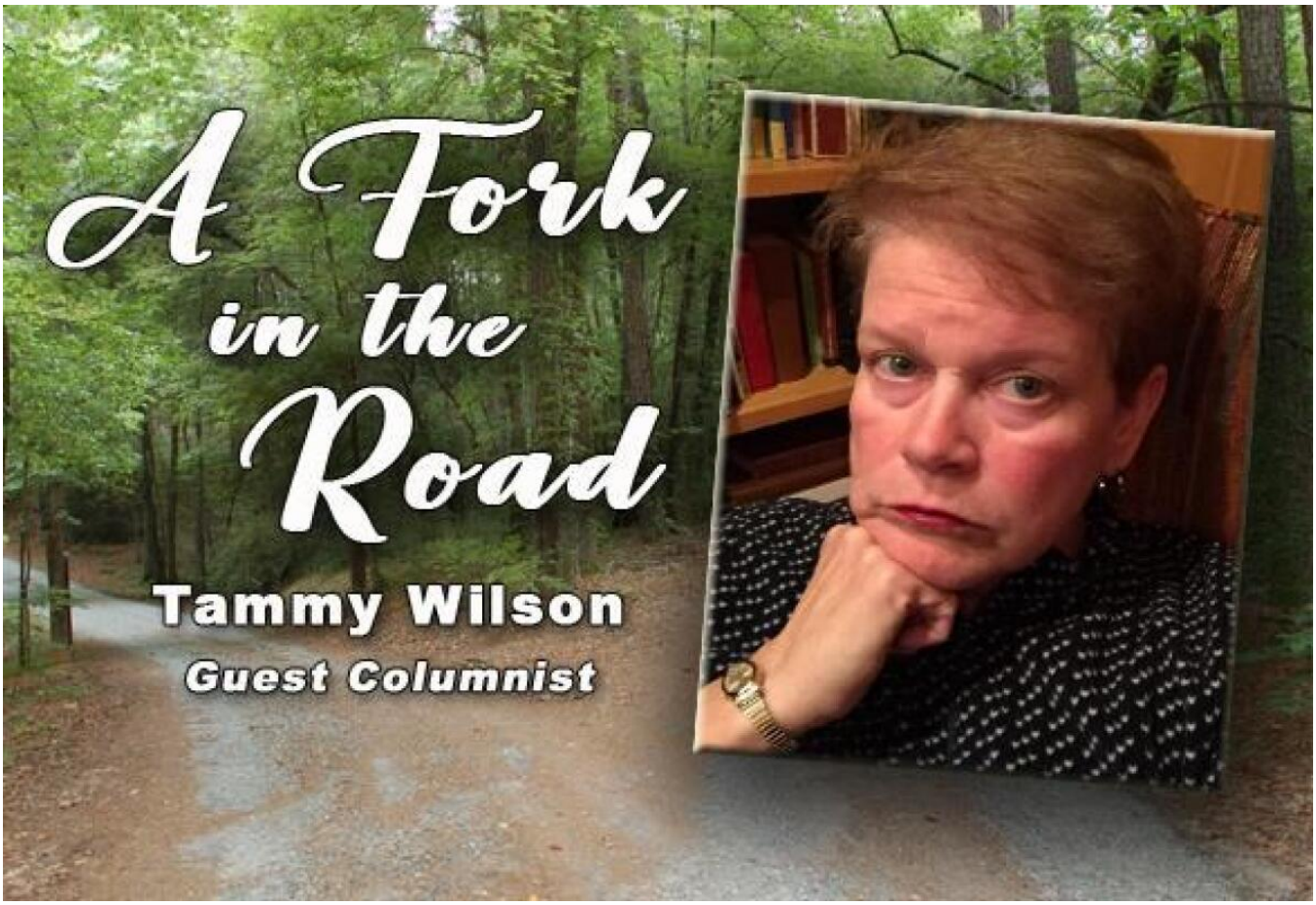

The Mystique Of Old Food

Tammy Wilson

Did you see the story about Queen Elizabeth's wedding cake?

A rare, boxed piece sold recently for $2,800, according to a British auction house.

The cake, which no longer looks edible, has survived for almost eight decades since the wedding day on November 20, 1947.

It is still neatly packaged in a small box with the silver insignia of a then-Princess Elizabeth stamped on it and an elaborate doily.

My friend Candace saw this and sent me the news link so I could read all about it. She and I share this fascination with old food. Her husband, who grew up in a family that owned a country store, so over the years he has acquired a variety of once-edible gag-gifts (emphasize gag).

One outstanding find: a can of pineapple tidbits that had somehow dried inside and rattled when you shook it.

Other items involved vintage baby food—tender reminders of fleeting days with an infant that will never come again.

I have no room to talk.

When I clean the refrigerator, I always find two things in the cheese drawer—one is a tiny container of Nutella chocolate spread. This particular sample expired July 5, 1996. It's accompanied by a packet of Savora mustard from Argentina, vintage 2000.

I acquired them on trips. They remind me of packing a picnic lunch for a boat trip on the Rhine and taking a side trip to Montevideo. And as crazy as it may sound, I can't part with either. The mini samples have survived numberless purges of the refrigerator, even relocation to a new fridge. When it came time to move to our new home in 2008, sure enough, the Nutella and its sidekick, Savora, got packed in the cooler along with refrigerated items and driven to our new address.

Joining them in 2010 was a mini bottle of Mead from Dublin. The label says 15% alcohol. Put that in your glass and drink it. Only I haven't. It's still lying in wait for a special occasion that will never come.

That's how it is with odd keepsakes. If you've kept something for decades, what's one more year?

Freezers contain more food keepsakes because they're cleaned less often. A deer ham stayed in our deep freeze for the better part of five years before I ran out of space and decided that well-aged venison wasn't going to make it to the dinner table, ever. It got the heave ho with freezer-burnt green beans and crystallized strawberries.

Maybe you have keepsakes in your icebox—a special bottle of wine you won't open, a jar of hot sauce with a funny label.

I get my keeper genes honestly. For twelve years, my mother saved a slice of our birthday cakes. The collection began in 1950 with my brother's first birthday, and worked its way through 1958 when my parents sold the deep freeze. The cake samples were moved to the attic where they re-froze, thawed and re-baked with the changing seasons. I remember the cake samples lined up inside plastic containers, neatly labeled by date and name. One had blue icing and silver dragées often used on cakes and cookies in the 1950s. When we moved, the collection was thrown away, which seemed sensible at the time.

I kept this family secret until I discovered that my mother-in-law owned a piece of old wedding cake—very old in fact. It has rested, wrapped in parchment paper, inside a ceramic ginger jar since the Civil War, as near as anyone could tell. The cake square was bought it at an estate sale and learned that what looked like white pumice was actually a Victorian pastry. Amazingly this this tiny square of cake survived bugs, moves, fires, and cleanings and everything else that could happen in a century and a half remaining inside a ceramic ginger jar. When we divided up the estate, I secretly wanted the jar with its precious contents, as if I need more old food lying around--but another relative had dibs on I, and that was that.

This example had definitely outlasted the wedding cake I saw at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum a few years ago. Of all the artifacts in that history-packed museum, I remember the wedding cake! I took a picture of it. The once-white square dated from 1916.

As the story goes, the Eisenhower cake sample was discovered in the attic of Mamie's parents' home after her mother died in the early 1960s. It's preserved in a stars-and-stripes box and has been helped by the museum staff to retain its cake-like appearance.

And then there's The Egg. My Aunt O saved the first hen's egg laid on the farm after she married my uncle. He wrote the date on the shell, Oct. 6, 1938—two days after the couple said "I do" in the farmhouse living room.

The Egg didn't burst or break and made the move into town in 1966. It resided in my aunt's kitchen cabinet for another 47 years—taken carefully out of its teacup to be viewed and admired at family get-togethers.

When Aunt O passed in 2013, my cousin took custody of The Egg, and I, in turn, gifted her a filigree egg-shaped container for display and safekeeping.

It seemed the least I could do.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Tammy Wilson is a writer who lives near Newton.