

Frozen Foods

Pablo Picasso.
The Kitchen, Paris,
November 1948.
Oil on canvas,
69 x 98-1/2 in. The
Museum of Modern Art,
New York, New York.
Acquired through the
Nelson A. Rockefeller
Bequest (422.1980).
Digital image
© The Museum of
Modern Art/Licensed
by SCALA / Art Resource,
New York.

SHORTLY AFTER WORLD WAR II, the country was swept with an interest in things cool and frozen. Movie theaters hung ice-blue banners with painted icicles dripping from each letter of the words AIR CONDITIONED! Bedrooms were cooled with small window air conditioners, then using larger units, whole houses, department stores, trains, buses, you name it—everything could be cooled, even your car.

TV quiz shows were giving away the latest two-door refrigerators with separate freezer and refrigerator in a single unit. The Crosley Company offered a startling innovation—a refrigerator with shelves in the door called a Shelvador. The Westinghouse refrigerator was advertised by consumer advocate and TV personality Betty Furness. Dressed in a strapless evening gown and fancy high-heeled shoes, she opened the refrigerator's door with a sweep of her hand and exposed the large food storage unit while bowing low to reveal a large amount of her 1950s TV-censored cleavage. The live TV audience responded with all kinds of oohs and aahs for her double exposure.

This was what was going on at the national level, but things were different at our house. All my parents could come up with during WWII was a secondhand, one-door, white Norge refrigerator with a clock that never worked built into its door. It had an ice compartment that held two ice trays and maybe a pint of ice cream. Oh how my mother longed to be part of the national cool-and-frozen movement.

She took her first tentative steps toward freon fulfillment by buying plastic molds that she filled with Kool-Aid and placed in the ice compartment. In about five hours she served them as ice pops. They weren't anything close. Sometimes she removed the ice trays altogether and replaced them with two packs of Birds Eye frozen vegetables. But this innovation met with disaster for two reasons. First, my grandmother, who lived with us, thought we should always have fresh vegetables whenever possible; second, and perhaps more important, my father did not have any ice for his scotch. I was often sent to our next-door neighbors' to borrow a tray of ice.

Yes, it was indeed hard for Mother to become part of the frozen-food scene. But life's problems have a way of working themselves out, and in this case they did with my grandmother and the old Norge dying around the same time. Maybe Grandma went first, I am not sure. Anyway, only the Norge could be replaced.

The new arrival was one of those square-cornered, avocado, two-door jobs, followed immediately by more and more frozen foods: first vegetables, then desserts, and eventually whole TV dinners. Dad didn't seem to notice this change in the menu, because with an unlimited supply of ice, his cocktail hour could be extended and dinner became somewhat of an afterthought. Mother continued to serve the meals, even the TV dinners that came with their own aluminum tray-like dish, on china plates and to have a centerpiece of fresh flowers on the dining-room table. Then Dad died, and Mother stopped cooking altogether. It's not that she was depressed; she just saw an opportunity and took advantage of it. From then on, we each simply thawed our frozen dinners in the oven.

In later life, equipped with a microwave oven, Mother joined the take-out movement with the same enthusiasm as she had joined the frozen-food movement. However, to the end, she was a traditionalist. Although many of her friends were gone, those remaining who visited were always served Mother's take-out cuisine on china plates, and her table always had fresh flowers.

WAYNE CARHART recently published a collection of essays on the history of Brattleboro, Vermont, commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of its Chamber of Commerce. He is working on a book with Charles Fish on the contributions of rural public works departments, particularly Brattleboro's, and a novel about a chance meeting in 1966 with actor Hurd Hatfield.