does most of the cooking for the two of us. His schedule usually permits him to be home earlier than I get home from work. And I will come in harried and tired and sit down to a lovely simple French dinner. [Laughs]. I am incredibly spoiled. I was telling her about the fresh, the fresh white fish with the ginger sauce, which was so good.

TT: That was, that was [undecipherable].

MM: Yeah. How often do you try new things?

MT: Oh gosh, I would say maybe once a week if I see something that I want to try. Or if, if we're doing a dinner and someone's requested something specific that I haven't done before. But maybe once or twice a week, I'll, I'll get an idea. It just depends on what I'm cooking for. But I do often...if I see something that, that I think for example would work for the Café, I do a kind of a trial run to see how, you know, how it comes together. But, you know, once, maybe about once a week I might get an idea if I'm lucky.

MM: Why do you enjoy cooking?

MT: I like to, I like to work with tangible things. And I like...I enjoy putting...I like working with my hands. I like to bake especially. And I also enjoy serving food to people and, and having it be appreciated. I enjoy the audience. If it's a good dinner [laughs] or a good cake.

MM: How does it make you feel when you do serve something that's good?

MT: Oh it's, it's very pleasing. It's, you know, after a lectureships dinner, people often stick their heads in the door and say, "that was a really nice dinner; I loved the cake" or, you know, "It was a delicious entrée," or something like that, and it, that's very nice. There was a time...I am known well in Gambier for a cooking disaster, which was...I don't know if I should tell you about this Molly. Joyce and I were doing a dinner for the honorary's commencement and she was off doing a reception somewhere else and I was in charge of getting the dinner organized. And everything was going splendidly, and we had done a lovely filet of beef with a green peppercorn, corn sauce decorated with puff pastry leaves, and, you know it was a very, very nice menu and all going very well. And

we were about to serve the dessert, which was a meringue with chocolate bourbon sauce and whipped cream, ice-cream and chocolate bourbon sauce and whipped cream. And I had-before the dinner-I had whipped the cream and stuck it in the refrigerator back in the food service. And we were just moving right along, serving up the desserts and somebody, one of the people who was helping us serve came to me and said "there's salt in the whip cream," and I thought...I stuck my finger in it and tasted it and it was very salty. And what had happened was that we had run out of, of sugar when we were setting up the tables. We were putting it on the tables with the sugar and cream. And I went back to the kitchen to whip the cream, and there was a big bin that said sugar on it. So I, you know, took a couple cupfuls of what I thought was sugar-maybe a cupful of sugar-and put it in and whipped it up and had it all ready to go, but I never tasted it. And when I went back to the kitchen, I, I looked more closely and the bin had said sugar, but the bag inside said salt, so...

MM: Oh no.

MT: ...that was, that was a time when I wanted to fall on my sword at the end of the dinner like a French chef.

TT: That was twenty years ago.

MT: It was a long time ago. But, you know, even that turned out to be amusing because people who were eating this dessert and realized that the [timer starts beeping], that, the, the dessert was salty rather than sweet were, were trying to decide whether that was something that was on purpose or not. [I laugh]. And then, and then Bill McCulloh said the most wonderful thing. I'll be right back. As he was leaving, he said something about "the gods would have been angry if there wasn't something wrong because the dinner had been so splendid." [Tom laughs]. So we were appeasing the gods by this salt in the whip cream.

End of tape

After the tape had ended, Peggy said that having someone else's recipe reminds you of that person. She recalled that she just used her friend's recipe and sent her a postcard to say that she had used it. She guessed it was nice for her friend to know. Peggy said that passing on recipes gives a sort of immortality. For example, her grandmother has passed away, but Peggy still remembers her when she uses her recipes. Perhaps immortality is a bit of a stretch, but using these recipes definitely invoke a remembering of people and remembering of experiences. "I once had a person tell me she did not share recipes." I think that's the most frustrating thing. Thomas recalled that she had one recipe in her book from the fairy godmother. She recalled that she had the recipe card, and it said it was from the fairy godmother. She had never been able to determine who that was although she wished she had, so she could give them the credit in the cookbook (By Request). As it was, she simply called it "Fairy Godmother's Almond Cake with Raspberry Sauce" in the book.

