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## Duke's or Hellmann's?

By Genevelyn Steele



What he asked for was tomatoes. Not the passport he'd left, or pictures of my "vineyard"—two acres of Catawba—planted in Richmond. Nope, it was July 1st and he wanted tomatoes.

Jason requested a bushel of green Hanover tomatoes to ripen on his Manhattan windowsill.

"Bring me Hanovers. Lots of them. I'm craving tomato sandwiches."

So I did.

I dragged the wood-and-wire crate past the fish-eyed security door. On the counter lay bread, bacon and a cutting board.

The only thing missing was mayonnaise.

"Where's the mayo?"

"Door of the fridge."

"Uh-uh, don't see it."

“It’s there.”

Bookshelves and bedside tables, these are maps to another’s makeup. Medicine chests, a movie cliché, reflect our concerns. But the condiment door of the refrigerator—that’s romance. Are you a sweet locavore, stocking Virginia honey and strawberry jam? Or do your proclivities veer to the spicy—an Asian jetsetter—with two kinds of sriracha from Tan-A Market? Is French your style—jars of gherkins and salt-packed capers? These culinary add-ons are indicators of gustatory romance, a palate profile, clues to the owner’s taste for sweet, hot, sour or a balanced combination of all three. The light from the icebox, not the eyes, illuminates yearnings.

BLT-makings ready—and the one ingredient I didn’t have was Duke’s or Hellmann’s. I couldn’t find the mayo because, coming from Richmond, hometown of C.F. Sauer, owner of Duke’s, I hunt for the black-and-yellow lid when I fetch mayonnaise. Jason’s cold box held no such jar.

The most important ingredient in deviled eggs, one that guarantees tangy, custardy perfection, was absent. When I spotted the mayonnaise, under a cornflower blue lid, I felt as if I’d found Jason’s adoption papers in the refrigerator. Sometime in his decade of NYC living, my brother had become a Hellmann’s man.

Nationally, Hellmann’s sales are brisker than Duke’s, especially in the Northeast. Hellmann’s also bears the distinction of being the first commercially available mayo in the U.S. The company was founded in 1905, by N.Y. deli owner Richard Hellmann, a dapper man partial to pinstriped suits. I imagine Mr. Hellmann uttering classic NYisms like “turdy-turd” for thirty-third or “Are you on line?” instead of the Southeastern, “Are you in line?” that Jason and I grew up with. A hundred years ago the words “on line” didn’t conjure images of porn.

Richard Hellmann lived in New York. He owned his own deli and sold his own mayonnaise. Those are sweet bragging points, even if his recipe called for sugar, an ingredient with no business in mayonnaise.

Hearing someone like my brother, who grew up in Virginia, ask “Are you on line?” is queer, just like jars of Hellmann’s would be stacked on an end-cap next to the Hanovers. But, Jason has queried just that while shopping at Ukrop’s.

I should have noticed his transformation. There were other signs. Once, he asked the tattooed barista at Lamplighter for a “coffee light” and a “coffee regular,” when what he should have said was “coffee with room for cream.”

I found his vernacular and his mayo fetish unacceptable south of the sweet tea line. Like wiping a booger on the seat of a Porsche 911, it was shocking, wrong—especially in Richmond, where housing a jar of Hellmann’s in an 804-area-code fridge is sacrilege.

Sugar, acceptable in other Southern staples, such as Kool-Aid, shouldn’t be found in mayonnaise. Duke’s is the only major label that does not sweeten its mayo. Thick, creamy, the color of pure cholesterol (though it has less cholesterol than Hellmann’s) Duke’s is the only thing to spread on a summer-warm ‘mater sandwich.

Who likes Hellmann’s anyway? Gabrielle Hamilton, owner of Prune in NYC does. So does Bobby Flay. He came to Richmond once.

Google Duke’s and find Virginia Willis, TV personality, chef consult and doyenne of the Atlanta food scene, whose cookery books always include one of the following words—y’all and/or Southern. Reminder: She’s also named Virginia. And, she’s Duke’s only spokesperson.

On the web, Willis’ photo pops up next to a photo of Eugenia Duke, the woman who created mayo perfection in 1917. Homey, but serious, Eugenia looks like she was bottle fed mayo during a suffragette rally—puffy cheeks, loose jowls, wearing the Southern, requisite pearl necklace, with not a pinstripe on her. Her body could have been made of mayo, though. Eugenia Duke wouldn’t be making tomato sandwiches the first week of July, unless she lived in N.Y. and was craving them, and then she’d stand on line to buy her Hellmann’s.

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