

The new food hero – the farmer

By Julia Read, Newsweek

In 1934, when Gertrude Stein was invited to return to America from Paris to deliver a series of lectures, the thing that troubled her most, according to her companion, Alice B. Toklas, was “the question of the food she would be eating there.” A French friend who’d made a trip to the United States had returned with tales of “very strange” fare, including “tinned vegetable cocktails and tinned fruit salads.” The ladies went anyway and managed to suss out wild rice and “unrivalled T-steaks and soft-shell crabs,” but they were right to be afraid.

The America of 1934 was a place where such “culinary improvements” as processed meats and canned goods were all the rage; chain grocery stores had been introduced 10 years earlier. After World War II, when women poured into the workforce, taste was further sacrificed in the name of “convenience products.” By 1959, things were so bad that A. J. Liebling wrote a piece in *The New Yorker* railing against processed cheese that wasn’t “cheesy,” lobster tails “frozen as long as the Siberian mammoth,” and synthetic vanilla that wasn’t “vanillary.” I was born a year later, and until my neighbor put in an asparagus bed I had no idea that the gray-green, brine-soaked mush that came from the Green Giant can bore little resemblance to the real thing. It would be many more years before I found out that grocery-store carrots had been bred to have blunt ends so they wouldn’t puncture the plastic bags in which they were shipped.

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