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FROM SALMAGUNDI TO E PLURIBUS UNUM

VICTORY AT YORKTOWN

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

Though celebrated on the 4th of July, our nation's birth really occurred when the British, under command of Lt. General Lord Cornwallis, finally surrendered Oct. 19, 1781, at Yorktown, Virginia. It was there that somehow, the nation, E Pluribus Unum — “out of many, one” — was born from a salmagundi of beliefs, customs and opinions.

Salmagundi, you say? To 18th century colonists or Englishmen, a salmagundi was an assortment of meats, seafoods, vegetables and eggs artfully arranged on a platter. More ornate salmagundis included everything from fruit and cheese to edible flower adornments. Taken from the French, salmigondis, salmagundi actually applies to more than just food. It is any contrasting mixture of things, people or ideas. It is a word that could well be used to describe the American colonies, too.

There is a reason why so many American words have been borrowed from the French. The French were with us from the very beginning. Without the generous assistance of King Louis XVI of France and bold Frenchmen who rushed to the rescue of the beleaguered Continental troops, America would likely have remained in British hands.

LAFAYETTE

Even before the American Revolution, King George III was not a popular man. Alienated from many within his own administration, George III's situation was worsened by the ensuing Seven Years War, better known in America as the French and Indian War. One of the King's chief detractors was his own brother, Henry, Duke of Gloucester. Henry had recently married outside of royal approval, and the king had made a point of showing his displeasure.

In her book, “LaFayette in the Somewhat United States,” author Sarah Vowell tells of how, in 1775, LaFayette encountered the king's brother at a dinner party in Metz, France. Over dinner, the duke criticized his brother's policies and expressed open admiration for the Americans at the recent battles at Lexington and Concord.

LaFayette's father was killed by the British during the French and Indian War and, like many Frenchmen, may have had his own score to settle with King George III. In spite of this, it also appears that he was genuinely intrigued by the duke's words in favor of the colonists. Vowell quotes LaFayette as stating, “From that hour I could think of nothing but this enterprise, and resolved to go to Paris at once to make further inquiries.”

About a year later, LaFayette encountered American diplomat Silas Deane, who was in France. LaFayette offered his services to the Continental Army free of charge. At the age of 19, he was able to convince Deane to grant him the rank of major-general. Shortly thereafter, LaFayette was arrested for attempting to sail for America. He managed to escape and make his way to South Carolina, where he stayed with a farmer for a short time before heading to Philadelphia.

Once there, LaFayette attended yet another dinner party where he met General Washington himself. Almost immediately the two became fast friends, and LaFayette soon expressed his desire to become Washington's second in command even though France had yet to commit to the American colonies. Initially, LaFayette's rank was considered honorary and Washington was not able to grant the request. However, Washington did admit to considering himself a father figure



A collaborative work between Thomas Pritchard and Louis Remy, this 1824 portrait, “Washington and LaFayette at Mount Vernon,” shows the close relationship between the two men.



Laden with anchovies, this traditional salmagundi would have pleased 18th century palates.

to LaFayette and invited him to visit the encampment at Valley Forge. Upon arrival, the devoted young Frenchman determined to stay by Washington's side throughout the harsh winter.

A few months later, LaFayette distinguished himself at the Battle of Brandywine, wherein he was wounded. By the time he recovered, France had openly declared its support to the colonies. LaFayette's rank became real, and he was placed in charge of his own division. His dedication to both Washington and the American cause became legendary.

ROCHAMBEAU

Born in 1725 in what was then the province de Orleanais, France, Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, was slated to become a Jesuit priest. After the death of his brother, though, Rochambeau's career path shifted toward the military. He fought most notably in the War of Austrian Succession and the French and Indian/Seven Years War, where he reached the rank of Brigadier General.

In 1780, King Louis XVI awarded Rochambeau the rank of Lt. General and placed him in command of 7,000 troops. He was then sent to join Rhode Island as part of a secret operation, code named the Expedition Particuliere.

When he learned that Rochambeau was leading the French troops from Connecticut to New York, Washington ordered the Continental Army to march to Phillipsburg, where the two forces would unite against the British. Rochambeau's forces greatly impressed the American general, who lavished the men with compliments on their precision and finery.

Rochambeau was astonished at the impoverished appearance of the American Army, too. Even

so, he was no less impressed with the men themselves. An officer in attendance with Rochambeau, Baron von Closen, wrote the following:

“I had a chance to see the American army, man for man. It was really painful to see these brave men, almost naked with only some trousers and little linen jackets, most of them without stockings, but, would you believe it? Very cheerful and healthy in appearance.”

He continued, saying that in contrast, the majority of the Rhode Island regiment, which consisted largely of “negroes,” were the most neatly dressed and precise in their maneuvers.

In spite of the destitute condition of Washington's soldiers, he and Rochambeau began to make plans to lay siege on New York. Soon, however, another Frenchman would join with the American forces and change everything.

DE GRASSE

Francois Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse, was nearing 60 years old and in poor health when, early in 1781, King Louis XVI made him rear admiral and sent him to the West Indies with a huge chunk of the French Navy to lend support to the American cause.

Informed of de Grasse's impending arrival in Santo Domingo, Rochambeau sent him a dispatch, telling de Grasse that there were “two points at which an offensive can be made against the enemy: the Chesapeake and New York.” It was left to de Grasse to decide which location to station his fleet. The Continental Army was, as Washington had written a few months earlier, at the point of “now or never.”

YORKTOWN, VIRGINIA

In March 1781, Washington sent LaFayette to the Chesapeake



Mount Vernon peach ice cream adds a historical touch to Independence Day gatherings.

to keep an eye on Cornwallis. Once there, LaFayette engaged Cornwallis in a series of small skirmishes to harass the British. He also offered his own funds to secure shoes and clothing for his troops, who were in nearly as poor shape as Washington's.

In late summer, when the British fleet arrived at Gloucester Point, it became evident to LaFayette that Cornwallis planned to establish fortifications at Yorktown. At approximately the same time, de Grasse chose to set sail for the Chesapeake Bay.

Along with men, ships and arms, de Grasse's fleet carried a donation from Havana to purchase provisions for the American troops. In response to a request sent by Rochambeau, the citizens of Havana had, in only five hours, gathered \$500,000 in silver pesos. Additionally, de Grasse had received a promise from Carlos III for additional support from the Spanish Navy, if necessary.

Unaware that the allies were on their way, LaFayette sent word to Washington of Cornwallis' plans and waited for a reply. About three weeks later, Washington and Rochambeau arrived. With de Grasse blocking the British fleet on sea, LaFayette, Rochambeau and Washington would close in on them by land. By a near miraculous set of circumstances, all of the pieces were in place.

By the end of September, the British troops were completely surrounded. In a salmagundi of horses, machinery and men, the allies began to close in, dismantling Cornwallis' defenses bit by bit. The siege lasted roughly the same length of time that it had taken Washington to travel to Yorktown. Finally, on Oct. 17, Cornwallis sent a request for terms of surrender. On Oct. 19, 1781, an official surrender was signed and the war was over. Sending word that he was ill,

Cornwallis did not attend the ceremony.

THE RECIPES

Add some historic flair to your Independence Day celebration with these dishes that would have been enjoyed by Washington and his French allies.

Mrs. Taylor's “Sallad” Dressing

Favored by George and Martha Washington, the dressing recipe actually dates to the 1600s and was served alongside salmagundi platters, as well as green salads.

2 hard boiled egg yolks
¼ teaspoon salt
2 rounded teaspoons Dijon mustard
¼ cup balsamic vinegar
1 cup olive oil

Mash the egg yolks with a fork in a medium-sized bowl. Add the salt and mustard, blending well; stir in the vinegar. Whisk in the olive oil, a little at a time, until dressing is well blended and slightly thickened. Store in a covered container in the refrigerator for up to three weeks.

Mount Vernon Peach Ice Cream

This simple recipe is from the 1824 collection of Mary Randolph, who advised using very ripe, soft peaches. I chose very ripe red haven peaches for my ice cream.

3 lbs fresh ripe peaches, peeled pitted and thinly sliced
1 ¼ cups sugar, divided, plus more if needed
3 cups heavy cream
3 cups half and half

Stir the peaches together with ½ cup of sugar; set aside for 30 minutes or so to dissolve the sugar and draw the juice from the peaches. Scald the cream by heating it until steaming hot, but do not let it boil. Remove from heat and stir in the remaining ¾ cup of sugar until sugar is dissolved. Add the half and half. Mash the peaches (a potato masher works well) and add them to the cream mixture. Chill for three hours; pour the mixture into an ice cream freezer and blend until firm.