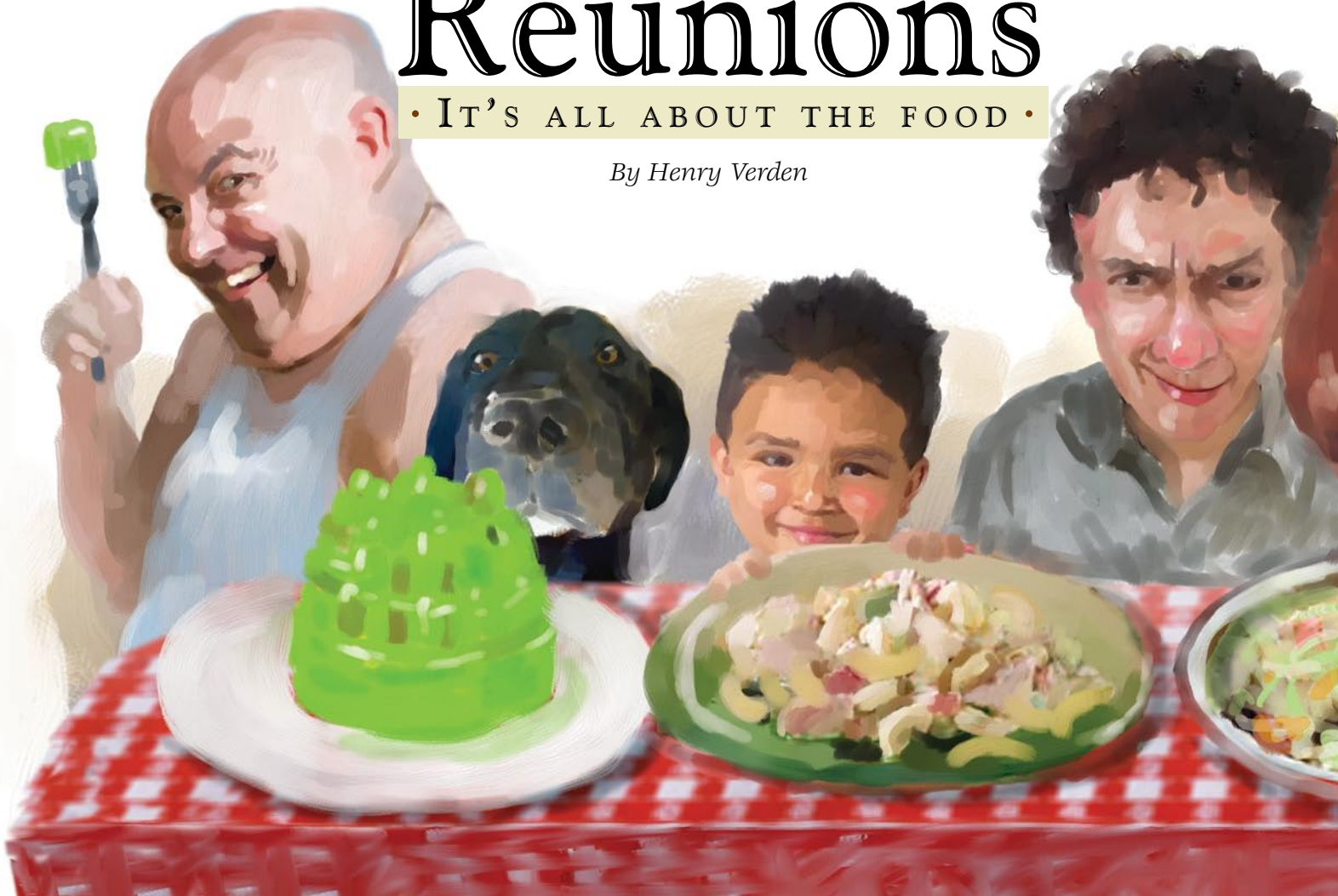


Reunions

• IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FOOD •

By Henry Verden



Family reunion. Those words seem simple, but they are often loaded with emotional content, memories—and stress. The stress of figuring out when and where everyone can get together, the stress of figuring out everything from housing arrangements to entertainment plans, and the challenge of how to feed the gathering herd with all their unique personalities and tastes. Your family may be different, but our extended family is full of relatives that get along and those that don't. In the end, the whole thing becomes an endurance trial focused around one thing—the food.

Family reunion food is the ultimate comfort food if you grew up in the Upper Midwest. It's not fancy or specific to any ethnic heritage. Some recipes have been handed down through so many generations that reunion food has entered the realm of racial memory (the race, of course, being anyone who grew up south of the Canadian border within three hundred miles of lakes Michigan and Superior).

For the sake of those who are new to the region

(remember that anyone who's been here less than 25 years is considered a newbie, so you know who you are), I compiled a primer to help you out, because sooner or later, you will be facing a table full of this stuff along with the inevitable hamburgers, hot dogs, and carbon-encrusted grilled chicken.

JELL-O® salad

Jello is a food only America could invent. In 1845, industrialist Peter Cooper obtained the first patent for a gelatin dessert, later named JELL-O®. It never went anywhere until the rights to sell it were purchased by a patent medicine salesman named Frank Woodward. The rest is jiggley history. Americans can never leave anything alone and started experimenting with ways to make JELL-O® more interesting. Folks combined flavors, layered JELL-O® into parfaits, stuffed it, cubed it, added fruits and/or vegetables, whipped cream, mayonnaise, and God alone knows what else and called the result "salads" for lack of a



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better title. As a result, Aunt Mildred now brings at least two JELL-O® salads to every reunion made, of course, from treasured family recipes. If you were born overseas and don't have family JELL-O® recipes that have been passed from generation to generation, visit www.JELLO.com. There are 250 travel-friendly recipes and over 500 family party recipes just waiting for you.

Macaroni salad

We're not talking pasta salads here. Pasta salads are for people who drive fancy European cars, talk about the subtle, unassuming, yet complex bouquet of their latest wine purchase, and own Afghan Hounds or Labradoodles named Pooky. No, we're talkin' elbow macaroni with mayonnaise and additives like peas, canned tuna, or cheese.

If you heat these up, they become a hot dish. At a reunion they are to be served cold—in Tupperware®. Most macaroni salad recipes are family heirlooms or come out of those cookbooks put together



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by church ladies. You can also go to www.mayo.com where the friendly folks at Hellman's offer four macaroni salads including Traditional Macaroni Salad and the more exotic Neptune Pasta Salad.



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Cole slaw

Cole slaw is usually one of the best things to eat at a reunion because it's so hard to mess up. Combine cabbage, carrots, and slaw dressing (sometimes homemade, but often bottled) and mix. Folks with fancy airs might add raisins, caraway seeds, or a little red cabbage for color. The only thing that's hard to get right is quantity. For some reason, cole slaw always expands to fill the available space and beyond until

the only container that will hold it all is a wheelbarrow. Our favorite bottled cole slaw dressing is Marzetti's. If you are looking for those fancy versions, there are a number of tasty recipes at www.marzetti.com.

Pork and beans

Some folks might try to tell you they're baked beans but we all know those beans came straight out of a can. The telltale sign is always that little cube of pork fat that makes it legal to call it pork and beans and not just beans. Some people try to dress them up, but breeding will tell. For reunion food purists, the only way pork and beans should be served is lukewarm.



BUSH'S Baked Beans (www.bushbeans.com) has a wide variety of flavors and there's even a recipe on their website for Sweet Baked Beans Pasta Salad that includes elbow macaroni and chunks of cheese. How much more basic can you get?



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The last thing I'll mention is what makes the rest tolerable. It's not technically food but I'm willing to stretch the point. It lets you tolerate Uncle Phil's jokes that you've heard at every reunion since you were allowed to join adult conversations. It gets you past all the "the last time I saw you, you were this tall" events (including the cheek pinch). I am, of course, talking about reunion beer. It's the cheapest beer that can be found, but after a while you don't care. It all gets better. Somebody pass me "Grandma's Disappearing Magic Marshmallow Carmel Fudgey Brownies."

Dessert bars

Apparently there is too much pressure to get ready for a family reunion to bake cookies or cakes so the Dessert bar is invariably several varieties of dessert bars. Dessert bars are divided into three types: brownie, pudding, and cookie and can range in consistency from chewing on roasted particle board to sticky with the cohesive force of Gorilla Glue[®]. Getting some of them out of the pan requires an air hammer. Here's a piece of advice. The cuter the name, the worse they'll be. Try to avoid eating "Suzy's Goody Gumdrop Apricot Extravaganza Bars." Dessert bars travel well and are simple to make as the 925 bar recipes and 243 brownie recipes at www.AllRecipes.com prove.



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