Vanns Spices: Blending Food, Women's Friendship and Business in 1980s Baltimore

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In 1981 friends and female entrepreneurs Virginia Limansky and Ann Wilder launched a boutique spice business in Baltimore. The company's name was a fusion of their first names, Virginia and Ann, and the business initially developed out of their home kitchens. Vanns created popular spice blends of high quality and flourished despite being located in the shadow of nearby spice giant McCormick. It began by offering six spice blends; today the company boasts over 350 spices, herbs and seasoning blends. By focusing on the Vanns' first years, this study first explores what prompted one of its female co-founders to create its foundational spice blends and then withdraw from the enterprise precisely as the business took flight. Next it looks to what circumstances contributed to the business' early success, and with only one exception, to ways these women entrepreneurs found to transform potential obstacles to Vanns' success into business opportunities. Finally, this story of Vanns, incorporating detail available through recent access to Val Limansky's private papers and personal interviews, reintroduces Val Limansky to the story of the business she co-founded, which continues to operate in Maryland today. It also adds particularity to existing accounts of Baltimore's social and food landscape in the 80s, and of the gourmetization of foodways in America during the 80s and 90s.

Keywords: spices, female entrepreneurs, Baltimore, food industry, Hon culture, gourmetization, community cookbooks

Introduction

In 1981 Virginia Limansky and Ann Wilder launched a boutique spice business, Vanns. The company's name was a fusion of their first names, Virginia and Ann, and the business initially

developed out of their home kitchens. Her son recalls that Val (**V**irginia **A**delaide **L**imansky) came to know Ann Wilder through a mutual friend when Ann moved to Baltimore in the 1970s. Val and Ann began exploring spice blends and, when these blends sold well in local bazaars, the business concept was born (Cohn 2009).

The fledgling company flourished despite its location in the same city as spice giant McCormick & Co. such that today it offers 350 spice blends ("Vanns Spices- About" 2016). Its success in the early years was due to the pairing of Val's spice blends and Ann Wilder's business savvy. Val withdrew from the partnership by 1985,[1] receiving royalties for her signature spice blends to her untimely death in 1987 (Limansky 2017a). By the 1990s, what began as a two-woman enterprise staffed more than two dozen employees and counted among its clients upscale vendors such as Dean & DeLuca (Menzie 1992). Ann Wilder would go on to lead Vanns after Val's departure, eventually finding outside partners and selling the company in 2006, just three years prior to her own death (Cohn 2009).

Because of her long association with Vanns, and also her keen attention to promotion and marketing, accounts of the company's history largely focus on Ann Wilder, tracking the company's evolution in terms of such metrics as sales (Flowers 1982), earnings, number of employees and awards (Menzie 1998), as well as increased diversity of product offerings and business partnerships (Morris 1983; Cohn 2009). In many accounts, Val's role in the company is completely ignored. See, for example, commentaries by Julekha Dash who (incorrectly) states the company was launched in 1978 (Dash 2006), and Francine Halvorsen, whose focus is on Vanns' success under recent owners Mick and Meg Whitlock (Halvorsen 2012). By shifting the

[1] In her letter to Igor Limansky of 29 November 1988, Ann Wilder records royalty payments to Val Limansky as of 1986. Consequently, by that year, Val's distance from Vanns' operation had been rendered official.

focus of study to Vanns' earliest years, to what prompted two women to become entrepreneurs, and specifically to what motivated Virginia Limansky to enter the business partnership and then leave it just as the business was gathering momentum, this story of Vanns offers a particular lens through which to explore women negotiating the intersection of the private and public spheres in late twentieth-century Baltimore. This story of Vanns also provides an illuminating case study of one corner of the retail food industry during a period that saw the growth of elite foodways and the revitalization of the post-industrial city in which their business was located. In hindsight, the Baltimore locale and the precise moment in time during which Val and Ann set about directing their love of culinary experimentation towards launching a retail spice business provided exactly the right ingredients for a successful business model.

I. Looking into Baltimore's Food and Cultural History *through Val Limansky's Papers*

It is notoriously difficult to access information about *descriptive* food practice, what foods people actually selected, served and consumed. Cookbooks, after all, as well as advertisements and marketing copy, provide information about *prescriptive* food practice: what women are told or instructed to do. But how can one reliably assess whether such advice was followed and followed regularly? Fortunately, Virginia Limansky, whose world revolved around the kitchen, kept a detailed food log. This journal, together with four other manuscript cookbooks generously provided and transcribed by her son, Jason, have enabled a more granular review of Vanns' early years than previously available.

The handwritten food journal records Limansky family meals and events of particular significance from 8 September 1961 through 31 March 1986, the year before Val died. These

include signposts of important family milestones as well as local events. For example, the entry for Monday 3 May 1976 celebrates an award won by Val's brother, Richard Lewis. It reads: "(Dick wins Pulitzer! – R.W.B. Lewis for a biography on Edith Wharton) calves liver, bacon, tomatoes Provençal, peas." During the next year, the word "curfew" appears beside entries for 8, 9 and 10 April in 1968, signalling the city's response to race riots (V. Limansky 1961; Puglia 2018; Crenson 2019). Val's inclusion of mentions of daily life both in and out of the kitchen adds nuance atypical for the food journal genre.

Alongside her food journal, Val's papers include four manuscript cookbooks. Two *Fare Thee Well* cookbooks were compiled for Saint Matthias Church in 1970 and 1971, likely as fundraisers, though no prices are marked. These books are small, their index-card-sized pages gathered together by a small ring clip. Two more cookbooks gathered Val's "go to" recipes, including those contributed by her closest cooking friends. Titled because of the appearance of their tapestry covers, the "White Flower Cookbook" was compiled between 1970 and 1980, and the "Tan Flower Cookbook," compiled between 1950 and 1970.

Access to primary materials, together with interviews with Val's son Jason, sister Nancy Lewis, friend Barbara Lambert and the daughter of close friend Barbara Cianelli, as well as context provided by family member Kate Williams, enriched this closer re-examination of Vanns. Whereas available literature about Vanns thus far emphasizes Ann Wilder's role in the company's evolution, these primary sources enabled a focus on Val's particular role in developing the foundational spice blends for this retail gourmet business concept.

In order to contextualize Vanns in its particular place and moment, this study situates itself at the intersection of social food history, on the one hand, and studies emerging from American urban and labour history, as well as American folklore studies, on the other. Most

obviously, it draws from food histories that describe the evolution of foodways in twentieth century America, particularly a phenomenon that would come to be known as the 'gourmetization of foodways' (Kamp, Neuhaus).

More specifically, this study benefits from identification of key characteristics of the community cookbook genre (Ferguson, Kennan, Le Dantec-Lowry, Mason, Theophano), and social historical accounts of women negotiating the transition from unpaid work in the private sphere to paid work in the public sphere (Cope, Hendley, Vester). Such descriptions of general food trends in America are qualified by insights drawn from studies of the specifically Baltimorean food landscape (Graham, Hammond-Harwood House Association), and giving attention to the mythic figure of the home food provider and caregiver, the Baltimore 'Hon' (Puglia, Rizzo).

Reference to watershed accounts of Baltimore's urban evolution allow this study to map developments in Vanns' business history onto landmark moments in Baltimore itself. Leading authorities on the history of Baltimore are examined along with labor reports in order to discern a clear picture of the city's history, as are newspaper articles largely drawn from the *Baltimore Sun*. American historian George Callcott, political historian Matthew Crenson, urban geographer Sherry Olson, and American and folklore special David Puglia, are among those commentators whose Baltimore-focused works are considered.

II. Baltimore's Storied Home Cooks

Val's writing tells the story of a time period when women's roles were in flux. Notably, Val's books include subtle period markers such as the format of contributors' names: Mrs. Ed

McKnight of Bogota, identified by her husband's name rather than her own, in the second *Fare Thee Well* (V. Limansky 1971) cookbook, or Mabel Kline (V. Limansky 1971), where the first name was fashionable in mid-twentieth century, and the last a possible Anglicization of the Jewish surname, Klein.

Together, these manuscripts and the social networks they reveal through recipe attribution trace the close involvement of Val with her community: as long-time choir member at St Matthias Church; and as cooking instructor through the 1960s and 1970s first at St Matthias, then at the Lion's Club, the YMCA, the Aisquith Presbyterian Church and the International Center (J. Limansky 2017c).[2] Through these associations, Val came into contact with a diverse and supportive community (Food Editor 1971)

Given the time and place in which Val cooked, and given the values that she held dear, it would be remiss not to imagine her in relation to the iconic cultural figure who would become affectionately known as the Baltimore's 'Hon.'[3] After all, she cooked in Baltimore during the period later remembered as giving rise to the city's iconic and mythic Hon figure, and shared with this persona a deeply-held commitment to friends, family and community.

However, as historian Mary Rizzo rightly contends, the Hon figure is a generalized one, "a highly exaggerated vision of a white working-class woman from Baltimore in the 1950s and 1960s" (Rizzo 2010), and which accordingly flattens the nuances of individuality. Not only did Hon mythology whitewash historical memory eliding, most obviously, mention of one significant portion of Baltimore working-class women who were black, but it also sweetened it

[2] Her son, Jason, warns that she sometimes attributed her own recipes to others. Regardless of the absolute accuracy of attribution, key here is Val's desire to gesture towards naming into existence a culinary community.
[3] An abbreviation for the term of endearment, 'Honey.'

in a way that assuaged vivid associations of Baltimore with street crime.[4] According to Rizzo: "In the collective memory, these women who participated in social, civic and religious organisations; watched the streets, and cared about their neighbours, were the connective tissue of their working-class neighbourhoods" (Rizzo 2010).

Historically Baltimore has been a diverse city for more than two centuries. Folklorist David Puglia (2018) writes that Baltimore has been racially and ethnically diverse as early as the nineteenth century; "prior to the Civil War, Baltimore was home to the largest population of free blacks in the United States" (12). During the mid-nineteenth century, "Baltimore encouraged European immigration," leading to the formation of Irish, German, Polish, Italian, Russian, and Greek communities (2018, 12-13). To this mix, latter decades of the twentieth century brought immigrants to the city from China, India and Korea (Puglia 2018, 13). Consequently, writes Puglia (2018), the Hon is "not the soul of the city, nor the city's *volksgeist*. At best, it is exclusionary; at worst, it is subtle nostalgia for a homogenous city" (46).

While the Hon avatar can arguably be aligned with some individual women of mid-century Baltimore, there are fundamental and significant ways in which Val and Ann must be sharply distinguished from this persona. Unlike the Hon, at home in blue-collar communities (Puglia 2018), both Limansky and Wilder were university educated (at Bryn Mawr and South Carolina respectively), and responsible for overseeing their distinctly middle-class homes. Wilder was a teacher by profession, at one time art instructor at the private Boys Latin School of Maryland (Flowers 1982; Cohn 2009). Further, the Hon figure speaks with Baltimorean

[4] In popular culture Baltimore is known through Barry Levinson's films and also, unfortunately, for its high crime rate. Formerly known as Mobtown, it earned the more positive moniker 'Charm City' in the mid-1970s for a marketing campaign that invited tourists to purchase a bracelet and then awarded them small charms for visiting particular points of interest. Charm City is also the (ironic) name of a film by Marilyn Ness focusing on three years of escalating crime in Baltimore.

inflection,[5] typical of white blue-collar workers at Sparrows Point mill,[6] the markets, and the docks (Puglia 2018, 47). But neither Ann nor Val had the 'Bawltmorean' inflections performed by latter-day Hons: Val came to Baltimore from Babylon, Long Island, in 1957 (J. Limansky 2017c) and Wilder hailed from South Carolina and was known for her trademark drawl (Buchanan 2009). Kate Williams recalls, "Aunt Val [was] quite tall (willowy as the common expression goes), distinguished white wavy hair from my earliest memories, and very, very funny. Surprisingly so, given her smooth-talking aristocratic Russian-descent husband" (2020). Igor Limansky was a highly skilled professional engineer who worked at Westinghouse Aerospace (J. Limansky 2017c). Wilder's husband was a nuclear engineer (Menzie 1992) and they lived in upscale Ruxton. Additionally, Vanns' success with its upscale products included targeting independent fine food purveyors Eddie's (in Roland Park) and Graul's (in Ruxton), as well as Sutton Place Gourmet, with whom they had developed a previous rapport as customers. In short, the story of the friendship and eventual business partnership of Val and Ann should neither be directly mapped onto nor understood as being closely aligned with that of Baltimore's iconic 'Hon' figure. However, Val's generous nature, and the way she forged friendships through her kitchen, certainly gestures towards the Hon's magnanimous appeal, which made this iconic figure such a welcome addition to the city's ethos, and an important urban marketing antidote to negative publicity plaguing a city suffering from high rates of crime and unemployment.[7]

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[5] See, for instance, Ernest Smith's 1993 linguistic guide to Baltimorese, *Hey Hon!: How to Talk Like a Real Bawlamoron*.

[6] According to Michelle Stefano, "For a significant part of its 125 years, Sparrows Point was the largest steel-producing mill in the world, providing employment for hundreds of thousands of steelworkers and associated personnel" (2018, 221-222).

[7] As Levine states, Baltimore exemplified the difficulties facing many cities in the United States since the 1960's, who sought to improve their social and economic positions and yet continued to be plagued by crises such as high crime rates, high levels of unemployment, and facing neighbourhoods of poverty and housing difficulties (Levine 2000, 123).

III. The Business of Mixing Spices

Despite a marked distance from the Hon persona, it is still useful to think of Val as kin to the Hon, sharing a deeply-held commitment to friends and community, in order to understand why she pulled away from Vanns so soon after launching it with Ann Wilder. Put succinctly, the business concept attracted Val because of opportunities for culinary experimentation and community building, not because of the possibility of profit and corporate expansion. Vanns' popular spice blend is perhaps the best example. Jason recalls how his mother "developed a way of [spraying] lemon juice on pepper and then slowly baking it into the pepper," a technique that took hours (J. Limansky 2017a). Once the business began to take off, inevitable pressure to increase production to meet increasing consumer demand (voiced by Ann Wilder, who took responsibility for marketing and business development), combined with Val's health issues and her unwillingness to alter production methods for fear of reducing quality, found business partners at odds with one another.

The business story of Vanns' early years must unfold with a prefatory glance at the spice blends the company first launched, which also shed light on the ways in which the Limansky's foodways reflected larger cultural trends in Baltimore.

Val's papers suggest she was exploring spice blends as early as 1965, with appearances of curry and tandoori chicken in her food journal (48-54). Wilder recalls that when she and Limansky met through their children (both had two sons), they began speaking about spice blends, but just for themselves and their families (Flowers 1982). For Val, her spice blends and her passion for cooking were about family and community. As Janet Theophano (2002) reminds us, when "we taste one woman's interpretation of a culinary creation, we remember that it is the

result of many minds and many hands" (48). Val's recipe books record the sustaining influence of friendships centered on this culinary innovator whose cooking and teaching were based in her particular, textured, Baltimorean community.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Most valuably for contemporary readers looking back to the 1970s and 1980s, Limansky's recipes offer us a detailed glimpse of the dynamic and collaborative nature of intercultural exchange in this port city of Baltimore. They include contributions from a wide network of individuals, anchored in foundational friendships with three women: business partner Ann Wilder (with whom she had a relationship that would eventually become fraught), Helen Olsen and Barbara Cianelli. Val's friendship with Swarma Gupta, with whom she participated in international cooking classes held at the East Baltimore Branch of the YWCA, likely accounts for the multiple Indian dishes represented in her books (*Recipes, Household Hints*1966). Good friend and restaurateur Donald Hom served as culinary inspiration for the classes Val taught with Helen Olsen on Chinese cookery as part of their "Foods of the World" series (Food Editor 1971).

Let me turn now to more detailed attention to Vanns' product line over time. This will serve two purposes. First, it sets the stage for identifying the way Vanns' early blends emerged from Val's culinary experimentation, inspired by her social and culinary community in Baltimore and supported by increasing popularity of ethnically-inflected cuisine. Second, it points to specific aspects of changing food tastes and preferences of the period that spelled success for spice retailers, including Vanns.

Val and Ann had initially set to work together when their jar of tandoori spice began to run low, and they decided to see if they could duplicate the blend.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

The notion of Vanns spice company began with a version of their tandoori blend, alongside a curry salt blend, which local store operator Bob Zella found to be very popular and to sell quickly (Flowers 1982). Additionally, Wilder credits Zella of Herbs Unlimited for nudging Val and Ann to go into business in the first place. When he sold out of the Curry Salt and Tandoori spice blend while the two women were on vacation, it was Zella who instilled a sense of urgency for production levels (Flowers 1982). Wilder recalls that when a store proprietor questioned why she was trying to source a full pound of cumin, he offered to stock and sell her spice blends when he heard Wilder's answer (Menzie 1992). With this, the business concept began to fall into place (Menzie 1992). Val's and Ann's business fits somewhat into the mold Alexandra Hendley describes of personal cheffing during more recent decades, women turning their passion for cooking into a career, and moving it from a private practice to one that operates in the public sphere. Although their role was not precisely that of independent caterer, on which Hendley's (2017) study is focused, and they made a professional transition decades before the period that figures in Hendley's study, Vanns offered Val and Ann "a new, professionalized form of domestic foodwork" that afforded them a similar independence both financial and in terms of their own time management (306).

When Vanns was launched, it offered six spice blends (Menzie 1992), which can be inferred from multiple documents, though some discrepancies emerge in the record. Clearest evidence comes in 1988, when Val's family received specific royalties for six spice blends: Curry Salt, Herbs for Fish, Lemon Pepper, Poivre (Irise), Tandoori and Spice Parisienne (Wilder 1988). One other blend can be attributed to Ann Wilder: "Provencal Spice" (J. Limansky 2017c).

However, Val's manuscripts, together with her son's recollections of the time, actually point to *seven* blends: Spice Parisienne, Lemon Poivre, Raz el Hanout, Basil Fish Blend, Salt-free Tandoori, Saffron-Turmeric blend, and Grey Lemon Pepper (J. Limansky 2017c). One of these gestures towards the company's future offerings. Concerns about sodium intake, about which the diabetic Val had presumably been long aware, comes increasingly to the fore for the general public by the 1980s. *Salt-free* Tandoori was likely a later Vanns' addition. In a letter from 1988, Ann Wilder cites fears about sodium intake as reason for the company's dropping Curry Salt from its list of offerings. "We got fewer and fewer reorders. I'm sure that it's because everyone these days is avoiding salt" (1988). Leslie Bloom (1989), also confirms other spice companies were developing salt-free product lines.

In addition to the reduction of salt in cooking during the 1980s, the decade also saw a turn to faster and less complicated cooking. McCormick noted both trends and adjusted its products accordingly, marketing herb and spice blends as alternatives to salt and its easy-to-use spices as ideal for busy cooks (Uzelac 1985). The trend to simpler cooking led Vanns to eliminate Spice Parisienne soon after 1988 (Wilder 1988), though it reappeared and is currently included in Vanns' 2019 list of products ("Vanns Spices- Spices" 2016).

IV. A Spice Business for Evolving American Food Tastes

Vanns grew from a fledgling start up to a solid gourmet spice business during a period that saw Baltimore evolve in two significant ways. First, it participated in what Wilder and others referred to as the "gourmetization" of foodways in America (Morris 1987; Kamp 2006). Second, this shift in foodways corresponded with the urban revitalization of post-industrial Baltimore.

The port city of Baltimore offered a number of positives for any spice business, including ready access to transportation for the shipping and receiving of goods and, especially once Baltimore was reimagined as a tourist destination in the 1980s, food venues and consumers eager and able to buy Vanns' products. Baltimore was also home to a beloved public market of long duration, established in 1782: Lexington Market. Baltimore included a substantial number of highly-skilled workers who worked for large local industries, including Martin Marietta and Westinghouse Aerospace, where Virginia Limansky's husband worked. One might expect that a port city of the time had a remarkably diverse population, one possible explanation for supporting the spice industry. But the demographic reality of Baltimore at the time was more nuanced. Urban geographer Sherry Olson (1980) writes that "foreign immigration was small: survivors of the holocaust in 1940s, Hungarians in 1956, Cubans in 1962, Indian, Filipino, and Chinese doctors and engineers in the late '60s, Russian Jews in the 1970s" (363). Olson (1980) argues that "most important in numbers was the flow of rural Americans into Baltimore" (363).

Nevertheless, in Baltimore as elsewhere in America, an enthusiasm for ethnically-inflected foodways was clearly evident as early as the 1960s. "The interest in foods from other lands continues to increase," explained a newspaper article in the Food Section of *The Baltimore Sun* (Food Editor "From Other Lands" 1966). "More and more markets are stocking ingredients to prepare foreign dishes …. The port city of Baltimore, with its internationally-famed institutions, is a melting pot of nationalities" (Food Editor "From Other Lands" 1966). Val's recipe books provide evidence that she was exposed to a wide variety of cuisines from around the world. As an article *in The Baltimore Sun* subtitled "How to Make International Dishes" explained, community-sponsored cooking classes such as those in which Val participated provided a venue where women could "make new friends in the community, enlarge their stock

of kitchen specialties, and get insight into the lives of those from other countries" (Food Editor 1966). Notably, when Val Limansky signs her own name to recipes in her recipe collections, they tend to have ethnic inflection: see, for example, her recipe for Tandoori (V. Limansky 1971, 13) and for *Chou-Fleur Du Barry* (V. Limansky 1971, 15).

The spice company was also supported by the presence of local grocers in Ruxton such as Graul's, which has been in the Graul family since the 1920s, and Harrington's, which operated throughout the 1950s and 1960s (McCord 2010). Both family-owned businesses, these stores were high quality food purveyors that supported incubation of local food industries like Vanns. They provided a primary outlet for the growing gourmet spice company and permitted Vanns to continue to develop and expand outward.

Just as the United States was becoming increasingly intrigued with exotic food practices (Julia Child's *The French Chef* aired on television as of 1963, for example, aimed at demystifying French cuisine for American home cooks), Val's daily life brought her into direct contact with individuals able to offer a wealth of culinary knowledge. By the time Vanns was ready to launch its initial product line, it would contain spice notes from South Asia (Tandoori) France (Spice Parisienne, and arguably, Lemon Poivre), and Morocco (possibly Saffron-Turmeric blend, and certainly Raz el Hanout). It was one of many North American spice companies that, by the end of the twentieth century, benefitted from consumers' rapidly-increasing appetite for diverse flavors.[8]

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[8] Vann's business history can be compared with those of other North American retail spice companies. Many were launched in mid-20th century North America: First Spice Mixing Co Inc. in Long Island City (1940; "First Spice Mixing Co Inc Company Profile" 2018); La Flor Products Company, Inc in Hauppauge, New York (1964; "La Flor Products Company, Inc. Profile" 2018); S. C. Seasoning Company in Harrison, Arkansas ("S. C. Seasoning Company Profile" 2018); Poivre des Îles in St Hubert, Quebec (1984; "Poivre Des Îles - History" n.d.); and Everson Spice Company, Inc. in Long Beach, CA, 1987 ("Everson Spice Company, Inc. Profile" 2018). Magic Seasoning Blends, launched in New Orleans (1982; "Magic Seasoning Blends, LLC Profile" 2018) offers the closest comparison: its president was a woman and its products sold in US retail stores. However, it produced other

Surprisingly, despite exposure to and enthusiasm for ethnically-inflected fare, the majority of meals Val served to her family and recorded in her journal were squarely North American. Meals such as prime ribs with string beans (V. Limansky May 29 1966), baked ham, sweet potatoes and cauliflower (V. Limansky January 9 1966), as well as hamburgers and corn on the cob (V. Limansky July 22 1965) appear frequently in her journals. Val takes pride in producing Baltimore classics, including her own Bay Salt spice blend. Based on the classic Old Bay spice of Maryland, which is "less a blend of 13 flavors than a flavor unto itself" (Graham 2018), Val's blend, produced from scratch, is markedly different from that of Gustav Brunn. Brunn famously created Old Bay in 1939 and it is now distributed by McCormick. Brunn's blend is a guarded secret, but includes "salt, pepper, mustard, pimento, cloves, bay leaf, mace, cardamom, ginger, cassia, and paprika" (Shields 2015, 13-14).[9]

Like other cooks of her day, Val gleaned information from food authorities to enhance the food she prepared. Amongst the community of close friends and neighbors credited in her pages, one finds a poignant glimpse into American social history through names of celebrities and food authorities who entered Val's home through the radio airwaves, magazines or television: among them, James Beard, Liberace, Vincent Price, Rumer Godden, and Dick Van Dyke. In some cases, we must question some of the attributions. Virginie Lariviere's recipe for Olive and Cheese Balls in the second *Fare Thee Well* cookbook (V. Limansky 1971, 3) is given as "Rose's Olive Cheese Balls" in the *White Flower Cookbook* (V. Limansky [1970-1980], 25). Val's son expects her use of other names was prompted by humility. **"**You know it was more to

products besides spice blends, and benefitted from close association with celebrity chef Paul Prudhomme's restaurant, K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen.

[9] Val's Bay Salt combines traditional European herbs and spices (allspice, garlic, celery seed, basil, and bay leaves) with touches of southern heat (cayenne and paprika) (V. Limansky, "Tan Flower Cookbook" [1950-1970], 152).

hide the fact that she didn't want to take all of the credit," he wrote. "Like when she used her mother's name, Beatrix Lewis. Her mother never cooked! Never, Never. She, I think that the one thing that she usually made was welsh rarebit and she usually burnt it!" (J. Limansky 2017b). Instead, I argue that, by at once recording the presence of a wider community and bringing it to life within the pages of her food texts, Val *performs* community.

V. A Spice Business in an Evolving Baltimore

The success of this entrepreneurial enterprise is particularly laudable when considered alongside the economic turbulence of Baltimore of the late 1970s and 1980s. Baltimore reached its peak population in the 1950s, experiencing a decline through the 1960s and 70s. The 1980s saw genuine urban renewal, with the election of William Donald Schaefer as the new mayor of Baltimore in 1971 (Callcott 1985, 89). Schaefer oversaw the highly ambitious Inner Harbor renewal project: "its centerpiece was Harborplace, two glittering malls on the waterfront… [containing] 134 shops…restaurants, gift shops, boutiques, and art shops" (Callcott 1985, 89). Harborplace spawned luxury apartments and hotels, prompted the construction of a new subway, and boosted Baltimore's morale and visibility as a tourist destination (Callcott 1985, 89). However, Harborplace's injection of jobs and energy could not stem the tide of a flagging economy. Three department stores closed in downtown Baltimore in the late 1970s, and once the new construction of Harborplace was completed, "the number of jobs began to decline rapidly," and a growing proportion of the population lived below the poverty line (Callcott 1985, 90-91). The elegant and tradition-proud Baltimore represented in such cookbooks as *Private Collections: A Culinary Treasure* produced by the Women's Committee of the Walters Art Gallery in 1973, or *Maryland's Way, The Hammond-Harwood House Cook Book* produced by the Hammond-

Harwood House Association in 1963 to raise funds and awareness, was a city seldom experienced by working-class Baltimoreans. Nevertheless, Mayor Schaefer's interventions were bold and, by the numbers, largely successful in initiating a revitalization of the city, which included a recommercialized downtown to attract "investors, developers, and tourists" (Levine 2000, 129). By the end of the decade, estimates were that "7 million visitors, including almost 300,000 conventioneers, were coming to the [Baltimore] Inner Harbor annually" (quoted in Levine 2000, 132).

However, the city's reliance on industry, and specifically on steel production, meant that it experienced a heavy toll during the downturn of the early 1980s. Baltimore's economy declined in lock step with the decline of US steel industry, with about half of the 16,500 workers at Sparrows Point, one of Baltimore's largest employers, losing employment during the 1980s (Zeidman 1991, 190). This grim picture of Baltimore's industrial backbone can be set against the larger economic picture of the period more generally, marked by job declines in the United States as of March 1980 (Westcott and Bednarzik 1981, 5), and a recession returning by 1981 despite a brief rally towards the end of 1980 (Bednarzik, Hewson, and Urquhart 1982, 3). Unfortunately for Baltimore, it was the manufacturing industry that was hardest hit in the returning recession (Bednarzik, Hewson, and Urquhart 1982, 10), the primary metals industry joining the list of 'low rebounders' (Devens 1984, 7).

These glimpses into Baltimore's economic history during the decade when Vanns established itself in the community's food industry sketch a portrait of a diverse and textured city, one that George Callcott concludes in *Maryland and America* "remained the hub of decay as well as vitality, … of failure as well as of success" (Callcott 1985, 91). That is, Mayor Schaefer's revitalization project for post-industrial Baltimore must be remembered alongside the

economic downturn and a transition away from steel production that prompted the need for such a massive investment project.

What might account for Vanns' success in its production of small-scale quality spice blends against such a backdrop of economic turbulence? In part, its success was due to the company's early winning marketing strategy of targeting only small stores and specific restaurants. Of course, there was little choice because McCormick had a virtual monopoly on large supermarkets and chain retailers. That McCormick's did have such a stronghold on spice distribution also meant that it had little need or interest in challenging Vanns' relatively inconsequential (from McCormick's perspective) business niche. Another possibility is that the backdrop of economic turbulence, also a time of significant change in terms of Baltimore's harbor development, made for a steady and increasingly strong retail customer base interested in affordable luxuries.

Vanns' success is also due to the personal strengths of its founders. Virginia Limansky's flair for producing innovative spice blends of high quality, left a creative hole upon her departure from the company that was filled by hired "professionals" during the tenure of later owner-operators (Morris 1982). Of original spice blends mentioned in Val's papers, two would become Vanns star products: Lemon Poivre, which was the company's best seller although labor intensive, selling three times as much as the second best-selling product, Tandoori. Scalability in relation to the production of Lemon Pepper was an ongoing problem for this company intent on producing high quality products. During the early years, Val Limansky felt pressure from her business partner to improve the production quantities – pressure that, combined with her own ill health[10] and interest in community-based projects, ultimately led to Val's retirement from the

[10] Val suffered from tuberculosis after university, and later had Type 1 diabetes, as well as having heart trouble after a first heart attack in the summer of 1973 (J. Limansky 2017b).

business in the early 1980s and certainly before 1985 (J. Limansky 2017a). In a letter to Val's husband Igor, Ann Wilder (1988) explains the Lemon Pepper dilemma:

> We could sell a lot more Lemon Pepper if we could find an easier way to produce it. Often we have orders for 25 pounds or more which we simply can't meet. I have been working with the Maryland Technical Services to develop an easier way of making it. So far we have tried wind tunnels and heat lamps. The only other way which seems to work is slow baking, not a step forward.

After Val's departure from Vanns, Ann Wilder made significant changes to the staffing complement of the company. Even in an early 1984 article, Serena Baum (rather than Val Limansky) and Ann Wilder are listed as the entrepreneurs of Vanns Spices (Morris 1984), the former playing the role of production manager. By 1985, Wilder explained that she had hired both a financial advisor (a Mr. Douglas Price) and marketing expert, the name of which she does not disclose (Wilder 1988). While Vanns initially marketed their products to boutique shops and specialty fairs, these advisors encouraged Wilder to set the company's sights on large specialty stores and large spice users such that by 1988, 50% of sales was in food service. This was a particularly effective strategy in a Baltimore hosting an increasing number of tourists, prompted by the Harbor's revitalization. By 1990, Ann Wilder's son Robert became involved in the business, taking charge of purchasing (Menzie 1992). And by 1992, the story of Vanns had largely been revised to become one in which Ann Wilder was the "presiding genie" of Vanns Spices, and the company inspired by *her* "fascination with herbs and spices" and the six spice blends *she* developed in her kitchen:

> The door opens and the aroma bursts out. Like a big, friendly Labrador pup, it nearly bowls you over. It is, all at once, dusty, spicy, earthy, herbal, hot and powerful: cardamom, mustard, pepper, sandalwood powder, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, lemon grass and cumin, tarragon and paprika and cayenne . . . And the presiding genie who orders all the scents and flavors into bottles is Ann Wilder, who started the business 10 years ago in her kitchen with six spice blends and now oversees a worldwide business that also packs spices for such notable vendors as Dean & DeLuca, Sutton Place Gourmet and Zabar's, among others. (Menzie 1992)

In a very explicit way, then, the story of Vanns' early years now available through Limansky family papers provides a specific example of the way business lore can be revised, altered and reblended.

Val would not live to see the business take flight. In the year of Val's death, Wilder was busy promoting the company brand, speaking to the media about and riding the wave of the "gourmetization" phenomenon (Morris 1987), so closely related to the increasing influence of globalization on food tastes ("Curry Favorites -- Old and New" 1966; "Inder's Chicken Curry" 1978). In her well-known retrospective of the gendered-nature of mid to late twentieth-century home food preparation, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking,* Jessamyn Neuhaus (2003) would refer to this increasing appetite for diverse foods as the gourmetization of America, and locate the phenomenon in the 1960s (262). However, in her thoughtful critical essay surveying four decades of commentary on the intersection of women and food in America, Hélène Le Dantec Lowry (2008) would soon afterward argue that the beginnings of this impulse towards elite foodways emerged after the Second World War, as early as the 1940s and 1950s in America, identifying the 1960s as a decade in which food was appreciated as a source of

pleasure and enjoyment (116). Le Dantec Lowry (2008) summarizes trends in mid-twentieth century America "such as the emergence of a literature devoted to ethnic cuisines, and a growing number of publications defending natural foods" (111). The story of Vanns' increasing momentum during the 1980s speaks directly to, and provides granular evidence of, Val's and Ann's ability to capitalize on this globalization and gourmetization of foodways and navigate the turbulent economic climate of Baltimore.

VI. How the 1960s and 1970s Set the Stage for Vanns in the 1980s

Le Dantec-Lowry (2008), without any hesitation, writes that "The 1960s and 1970s were also a period in which American cuisine became much more 'ethnic' and international, a trend that has persisted to this day and has had a profound influence, as demonstrated by the appeal of 'fusion cooking,' among other things, and the elaborate infrastructure developed to distribute and market 'ethnic' food throughout the United States" (117). Michael Symons (2006) identifies 1963, in particular, as a pivotal year in which Western foodways shifted, citing as evidence the writing of Julia Child, Elizabeth David, and Betty Friedan. "Cooking changed dramatically around 1963," he writes, "and not merely in the United States" (180). Certainly, Val Limansky's careful documentation of her food choices and recipes illustrates that the enthusiasm for diverse cuisines in the Baltimore area only gains momentum as the twentieth century continues. In 1971, for example, Virginia Limansky could be found teaching a series of classes on "Foods of the World" – including recipes "from China, France, Germany and India" (Food Editor 1971) – with her close friend Helen Olsen. Other indicators of an appetite for ethnically-inflected foodways are evident in feature articles in major women's magazines. For instance, mention of curry spices and a variety of curry recipes appeared regularly in articles as of the 1960s and through the

1970s in *Better Homes and Gardens*, and in *Ladies Home Journal* (Happel 1972).[11] Maude Labonté (2017) identifies international influences on North American cuisine even earlier, during the 1950s and 1960s. Suzanne Cope (2018) suggests we could date this phenomenon even earlier, remembering that the food editor of the *New York Times* from 1942 to 1957, Jane Nickerson, significantly expanded the range of contributions to the paper's food pages.

Given this building interest in international flavors over the course of the mid-twentieth century, specifically what conditions converged in the 1980s to support a gourmet spice business despite seemingly adverse economic conditions? One answer certainly had to do with this growing appetite for culinary experimentation (Labonté 2017), also a primary explanation for the renewed growth of the spice giant McCormick in 1988 almost a hundred years after its founding in 1889, and three years after it significantly revamped its product line in 1985 to introduce thirteen spice blends new to the East Coast Market. In its marketing script for this reinvigoration of the company's product line, McCormick explained that "The gourmet spices are drawn from products grown in countries as far-flung as India, Madagascar, Yugoslavia, Canada and Turkey" (Uzelac 1985). I cannot help myself from pausing here to note that is surely extraordinary today to think of Canada as participating in this list of "far-flung" countries![12]

By 1982, the increasing momentum of change in foodways could only be described as a revolution and it was one flavored by a growing appetite for spices. "If there's been a revolution in American food – and all the experts are saying there has," wrote journalist Linda Lowe Morris (1982), "it's been as much as anything a change in the way we use herbs and spices." This period saw a dramatic increase in the diversity of food products, that arguably only went partway to

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[11] For other examples, see *Better Homes and Gardens; Des Moines* (1966); *Better Homes and Gardens; Des Moines* (1978) found in *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Ladies Home Journal*.
[12] My thanks to Andrea Wahba for this insight.

restoring the extensive variety of foods available in America during the Colonial period (Engel 1986, 148). The phenomenon is generally described as the "gourmetization" of America, which enters the American mainstream as early as the 1930s (Vester 2015, 107) through magazines such as *Gourmet Magazine* (113) and is sustained throughout the 1980s. Almost twenty years after Julia Child had familiarized the nation with French food preparation techniques, the wildly successful *Silver Palate* cookbook served up a mixture of Spanish, Mediterranean and Asian fare with recipes that were doable within a reasonable amount of time and so tasty that they were quickly adopted into the mainstream culinary canon – Chicken Marbella comes instantly to mind (Mason 2017).

By 1984, Ann Wilder observed that she was getting accounts from "grocery stores that never would have thought of gourmet products a few years ago" (Morris 1987). Linda Morris (1987) writes that the "gourmetization" of America was characterized by a "rapid encroachment of high-class eats on the heartland of American food. Soon there'll be no escape from the extra virgin olive oil." Of course, this surge of interest in foods and food culture served Vanns particularly well in that small, gourmet purveyors gained increasing currency.

Conclusion: Cooking up a Sense of Community

This study of the early years of Vanns Spices, a business prompted by one founder's firm commitment to performing and building community through foodways, and driven by the other co-founder's strategic sales and marketing plan, speaks to a culinary culture born of community, friendship, and a business acumen. As Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón (2017) explains, "cooking and selling food can be art and commerce, passion and avocation" (257) and this is only too true for the spice business Val and Ann created together.

In hindsight, the moment in time during which Val and Ann launched their business, named after themselves in honor of their friendship, was propitious, precisely the right one to ensure its success.[13]

Several key factors facilitated the success of their business. Val's culinary coterie served as inspiration and encouragement for her transition from home-based community-involved cook to a culinary professional. Val's creativity paired well with Ann's business acumen, and their blends found a strong consumer base in an evolving Baltimore. Vanns' success was cemented by its ability to capitalize on the gourmetization phenomenon and place its niche products in respected local stores. In particular, Baltimore, which welcomed workers coming to fill roles in large industrial plants, and embraced urban revitalization initiatives, reflected a society open to innovation. A port city with regular food shipments and, after the Harbor's revitalization, also a tourist destination, Baltimore's food scene was expanding. The gourmetization of American foodways taking place at this time, alongside a growing concern over salt intake levels, provided the perfect market for Vanns' specialty blends. Appetite and demand for different spices was only growing in America, and Vanns was well positioned to respond.

For the most part, Val and Ann were able to transform obstacles into business opportunities. The company's location in the shadow of Goliath spice company, McCormick,

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[13] To better understand Vann's positioning within the entrepreneurial landscape of the time, it is useful for us to identify features emerging from business histories of cottage industries that became highly successful public companies, founded by women during the same period. Four key plot elements of this genre of public business history, shared by the story of Vanns, speak to the: (i) relationship of the business concept to the lifelong passion or vocation of at least one of its founders; (ii) development of a business partnership that begins as a friendship or family relationship; (iii) expansion of the company that often takes it in a new and slightly different trajectory; (iv) and eventually a moment where the company is subsumed within a larger corporate entity. Examples from diverse sectors include fabric and clothing company Laura Ashley, started by the eponymous Laura Ashley and her husband in 1952 out of their home kitchen in London's Pimlico (Wood 2009, 17), the first store opening in 1957, and international operations began in 1972 (226). Also Anita Roddick's The Body Shop, founded in 1976, which went public in 1985, and was sold to L'Oréal in 2006 ("Our Heritage" 2018).

productively directed Vanns' initial attention towards the local, gourmet retail market, and away from direct competition with the spice giant. While Val and Ann's different visions for the business (combined with Val's ill health) brought about a split between the two female entrepreneurs, Ann's business drive propelled her to steer Vanns through turbulent economic times by cementing established relationships with retail stores, additionally looking to new industry partners and expanding into the wholesale spice business.

The one obstacle that proved to be persistent was the difficulty in increasing the speed and quantity of the production of Lemon Pepper, a difficulty which Ann's 1988 letter suggests continued beyond Val's departure.

What remains for closer scrutiny in this study of Vanns' early years, however, is Val's decision to trust her culinary legacy not to the business venture, but rather to her teaching in the community, generous food service to friends and family largely in her home or other intimate settings, and five unpublished books. What purpose did Val's careful documentation of her food practice serve in books that were never commercially published?

Insights from Meredith Abarca and Josh Colby on the ways in which food narratives reinforce food memory are particularly helpful here. While "food memories speak through our senses," they argue, "every time a *food memory* is narrated—in an oral, written, or performative form—the food recalled is reproduced as an embodied experience. In telling what 'we eat,' we are showing who 'we are'" (Abarca and Colby 2016, 7). This aligns well with Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's (2004) watershed argument that what elevates cooking into a *cuisine* is its codification in a substantial body of literature that records, interprets, and defines it. As she puts it, "as much as the foodways by which it is shaped or the actual foods consumed, words sustain cuisine" ("Prologue Eating Orders" 2004, 10). In describing what foods she prepared and served,

her legacy of food manuscripts introduces Val Limansky and her food practice to an extended community and begins the process of culinary codification.

That Val's books contain recipes contributed by friends and relatives, renders them less personal food diaries than community cookbooks. Certainly, the two church community cookbooks were explicitly such., However, all Val's food writing mentions her larger coterie of friends and family and approaching them through the lens of community-building projects is productive. Kennan Ferguson's (2012) insights into the rewards for contributors to community cookbooks are helpful here. An American social and political theorist, Ferguson (2012) observes that community cookbooks "emphasize the material, the gustatory, the domestic, and the creative; they do so to regularize, inform, and inspire the women who are their presumed readers. In other words, the cookbooks intensify….they intensify a sense of belonging and a sense of community" (698). In a very similar way, by recording her food selections – what she chose to prepare – Val was able to intensify the pleasure of her cooking, to relive the scenes of food and fellowship in writerly recollection. Further, by including within her written texts mention of and contributions from her network of cooking friends and food authorities of her day, Val was able to intensify her sense of community in a way that helped sustain her during moments of challenge, including a parting of ways with business partner Ann Wilder by 1985, moments of turbulence in the course of close relationships, and periods of ill health. Today, for Val's son Jason, these books serve as poignant reminders of his mother and the community her cookery nurtured.

Remembers her sister, Nancy Lewis (2017), "Val was an unusually inventive and daring cook. She was ready to try anything." What will Val be remembered for besides her Curry and Lemon Salt spice blends? Val's hummus, Lewis remembers "is the only one I know that does not

call for tahini; hers is chick peas, lemon, garlic, olive oil, always served with chopped parsley" (2017). Val's niece, Kate, remembers "what a treat it was for my mother when Val and Nancy came to visit, as they set off for Magog [Quebec] to find ingredients we lacked at home… and then prepared the most exotic Indian or Chinese meals imaginable, always laughing and joking in the kitchen" (Williams 2020).

Renée, daughter of Val's close friend Barbara Cianelli, has a different and definitive answer: her saffron chicken recipe (Kurtz 2017). Unfortunately, Val's recipe has been lost to time. Yet the insistent emphasis in her food writing on the importance of sustaining culinary community through experimentation and sharing food information will perhaps encourage readers to send a query to their own culinary coteries about ways to prepare such a dish.

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