Minnesota Unraveled

Episode 205 - Eating the Iron Range: A Cultural Culinary History

Publish Date: 12/4/2025

Chantel Rodríguez:
On a rainy Thursday afternoon, I am walking down Grand Avenue in St. Paul to meet some work colleagues for lunch at the Iron Ranger. I step through the door and into what feels like a rustic dive bar. Wood floors and earthy tones like deep browns and terracotta evoke warmth and charm. Framed photos of water towers–from Hibbing, Calumet, Eveleth, and many others–decorate the walls alongside a mounted shovel and pickaxe. On my left, there is a large vintage-looking billboard that reads, Sunrise Bakery – homemade taste served daily, established 1913. Hibbing, MN.

I take a seat with my colleagues at the booth and eagerly look at the menu. So many of the dishes–pasties, potica, porketta, poutine, and sarma–are new to me. I grew up in South Texas where iron range food was nowhere to be seen. I'm not an adventurous eater, but my foodie colleagues were eager to give me a taste of the iron range so we ordered them all for the table.

Our food was served by none other than the owner himself–Tom Forti. It turns out that his restaurant, and the dishes he serves, have deep roots in Minnesota's iron range.

> **Tom Forti:**
> My name is Tom Forti, owner of Iron Ranger, which is a restaurant on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. I've been open for 10 years, eight of which have been the Iron Ranger. The first two was an extension of my family's deli bakery out of Hibbing, which was Sunrise Deli and Sunrise Bakery.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Welcome to *Minnesota Unraveled*. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

To learn more about how iron range cuisine came to be and how iron range recipes and cooking techniques have been passed down across generations, I spoke to Tom and three others with ties to the iron range and unique perspectives on the region's cultural culinary history.

Bryan Morcom:
My name is Bryan Morcom. I'm from Tower. Couldn't be prouder. I think I wear many hats as far as chef, gardner, forager, traveler. I would say I'm kind of a renaissance man, always trying different things and not trying just to be one thing.

BJ Carpenter:
I go by my initials BJ, but my real name is Bobbie Joe Carpenter, and I was born in Hibbing, Minnesota, which is right in the middle of the Mesabi Iron Range. And I lived there all my life before I went off to college down at the University of Minnesota.

Mary Lou Nemanic:
I'm Mary Lou Nemanic. I'm a producer at Documentary America, co-founder with my husband Doug, and I have a BA in journalism, MA and Mass Communications and a PhD in American Studies. And I've been working with Doug. We just finished our 48th year.

Chantel Rodríguez:
The iron range food I ate at Tom Forti's restaurant was absolutely delicious. But I was very aware of the fact that I was enjoying the cuisine in St. Paul, and not the iron range. To learn more about the region, I spoke with historian and documentarian Mary Lou.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Could you geographically identify the Iron Range region and what constitutes it?

Mary Lou Nemanic:
It's north Eastern Minnesota and it's three different iron ranges really. The Vermillion is the closest to the Canadian border, and that was settled first. And then the Mesabi is the most populous and the biggest area of population. And then we have the Cuyuna, which was settled last and didn't have quite the mining activity that the other two ranges had.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Minnesota's Iron Range is one of the largest, most productive iron ore regions in the world. Geologic and volcanic activities starting over one billion years ago left behind large deposits of minerals, including iron, gold, silver, nickel, and copper. Long before European Americans began to extractively mine these minerals in the 19th century, Native Americans mined copper from deposits around the Great Lakes. They

fashioned knives, tools, and jewelry from the pliable metal. They exported both raw copper and finished items through an expansive Native trade network across North America.

When European Americans arrived in search of minerals in the 1860s, Ojibwe living near the Great Lakes shared their knowledge of iron, gold, and other minerals. European Americans began mining iron ore on the Vermillion Range in 1886, the Mesabi Range in 1890, and the Cuyana Range in 1903. Soon prospectors and companies set up shop in northeastern Minnesota to extract the metal. A surge in labor immigration soon followed.

> **Mary Lou Nemanic:**
> The earliest ones were Scandinavians and Northern Europeans, and later on the Southern and Eastern and central Europeans were recruited. Single men came first and a lot of them intended to go back, but because there was such an imbalance in terms of gender on the range, in some places it was like eight to one men to women. And so there had to be a lot of intermarriage, and that also diffused a lot of the conflicts culturally and also helped people to develop English speaking skills.

Chantel Rodríguez:
One of the many single men who arrived in the first immigration wave was Elisha Morcom, the great great grandfather of my guest Bryan Morcom.

> **Bryan Morcom:**
> His first mining accident was recorded when he was nine years old and that was in Cornwall, England. And then he came over, was working at a mine in the up and then all these financiers got together. They were here prospecting gold and they didn't really find much gold, which there is gold here, but it's so deep in the iron ore rock, it's hard to mine out and that's why they're not mining it out. But they saw all this iron ore up here and all these financiers got together, created the money, and then they found my great great grandpa and actually sent him up here. Charlemagne Tower is the name of the town that I live in and he, he's never been here. He was just a financier, so they named it after him.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Bryan's great great grandfather was incredibly skilled in mining and he shared this knowledge around the world.

Bryan Morcom:
I mean he was the captain of the underground mine, but he did so much more after that. I mean he started a brick company here. He became an ambassador and he actually went to Australia to give teachings on mining and that was a rare thing to travel to Australia back in the 1800s. He was also at the World's Fair in Chicago and I think that was 1893. And he was giving lectures on mining there.

Chantel Rodríguez:
In the early years when single men came to the iron range, food options were fairly limited. Here's Mary Lou.

Mary Lou Nemanic:
They're eating off the land. So there was people hunting and the mines closed a lot during the winter, so people would have to live off the land. So hunting, berry picking any kind of gardening. But the summer is only maybe a hundred days or even less depending on the weather. And it's really hard to grow a variety of crops. Hay and potatoes are particularly good for that climate, but it was very difficult for people to farm on the range because of the rocky, hilly soil and minerals.

Chantel Rodríguez:
So at what point do you have families coming in, in terms of time period and joining men and creating more of a family connection?

Mary Lou Nemanic:
Towards the turn of the century, you see more families, but again, some of the men were able to marry and stay on the range rather than go back, which was their original intention. And the women were really insistent on education and churches. So when the women started coming over, you started to really see the towns develop.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Many immigrant families were attracted to Minnesota by the promise of owning land through the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed settlers to claim former Native land for free. Families were required to farm and make improvements to the land for five years. The family of my guest BJ Carpenter is one of the many who moved to the iron range for this reason and contributed to the building of towns in the early 1900s.

BJ Carpenter:
My great grandfather on my father's side, they lived in Maine and in around 1900, president Roosevelt was giving land away right in the left. And if you

remained on the land for five years, it was yours tax-free. And so they took advantage of that. -They had moved to Minneapolis, where they lived around Lake of the Isles at the time. And then they took advantage of this land giveaway and they moved up to a place north of the Iron Range called Togo, Minnesota. And my great grandfather was the first homesteader up there, so they named the township after him. My grandmother was the first school teacher up there. And so she roomed with my great-grandfather and grandfather, and that's how they met.

And then on my mother's side, my grandmother had come over, her brother had encouraged her to come over, he'd come over to work in the mines in the early part of the last century. And then my grandfather came over. They did not know each other in Southern Finland, but my grandfather on my mother's side, he came into the country illegally, very proud of this. He was a socialist. He came from Finland through Canada and came down illegally into the Iron Range because his sisters had come to the Iron Range, and that's how he came to meet my grandmother.

Chantel Rodríguez:
The shift toward family immigration made me wonder how this impacted the food scene in the iron range. Back to Mary Lou.

Mary Lou Nemanic:
As the women came, more foods were brought in from different countries, but then they became adopted by the people on the range, which really shows that development of Range identity.And so you have potica, which is a Slovenian kind of a sweet bread that has walnuts and sugar, and it looks like a jelly roll when it's kind of rolled up. And they had pasties, which are Cornish meat pies, and you could buy these kinds of things at different stores once the businesses developed and they were Range foods, it didn't matter that they originally were Italian or Slovenian or whatever, they became range foods and they were particularly important to have on holidays and especially the 4th of July.

Chantel Rodríguez:
BJ told me more about how some iron range dishes have been made and at which social events they can often be found.

BJ Carpenter:
There's kind of the three P's. There's pasties and there's porchetta, and there's potica, and those are very much very identified with the Iron Range. And porchetta is served at all sorts of picnics and weddings and funerals, as is

potica. And potica is another thing that was very competitive. You knew which church on their holiday, bazaars women had their favorites and they would go to get it before it was all gone. And it's, if you've not heard of it or aren't familiar with it, it's a very thin dough that's made, it's a group effort, maybe three or four at least women. And you make this dough and you stretch it over. Usually they would put a bed sheet on the dining room table and stretch it over this bed sheet, and you have to pull it so that you can see through, they would say, so you could read the *Hibbing Daily Tribune* through it without any holes in It.

And then there's a mixture of ground walnuts and honey and brown sugar and butter and cinnamon. And you spread this mixture over the whole sheet of dough. And then you start pulling one end of the sheet, it would take three women, once they got it to flip over, they would pull it toward them, and you had to roll it really tight, and then you'd cut it into maybe eight or 10-inch lengths and bake it. And it's a lot of work, just like sarmas are a lot of work, but everybody wanted that, especially during the holidays, you wanted to have potica to serve.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Can you explain Sarma?

BJ Carpenter:
Sarma is a cabbage roll, and many different cultures have cabbage rolls. And it's basically, you would take the larger leaves, and when someone came up – it was brilliant, came up with the whole pickled sour head, they call them sour heads – I think there were a great size of relief that went up from the women working with the whole larger cabbage leaves was often very difficult, but the filling is made of usually ground pork, ground beef, rice, tomatoes, onions. I think that's about it. And you would pull, wrap these cabbage leaves. So they were into little piglets. I think a lot of people called them pigs in a blanket, then basically baked them in the oven under a lot of tomato juice, tomatoes and onions, at a low simmer and then freeze them for a winter staple.

Chantel Rodríguez:
These iron range foods were eaten by many living in the region. But it was the pasty that became the main staple of the miner's lunch pail. As a savory handheld meat pie, the pasty was a convenient, high caloric food that did not require utensils.

Oftentimes, miners' lunches were made by their wives. BJ interviewed iron range women to learn about what they packed in their husbands' lunch pails.

BJ Carpenter:
Sundays were always the big meal day and whatever, roast or meatloaf or would be leftover that would go into a sandwich usually on Monday or Tuesday. And there was always some fresh fruit, unless it was winter time, then there might be some canned fruit and pickles, but usually a very meat-centric community; meat sandwiches. But pasties were real big in the mines, and the different churches sold pasties on different days, and the different miners had their favorites from the different churches, so they would know what days to go and get the pasties. And my father was very popular on those days because he had these hot kilns that he was working with in the machine shop and guys would come and bring their pasties or any other thing that they wanted to heat up, and he would warm them up for him. And he learned to eat different dishes because they were always trading off things from their lunch pails.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Yeah, just like kids do, right? In elementary school and otherwise, you mentioned how there was different kinds of pasties that the men would like to purchase. Can you tell me the different types of pastes that might've been available or types of fillings?

BJ Carpenter:
Yes... I called it an ecumenical lunch on Mondays. They were from the Immaculate Conception, which was the little Italian Catholic church, and those were made with beef and pork. And on Tuesdays they came from Grace Lutheran, which was the Finnish Lutheran church, not the Swedish Lutheran church. And they did not have potatoes. They used rutabagas and beef. And on Wednesdays, the first Presbyterian church, they had carrots, potatoes, and a gravy with their beef. And on Thursdays, First Lutheran church, which was the church I grew up in, that's the Swedish Lutheran Church. They had onions, carrots, potatoes and no gravy. And then on Fridays, the Wesley Methodist Church with carrots, potatoes, and gravy, kind of like the Methodist and the Presbyterians were kind of in sync together on that.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Local businesses, like Sunrise Bakery in Hibbing, which opened in 1913, sold food that often made its way into miners' lunch pails. It was started by a baker from Rome named Giulio Forti, the great grandfather of my guest Tom Forti.

Tom Forti:
I grew up in Hibbing up on the Iron Range about 200 miles north of St. Paul and my family, we started a bakery in Hibbing in 1913. My great grandfather

then was taken over by my grandfather and his siblings, then onto my dad and my aunts. My grandfather by trade was a baker, so I don't think he made it too long in the mines and decided to work in a bakery in Eveleth. And then they moved to Hibbing and opened up his own shop.

Chantel Rodríguez:
So that bakery that he opened up was that, you called it an Italian bakery?

Tom Forti:
Yeah, so again, I don't have a ton of information or background on that, but I think it was Italian bread and hard rolls, pretty simple scratch bakery items. But at that time, I think as it's been told to me with all the ethnicities on the range, I think he learned pretty quick that he had to accommodate everyone. So I know we remember we'd have a Finnish rye or a German rye, just ethnic breads for all the different immigrants on the range.

Chantel Rodríguez:
And when your family first opened that bakery in Hibbing, do you know where it was located? I'm assuming it may have moved over time.

Tom Forti:
Yeah, it did. I mean, originally Hibbing was once they call it the town that moved. So originally the town was what we now know as North Hibbing, but in the early 19 hundreds, I think US Steel came in and discovered a lot of this iron ore under the town. So actually they had to move the town from North Hibbing to now, which we know is Hibbing. And they moved the bakery a mile and they moved it on it was logs and they just did different techniques back then to see how they moved buildings. And so now, I mean the original Sunrise Bakery was in North Hibbing now, which is, there's no land beneath it. It's all been mined. And they've moved a few times since. But in large part, the Rangers who would go to Hibbing would go to Third Avenue. And then we had a Sunrise Deli, which my mom and dad opened in the early eighties, and that was on First Avenue. And so there's been some movement throughout the time, but for the most part, Third Avenue is where the business was and people remember it being.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Can you tell me more about either the research you've done or how you've heard these stories?

Tom Forti:
Yeah, I mean it's really just passed down whether it's sitting around the dinner table or the coffee table, just hearing my parents or my aunts and uncles speak about how things were in the old days. And even operating the business I have now in St. Paul, I have a lot of customers, a lot of families who come in and would tell me stories of their experiences of what they remember of Sunrise Bakery and Sunrise Deli. And I've heard stories about people going to the bars and leaving the bar at midnight and going to the back door of the bakery and getting glazed donuts.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Was he passing along the trade of being a baker, and a bread baker?

Tom Forti:
My grandfather Vince carried the water for many years, but he worked endlessly tirelessly six days a week. And then that was passed on to my dad, who also took on the bakery for a number of years as well, although he went to college and studied and came back to Hibbing to take on the business. But for the most part, in those early years, my great grandfather, Giulio, he didn't come here when he came in 1910, he was already in his fifties.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Sunrise Bakery is still in business today, over 110 years after Tom's great grandfather opened it. I asked Tom what the Bakery means to him.

Tom Forti:
It was a very special upbringing to be a part of a family business like this, especially that means so much to people on the range, I think. So, I think gratifying and rewarding to have this business where I get to meet people from Hibbing or Chisholm or Eveleth who would shop at the bakery and who knew my dad or my grandfather or my aunts or maybe their aunts or their grandmothers or their mothers worked for us at one time.

Chantel Rodríguez:
For my guest BJ, her family kitchen was an important gathering place for sharing the practice of canning food.

BJ Carpenter:
There weren't any convenience stores and people grew most of their own foods and everybody's mother canned. I learned how to can and I baked and preserved, and my father and my uncles all hunted and fished. And so I grew up on a diet of walleye and northerns and venison. And my father used to hunt

with a group of farmers from the Montevideo area, and they would all come up to the homestead, my great grandfather's homestead every year in the fall. And they would eat better than anybody because they would bring cases of their freshly laid chicken eggs, and their freshly slaughtered chickens, and their freshly slaughtered pork and their homemade bacon and bread that had been made from their wheat.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Do you have perhaps, maybe a fondest memory of either eating or preparing iron range food that you wouldn't mind sharing?

BJ Carpenter:
My favorite memories center around, one of my great aunts had a farm, a dairy farm just outside of Hibbing, out by the airport. And I used to go, that was my favorite place to go because they grew everything. I mean, absolutely everything. They baked their own bread, they made their own yogurt, their own cheese, they churned their own butter. And that's where I learned to cook. I learned how to bake bread on a wood burning stove, and they still had a woodburning stove when I was growing up.

And they also had a summer kitchen. And if you're not familiar with what a summer kitchen is, it's because a kitchen that had their wood stove in, so you wouldn't heat the house up in the summertime where all the cooking would take place in the summer. And the canning, I was always going to run away from home and live in that little summer kitchen.

Chantel Rodríguez:
And when you think about those memories of canning, for example, can you tell me who was present at that sort of event?

BJ Carpenter:
Well, it was usually my mother and my grandmother when they were still alive. And oftentimes one of my aunts and my mother had one of those really big pressure cookers that looks likema bomb or something, and with all these levers to hold it down. And I was always very afraid of it, and it was heavy, and she was always sweating and it was really an arduous thing for her to undertake. But she canned all her tomatoes and beans and peas, and when my dad would bring home fish, she would pickle fish and in addition to freezing it. I got into canning when I was in college, but it was too much work and I was too afraid of the pressure cooker. So I was doing most of it in a water bath, which there are certain things you can't do in a water bath. I got to wash jars and canning rings, and I got to make sure that the lids were sealed. I

learned all the little nuances about how you have to make sure that the rims are clean and how to pack things into jars.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Beyond canning, BJ recalls another one of her favorite family traditions, chocolate cake.

BJ Carpenter:
My father loved chocolate. He loved chocolate cake. So my mother would bake from scratch, basically like a really good devil's food cake.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Well, I'm loving this story already. I love chocolate. So chocolate cake is my favorite of all time.

BJ Carpenter:
Well, he called it his Vitamin C

Chantel Rodríguez:
Smart man.

BJ Carpenter:
And it was in one of those long, I think they're like nine by 11 or nine by 13 pans. And then she would make hand beaten fudge icing to go over it. And she made that usually every Sunday so that he would take it in his lunch pail. And then he worked in the mines from seven until three, he'd be home and they always had coffee at 3:30 when he came in the door and a piece of cake, a piece of chocolate cake. And we were not allowed to go into that chocolate cake unless it was served to us. And so he was very serious about chocolate and no box cakes were allowed in the house.

Chantel Rodríguez:
While iron range cuisine and food traditions have a rich history, there is a growing concern today that this cultural knowledge might be fading away. Here's Bryan.

Bryan Morcom:
I see it drifting away because the elderly people are passing away and it hasn't been passed on, and it scares me to see it, but for people when I was younger, there people are always group of people making potato sausage, always community getting together, smoking suckers, doing all these things that are related to our area. You just don't see it anymore because it's hard work and

people are not doing it. They're looking to go to the grocery store, go to the deli and go for the convenience.

Chantel Rodríguez:
This same concern sparked BJ to write her book, *Come, You Taste: Family Recipes from the Iron Range*.

BJ Carpenter:
I'd always be asking for recipes from my different great aunts and anyone who would give them to me. And I was thinking about it, oh gosh, 20 or 30 years ago. And as the successive generations come into being, these kids don't know about this food, and it's so important. And I thought it needs to be written about. And there are many, in fact, you have a lion's share of them in the Historical Society, of sort of the church cookbooks and different fraternal organization cookbooks. And I did a lot of research over there for the book, but I wanted it to be a more formal telling and more than just some recipes, I wanted the stories to come out.

Chantel Rodríguez:
And how many recipes end up in your book, and where do they come from?

BJ Carpenter:
A lot of them came from different families. There are, they're well over 150, I know that. I contacted as many people as I could who were of the first generation, who I thought might be willing to talk with me. And the ones that I knew were really good cooks, and they were really happy to share their recipes and their stories. And I spent the better part of that year interviewing people and a lot of running back and forth to the iron range. But it was really a fun project, and I was really happy to finally get it off the ground.

Chantel Rodríguez:
And you had probably over 150 recipes. Did you make all of them?

BJ Carpenter:
Oh, yes.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Wow.

BJ Carpenter:
You have to test them.

BJ Carpenter:
And so I called in a lot of favors, and I had my friends and family all testing them to make sure that they worked and tweak them where needed. And one of the recipes, I do have the recipe for my mother's chocolate cake. And I was looking at it, the recipe card that she had written for me many years ago, and I realized she had just written it off the top of her head, and she didn't have any leavening listed in there. And I had to call her and ask her, what is it? Is it baking powder? Is it baking soda? And she just kind of laughed and she corrected it for me so that I could get it in properly.

Chantel Rodríguez:
And you mentioned that you did sort of historical archival research for the recipe book. So I'm curious how you were connecting the past and history through these documents to these recipes?

BJ Carpenter:
Well, I looked for what was traditional in the various communities, and I looked up different church books or community books from Chisholm and from Eveleth and from the Greenway, Coleraine area. And I wanted to give sort of a balanced, I started it out with bread, the most basic food, and then breakfast items. I mean, what would they eat at breakfast and what would they have for lunch and dinners? And there's a real tradition, at least maybe it's in the Scandinavian culture, but I think it goes across the board where the women would get together in the mornings and have coffee, and then they would have coffee when their husbands would come home in the afternoons, and you would have, lunch was always referred to as dinner at noon. And what most people call dinner, no, was called supper. And then often on the weekends, if you would go out to visit someone in the country or they would come into town, you would have lunch at eight or nine o'clock, which would be like some baked good or something that they had canned or pickled something light.

Chantel Rodríguez:
I'm hoping that you can speak to why you think it's so important to preserve Iron Range culinary traditions.

BJ Carpenter:
Well, it gives a sense of where people came from and there's something about cooking with a family, cooking with your elders, learning things. I mean, I remember I always looked forward to Thanksgiving because we always, always made these wonderful dishes and that we wouldn't have any other time of the year or the Christmas traditions. You would go to these different church

bazaars and the foods were radically different. The baked goods were radically different. And it was always fascinating to me. And there's so much junk food out now that, and the kids, as I said, there are kids, I remember meeting, I worked with a group called Urban Roots for a few years over on the east side of St. Paul, and a lot of these kids didn't even know what basic foods were. They'd never seen a fresh orange or they don't know where a fish comes from. And we are losing everything to fast, immediate, readily available, and that's just not right.

Chantel Rodríguez:
While BJ wrote a book to preserve iron range cuisine history, fifth-generation iron ranger Bryan Morcom is on a mission to expand the definition of iron range food. I spoke with him about what it was like to grow up in Tower and how he became a chef.

Bryan Morcom:
Typical middle class family. I grew up, my father was a miner as well, so he worked at MinnTac US Steel, which creates really good jobs up here for people. And yeah, it was a simple time. It was good. We played outside. We didn't have the social media or the internet or things like that and Tower's based off of Lake Millions, so a lot of activities were around fishing, hunting, a lot of outdoor sports up here for sure.

Bryan Morcom:
For me, my father always told me not to be a miner. He said, do something else. So he had come home and he is like, don't do this, do something else.

Chantel Rodríguez:
When did you first get interested in cooking?

Bryan Morcom:
I was 15 years old and I was working at the casino up here, and I actually wanted to go to UW Stout for hotel and restaurant management, and then all of a sudden I started cooking and I fell in love with cooking My thing. I love that you take raw ingredients, you create something with it and then you can see how people react from it, and it's kind of like all within a day. It's not like a carpenter building a house. It takes months upon months to get that end gratification. It was more of a boom, boom, boom thing because I was a very picky eater growing up. I mean, I ate macaroni and cheese and hot dogs. I mean, that was my staple. When people found out I wanted to become a chef and became a chef and stuff, it still was like, huh.

Chantel Rodríguez:
What was it that sparked your interest in cooking?

Bryan Morcom:
A lot of it was when you'd be sick and you'd stay home and watch PBS and you would watch *Julia Child* or *Yan Can Cook* and seeing these different things that I never had really seen. The only thing I had seen around here was kind of blob boring food. Of course they make polish and potato salad and stuff. I mean, there's a lot of great techniques that they use on how to make food, but there was just nothing that really was like, wow, that was good. It really excited my taste buds.

Chantel Rodríguez:
In hopes of making his culinary dream come true, Bryan joined the US Navy.

Bryan Morcom:
My idea was is I wanted to go to the Navy, have school paid for, and then actually be able to travel and learn different cuisines. That was my goal. Went to the Navy, find out, well, that's not how the GI Bill worked. You had to go to a four year school to get all your money out. So I was very fortunate though, leaving Brown Institute or La Cordon Bleu, I got an internship at Restaurant Alma down in the cities and I mean, they're still there. I mean it still, it's almost becoming an institution. It's been there so long and that's where I really fell in love with food and understood flavor and just the different cuisines and how Italians use garlic differently. It's not just raw. You could fry it and just everything. And being able to change our menu every two months and stuff, it really broadened my horizon on food that I was like, wow, food is important.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Bryan worked at Restaurant Alma for 13 years under chef Alex Roberts. Then he returned to the Iron Range where he opened a popup restaurant in Ely and called it Moose Bear Wolf.

Bryan Morcom:
It was, I believe the summer of '19 .I started off with all scratch cooking, full menu, tried to offer sandwiches along with entrees and stuff, and I didn't have the staff, so I turned it into a *prix fixe* where you pick, pick, pick kind like how Alma did. And I was trying to take all the ingredients that you would find around here and combine them like cream and wild rice soup, sweet corn soup, doing the ingredients you would find around here. I had porchetta, obviously porchetta with rhubarb chutney using things that I learned and

then using the ingredients here and putting it in a way that no one had ever seen before, and people really appreciated it.

Chantel Rodríguez:
I was especially interested to hear what Bryan's version of the pasty looks like.

Bryan Morcom:
I add fresh thyme to the pasties I make and you wouldn't see that. That's something as being a chef and understanding the flavors and it's like people love my pasties. I tell him it's my recipe for my great great grandpa, he snuck it over in his boot and I have it, but that's really not true because they wouldn't put fresh thyme in it and stuff, even though all that could be readily available around here, because those things do grow. Well, rhubarb's a huge thing around here on the Iron range, horseradish, things like that, sauerkraut. So it's like all these foreigners that came here to mine brought a little something of from their culture, and then it kind of got bastardized with everyone kind of mixing and mingling it and changing it to their liking.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Yeah. So for you, what were you hoping people would experience when they eat your dishes?

Bryan Morcom:
Well, I wanted people to see that different food was possible with the ingredients they could relate to. Like, oh, that's fancy. It's like, what do you mean it's fancy, it's wild rice. You know what wild rice is? Just because I put it in a cake and took some smoked white fish from Lake Superior and put it over and made a salad out of it. I mean, all these ingredients, it's just been put in a different package. So trying to break down that barrier. People just, I want this, I want this. But when they do eat those special dishes and stuff, and you have the different flavors and stuff that are all around here, it's just like, oh, wow, that is good.

But the Natives were here before all of us, so how can it not be wild rice be one of the main staples of Iron Range food. Or walleye, I mean the fishing and stuff like that. And you just don't hear people speak to that saying that is Iron Range food. And to me, that is absolutely Iron Range food. I mean, it's more so then because it was here first, and it has to, because they intertwined and intermingled and all the different nationalities, I guarantee eat wild rice up here. They eat those things that were here before them, so that's why it's like a melting pot. That's why for me, when you guys ask me about this, it's like, well, I've tried to define what iron range food is through doing different things, and

when I put it on the plate, people are like, what is this? And it's like, well, that's corn. That's wild rice. These are all iron range ingredients that grow really well. We have a short season and not a whole lot of everything grows here.

Chantel Rodríguez:
For Bryan, the work of redefining iron range cuisine to be sustainable and regionally inclusive requires taking into account the connection between memory and food.

Bryan Morcom:
I think about my grandma's chicken noodle soup. I mean, it was horrible, but it didn't matter because there's like two pieces of chicken and four noodles, but Grandma was making it for you and you were sitting there and having it with her. So it is hard to replace emotions when it comes to food. And I realized if people are upset and angry, the food won't taste as good as if people are in a good mood, in a good setting. So it is a whole thing. I mean, food can help a lot and bridge gaps, but you need ambiance. You need service. I mean, you need the whole show to make it really shine.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Like Bryan and BJ, Tom Forti is eager to celebrate iron range cuisine. I spoke with him about how his Iron Ranger restaurant in St. Paul brings together service, memory, and family history.

Tom Forti:
And so grew up in this family food business that started as an Italian bakery. And then over time evolved into other eastern ethnic specialty foods. I think that spirit I've kind of taken with me with this business in St. Paul, and you have to keep moving forward. That's one thing. I mean, they haven't really passed down recipes to me as much as they have passed down, like work ethic and always expanding, always growing, and always putting your best foot forward. So that's, I think the one thing I've taken from my dad especially. And then the lessons he learned from his dad and then Giulio who started it.

And I think I get people in from all over the range, and they know Sunrise Bakery or Sunrise Deli, and it's a business that people I think well of. And when I opened this business originally in St. Paul in 2016, I thought that might translate. I thought, oh, there's so much goodwill for Sunrise on the range, it's going to work here. But it dawned on me pretty early that this isn't the range. I'm not a baker. I don't make pasties. I don't make porchetta, but I know how to serve in a restaurant or to customer service or to interact with people. And so those are my strengths. And rather than have such a focused business on

the Sunrise, it's a bigger thing than that. And that's kind of how Iron Ranger came to be. And I love it.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Tom's Iron Ranger is located near the corner of Grand Avenue and Lexington. The restaurant's interior decor has many connections to the iron range.

Tom Forti:
I try to give it a feel of a Iron Range dive bar with a Grand Avenue touch. So it's rustic, it's unrefined, but yet it's clean and organized and we have a nice ceiling. We have beautiful woodwork on the floor from all natural woods taken from northern Minnesota. And then you walk in and it's all the Iron Range water towers from, and some of which don't even exist anymore. So they're just old pictures of water towers on one side, and on the other side you'll see all the hockey rinks on the iron range. We have a beautiful bar made by a carpenter from Hibbing, and then throughout the restaurant. And I think people, generally speaking, are very proud of where they come from and whether it's the Iron Range or Western Minnesota or the Twin Cities, I think seeing those things I think really makes it a little more endearing to them.

Chantel Rodríguez:
For me, whenever I walked into your restaurant, the first thing I saw was actually the big piece on the left that said Hibbing 1913 and then your family's bakery. Can you tell me about that piece and how that connects to the Iron Ranger?

Tom Forti:
Yeah, so would be, I mean, if we had a billboard in 1925, that's what it would've looked like. It was like a rendering, and I had a good friend kind of draw that up. And for me, and the menu and the food and the background, I have an opportunity to, just because my family business legitimizes or gives me the confidence to know that we're authentic, we're doing what was done on the range with food 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago. And so I think we're very proud of our heritage and our history and what my mom and dad have done and my grandfathers and my aunts and uncles with these businesses. And so the Sunrise, I think is very much like a key ingredient to really this restaurant. It is a way for me to carry the tradition going with our foods. And in addition, I mean our pasties, our sarma, our porketta, our bread, our potica are still coming from the Iron Range. So it's a good way for me to give back and keep spending money up there. And I mean, it's tough up there for many businesses and many people. And anything I can do to contribute or sponsor a hockey team or get involved with different curling events, we'd certainly jump on those

opportunities. And so yeah, Hibbing and the rest of the range, Chisholm and Virginia, and I mean, people are so supportive and they're so proud when they come in here and it's really great.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Your potica comes from somewhere in Hibbing. Is that one of your family members that makes It?

Tom Forti:
Yeah, that's my cousin Paul. He's been making it. He's been up there for, he's been running the bakery for 30 years, and he worked under my grandfather, and yeah, he's as talented as a baker as there is. I know if we get potica, I know if Paul made it or if I know if someone else made it, he is a magician with it, and it's not easy to make it. Making potica is an art, not a science. And for those who have made it, they know what I'm talking about.

Chantel Rodríguez:
After hearing from my other guests about the many pasty variations, I was eager to learn about Tom's take on the popular dish.

Tom Forti:
I think what you'll find is what the pasty is rutabaga, that's like the kind hot button ingredient, or if people put ketchup or gravy on it. So we've always put rutabaga in our pasty, and that's kind of the way we've done it. And most people would agree, but there's some people and ask if we have rutabaga in it and they just won't eat it, it does. But so rutabaga of all things is the one that people have to make sure it's in or not. And then the gravy question, whether you put gravy or ketchup or nothing. And if people want to put ketchup on a pasty or gravy on a pasty or mustard on a pasty, no judgment here, just eat it, enjoy it, however you like it.

Chantel Rodríguez:
When it comes to defining iron range food, Tom believes it depends on local context.

Tom Forti:
I think what Iron Range food is to me, I mean, of course it's the sarma, the pasty, the potica, and the porketta. South American is another one. It's kind of like a spicy chili meets sloppy Joe in a way. So I think that's what most people would agree on. But then I think you look at towns like Hibbing that has, Fraboni's, which is a very old sausage meat company, Virginia has F & D Meats and Dave's Pizza. And so I think to me, in my experience with what Iron Range food is, it's the town in which you're in. I think if you're in Eveleth, whether it's

the Roosevelt restaurant or if you're in Virginia, like I said, Dave's or maybe the Sawmill, and Chisholm Valentini's, which was an incredible restaurant for decades. And so I look at iron range food more as each town, maybe what their flagship restaurant would be. And so I think that's kind of, when I think of Chisholm, I think of Valentini's. Hibbing had the old Howard or the Atrium restaurant, or of course the Sunrise Deli and Bakery. So that's kind of how I see more of iron range food is how people identify with, again, their hometown and what they're proud of.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Not only is there more than one way to prepare a single iron range dish. There are also different spellings.

Tom Forti:
Sarma, which is, we're very much Croatian in our family, so that's Croatian cabbage roll, porchetta, which everywhere else except for the Iron Range, you'll see Porchetta spelled with a CH rather than what we spell it as with a K. But there is no K in the Italian language. But the Iron Range, the immigrants who came from Italy in the early 1900s, or when they started making porketta, they didn't have a really good grip on the language, so they put a K in there.

And that's where you see, you'll see Porchetta spelled with P-O-R-C-H-E-T-T-A, whereas we have it just with P-O-R-K-E-T-T-A. And so that's what makes it a little bit different. And I've had people say, oh, you spelled Porchetta wrong. I'm like, we did, but we didn't. But yeah, I think it's just all these little iron range towns. I mean, I think you'll find, I have found that people are just so proud of the town in which they came from. And now as those of us who have left the range, we're all just more so proud of the range than we are just every bit as much as the town we came from.

Chantel Rodríguez:
When I spoke with chef Bryan, he said that ambiance – creating a space for connecting food and memory – is an important part of a successful restaurant. Tom agrees.

Tom Forti:
It is more than just coming in here and a server taking your order. And I tell people who work here, I mean, it is more about you're more than just a server. It's about giving people a really good experience from the minute they get here to the second they leave. And that also includes obviously, the food, and especially the iron range food, because that is what we hang our hat on, and

that's what we're very proud of. And that's the origin, that's the backbone of this business or the menu.

And people are very nostalgic about not only the iron range, but especially iron range food in particular, potica and porketta. And I think it is very special to them. And because I think if you look at the Iron Range, the history of it, very proud, very prosperous for many years and tough times, good times, but there's definitely a spirit of the people of the range. And when they come into this restaurant, it's wonderful to talk to them and they want to tell their story. And so there's more going on here for me in this restaurant than just serving beers and salads. And it's more of, I think, an experience that we want not only people who aren't from the iron range, but when Rangers do come in here, they see the walls with their water tower or their hockey rink, or there's little tributes and nods on the menu to different Iron range towns. So it's special. I feel very blessed to have this opportunity to continue a tradition that, like many, fade away.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Listening to Tom talk about the stories he hears from Iron Range customers got me wondering about the food scene in the range itself.

Bryan currently lives in his hometown of Tower in the Vermillion Range. The Vermilion first attracted speculators looking not for iron, but gold. The last mines on the Vermillion closed in 1967, and the range's economy shifted to tourism and recreation. Today, just over 400 people live in Tower.

Bryan Morcom:
We live in a food desert here, essentially. There's no real good food. Everything's just high fructose corn syrup, overly processed box food. It's getting worse and worse, and we see the obesity of it, and we see the risks of it and the hazards of it.

Right now, I'm not cooking up here. I'm kind of freelancing. I took this summer off and I actually, I planted 3000 zinnias out before you come to Tower in purple and gold, so it says Tower, when you drive into town, there is no restaurants. I mean, the restaurants around here are a Sysco truck, hamburgers, fried chicken sandwiches. There's not a scratch place around here for miles. Ely there's a gentleman that he does well. I mean he's trying, but I can see over the years that he's backed up what he was really pushing for to offer to the masses. And if you are doing quality scratch food, you need skilled labor to pull it off as well. It's hard. It is a hard industry as I get older and look into it to really see. What is the business model where you are giving

people sustainable pay to do the work that difficult and being able to charge the customer? Because the customer doesn't want to see that price, but it is the truth of it. I don't think people really realize what it takes.

Chantel Rodríguez:
Unlike Bryan, Tom grew up in Hibbing, which is in the Mesabi Range. It is currently the only active iron range in Minnesota. While Hibbing's population is larger than Tower at around 16,000, its food scene faces similar challenges.

Tom Forti:
I graduated from Hibbing High School and I came to college in St. Paul and I moved back for a brief time in the early two thousands. But when I do go and visit, I don't see as much of an evolution with the food. We're keeping the traditions alive with the food that we're doing. But with what I'm seeing up there, I mean, we're seeing restaurants that are, it's hard to take creative, I think leaps sometimes, especially in places like the iron range, because whether it's the clientele or the economy, it's a tough business as it is, and it's a business that you have to play it safe with the menu. And I think especially on the iron range, because if you take leaps, it's just a harder place to take chances with a menu. People, they only can spend so much on going out to eat. And I think pizzas and chicken wings and burgers are kind of where it's at. And I think that's true for many places, not only the Iron Range.

Chantel Rodríguez:
In the face of concerns over fading food traditions and challenging economic landscapes, my guests remain hopeful about the future of iron range cuisine. Here's Bryan and Tom.

Bryan Morcom:
I'm a very hopeful and optimistic person, so of course I always think there's possibility or I want to try to open a restaurant or I am always trying to think of what can we do. I just don't think Iron Range cuisine has been really defined and been able to market it as one. What are you going to go to a restaurant and have porketta, pasties and potica? I mean, there's got to be more to it. And I think it's more about the ingredients that are around here that do really well that can be added in and kind of create our own iron range cuisine in a sense, even though it is clearly iron range, wild rice, the gardens that do well because of the cold weather climate up here and things like that. That's what I would like to see – is a restaurant like that.

I would love to see using local ingredients when possible, connecting with some of the farmers that are around here that when I did have a pop-up, I was

buying local pork from Embarrass and some other things that I was very proud to sell because for me and what I learned was it is not about the chef. If you find the right ingredients, you just got to cook it right, season it a little bit, and it shines for itself. It's not the chef and his creativity. Somewhere around here, it's actually the quality of food.

Tom Forti:
Well, my hope is that the foods in which we're doing, I think the porchetta, the pasty of the sarma, the potica, I think my hope is that in 20, 30 years from now that people are still eating them and can pronounce them and know what they are, and those of whom are up in Hibbing, Mickey Brown, who's now he purchased the Sunrise Deli, and then my cousin Paul and his wife Hannah, who now owns the bakery, my hope is that they're able to keep the tradition going with their businesses because without them, it is grandmothers and it is aunts and uncles, but it's becoming a lost tradition with a lot of these foods. And so that would be a hope for me is that it continues. And for anyone listening to this podcast, I would encourage you some cold wintry weekend to drive up to Hibbing. And in any town on the Iron Range in Chisholm or Virginia or Eveleth or Mount Iron, Buhl, Coleraine, Nashua, Keewatin and any one of these towns go up there and spend a weekend and spend some money and go to some restaurants. And I think that would be a hope for me, if anything, is to keep supporting these businesses up on the range.

Chantel Rodríguez:
After speaking with my guests and sampling all of the iron range dishes, I can see there is so much history on the plate. Dishes like porketta, the pasty, and potica tell stories of mining, immigration, and community formation. It is clear that iron range cuisine is an important part of cultural identity that connects individuals to family history, and over time has also connected individuals to a regional iron range identity.

And yet iron range cuisine is threatened by circumstances like changing lifestyles and global economic forces. All of my guests have responded to this reality by working to preserve cultural knowledge of iron range food in their own ways. Whether it be by writing down recipes and their histories or carrying forward family traditions.

In the process they are participating in the tradition of *adapting*, and in some cases *expanding*, iron range dishes. This is what I love about this story of iron range cuisine. There is no single definition of it, and no single recipe for any given dish.

If you have a favorite range dish or family food tradition, especially if it's chocolate cake, share your story by tagging us on social media with #MNUnraveled.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled: pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

Special thanks to Kimmy Tanaka for her help on this episode.

You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website mnhs.org/unraveled.

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Rose Productions. Our research team is Ari Fields, Alex Magnolia, Hayden Nelson and me, Chantel Rodriguez. Our production team is Brett Baldwin and Meghan Buttner, with recording, sound design and editing by Chris Heagle and Zack Rose.

Our theme music is Careless Wandering by Arthur Benson.

Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the State of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on Nov. 4, 2008, and our generous donors and members. You can support Minnesota Unraveled at mnhs.org/support.

Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious, and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.