

Our Town

The real owners in the ownership society. Economist Gar Alperovitz writes in a TomPaine.com article drawn from his new book, *America Beyond Capitalism*: "Our current 'ownership society' allocates

just under 50 percent of the nation's business wealth to the top 1 percent of people. The most recent data (1999) showed that an even smaller group—a mere two-tenths of 1 percent at the very

top—made more money on the sale of stocks and bonds than all other taxpayers taken together. These are truly medieval patterns." —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Americana

Mmmm, Sauerkraut Custard Pie

Meet Sue Anne Zollinger: no-wave guitar hero, doctoral candidate, collector of unusual pastries

By Peter Margasak

Sue Anne Zollinger was starstruck. "Look, there's Phyllis Bartholomew," she said to her friend Susan. Bartholomew, a 60-year-old woman from Columbus, Nebraska, was the amateur winner of last year's National Pie Championship, and she was walking across a convention room at the Radisson WorldGate Resort in Kissimmee, Florida. This was Zollinger's first visit to the Great American Pie Festival, an annual event put on by the American Pie Council, but she wasn't there to compete. Zollinger, a scholar and specialist in pie-culture arcana who lives in Indiana, had rented a booth at the festival's outdoor expo in nearby Celebration to promote her Web site, the Pie of the Month Club (pieofthemonth.org).

It didn't go quite as she'd planned. Rain limited visitors on the first day, and instead of meeting other pie aficionados, Zollinger found her booth surrounded by vendors hawking jewelry and soap. The primary attraction was an all-you-can-eat pie buffet stocked with mass-produced goods. "Who wants to eat Sara Lee pie?" Zollinger asks. Meanwhile, the pie competition was being held back at the Radisson, some four miles away. "I was hoping it would be 10,000 people who were into pie, but there was only a small group of people that traveled [to Celebration] for the pie festival," Zollinger says. "The rest were people that lived there, or were there for Disney World and just happened to be strolling by."

Back when Zollinger was studying at Chicago's School of the Art Institute in the early 90s her interest in pie was ordinary—she just liked a slice every now and again. But in the stifling summer of 1993 she began spending evenings at the Harold Washington Library Center, basking in the air-conditioning. She stumbled upon a cookbook that featured the favorite recipes of U.S. presidents. "I



Sue Anne Zollinger

can't remember which one was into Transparent Pie, but it seemed so wacky," she says. "I found enough strange pie recipes that I started feeling that there was some underlying Americana cultural thing that I found really interesting and that I thought my friends would also find interesting." She began jotting some of the more peculiar recipes and historical lore down in a notebook. "I would sit on a stool in the cookbook aisle and open up indexes and read pie recipes. I started making xeroxes of any weird pie recipe," she says.

Most of the recipes she's gone on to collect are folkloric, many of them drawn from old community cookbooks Zollinger's discovered over the years. Some pies are decidedly white trash in origin—there's Tang Pie, the poor man's orange chiffon, and Pink Lullaby Pie, whose main ingredient is Jell-O, "any red flavor you like." (The

latter was concocted by Nita Krebs, who played a Munchkin Lullaby League girl in *The Wizard of Oz*.) Others are variations on old favorites like chess pie and shoofly pie sporting quaint names like Barbara Fretchie Pie and Collage Pie. And some are just downright bizarre: Beer Cheesecake Pie, Sauerkraut Custard Pie, Pralined Cicada Pie.

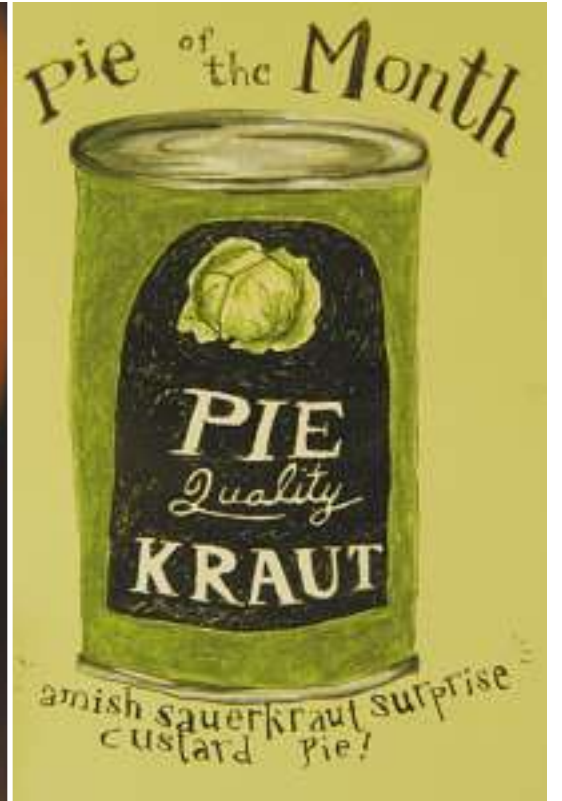
That fall Zollinger began designing postcards that featured a recipe on one side and an original illustration on the other. She'd duplicate them at Copy Max in Wicker Park and send them out to about 50 of her friends. She prominently labeled the first card with "Pie of the Month Club," but given her busy school schedule it took her nearly two years to produce the first dozen. After that she stopped, but then "everyone pitched a big fit because they liked them," she says. "I was burnt-out, so I worked

on getting guest artists for a year, but they were even worse at getting them done on time than I was."

At the time Zollinger was the guitarist in the avant-rock trio Scissor Girls, and many of her guest artists were fellow musicians like Lois Maffeo of Lois, Eternals front man Damon Locks, and Kelly Kuvo, her eventual replacement in the Scissor Girls.

While she was working on the second set of Pie of the Month Club cards Zollinger moved to Baltimore, where she put her art career on hold to study biology at the University of Maryland. "I went to art school and decided that I should be a scientist as a day job to support my art habit," she says. From Baltimore she went to Bloomington to get her PhD—she's studying the mechanisms involved in birdsong. Three years later, in 2002, feeling isolated from her friends and frustrated that

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Our Town

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she hadn't been making any art, she restarted the club. "It satisfies all of these needs I have," she says. "It keeps me in touch with my friends without my having to actually correspond with them all, . . . and it forces me to make some piece of artwork every month, even if it's thematic about pie."

After two more years Zollinger was getting exasperated with both the cost of the postcards and postage and the time it took to address all the recipes. She decided that selling subscriptions to the club could offset some of her expenses, so with that goal in mind she and a friend designed the Web site for the Pie of the Month Club early last year. "I thought, 'I'm going to have the Web site for all things pie—an international pie database,'" she says. "I decided I needed to be like the Willy Wonka of pie or something, I guess." In addition to archiving the previous recipes and art, she created a pie map directing visitors to the best pie places in America, listed pie-oriented events, and provided links to pie cookbooks. She also started an advice column about baking pies, reluctantly appointing herself the site's pie expert. Although she had to make up the first couple questions herself, she now gets about two a week; answering them requires that she spend a few hours consulting

cookbooks, surfing the Internet, and talking on the phone to her mother. Fearful of the commitment to a steady schedule that subscriptions would demand, Zollinger initially held off from offering them, but they're now available for \$16. So far she's only had 24 takers, bringing her mailing list up to 121, but with 10,000 people visiting the site each month, she's anticipating more.

Zollinger estimates that she now spends between four to ten hours a week on pie-related activities. She's also taken up pie sculpture, crafting a handful of little snow-globe-like objects. "One of them has some paramedics carrying a big pie on a stretcher, and another has a bunch of circus chimps on a teeter-totter and there's a big pie on the other end," she says.

But oddly enough, baking pies has remained a minor activity for Zollinger. Although at first she planned on taking a stab at every recipe she sent out, she was soon relying on her friends to do it. "I think the grossest pie I had was Prune Butterscotch Orange Nut Pie—it was disgusting," she says. "But some of the ones that seem gross are pretty good—Sauerkraut Pie isn't bad, as long as you distribute [the sauerkraut] evenly through the custard." Early on Zollinger had ambitions of compiling the various recipes

Let's not kid ourselves. From the online "Reason Express": "The 21st century will see great advances in biotech, and the U.S. will not dictate what those advances will be. The federal government may opt to ban, restrict, or

refrain from funding research involving human somatic cell nuclear transfer, but labs elsewhere in the world will pay no heed to political dust-ups in Washington. To pretend otherwise is madness." —HH



and art in a cookbook. But she wants to finish her dissertation first. She hopes to get her degree next May.

Meanwhile there are plenty of other pie projects to occupy her. "I had a friend who's been on the mailing list for years but with whom I rarely actually correspond write me a letter this week," Zollinger goes on. "In the letter she said she was checking out the

Web site on the off chance that I might have had a section on pies in film online. And I actually felt guilty that I didn't have that up yet, because I have been compiling this list of pie appearances in film, and that made me laugh at myself because (a) my friend went online assuming I was deranged enough to have this information and (b) I do." ☐

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At his request, we do not make his work available online.