

Pickles: A history

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I've long had it in mind to write a book with the title *Pickles: A History*. My husband thinks it's a crazy idea, but there is precedent in the recent spate of social microhistories—big books about small things—which has given us books like *Salt: A World History*, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance*, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, and *Consider the Fork*. Whimsical though it may seem, the impulse to tell the story of a civilization through a single object—a spice, a silkworm, a microbe, a pruning hook—can be a serious one. One can see the universe in a grain of salt.

G. K. Chesterton had a gift for microhistory: “Once I planned to write a book of poems entirely about the things in my pockets,” he tells us, “but I found it would be too long; and the age of the great epics is past.” In lieu of the epic poem the subject deserved, he contributed an essay to the *Daily News* on “What I Found in My Pocket.” And what he found in his pocket was a pocketknife, “one of the most primary of those practical origins upon which . . . all our human civilisation reposes”; a box of matches embodying “fire . . . the thing we all love, but dare not touch”; and a piece of chalk, in which he saw “all the art and all the frescoes of the world.” For Chesterton, the microhistory was a way to give thanks for existence itself.

But why pickles? It's partly personal. I grew up on the border of the Lower East Side in the decades before its gentrification. New York was a little world for me then, a walkable microcosmos, from my neighborhood where everyone was Jewish though no one went to synagogue, to the multiethnic immigrant streets where Jewishness

confronted me in forms at once exotic and connatural; and where the only Christians I was conscious of meeting were Catholic Workers at Dorothy Day's St. Joseph House (they seemed pretty Jewish, too). My favorite walk took me to the Roumanian Pickle Works on Orchard Street. Uptown there were steaming chestnuts from street vendors at Christmas time; in my neighborhood there were candy buttons that stuck to the paper; but on the Lower East Side it was pickles all the way. Proust had his madeleines; I knew neither madeleines nor the Magdalen they bring to mind, but I had pickles, drawn from the depths of the giant barrels that crowded the sidewalk. No memory can compete for poignancy with one that has fermented in a great oak barrel.

As I get older, this pickle memory is likely to intensify. When we're young, the field of experiences seems wide open; but one day the thought strikes us that our stock of experiences is not infinite. It's not a painful realization, this narrowing of temporal horizons, but it gives the present moment a sharper, more saturated flavor, as if it had been steeping for a long time in all that has gone past.

Pickles, it seems to me, convey this saturated quality of experience with a peculiar vividness and universality. As the most ancient means of preserving fresh produce during cold and lean times, pickles are as fundamental to civilization as any of the contents of Chesterton's pockets. Pickles are an emblem of survival, homespun craft, and household thrift (and how I would like to be that kind of resourceful mother who can keep her family healthy on an astringent budget!). Pickles speak, they smell, of Tradition with a capital T. Whether naturally fermented or assisted by vinegar and spices, pickles are conveyors of a culture nurtured and passed down from generation to generation.

And the culture of pickles can be subtle, complex, finely differentiated. Like many fermented foods they are rich in the "fifth flavor" for which the Japanese term *umami* has been coined. The *tsukemono* that accompany traditional Japanese meals—fermented, dried, sometimes brilliantly colored slivers and shapes of ginger, radish, plum, cucumber, eggplant, cabbage—are as redolent of the studied naturalness of Japanese aesthetics as sauerkraut is of German heartiness. Every nation and culture from ancient Sumer to modern Korea has its characteristic art of pickling; and every civilization has developed, as essential to its advancement, a corresponding science. We may look for the origins of chemistry in the pickle jar rather than the alchemist's alembic.

But this does not exhaust the fascination of the pickle; for what the pickle really stands for is the mystery of taste itself. In the taxonomy of the spiritual senses, taste is, with seeing, the sense that partakes of intimate and unmediated knowledge of the beloved. To hear and obey is very good; to taste and see is far better. Perhaps this is what the pungent, the poignant, the unclassifiable tastes are trying to tell us: that our past and present, our traditions and cultures, the pristine sensations of childhood, the memories leached by age, will be preserved for us in the divine presence. Perhaps they are hints that, in the promised resurrection, there will be tasting (didn't the risen Jesus taste that broiled fish?) as well as touching, seeing as well as hearing, remembering without forgetting, world without end.