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Norine Kotts and Cheryl Lewis Papers

1982-2013
6 boxes (2.5 linear feet)
Call no.: MS 1177

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Read collection overview

Longtime partners in work and life, Norine Kotts and Cheryl Lewis met in San Francisco in 1980. Kotts, daughter of a law enforcement officer and a homemaker, whose family who moved frequently, was a freelance photographer; Lewis, a biracial Chicago native and daughter of a furniture maker and a schoolteacher, who grew up in Rockland County, N. Y., was an art student in the Bay Area and a lifelong cook. They moved back to the house Kotts was sharing with a group of lesbians, in Somerville, Mass., and eventually into the world of food collectives, restaurants, and hospitality. In 1982, along with two co-founders, Kotts and Lewis opened the cafe Beetles' Lunch in Allston, a Boston neighborhood. Named "1983 Best Punk Restaurant" by Boston magazine, Beetle's Lunch became known as a welcoming alternative community space situated at a convergence of queer and feminist politics, new concepts in art and music, and the changing food scene, with a dash of idealism, especially on the part of its young feminist founders. Relocating to Portland, Me., in 1985 Kotts and Lewis opened Cafe Always, playing a significant role in fostering and shaping that city's burgeoning food culture: as Portland's first restaurant to employ local farmers and incorporate local ingredients into the daily menu, Cafe Always garnered national attention. After selling the business in 1995, the couple opened Aurora Provisions, a gourmet food and wine shop with an in-store restaurant and catering service, which they ran until selling it in 2001. As consultants they continued to participate in and influence the food scene in Portland, helping to launch Portland favorite El Rayo Taqueria in 2009.

The Kotts and Lewis Papers provide glimpses into the formation and operation of several notable New England food establishments, documenting the creative, professional, and personal aspects, as well as the food itself. The collection contains menus, photographs, business plans, correspondence (including a set of letters Kotts wrote to her mother on the backs of menus), recipes and cookbooks, memorabilia, and a guest book filled with diners' comments. Kotts and Lewis are also the subjects of a series of oral histories conducted by sociologist Janice Irvine.

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Background on Norine Kotts and Cheryl Lewis

Longtime partners in work and life, Norine Kotts and Cheryl Lewis met in San Francisco in 1980. At the time, Kotts was a freelance photographer, and Lewis was an art student in the Bay Area and a lifelong cook.

Kotts, the daughter of a law enforcement officer and a homemaker, grew up in a family who moved frequently and, during times of relative stability, cared for a series of foster children. She began working in newspapers in the early 1970s, taking on an assortment of tasks from answering phones to laying out pages, until she became interested in cameras and photography and began shadowing one of the photographers. As she gained in experience, confidence, and photo credits, she decided to go freelance. She spent a lot of time on the road including as a photographer for the Virginia Slims Women's Tennis Circuit, until she met Lewis in San Francisco.

Born in Chicago in 1957, Cheryl Lewis was the biracial daughter of a department store executive-turned-furniture designer and a schoolteacher who was also a teachers union organizer. When she was still very young, the family moved to Rockland County, N. Y., where they built a house and Lewis, from an early age, began cooking alongside her mother. She went to art school in San Francisco with the idea of becoming a ceramic artist. Meeting Norine Kotts changed her plans. They moved back to the house Kotts was sharing with a group of lesbians, in Somerville, Mass., and eventually into the world of food collectives, restaurants, and hospitality.

In 1982, along with two co-founders, Kotts and Lewis opened the cafe Beetle's Lunch in Allston, a Boston neighborhood. Named "1983 Best Punk Restaurant" by Boston magazine, Beetle's Lunch became known as a welcoming alternative community space situated at a convergence of queer and feminist politics, new concepts in art and music, and the changing food scene, with a dash of idealism, especially on the part of its young feminist founders.

Relocating to Portland, Me., in fall 1985 Kotts and Lewis opened Cafe Always. With their friend and business circles expanding and their reputation growing, they came to play a significant role in fostering and shaping that city's burgeoning food culture. As Portland's first restaurant to employ local farmers and incorporate local ingredients into the daily menu, Cafe Always garnered both regional and national attention. After selling the business in 1995, the couple moved into catering. In 1997 they opened Aurora Provisions, a gourmet food and wine shop with an in-store restaurant and catering service, which they ran until selling it in 2001. As consultants they continued to participate in and influence the food scene in Portland, helping to launch Portland favorite El Rayo Taqueria in 2009. Kotts and Lewis travel extensively, often centering their trips on food.

Between opening or helping open around a dozen restaurants and introducing new, often international ingredients and cooking styles, Cheryl Lewis and Norine Kotts influenced the Maine and New England food scenes in fundamental ways, and that impact--along with their unofficial mantra "no food rules"--endures.

Scope of collection

The Kotts and Lewis Papers provide glimpses into the formation and operation of several notable New England food establishments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, documenting the creative, professional, and personal aspects, as well as the food itself. The collection contains menus, photographs, business plans, correspondence (including a set of letters Kotts wrote to her mother on the backs of menus), recipes, memorabilia, and a guest book filled with diners' comments. Several cookbooks are included: those featuring their restaurants as well as those they used heavily and learned from. The many photographs document the couple's restaurants and catering work, as well as their travels. Kotts and Lewis are also the subjects of a series of oral histories conducted by sociologist Janice Irvine.

Inventory

Advertisements, promotional mailings
1986-1987, 1991, 1995, undated

Box 1: 1

Anniversary card
1999

Box 1: 2

Business cards album
undated

Box 1: 3

Business plans: Cafe Projects Two/Aurora Catering
1996 Dec. 6

Box 1: 4

Business plans: Cafe Always (in binder)

ca.1985
Box 6
Business plans: Cafe Always (removed from binder)
ca.1985
Box 1: 5
Clippings: magazines
1986
Box 1: 6
Clippings: magazines
1987-1989
Box 1: 7
Clippings: magazines
1994
Box 1: 8.
Clippings: magazines
1999
Box 1: 9
Clippings: magazines
2001, 2012
Box 2: 1
Clippings: magazines
2012
Box 2: 2
Clippings: magazines
2012 Dec.
Box 2: 3
Clippings: newspapers
1983-1986
Box 2: 4
Clippings: newspapers
1987-1989
Box 2: 5
Clippings: newspapers
1990-1992
Box 2: 6
Clippings: newspapers
1993-1994, 1998
Box 2: 7
Clippings: newspapers
2007, undated
Box 2: 8
Clippings: website printouts
2007, undated
Box 2: 9
Correspondence: business
1982-1998
Box 2: 10
Correspondence: business
undated
Box 2: 11
Correspondence: email, Cheryl Lewis's family
2002
Box 2: 12
Correspondence: email, Norine Kotts's family
2002
Box 2: 13
Correspondence: email, "Travel Pals"
2002
Box 2: 14
Correspondence: postcards
1987-1992, 2002, undated
Box 2: 15
Guest book: Aurora Provisions
ca.1999
Box 6
Menus: Back Bay Bistro
undated
Box 3: 1

Menus: Beetle's Lunch, Cafe Always, Aurora Provisions
ca.1982-1999
Box 3: 2
Menus: other
undated
Box 3: 3
Notes
ca.1990, undated
Box 3: 4
Notes: chef's notebook
1982
Box 3: 5
Photographs: Aurora Provisions
ca.1990s-2001
Box 3: 6
Photographs: Aurora Provisions, collages
ca.1990s-2001
Box 6
Photographs: Cafe Always
ca.1985-1995
Box 3: 7
Photographs: Cafe Always seasons greetings
ca.1985-1995
Box 3: 8
Photographs: collages
undated
Box 3: 9
Photographs: unidentified
ca.1980s-2000s
Box 3: 10
Photographs: last night of Cafe Always
1995 Oct. 22
Box 3: 11
Photographs: mementos
undated
Box 3: 12
Photographs: sale of Cafe Always
1995 Oct. 22
Box 3: 13
Photographs: staff Christmas card
undated
Box 3: 14
Photographs: personal
ca.1980s-2000s
Box 3: 15
Photographs: travel
ca.2000s
Box 3: 16
Photographs: wedding/catering
ca.1980s-1990s
Box 4: 1
Recipes
ca.1990-2022
Box 4: 2
Publications: Martha Stewart, Entertaining
ca.1982
Box 4
Publications: Margaret Hathaway, Portland, Maine Chef's Table
ca.2012
Box 4
Publications: Time-Life Books Editors, The Good Cook: Fish
ca.1982
Box 4
Publications: Bloodroot Collective, The Political Palate: A Feminist Vegetarian Cookbook
ca.1980
Box 4
Scrapbook: Aurora Provisions
1996-2001

Box 6
Scrapbook: Aurora Provisions
1996-2001
Box 6
T-shirts: Cafe Always
undated
Box 5

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Norine Kotts and Cheryl Lewis, Nov. 2022.

Processing Information

Processed by Hailey Dote, September 2024.

Related Material

The first part of Janice Irvine's oral history interview with Kotts and Lewis is available on the [University of Southern Maine's Digital Commons](#). The rest of the interview is part of the Janice M. Irvine Oral History Collection and will soon be online in Credo.

Cheryl Lewis's grandfather, Julian H. Lewis, appears in the [W. E. B. Du Bois Papers](#) (also [online](#)) and in the [Eva Overton Lewis and Julian Herman Lewis, MD, PhD Collection](#).

Language:

English

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Search terms

Subjects

- Lesbian businesswomen
- Lesbian cooks
- Restaurants--Maine--Portland
- Restaurants--New England
- Restaurants--Social aspects
- Restaurateurs

Contributors

- Kotts, Norine [main entry]
- Lewis, Cheryl

Genres and formats

- Letters (Correspondence)
- Menus
- Photographs

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