

READINGS FROM BOWDOIN'S PAST  
Baccalaureate May 2022

Today I get to share with you voices from Bowdoin's past.

In October of 1989, Larry Pinette, director of Bowdoin College Dining Services, retired after thirty years here. The retirement reception was a quiet affair, mostly because everyone had their months full—of lobster and seafood rolls, baked salmon, shrimp cocktail, steamed lobster, and corn—all presented with what was described by the attendees as “grace and beauty.”

This extraordinary effort was put on in honor of a man full of passion for food: its presentation, its taste, its deep meaning for communities, and its great ability to form connections. He was a man in whom you could see the joy of talking about new recipes or planning out a lobster bake. His whole face would light up, and you could just tell that he was in his element.

Larry Pinette, the son of immigrant parents who came to Maine from Canada before the Great Depression, grew up in Brunswick and later found professional success at Bowdoin, a place once thought to be out of bounds for someone from “below the tracks.”

You see, in nineteenth and early twentieth century Brunswick, the town/gown split was between “hillside,” the Anglo-Saxon neighborhoods around the college, and “millside,” the predominately French-Canadian-speaking neighborhoods on lower Maine Street by the huge Cabot cotton and textile mill (now Fort Andross) where French-Canadians immigrants worked long hours. The railroad tracks served as both a physical and metaphorical boundary between these two communities.

By the mid-twentieth century, things began to change and the “great divide” of the railroad tracks began to lose its meaning. Larry Pinette personified this shift when he accepted the job as Chi Psi fraternity's chef in 1955. Once Pinette came to Bowdoin, his influence was “epicurean;” he changed the way Bowdoin thought about food—how it was presented, how it was served, and who it was being served to. As Pinette would say, “These aren't just kids. These are guests of the Bowdoin Dining Service....I disproved the notion that the students were animals. When the platters went down, they were beautiful and attractive, always garnished. The tone was set, and the kids started acting like gentlemen.”

To remember Larry Pinette is to pay homage to the formal meals and lobster bakes, the fresh local vegetables and fruit at every meal, and the parsley garnish on every plate. Ken Cardone, director of dining services, who is retiring from Bowdoin this July after thirty-three years, notes that “Larry inspected operations daily, taking full advantage of a teaching moment when the opportunity presented itself. He was hands on and loved to teach. I recall a salesman attempting to sell Larry imitation lobster meat. Larry was appalled; he asked the salesman if he knew what state he was in.”

This history of Bowdoin food offers insight and a continuous evolution of history, community, and excellent storytelling. Keep in mind that the College opened its doors in 1802, and there are notes in the archives that reflect that in 1815, students ate in boarding houses and supplemented their diets with indigenous berries and game animals, fresh-caught fish, and locally raised vegetables, beef, chicken, and pork. Food preferences have changed over these last 220 years—the early 1900s shows a particular taste for lamb chops, mashed potatoes, and tomatoes on toast. One dinner menu example from January 11, 1916, is steak, boiled sweet potatoes, spaghetti, biscuits with jelly, grapefruit, and coffee. Perhaps we wouldn't find that exact dinner being served in Thorne today, but the commitment to local food and sourcing has remained consistent.

About 35 percent of the food at Bowdoin dining is locally grown, raised, or processed. “Local” is even closer to home in the form of our own Bowdoin Organic Garden, which grows vegetables that are served at dining meals and where sap is collected from campus maple trees to produce syrup for various events. Dining also freezes locally grown berries, zucchini, and pumpkin to serve for later use, creating a rich stockpile for us to enjoy and eliminating the potential for fresh produce to go to waste if not eaten immediately.

While Bowdoin dining has remained committed to local sources of food, they have also gone through a series of evolutions as enrollment and diversity increased. According to Ken Cardone, “dining is in a constant state of change to meet the needs of the campus community. The days of two dinner entrée options with tossed salad and dessert are gone. To put it into perspective, today, we offer ten selections of ‘milk or milk products.’ It’s a long way from whole, skim, and chocolate [options] served in the past.”

From the time he began at Bowdoin, Larry Pinette sought to elevate food and dining at the College. Meals were about creating the capacity for community and connection. Students enjoyed sitting, eating, connecting with one another because Larry and his staff created the atmosphere to allow for these pleasures. He wanted students to take the time and the leisure to enjoy both the food he served and the engagement that goes along with sitting down to a family table and sharing in conversation over a meal.

Pinette was also responsible for Bowdoin’s signature dessert the “Bowdoin Log.” He created this ice cream dessert while working at a restaurant in New Hampshire during the summer months. Larry, of course, insisted on the highest quality of ingredients as he took vanilla ice cream, rolled it in pulverized chocolate cookies, and topped it with real hot fudge sauce. Making this dessert is time-consuming for dining, but it is something that remains oh so memorable and delicious (at least to those who are not lactose intolerant). It also serves as yet another reminder of the way that food conveys love from those who prepare it and merits respect from those who enjoy it.

Today’s Bowdoin dining appreciates not only the students who they get to serve, but also the students they work beside. As Mary Lou Kennedy, the successor of Larry Pinette, who served the college for thirty-four years as the director of dining services notes, “our staff forges deep

connections with students. This makes the goals of dining a personalized service and meaningful to the dining staff. Students are able to offer valuable suggestions, [and they gain] newfound knowledge of the intricacies of providing 20,000 meals per week to hungry young adults!”

The goals of community—both in where our food comes from and what a dining experience aims to achieve—remain an integral part of how Bowdoin dining approaches its goals. These last two years have created challenges with the intersection of food and community as we worked through COVID-19 and to-go containers. With all the changes we needed to consider during the pandemic, the idea that students, faculty, and staff could not enjoy Bowdoin dining together had an enormous impact. It was often the first question when people asked about COVID-19 changes: “When will dining open up for seating?”

Perhaps this communal attention toward the impact of the pandemic on food and Bowdoin dining is not just because we all need to eat but because of the rich history and deep connections that Bowdoin strives to create between students and food. When you arrive on this campus, you are greeted with a lobster bake, and you will enjoy another after this event, which echoes too Larry Pinette’s great joy of organizing formal meals. As he said, “I have to admit, my instinct is to try to control everything,” a sentiment that may feel particularly pertinent after two plus years of navigating a pandemic.

And dining services continues to strived to be prepared. Ken Cardone notes that in planning for lobster bakes “the equipment used to prepare the bake is custom manufactured. We design our own bake equipment to meet our needs. Firewood is cut and seasoned to our specs to increase BTU output to properly prepare a bake. Planning well in advance is the key to success, including weather-related contingency plans.”

Larry Pinette created a culture of immense care between Bowdoin Dining Services and Bowdoin students, something that has lasted and continues to provide great comfort to us each time we enjoy a Bowdoin meal.

So, to our graduating seniors, when you take that last bite of your dinner tonight as a Bowdoin student, you might pause to offer thanks and a toast to the memory of Larry Pinette and to the staff of Bowdoin dining who have cared for you and nourished you through these years and through the pandemic with love in every meal.