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An Interview with Dun Gifford: President of OLDWAYS, the Food Issues Think Tank

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Boston, November 6, 2007

After graduating from Harvard, Dun Gifford served three years in the US Navy before going to Washington D.C. There he worked in the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, as National Campaign Coordinator for the Presidential Campaign of US Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and as Legal Assistant to Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

In 1956 Gifford survived the sinking of the Andrea Doria; in 1968 was in the kitchen at Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel when RFK was shot; and the following year, he had to identify the drowned body of Mary Jo Kopechne, Ted Kennedy's girlfriend. Shortly afterwards he moved back to Boston and gradually developed an ever-growing interest in food and diet, but always with the public's interest at heart.

Lucy Gordan first met Dun Gifford in 2004 at the Healthy Pasta Meal Conference held at the Rome Hilton, and will attend Oldways' Symposium on Olive Oil, Health, and the Mediterranean Diet in Palermo in April, 2008.



Sara Baer-Sinnot and Dun Gifford, co-authors of *The Oldways Table*

LG: Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood; your first memories of food?

DG: My mother making oatmeal for me at breakfast when I was about four years old. She made it everyday for me and my brothers and my sister. I'm still a great fan of oatmeal. She was very wise the way mothers are. She always gave us a little bit of brown sugar and, as it melted from the heat of the oatmeal, it made little rivers. So we made up stories about rivers, little waterfalls, as we ate, which made eating oatmeal fun. Besides its being wonderfully tasty, my mother was very shrewd. She never said: "You must eat this."

LG: You grew up in Boston?

DG: No, Providence, Rhode Island. I'm the oldest of four. My Dad loved to shop in the Italian markets on Federal Hill in Providence. This was my first contact with Italian food. Federal Hill is still the Italian neighborhood of Providence and it's just crammed jammed with Italian markets and products. Dad went over there every Saturday morning.

LG: So besides oatmeal, were there other foods that you associate with happy childhood memories?

DG: Vegetables. My Dad brought back all kinds of fresh vegetables from Federal Hill. My Mom cooked them. In the USA, you'll remember, we were big on butter then, but because of my Dad's relentlessness in going to Federal Hill, because of that Italian influence in our lives, in my family we picked up on olive oil very early. It was very unusual then except in families of Italian and Greek backgrounds, which mine wasn't. When I got involved later on with olive oil and the Mediterranean diet, all these old memories kicked in.

LG: So by pure chance your father enjoyed and introduced you to the Mediterranean diet?

DG: Yes. As you know, no one had ever heard of the Mediterranean diet in those days. It was just that my Dad liked vegetables and veal dishes. He often made veal scaloppine and veal parmesan. However, besides oatmeal, my most vivid childhood memory of food is in fact my Dad burning pork chops time after time after time again. He was from Kentucky and his favorite dish was pork chops, but sometimes he got a little distracted.



LG: So he did most of the cooking?

DG: He cooked the special meals on Saturdays, but we were a traditional family where the wife/mother cooked and the husband read the newspaper. When my mother said she did not know how to cook what he brought back from Federal Hill, he'd say: "Oh, let me show you, let me show you." So we ate a lot of burned scaloppine too.

LG: Your first jobs were in government, next as personal advisor to first Robert and then to Ted Kennedy. From government you moved over to business. When and why did you become interested in food, nutrition, and the Mediterranean diet?

DG: I had three little children and another on the way, so I said, "Boy oh boy, I'm not going to make it on a government salary." When I came back from Washington D.C. to Boston, the company I went to work for, Cabot, Cabot & Forbes, owned the Ritz-Carlton Hotel near Boston. It was the original Ritz in the US. As one of company's younger executives I had the Ritz-Carlton's portfolio. I loved my job, even if the Ritz-Carlton wasn't the main thrust of the business, which was a real estate company.

Through my connection to the Ritz, I got into the issue of food in the professional sense. The Ritz-Carlton was a business, but it also had to be a place that people wanted to keep coming back to. We did some very good promotion so that young couples started eating and staying there and the hotel wouldn't just be for old money who remembered its glorious past. Before long the bar became famous too. I was in charge of the hotel for Cabot, Cabot & Forbes for several years. I wasn't the manager; I was the owner's representative.

He was very old, but I met César Ritz. I also met his son Charles, who was by that time running the Ritz in Paris and was a board member of the Boston Ritz too. Like me, Charles was an avid fisherman. He invited me to Paris and showed me the workings of his hotel: the wine cellar, the library with his father's menu-books all beautifully bound. His was a whole different attitude about food that I'd never encountered before: a reverence and an insistence on standards. That new exposure really bowled me over.

LG: How long did you stay at Cabot, Cabot & Forbes?

DG: After around five years I set up my own business. I was an investor and owner in several restaurants around Boston. One of them was "The Harvest" in Harvard Square, which is still well-known. I got deep into food and very friendly with Julia Childs. She was a major influence on my life. Again, like Charles Ritz, she believed that food and eating need to be joyous and fun, but food needs to be cooked well and nutritionally valuable too.

LG: What is so advantageous health-wise about the Mediterranean diet?

DG: The classical Mediterranean diet consistently over the last fifty years has been judged the most healthful diet in the world. The main reason is that its principal fat is olive oil, which is not only delicious, but it's a mono-unsaturated fat. In this country, as we all know, butter was the principal fat for some generations, and butter is a saturated fat. The differences have to do with heart health. The Italians, Greeks, Spanish, North Africans, in other words, all Mediterraneans, had a much better heart health profile that Americans did during the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s.

Another reason is fish. Much more fish is eaten per capita in the Mediterranean countries than in the US. This helps prevent obesity and hypertension.

Then there are vegetables. Again the Italians, Spanish and Greeks eat more vegetables per capita than we Americans do. You should delete potatoes. Our government counts potatoes in the vegetable category, but the Europeans don't. They count it in the starch category. So when you really dig down into the data, you find out... Mediterraneans eat a lot more vegetables. This lowers the risk of colon cancer.

Our Italian and Greek collaborators here at Oldways always tell us that it's olive oil that makes the vegetables appealing. Fifteen years ago Americans didn't use olive oil to cook or to dress their salads. This makes a huge difference. Eating vegetables is a good way of getting that delicious and nutritious olive oil into your system and also of making the vegetables appetizing. Just think about the coincidence of it all. Nobody planned it out that way. No nutritionist 1,000 years ago said: "This is how we are going to do it in Italy."

The more I got into the Mediterranean diet, the more fascinated I was with its thousands of years of evolutionary development of the healthfulness of the Mediterranean peoples. If we can get Americans to think about a couple of glasses of wine, or just one depending, and olive oil, we would be a healthy country.

LG: Any other health advantages?

DG: Yes, a lower risk of developing diabetes, Alzheimer's, and arthritis.



LG: Can you briefly explain the Mediterranean Food Pyramid?

DG: At its base is daily physical activity. Its central part is divided into food types to be eaten daily: breads, pasta, rice, cous cous, polenta, other whole grains, and potatoes; then we have fruits; beans, legumes, and nuts; and vegetables; next olive oil for cooking and for dressings; then cheese and yogurts. Above this central section, to be eaten on a weekly basis are fish; poultry; eggs; and sweets; the peak of the pyramid to be eaten once a month is meat. We also suggest drinking six glasses of water per day and wine in moderation.

LG: In 1988 you founded the Oldways Preservation Trust and have been its President ever since, right?

DG: In actual fact, in 1990. However, the idea for Oldways came to me in Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, during a visit to China in 1987 after a three-hour traditional banquet in the replica of the Confucius family home. We'd been

served 36 magnificent dishes and drinks, which expressed the Confucian ideal of harmony between earth, body, and spirit.

LG: What was your motivation?

DG: I wanted to challenge the insidious and overwhelming rise of junk foods, fad diets, and

genetically modified agriculture, and to advocate a return to healthy, traditional old ways of eating. I saw Oldways as an agent of change, as a new organization that would challenge the world's assumptions about the future of our food from harvesting, to processing, preparing, and eating.

LG: What is the Oldways Preservation Trust and what does it do?

DG: By definition we are an educational organization, a public charity, a culinary and dietary think tank. For nearly twenty years now we have tried to persuade people that they can eat more healthily and enjoy their food even more because they are going to feel better physically after meals. The food and drink we put into our bodies every day truly matters -- for the bodily and mental health of each one of us, for the children we bear and raise, and for the very viability of this planet, which sustains us. We need our planet to continue supplying us our food and drink, so we must not poison and deplete it in ways that dampen its abilities to grow our food and provide our water.

Olive oil is the key. At first I never thought we could ever sell olive oil to Americans, that we could never sell many of the aspects of the Mediterranean diet here. The biggest seller in the US is health and Americans love to buy books and follow diets proposed by all sorts of nutcases, i.e. if you only eat cream-of-wheat five times a day in small amounts for seven years, you're going to really be healthy and live longer. Unfortunately, in spite of Oldways efforts, people still buy books like that. It makes me crazy.

So as to have scientific credibility, from the start we've recruited a large group of very prestigious nutritionists and we recruited some chefs who not only knew about Italian cuisine, but were willing to try olive oil in new ways. We also did sustainable farming and we did fish.

LG: Where is Oldways located?

DG: 266 Beacon Street, Boston Massachusetts. Our telephone number is 1617-421-5500.

LG: How many people work at Oldways?

DG: Ten now. They help me to spread Oldways' philosophy about the Mediterranean diet at seminars and symposiums like the one you attended in Rome in 2004 and to set up familiarization trips/culinary tours to various Mediterranean countries. Our next Symposium will be to Sicily next spring. We will be looking at the agricultural elements of the Mediterranean diet. For example, what is the olive tree all about? How can it produce a fat like olive oil?

LG: Do you have consultants outside the USA?

DG: We have colleagues. We don't call them consultants because we don't pay them.

LG: How is Oldways funded?

DG: We fund raise. Foundations and people, even the US government, give us grants to do studies on healthfulness. We are non-profit.

LG: Oldways promotes the Mediterranean and other non-fat diets by holding seminars nationally and internationally. The speakers are famous chefs, scientists, doctors and chemists. Are the audiences by invitation only?

DG: We invite professional groups: government officials like the ministers of agriculture and health, professors at medical schools, nutritionists, doctors, journalists like yourself etc. When you turn around that's a lot of people. As you know, not everybody comes to every event.

LG: Many of your seminars have taken place in Italy and you are a member of the Advisory Board of Accademia Barilla. What exactly does your collaboration with Barilla involve?

DG: It's a great story. The World Pasta Organization was really an office with two people in it six or seven years ago. The industry that supported it said we want a bigger deal than that so the World Pasta Organization contacted Oldways. They invited me to come to New York as the keynote speaker of World Pasta Day in 2004. I thought: "Wow, World Pasta Day, what a concept!"

Out of that event came a very reinvigorated World Pasta Organization and it now holds a



World Pasta Day every year in October. It's now the IWPO because it's the International World Pasta Organization. You can find it on the web. Through that I thought this Adkins diet is nutty, but how can we ever attack it? I didn't want to get into a direct fight with Atkins because he has so many advocates in the news business. So at Oldways we just said: "Hey, the pasta meal is the perfect meal because pasta is more than pasta. It's vegetables, cheese, olive oil, a glass of wine. It's just the perfect Mediterranean diet picture. *The Washington Post* covered our symposium in Rome with a huge, huge full-page story. Its headlines said "Pasta Fights Back" with a cartoon of two boxing gloves attached to spaghetti in brilliant colors. Because it was published in Washington, it had an immediate impact on this whole business of low-carb diet and so, just by luck, that was the beginning of the end of the low-carb craze, the Atkins Diet.

LG: So where does Barilla come in?

DG: Barilla was one of the sponsors of World Pasta Organization's New York event along with other pasta companies. I got involved with Barilla because it's the biggest pasta company and it has a foundation. Oldways collaborated through the Barilla Foundation. It is more comfortable for us as a non-profit organization to work with foundations and not industries. The present generation of Barillas, four siblings, who run the company now, set up the *Accademia* and foundation in their parents' house. Oldways helped them launch the *Accademia* and its excellent library. I was on the Advisory Board, but after three or four years I stepped down. I really like to get things going and then hand them over to qualified administrators.

LG: Does Oldways have any official connection to the Slow Food movement?

DG: Carlo Petrini and I are very good friends. In Italy he always introduces me as "Dun Gifford is the Carlo Petrini of the United States, and I'm the Dun Gifford of Italy."

LG: Speaking of Barilla, when I was a child the only pasta on the U.S. market was U.S.-made Ronzoni; the Abruzzese company De Cecco revolutionized the market and won lawsuits against the U.S. government which was attempting unsuccessfully to tax it off the U.S. market. Then Nina Zagat and Barilla joined forces to compile the guide to the best Italian restaurants in North America, and Barilla started to take over first place from De Cecco. Now Ronzoni is back in first place. Can you explain?

DG: I think it's pricing.

LG: Is there a region of Italy that can boast the healthiest diet?

DG: I think the further south you go, the healthier the diet is. I think the reason is they consume more olive oil and more fish per capita.

LG: Do you personally have a favorite region or regions, and why?

DG: I do. I like Puglia very much. I love Sicily and everybody including me loves Umbria and Tuscany, but they are very crowded now with tour buses unless you go off-season. I'm also a fan of Verona because it hasn't much changed from many years ago. The streets are narrow; the churches are still dark and haven't been cleaned up. It's got the arena, the mini-Coliseum, which is freaky it's so beautiful. It's also a university town so you have the energy of the students. You can also walk everywhere. That's what I love about it. Nothing is farther away than a 15-minute walk.

LG: A favorite food market?

DG: Maybe Campo de' Fiori.

LG: Favorite restaurant or chef?

DG: No comment, because I'd hurt people's feelings.

LG: Favorite pasta dish?

DG: Spaghetti *alle vongole*.

LG: A favorite non-pasta dish?

DG: *Fave* in the spring, and *cicoria* from Puglia especially in cold weather.

LG: A favorite wine?

DG: I like the wines from around Siena because I like a lusty red. They have distinct aromas.

LG: Can you tell me about your culinary discovery tours? Where do they go and how



can someone participate in one?

DG: We've just recently done two, one to Puglia and the other to Istanbul. As we'd hoped, Istanbul was a great success because Americans are curious about Turkey, but are kind of nervous to go by themselves.

Italy is by far the favorite destination of our culinary discovery tours. The tours are all listed on our website which is www.oldwayspt.org. PT stands for Preservation Trust. Our next one will be to Morocco in December. The tours are open to everybody. My gosh, it's amazing how the internet is changing everybody's lives, even though I'm sad that so many magazines have folded because of the web. I love the written word. I miss the smell of paper and ink.

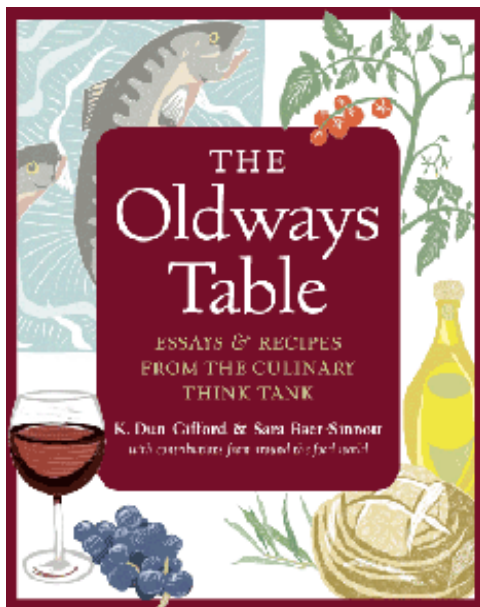
LG: Do your culinary discovery tours include cooking lessons?

DG: Yes.

LG: Last year you published a splendid cookbook, *The Oldways Table, Essays and Recipes from the Culinary Think Tank*; are you working on another?

DG: We are actually. It's more specific to national foods. We want to help people learn how to flavor and season dishes so they can have a Spanish, Italian, Greek, or Chinese meal with their different aromas, tastes and sensations without having to spend weeks looking for precise herbs and spices. The book will focus on the sensory aspects rather than the technical side, like having to find the exactly right cut of lamb shank. I think that increasingly people want to resurrect the flavors and sensations they had when they went abroad. They get frustrated by most cookbooks, which tell them they have to find original ingredients for their

recipes. For example, if you don't have this particular clam or cumin, the dish won't come out right. That's not friendly. The real issue for us is what people talk about when they love a dish: its flavors, the smells, the textures. They don't talk about that only the left rear shank of a lamb can be used to make this dish.



LG: Besides the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, you have recently introduced the Latin American Food Pyramid, what are the differences between the two?

DG: The principal difference between the three diet pyramids, the three great cooking civilizations — Mediterranean, Latin American, and Asian — is the grains: wheat, corn, and rice respectively.

The preferred spices, olives and garlic for the Mediterranean, sesame for Asia, chili peppers for Latin America, make the smells and taste different.

LG: You are just back from a seminar in Kansas City about whole grains. Did you hold this in Kansas City, one of America's meat capitals, on purpose?

DG: It wasn't so much because of the beef. I wanted the people there to know what a grain elevator was, and to realize the abundance and importance of American grains. Most attendees, about 275 people, were in the grain or baking business.

LG: Can you tell me more about what went on in Kansas City?

DG: Since 2005 Oldways has run the Whole Grains Council Project. It's been a big success in solving the problem we set it up for: How do you get people to eat more whole grains? At first people didn't know what products contained whole grains. Everyone knew they should eat more whole grains (even their grandmothers, mothers, books, and radio told them to), but where could they find them? Oldways and the Whole Grain Council designed a stamp for the packaging of whole grain products. The Whole Grains Council now has a huge number of members that produce whole-grain products from General Mills to garage bakeries.

LG: What events is Oldways planning for 2008?

DG: Besides Sicily's Symposium on Olive Oil and Sicilian cuisine in Palermo from April 21-27, also during April is "Managing Sweetness," a conference in Washington D.C.; our presence at the "54th Summer Fancy Foods Show" in New York City during June and July, and at the "World Food Exchange" in Adelaide, Australia, not to mention at "World Pasta Day," always in October, to-take-place in Istanbul this year.

Oldways will also be leading "The Mediterranean Diet 15th Anniversary Symposium" in Boston in November; the culinary tour, "Morocco Culinaria" in Marrakech and Fez during December, and the "Latino Nutrition Coalition Conference" in January, 2009.