

# The Secret Life of Food



Every opera performance is a triumph of the senses. The eyes revel in the grand spectacle of costumes and set designs while the ears savor vocal acrobatics. There is one sense that we rarely imagine to be part of the operatic experience: taste. And yet, hidden behind a production, there lies a secret world of culinary pleasures. From the extravagant banquet scenes in *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto* to the Café Momus in *La Bohème*, the story of food in opera is rich with fascinating tales that shed light both on the lives of composers as well as the work of stage professionals.

*Operas such as La Bohème involve a complex gastronomic dimension for the Company's prop department*

## **Cooking Lessons with the Prop Master**

As you quickly come to realize, creating convincing props is an art, involving various tricks of the trade. San Francisco Opera Master of Properties Lori Harrison is a singular expert in the field and feels passionately about the performances' culinary components.

After starting in 1985 as an assistant stage manager, Harrison became in 1998 the first woman to run the Company's property department. "The great thing about props is that it's multidimensional," she explains. "It involves historical research as well as knowledge of technical theater." Handling food adds even more complexity: the staff of the prop department must become culinary historians, researching gastronomic habits of each production's setting. They must employ diplomatic skills when dealing with challenging requests from directors or performers, and forge alliances between the opera house and chefs who create delicacies that meet each production's overall aesthetic.

When embarking on research for a new production, Harrison starts from her own personal library, hidden away in a tiny backstage room. She has

assembled a precious collection of cookbooks and books on props from around the world. She also hunts for photographs and images of street vendors, carts, and *métiers oubliés* (forgotten obsolete jobs) to understand what food was like in each particular period. “I tend to look at paintings of parties, table spreads, and still lifes from the 17th and 18th century, because that gives me the best clue of what was plentiful at the time, such as figs and grapes,” Harrison says. “You wouldn’t want to put bananas in a 19th-century French food cart!”

Just how does one make a grocery list for a production? “Directors and designers decide which foods are necessary for every performance, and which props have to be real,” Harrison explains. “Then we ask singers what they would like, and we work together with them, according to everyone’s needs and dietary restrictions.” Sometimes there is the added challenge of having to match the fake food with the real. “And we’ve got high-definition cameras now, which once upon a time we didn’t have,” she adds. “Everything has to look perfect!”

As for the actual food preparation, Harrison has some ready substitutes: oysters are “played” by canned pears, apricot halves can be raw eggs, and a slice of watermelon with some food coloring mimics a steak. What’s more, she reveals, mashed bananas have the quality to become almost anything. “We even have a recipe for edible blood, in such cases as Strauss’ *Salome*,” says Harrison. “The ingredients include chocolate syrup, food coloring, and corn syrup.”

Alcohol is not allowed in San Francisco Opera productions, so the drinks are a source for endless innovation. White wine can be replaced with watered-down grape juice or chamomile tea; brandy and other hard liquors with iced tea or dark apple juice; champagne with ginger ale or extremely watered-down tea. “Some singers prefer water with food coloring, others prefer juice or Gatorade,” Harrison says. “So, every time, we have to start from the original drink’s color, and then we get creative.” She recalls that some singers specifically request “super flat, warm Diet Coke” for red wine. That may sound odd but, as she reminds us, “the performers are the ones out there on stage, so we provide them with whatever they like!”

Left: Nadine Sierra as Musetta in the Company’s 2014 production of *La Bohème*.

Right: In 1988, Mirella Freni and Luciano Pavarotti starred as the lovers Rodolfo and Mimì at San Francisco Opera. For Act II’s *Café Momus* scene, Pavarotti specifically requested a table spread of salami, chicken, roast beef, cheese, bread, ragù, lobster, grapes, bananas, and vanilla ice cream for his and Freni’s dining pleasure.

## A Foodie Opera House

Many humorous accounts of culinary adventures eventually wound up in a unique volume: the San Francisco Opera Cookbook, a colorful collection of recipes and anecdotes that members of the Company documented over several years. The Company gifted the cookbook to late General Director Lotfi Mansouri, a gourmand himself, on the occasion of his 2001 retirement. Since then, it has acquired an almost mythical status among members of the Company.

The cookbook paints a vivid portrait of the Company’s food culture. There we find members of the prop department reminiscing on the challenges of obtaining specific foods not in season. For the 2000–01 production of *The Magic Flute*, the prop department had to select, preserve, and handle a large quantity of fresh figs. There was one complication: fig season was practically over. The figs were finally located, but only after an audacious quest through “the dark and dangerous back alleys of San Francisco’s produce world,” according to the cookbook. The troubles weren’t quite finished, however. Would the figs survive freezing and thawing? Would their mushiness create disaster for the costume department? Did the singer even like figs? Fortunately, the fig adventure had a happy ending and the successful enterprise became a matter of pride among the prop department.

Other challenges include obtaining complicated local dishes, specifically requested by the production team. An unforgettable case was Charpentier’s *Louise* (1999) and its cassoulet—an elaborate meat stew with white beans typical of southern French cuisine. A “Great Cassoulet Cook-Off” was organized: the contenders were versions of the dish prepared by several San Francisco French restaurants that still had it on their menus in August and September (not a given since cassoulet is a winter specialty). For each performance, a different cassoulet was selected; then, directors, stage managers, and performers participated in the tasting panel. The winner? An excellent cassoulet from San Francisco’s oldest French bistro, Le Central. Though the production of *Louise* made everyone a few pounds heavier, the “Great Cook-Off” remains one of the most treasured stories from San Francisco Opera’s collective culinary memory.



RON SCHERL





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There are also times when the prop department must resort to cooking things themselves. This was the case of a production of Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier*. In Act Three, the protagonists enjoy *Leberknödel*—a traditional Austrian soup with dumplings made of liver, breadcrumbs, and eggs. Harrison herself writes in the cookbook that the dish was specifically requested by the director, but it proved impossible to find a Bay Area restaurant that could make it. The hardship of this task did not stop members of the prop department: they learned how to make the dumplings from scratch, to the great excitement of the cast and profound admiration of Mansouri. “Nowhere else in the world,” he declared, would he find “such care, such attention, and such an effort to come up with the right things.”

When perusing further the pages of the cookbook, one can’t help but pause over a 1988 production of *La Bohème*. It’s a well-known fact that the Café Momus scene in Act Two requires an extensive shopping list. In this case, the celebrated tenor playing Rodolfo, Luciano Pavarotti, decided to contribute to it with his own specific gastronomic suggestions: salami, chicken, roast beef, cheese, bread, ragù, lobster, grapes, bananas, and, intriguingly, a little dish of vanilla ice cream—not for himself but for the soprano playing Mimì, Mirella Freni.

There was an important detail to consider: the tenor was on a strict diet. He was only allowed to eat specific foods with one single loophole: onstage, he could eat whatever he pleased. During each performance, nobody would give much attention to the tenor, as Rodolfo is featured less prominently in Act Two. Only the lighting crew working at a higher stage level had a view of the entire scene, and they witnessed the tenor devouring the sumptuous meal... and Mimì’s ice cream first!

As Harrison reminds us, funny episodes such as this one are part of the secret culinary pleasures of opera: “Once the performance is live, nobody can touch the singers... not even if they want to eat all that’s on the menu!” A triumph of the senses indeed. ✨

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## A Puccini Family Recipe

Cooking for friends such as composer Pietro Mascagni was one of Giacomo Puccini’s greatest pleasures. His modest origins and financial struggles in his youth turned him into a clever chef who could conjure tasty dishes from the humblest of ingredients: pasta with eels and herring with radish are counted among some of his most original creations. A passionate hunter, Puccini also enjoyed cooking the birds that he hunted near his Torre del Lago home at Lake Massaciucoli.

There was one recipe that he guarded with utmost secrecy, a unique way to cook *folaghe* (coot). Sometimes mistaken for ducks or geese, *folaghe* are small birds with predominantly black plumage. They are now a protected species in most of Italy, but during Puccini’s time they were common in the area of Lake Massaciucoli. The composer would not disclose his recipe to anybody. Finally, from a private collection in Milan—a letter by Puccini dated December 9, 1903—details emerged of his culinary creation.

Puccini’s version differs from the typical way of cooking *folaghe*. With its intense flavors, this dish has been received enthusiastically for generations—so much so that nowadays, Tuscan restaurants serve *tagliatelle* or risotto with Puccini-style coot.

### FOLAGHE ALLA PUCCINI

*(If coot is not readily available, substitute duck or Cornish game hen.)*

First, carefully remove the coot’s skin. Marinate the meat in cool water and vinegar for one to two hours. Rinse, then cut the meat in quarters.

Warm a pot on the stove and place the meat quarters in the pot with a bit of olive oil, carrots, plenty of onion, some basil, marjoram, *mentuccia* (lesser calamint), bay leaf, salt, and green or red bell pepper. Cover the pot and let the meat simmer on low heat for approximately an hour.

Remove the lid and sear the meat until slightly browned. Then, add a cup of water mixed with a little wine. When the water is absorbed, add some chicken broth and cover the pot again. Let it cook on low heat for 30 more minutes, while adding some flour to thicken the sauce. Once the meat is ready, the sauce can be strained and used as a spread on *crostini*.

