

## Sidedoor Podcast S2 Ep. 19 America's First Food Spy Transcription

[INTRO MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Okay, so confession time. In addition to being a podcast host, some days, I also work at the farmers market, at a pickle stand. I know, it's weird, but I just love food.

Tony Cohn: And after my shift, I shop around for fresh produce; things like lemons, avocados, peaches, leafy greens. And I always feel kind of old school, like "this is how it must've felt to shop in the 1800s," before grocery stores were really a thing. But in reality, if I was shopping back then, I wouldn't have been filling my reusable bags with fruits and veggies.

Tony Cohn: That's because 150 years ago, Americans ate mostly meats and cheeses. And if fruits and vegetables were on the menu, it was typically things like root veggies, or cabbage, sometimes green beans. Basically, crops that you could grow in your garden. After all, this was a time before refrigerators, and there was always a chance that your salad could come with a side of cholera.

Tony Cohn: But in the late 1800s, Americans' got a little more, adventurous. People began eating more foreign fruits like bananas and grapefruit, and veggies like broccoli. US businesses, farmers, even the government realized that there was money to be made off these exciting, tasty crops. But first, someone had to find them, and that often-involved international adventure, intrigue, and, in some cases, danger.

Tony Cohn: So, this week on Sidedoor, we learn all about food explorer David Fairchild; a man who traveled the world and took risks all in the interest of finding the next big thing.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: David Fairchild was a scientist and explorer who traveled around the world from the late 1800s to 1948, looking for treasure. Except the treasure he was seeking wasn't gold or jewels. It was plants.

Tony Cohn: Most of what I know about David Fairchild, I learned from Daniel Stone, an author and a writer for National Geographic who just came out with a new book "The Food Explorer: The True Adventures of the Globe-Trotting Botanist Who Transformed What America Eats."

Tony Cohn: So, I've asked Daniel to join me to talk about Fairchild's work. Say, "Hi," Daniel.

Daniel Stone: Hi!

Tony Cohn: Um, welcome to the Sidedoor studio.

Daniel Stone: Great to be here!

Tony Cohn: Okay. So, introduce us to this guy, your man. It seems that David Fairchild was like, part explorer, part botanist. And like me, he was a man seriously devoted to food.

Daniel Stone: He was all of those things. Uh, he was a son of the Midwest, uh, about 120 years ago, who grew up on farms. Uh, at the time, you had most farmers growing mostly the same things. And he saw a need for more diverse crops; bananas. Avocados were his big one, which he referred to as alligator pears. Umm...

Tony Cohn: I guess that kind of makes sense if you think about it.

Daniel Stone: It does when you think about it.

Daniel Stone: Uh mangoes; he brought in 58 varieties of mangoes. Dates, he picked up, uh, in Baghdad in 1902. Um, Egyptian cotton was his introduction from Egypt in 1899.

Tony Cohn: How does somebody even get into this kind of a thing? Like, to become a food explorer? How did he enter this profession?

Daniel Stone: He was a young botanist and then a staffer for the USDA. And so, he was sent abroad to find things that can help farmers. Things that could grow the U.S. economy. And the two of them together led him on all of these adventures to more than 50 countries around the world.

Tony Cohn: Daniel, I've been reading, "The Food Explorer" for the past couple of weeks now and it is amazing! And I want to give listeners a taste, um...

Tony Cohn: Do you see what I did there?

Daniel Stone: I did.

Tony Cohn: Very funny.

Daniel Stone: Nice work.

Tony Cohn: Um, let's get you to read an excerpt of the book. But before you do, can you set the stage for us? Uh, I want you to read the first chapter. What's going on there? What's, what's happening in the very beginning of the book?

Daniel Stone: So, David Fairchild was not a professional from day one. In fact, when he started doing this kind of work, of going to other countries and acquiring, sometimes by stealing their seeds and fruits and crops, uh, he wasn't very good at it. And so, that's where we start at the very beginning of the book. It's one of his first episodes and it doesn't go quite as he planned.

Tony Cohn: And we're sitting here at the Smithsonian and from what I understand, the excerpt you're about to read, the Smithsonian is actually, kind of involved.

Daniel Stone: Exactly. The Smithsonian used to offer, uh, internships around the world at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Tony Cohn: Like, how can I get one of those?

David Stone: [Laughs]

Tony Cohn: Do they offer them to staff members?

David Stone: Time machine?

Tony Cohn: [Laughs]

David Stone: But Fairchild was lucky. He got one of the first ones at the Smithsonian zoological stations in Naples, Italy.

Tony Cohn: And listeners, just a little side note. At this point, Fairchild's kinda like a food-explorer freelancer. While he's in Naples, he gets an assignment from someone in the Department of Agriculture to go to Corsica, which is a small French island off the coast of Italy. There, he's supposed to get a citron, or a Corsican lemon, by whatever means necessary.

Tony Cohn: Okay. Back to Daniel Stone, reading from his book "The Food Explorer: The True Adventures of the Globe-Trotting Botanist Who Transformed What America Eats."

[MUSIC]

David Stone: The trip had been punishing. A rocky, overnight voyage over rough seas. Humid air, the kind that clings to one's face, stifled romantic visions of the Mediterranean. Even David Fairchild, a 25-year-old from the prairie lands of Kansas, was surprised by the small town of Bostia, Corsica's eastern outpost where the boat docked. "I had been accustomed to a certain degree of dirt, but the town of Bostia appeared unbelievably filthy," he wrote of his first

impression. Shabby dogs circled him on the dusty street as he stumbled around, disoriented in the early light of day.

[MUSIC]

David Stone: Had he been closer to home, he had found the scene easier to stomach, but here on the French island, Fairchild was as far as anyone in his family have ever ventured. His journey had taken him from Kansas to Washington, across the Atlantic to Italy, north to Germany, and then south again, across the Alps, to the port where he met the boat. Such distance might have filled him with pride or pleasure, if the last leg hadn't stirred a deep, ailing in his stomach. Sometime during the night, it had become December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1894. Fairchild had spent his youth dreaming of traveling overseas. And now, finally, he was on his first assignment. He waited for the Post Office to open. And when it did, a man handed him an envelope, crowded with forwarding addresses. Inside was a short message. "Secretary refuses authorization."

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: As an agent for the United States Government, Fairchild had been cautioned to keep secret his mission in Corsica. This sort of undertaking had rarely been tried and without a treaty or informal diplomatic agreement or even the definitive knowledge that such a visit was legal, the best Washington could hope for was that it's man could get in and out without causing a scene. Fairchild had little direction and, as now had become clear, even less money. The order from the Secretary of Agriculture to go to Corsica had been nullified by the same man who refused to cable money for his agent to complete the job.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: Fairchild liked the idea of espionage, but he was as skilled at covert action as he was at ballroom dancing, having done neither. He was a botanist; an agent of plants, and not a good one. Without money, Fairchild couldn't afford to stay long. But since he was already on the island, he figured might as well try to complete the objective.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: He flagged a cab drawn by a single horse that trotted south along the coast. To think clearly, he needed to eat. He also needed a lead. Corsica was hilly, hot and too big to wander blindly. He stopped at a roadside restaurant, where he was the only customer. While he waited to eat, he mentioned casually to the restaurant's owner, a hapless man eager to divulge his own life's problems, that he was interested in plants. "Where," he asked in a mix of English, broken Italian and arm gestures, "could he some of the island's trees? Perhaps it's famous citron?" The man lit with purpose. He took Fairchild behind the restaurant to sample figs he had grown, each one a mouth full of syrup. He suggested that Fairchild see the Mayor of Barugo, a town at the top of a nearby mountain, at the center of the citron region, and gave

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Fairchild a note of introduction. "There I was, with an adventure on my hands, and I enjoyed it," Fairchild wrote. He walked outside and hired a donkey to carry him up, observing the view at every switchback up the mountain, oblivious to the fact that Corsicans can be weary of outsiders.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: "The Mayor of Barugo was a red-faced man with skin baggy and sagging, a bandit of a fellow," Fairchild jotted in his red pocket notebook. The Mayor's house sat on wooden stilts a top a pigsty, caked in mud. Fairchild had to navigate the snorting beasts to deliver the note from the man that served him lunch. As he might have expected, the Mayor spoke no English and Fairchild knew almost no French, but the Mayor made it understood that he had to leave for a funeral. He poured Fairchild a glass of wine and told his guest to wait. When the Mayor left, Fairchild noticed a gray patch of mold floating in his glass. He emptied it through a crack in the floorboards, on to the pigs. Then he moved to the window, where he looked for a long moment at the deep valleys of orchards filled with fruit. It occurred to him, so long as he was waiting, what difference would it make to wait outside? Efforts to be inconspicuous were betrayed by his large camera, an Eastman Kodak that folded like an accordion and had a cloth curtain. On the street, a small crowd gathered around him, murmuring about the peculiar contraption and the man holding it. He stopped to photograph a group of women in long, black skirts. A man urged Fairchild to photograph the view off the side of the mountain. Another woman asked him to take an image of her daughter. He obliged the woman's request, but ignored the man, who turned and marched away. While his head was concealed by the curtain, he felt someone grab his arm. "Vos papier s'il vous plait." It was a policeman, or perhaps a soldier. Fairchild had no papers to show nor could he respond in a way the man understood. The minimal French learned in school left his head at the precise moment it might have been useful. In just two hours on the island, two hours into his first assignment, working in a foreign land on behalf of the American government, Fairchild found himself arrested.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: If he knew anything about this type of work, he demonstrated the opposite. He had made his mission known to a government official, he had drawn attention to himself in the streets and worst of all, he would now be interrogated. If he couldn't hold his resolve, the man would compel him to divulge what he had come for and who had sent him. The gendarme escorted Fairchild to a small house that doubled as the town's jail. He gestured for Fairchild to empty his pockets. The man picked up Fairchild's red pocket notebook and began to thumb through its pages. He asked *insticada* what each word meant. Some of the scratches were in English and others in German and Italian; his attempt to practice languages he didn't know. Fairchild was filled with half of fear, half with indignation; neither of which compelled him to cooperate. In the corner of the room sat a woman in a black robe. Under it, she held a baby,

perched at her breast. As she rocked, she barked sharp orders in Corsican French to the man. He paid her no attention His gaze affixed on the notebook. It struck Fairchild that the man mistook him for a spy, which he technically was, but the kind seeking more serious secrets. How else to explain the notebook with suspicious writings? Why the camera? Owing to the heat, his growing annoyance and the creeping fear that he could spend his life in a Corsican prison, blood began to rush from Fairchild's face. "On an errand that was not likely to be pleasing if explained to the guard, with no papers in my pocket, with a captor whose very look was enough to terrify anyone and in a jail that would rival in filthiness any that the Inquisition ever had, I think there are a few men who would have not impaled," he later wrote.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: The policeman was familiar with the game of espionage, with foreigners arriving innocently, but looking for political or economic secrets. Or worse, to survey the land's value. The island had been war torn for centuries. A play thing for European empires that fought for the rights to a Mediterranean oasis, rich in crops, water and fertile soil. America wasn't a threat, but the superpower Spain was, as was Italy, France's neighbor, which saw rich promise in a nearby island. A European spy, hoping to steal strategic secrets from Corsica would be wise to impersonate a bumbling American who can barely speak French. If the money had arrived from Washington, Fairchild would have had papers to prove his identity, his employer and his mission, which at the very least, was less threatening than looking for military secrets. Instead, all he had remaining in the bottom of his pockets was an old reimbursement check for 15 dollars for work as a government contractor. With nothing left to offer, Fairchild tossed the crumpled envelope containing the check on to the desk. But something caught both men's eyes. There, on the envelope, the muscular visage of Ulysses S. Grant. 30 years prior, General Grant led Union troops in America's Civil War, which made him a front-page face in European newspapers. "Ulysses Grant," Fairchild said, pointing at the imprint. "Americano." The woman with the baby stared. The man held the envelope up to study it. He seemed more taken by Grant's brawny gaze than by Fairchild's flailing insistence. Then, slowly, he pushed the red notebook back at Fairchild and uttered a strong of words that sounded like a warning, never to come back.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: Fairchild stumbled out of the house, sweating lightly and breathing hard. With his head down, he walked past the group of Corsicans watching him. Then hoisted himself on to the donkey he had hired and kicked its side. As the animal trotted away, Fairchild peered over his shoulder every few paces, wary of being pursued. Halfway down the mountain, when he felt confident he wasn't being followed, he dismounted. An orchard of yellow fruit had caught his eye. And he dashed into the grove of citron trees. He checked over both shoulders as he crouched in the dirt. Then, he broke off four small bud sticks, the part of the tree where two thin branches merge into one. He tucked them into his breast pocket. These cuttings could later be grown into new trees; the Corsican Citron mimicked in American soil. Then he plucked three small fruit from the tree's branches. If the buds didn't survive, the seeds inside the citrons

might. Back on the trail, Fairchild slowed the donkey. Success was in reach, but only if he could safely leave the island. The smartest thing he could do was to depart Corsica from a different city, where port agents wouldn't recognize him or have reason to inspect his camera and search his pockets.

[MUSIC]

Daniel Stone: In Bostia, he hailed another horse drawn cab to drive him to the west side city of Ajaccio. There, he asked an old man in an orchard for one of the few French terms he did remember: pomme de terre (potatoes). Fairchild paid for the stolen citron buds with agricultural knowledge. He demonstrated for the man a method he had once read about in a book. He stuck the sticks into the starchy centers of potatoes, so that the cuttings would survive the lengthy trip to Washington. And after that, the remaining coins dangling in Fairchild's pocket were just enough to get him back to Naples.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: That was Daniel Stone reading from his book, "The Food Explorer: The True Adventures of the Globe-Trotting Botanist Who Transformed What America Eats." We'll find out how Fairchild goes from rookie to food spy right after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Welcome back! So, I'm here with my new friend, Daniel Stone, who just told us about a food spy. Can I say that he was a food spy?

Daniel Stone: He was.

Tony Cohn: Is that right?

Daniel Stone: Yeah.

Tony Cohn: Named David Fairchild and his first trip to Naples. So, what happens after that reading in Corsica?

Daniel Stone: Fairchild was kind of a free agent at the beginning of his life and his career, who was funded by a friend of his, to circle the world and collect plants. This friend was someone he met on a steamship on his way to Naples. A fabulously wealthy, traveling playboy named Barbour Lathrop and the two of them, Fairchild and Lathrop, travelled around the world for the first few years of this type of work. Eventually, Fairchild becomes an agent for the U.S. government, then the government finances his travels around the world.

Tony Cohn: You know, you mentioned that an avocado is one of the fruits, right? An avocado is a fruit.

Daniel Stone: Correct.

Tony Cohn: Um that he helped cultivate in the U.S. When he brought that sample back, did he know that it was gold? Like, did he know that I would be sitting, you know, at a coffee shop, having avocado toast in 2018?

Daniel Stone: Uh, I don't know how he could.

[Laughs]

Daniel Stone: Not at all. Remember, he's seeing a lot of different fruits all over the world. Things that everyone where they grow, everyone says this is the greatest fruit in the world and he's trying to figure out 'will these things grow in American soil? And even if they do, will people in America want to eat them?' Right? There's two parts and there are a lot of failures. I could go into some of them.

Tony Cohn: What's one of them?

Daniel Stone: His biggest one was the Mangosteen. It's a small, purple fruit of South Asia. It is indescribably delicious and sweet. Uh, but it has a very thick skin. It bruises really easily. There's not a lot of fruit and it doesn't ship.

Tony Cohn: But, he was like, in love with it. And then ships it.

Daniel Stone: He loved it.

Tony Cohn: And nothing really happened.

Daniel Stone: It's a tropical fruit, native to a part of the world whose climate doesn't really exist in the U.S.

Tony Cohn: Something that I love about, um, Fairchild's story is that he's able to, for the lack of a better word, like charm all of these, um, policeman, wealthy patrons, throughout his life. I mean, you describe him in the book as being awkward and charming and charismatic. Where does he... what was his personality like?

Daniel Stone: He was a little of all three. At the beginning, he starts off very awkward, unsure of himself. Later, he gets to be something of a spy. He realizes that some of these countries don't always want to give up their agricultural capital, right? But he always saw value in diplomacy over theft and I'll give you an example. In 1901, American beer is not the greatest beer in the world. The brewers of beer, they need better hops. And the best hops in the world are grown in Bavaria, in southern Germany. So, Fairchild is sent to Bavaria to essentially steal or acquire some Hallertau hops. And Germany knows that it has some of the best hops in the world. It



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actually has guards, young men that they hire to guard the fields at night. So, Fairchild is sent and he could of waited til the guards kind of fell asleep, taken a few cuttings like the citron and just fled, gotten out of there and it would have been fine. But he saw value in diplomacy of trying to befriend the growers. And eventually, one night, one of the growers came to his guesthouse and knocked on the door and said, "You can't tell anyone I'm doing this, but I'm going to give you a few cuttings of the hops. I'll send them to a hotel in the next town. Get them and leave."

Tony Cohn: Wow!

Daniel Stone: And, and that really fueled the American beer brewing industry, uh, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the teens and certainly in the years before prohibition.

Tony Cohn: You said earlier that you spent four years researching Fairchild's life. Like, how did you even go about that research?

Daniel Stone: Uh, I found his archive of letters and correspondence. Um, I also found his living grandchildren. They had some of his diaries, some of his old journals, his memos. They also had his love letters, uh, written in 1902 and 1903.

Tony Cohn: Well, we have a little bit of a surprise for you that I'm really excited about. Can I take you downstairs to show you a surprise?

Daniel Stone: I would love that!

[Laughs]

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Mics in hand, Daniel Stone and I left the studio and headed to the elevators.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Okay, we're in the elevator. Daniel looks like... you look giddy.

Daniel Stone: I'm excited, yeah!

Tony Cohn: Yeah.

Tony Cohn: Daniel, you can read where we are right now.

Daniel Stone: Uh, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Tony Cohn: Exactly. Go ahead.

Tony Cohn: We had gotten to our destination. Three floors down from the studio, where Smithsonian Reference Archivist, Ellen Alers, helped us set up the surprise.

Ellen Alers: [Laughs] I went looking for you and so, I came across this. And even though it's a very small box, I think there's going to be some cool stuff in here for you. As you can read by the title on the folder, "Notebook and Accompanying Photographs and Notes – 1896-97."

Tony Cohn: So, what are we... what are we looking at right now?

Ellen Alers: What we're looking at is, uh, a field notebook. It's about six inches long, about three and a half inches wide. It's covered in leather that shows a lot of wear and tear.

Tony Cohn: The owner of that leather-bound notebook? None other than David Fairchild.

Ellen Alers: Um, but it's um, full of his notes.

Daniel Stone: Wow.

Tony Cohn: Do you like already immediately have guesses of what this is?

Daniel Stone: Are these when he was in Germany?

Tony Cohn: No.

Ellen Alers: No.

Daniel Stone: Wow, this is, this is really cool.

[Laughter]

Daniel Stone: Full of food. Attendance. Thus have small hands and transparent abdomen.

Tony Cohn: How are you so good at reading... I bet you've read his handwriting a lot.

Daniel Stone: I can read... I can read his handwriting better than my, my own. Yeah.

Tony Cohn: Wow.

Daniel Stone: Wow. Uh, "Please return to owner by mail."

[Laughter]

Ellen Alers: So, if it's lost, there's, there's a return address.

Tony Cohn: 1896.

Daniel Stone: This could be when he was in Java.

Ellen Alers: Yes!

Tony Cohn: Yes! Yes! Yes!

Ellen Alers: Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Daniel Stone: This is in Java. Wow!

Ellen Alers: Yeah!

Tony Cohn: What was going on when he was in Java? Like, what's he probably writing about in this particular journal?

Daniel Stone: When he went to Java, he was studying insects and termites still, for a long time before.... kind of his wealthy companion, kind of grabbed him by the lapels and said, "Hey! You should be studying plants instead and bring them back to America." And he couldn't have imagined that 130 years later, we'd be sitting here.

Daniel Stone: Oh, measurements of termite fungus, with a little drawing. That's cool.

Tony Cohn: Do you think that Fairchild's work is less relevant today than it was 100 years ago?

Daniel Stone: Uh, his work, I think of as the building blocks of agriculture that we still work with today. So, you could think of Alexander Graham Bell inventing the telephone and how much he's responsible for the current iPhone as a result, right? Fairchild has some of the earliest specimen of avocados and mangoes in this country. And as a result, 130 years later, we have not his exact mangoes, but mangoes that his are incorporated into and it's all part of a living process that will keep going on for centuries.

Tony Cohn: You get Fairchild, right? Not only his work, but his personality, his essence. If, like, I was interviewing him right now and I were to say, "What would you like your legacy to be to the American people?" How, how do you think he would answer that question?

Daniel Stone: He was baffled at why people were so accustomed to so little, right? People who never travelled beyond their community. People who never tried foods that were foreign or new to them, right? He even had a quote that said, "You know, I can't believe man's propensity

to be satisfied by so few.” So, he always pushed his children and his grandchildren and anyone he knew to keep pushing farther. Keep asking. Keep trying to find out new information. And don’t be satisfied with what you already know. Focus on what more you can find out about.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: You’ve been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Tony Cohn: If you enjoyed hearing about Fairchild’s adventures and want to know even more about his life, check out Daniel Stone’s new book, “The Food Explorer: The True Adventures of the Globe-Trotting Botanist Who Transformed What America Eats.” You can find it wherever books are sold.

Tony Cohn: Daniel and I visited the Smithsonian Institution Archives to gently turn the pages of Fairchild’s journal, but, and here’s the really cool part. You can also look through his journal! Anyone can visit the Archives reading room. Just make sure to contact the archives before you visit, so that they can pull the objects that you want to see. To learn more about the Archives or to contact the archivists, go to [www.siarchives.si.edu](http://www.siarchives.si.edu).

Tony Cohn: Special thanks to our friends at the Smithsonian Institution Archives, Ellen Alers and Effie Kapsalis.

Tony Cohn: Our original score is by Nico Porcaro. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. This episode was mixed by Tarek Fouda.

Tony Con: Daniel, no pressure, but can I ask you to read the credits for the show?

Daniel Stone: Oh yeah! What are you talking about, pressure?

Tony Cohn: Cool.

[Laughter]

Daniel Stone: That’s big time.

Tony Cohn: Now that you’re all warmed up.

Daniel Stone: Our podcast team is Justin O’Neill, Rachel Aronoff, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Elisabeth Pilger. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. I’m your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!

[Laughter]

Tony Cohn: Maybe!

[MUSIC]