

COMING TO TERMS WITH SPAM (AND VIENNA SAUSAGE AND CORNED BEEF AND SARDINES)

“SPAM!” shuddered an acquaintance from Wisconsin. “You mean the SPAM we ate in the War?” Yes, that SPAM. In Hawaii, there is no dodging the question of SPAM (or of other canned meats and fish, for that matter). SPAM is an important protein for much of the state’s population. SPAM is the subject of a whole cookbook, Ann Kondo Corum’s only partially tongue-in-cheek *Hawaii’s SPAM® Cookbook*.² SPAM sells out on grocery shelves and was hoarded during the Gulf War. SPAM is made into SPAM and eggs, SPAM and rice, SPAM sushi, SPAM musubi, and SPAM wonton. No SPAM? Then substitute luncheon meat or canned corned beef, Vienna sausages, or Holmes sardines.

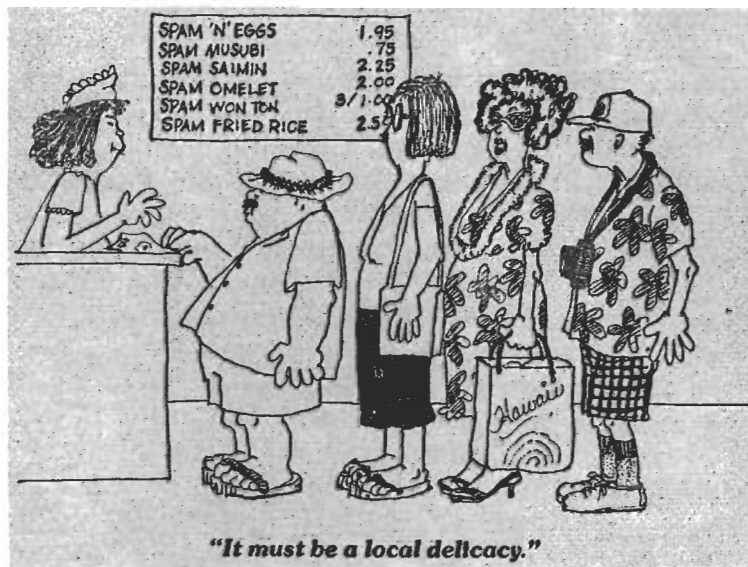
To take on SPAM is to pick at all the ethnic and economic seams of Hawaii. To newcomers, to nutritionists, to those with pretensions to gourmet status, SPAM is an embarrassment, serviceable during wartime rationing perhaps, but too salty, too fatty, too overprocessed to be eaten in these enlightened times. It contains—horrors—256 fat calories for every 4-ounce serving. Its manufacturer—can you imagine?—advertises not recipes but SPAM carving contests.³

As a child in postwar Britain, I too was less than enamored of SPAM. It turned up regularly for school lunches in the form of SPAM fritters, slices of SPAM dipped in a batter and deep-fried (surely one of the worst things to do with an already fatty meat), one more in the series of horrors produced by the school cooks, whose efforts exemplified the popular reputation of British food. Blessed with sympathetic parents who regarded as so much rot the theory that choking down bad food develops moral fiber, I was granted the privilege of small helpings. But on leaving school, SPAM was one food I happily forgot.

That is, until I came to Hawaii. Even now, I can’t say that I yearn for SPAM fritters, or that I regard SPAM sushi as a great innovation, or that SPAM is on my weekly shopping list. But SPAM is so satisfyingly easy to dismiss that I have become uneasy about my smugness. I’m no longer sure that a well-fed urbanite

like myself, with a full freezer and supermarkets just down the road, should be too sniffy about canned meat. My alternatives to SPAM are fresh meats, not dried and salted meat and fish. I do not have to spend hours fishing, calm or storm, but simply pop down to the local market. I do not have to worry about my fish going bad in the tropical heat, I just stick it in the refrigerator or freezer. I am not concerned that fresh fish costs more than SPAM because I can afford it. And what I suffer from is an excess, not a deficiency, of fat in my diet.

Such considerations make me a little more aware of why in remote Pacific islands (and before that among the poor and in far-flung parts of the world), SPAM, like other canned meats, had such appeal. When scientists discovered how to electroplate a neutral tin lining on to steel cans in the 1870s, and canned meats first began to appear, they were hailed as a great innovation. The rapidly growing towns in Europe and the eastern United States were full of people hungering for something other than the endless salt meats that, given the lack of refrigeration and mass distribution, were the lot of most of the population—if they had meat at all. Entrepreneurs opened up canning operations on the distant ranges of the American West, Australia, and Argentina, where there was plenty of beef and mutton but no one to sell it to. The editors of the second edition of Mrs. Beeton's classic *Household Management*, published in 1888, inserted a new chapter on canned meat.* If canned Australian beef was already on British tables, could canned wallaby and parrot be far behind? For good measure, they added recipes for roast wallaby and parrot pie to the chapter on foreign and colonial cooking.



Ultimately, though, the editors' enthusiasm for the first canned meats was muted. Canned meat, they decided, was overcooked, fibrous, and lacking in flavor. They owned, though, that it might be a useful stopgap for the working poor who could not afford fresh or refrigerated meat and a handy staple on board ship. And—what they did not say and neither knew nor cared about from their British perspective—for the same reasons, plantation workers and Pacific Islanders would welcome it as an addition to their diet. In the fishing villages and the plantations of Hawaii, canned luncheon meat and sardines became a regular part of the diet.

Meanwhile, the Hormel Company set about designing a canned meat that was neither tough nor bland. To beat the toughness, they ground pork up finely; to give it savor, they spiced it up with salt, sugar, and a variety of other flavorings. They held a competition for a catchy name: in 1937, a certain Keith Daugeau submitted the winning entry—SPAM (spiced ham)—and walked off with the \$100 prize. SPAM joined and then overtook sardines, luncheon meat, corned beef, and Vienna sausages as a favorite. All keep well, are quick and easy to prepare, can be stretched with vegetables, and taste good with rice. In World War II, when offshore fishing was prohibited, SPAM helped fill the gap.

Hawaii gives SPAM (and the other canned meats) an Asian or Pacific twist. It is perhaps most commonly fried and served with rice (and maybe eggs) for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Victor Hao Li, the urbane former president of the federally funded East-West Center, suggested “Begin the day with thickly sliced Spam, fried crisp on the outside, served with rice and sunny-side eggs plus a streak of oyster sauce across the top. (In truth, this really is better than *jook*.)”⁵ Or it can be made into a musubi, as does John DeSoto, a Council member of the City and County of Honolulu. If his name is anything to go by (and given the high intermarriage rate, this is far from an infallible guide in Hawaii), DeSoto is not Japanese, but he offers what is in effect a recipe for SPAM musubi, demonstrating his bonds with his constituents. He explains that “When I was a kid, we always had rice and nori and SPAM around the house, and we would eat those things in various ways. But when there were leftovers, we put them together, creating a kind of sandwich. Since this particular one featured SPAM and since this is a family recipe, we called it a DeSPAMwich. Besides being good to eat, the DeSPAMwich taught me a valuable lesson: To make something good you don't always have to use conventional things in conventional ways. Sometimes, by using what is available and a little imagination, you can create something just as good, sometimes even better.”⁶

SPAM can be wrapped in ti leaves or foil and left roasting in the ashes while you go fishing. It is relished cooked in a little soy sauce, sugar, mirin, and ginger and served on toothpicks for cocktails. It is a common stuffing for deep-fried wonton. It can be mixed with Chinese fishcake. It can be used to stuff

aburage; you can make SPAM lumpia with kamaboko, green onion, and eggs. Just as good is SPAM fried rice or chow fun or stir-fry. It is standard as a topping for saimin. If your taste runs to the Japanese, SPAM can be used to stuff lotus root or cooked with miso or daikon, and, of course, it makes excellent tempura. Or if it runs to the Korean, you can skewer squares of SPAM with squares of kim chee, dredge them in flour, dip in beaten egg, and deep-fry to make SPAM and kim chee jun. Needless to say it also combines happily with haole foods to make omelettes, meatballs, burgers, quiche, or macaroni and cheese. Sometimes it is even eaten on white bread as a sandwich.

Locals, then, understandably regard SPAM as thrifty and tasty, a food of childhood, a food of family meals and picnics at the beach, a food of convenience. A food of convenience, moreover, with a certain status, harking back to the time when buying something canned conveyed affluence and keeping up with the times. Even the fact that it can be carved is endearing because it makes SPAM easy to shape for sushi and musubi. It is the motherhood-and-apple-pie of Hawaii, not specific to any ethnic group, and hence invoked by politicians to show just how deep their Local roots go. The governor can refer to his State of the State address to the Legislature as a "SPAM-and-rice kind of speech" and have the quip reported approvingly in all the newspapers. Locals get through over 4 million cans every year; that is more than four cans for every man, woman, and child in the state, making us the SPAM champions of the country: over three times more SPAM than any other state in the Union. No wonder that when Hormel came out with Lite SPAM they used Hawaii as one of their test sites.

Maybe now that the standard of living has risen in Hawaii, politicians should be moving away from the inverse snobbery of SPAM, and Locals should be cutting it out of their diet. But for what? For a fast-food hamburger covered with glutinous sauce on a slimy bun, accompanied by french-fried processed potatoes? Surely, for both flavor and health, the SPAM musubi, with its good rice, its wrapping of nori, and the sliver of SPAM with a touch of salt and sugar and soy sauce, is a better bet. Shudders or not, in Hawaii SPAM continues to be something to be reckoned with.