



Photographs from the Barbara Hansen estate

BARBARA HANSEN, left, from her book "Mexican Cookery." She "covered food right up to the end," a friend notes. Below with costume designer Edith Head.

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they hadn't received a lot of press attention — and learning from cooks from all over the world.

"Isn't it just marvelous?" she'd often say if you told her you'd followed up on one of her recommendations.

After news of Hansen's death started circulating, Tila wrote on Facebook that when he first encountered her, "I was 24, confused about my life, career and direction. I was teaching cooking classes out of my mom's back yard... working odd jobs and not sure if cooking was my path. Barbara Hansen quietly paid the 35 bucks [and] attended the class. She wrote the cover story in the L.A. Times that gave me the spark and inspiration that started my journey. She... wrote a letter of recommendation that helped me enter culinary school. Then helped me with my L.A. Times Food section internship... and guided [me] through writing my first published articles. Taught me how to write food reviews. Reminded me to eat, taste and be mindful about the history of the food and love the people who made it."

Her appreciation for the people who made the food she loved may have been the key to Hansen's strength as a reporter — if she liked something she ate, she always wanted to meet the cooks and learn from them.

L.A. Times Today producer Nicolette Medina shared a story about her father meeting Hansen when he was installing a floor in the Times Test Kitchen at the paper's old downtown headquarters. The two got to talking, and when Hansen heard about the quick, one-pan chile verde he learned from his mom, she got the recipe, tested it and then asked him to bring in a clean shirt the next day for a photo shoot. On Nov. 29, 1979, the story, his recipe and photo were published in the Food section. As Medina wrote in her appreciation of Hansen, the story "was one of the biggest highlights of his life. He was a simple guy from East L.A. who supported his family by pouring cement and loving them by cooking tasty dinners every night. If the L.A. Times said his cooking was good... it was good... and he never let anyone forget it!"

Hansen's cookbooks, including "Cooking California Style," "Good Bread," "Mexican Cookery," "Barbara Hansen's Taste of Southeast Asia" and "South-east Asian Cooking," showed her intense curiosity about the world and her passion for travel. I remember that in 1964, Manhattan Gold and I traveled to Singapore many years back, she was extremely generous with food recommendations, and nearly every food person we encountered there seemed to have met and admired her.

"Barbara was an intrepid solo traveler who traveled 12 times to India alone," Furth-Sides said. "She has notebooks on her local and international trips going back to 1964."

When former L.A. Times Food editor and current Substack columnist Ruth Reichl and I were talking about Hansen not long after her death, she said admiringly, "Barbara always had a restless palate."

There are plans, Furth-Sides said, to place Hansen's notebooks into a permanent collection, along with the many food books she acquired from all over the world.

If you have a chance to go through Hansen's older, pre-internet work on a site like newspapers.com, you'll get a fascinating look at the progression in attitudes about what was once known as "ethnic" food — a term Hansen was one of the first to reject "because it sounds like something apart, something that doesn't fit into the mainstream. But that's not the case," she told an audience gathered in 2010 by the Culinary Historians of Southern California.

Above all, Hansen felt that food writing wasn't an exclusive club. When Fay expressed amazement that Hansen seemed to be busier than ever at 90, Hansen said, "I think food is an unending interest and anybody anywhere can pursue that in their own fashion because it's all around us. And especially in L.A., where we are now, the food opportunities are fantastic. And I don't mean just the high-end, celebrity-chef-pursuing approach to food. I mean the markets and people and tiny places. And just great food."

— BARBARA HANSEN

AN APPRECIATION

A FOOD INFLUENCER BEFORE WE HAD THE TERM

BARBARA HANSEN CHAMPIONED CUISINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD. BY LAURIE OCHOA

THE FOOD WORLD LOST an important, pioneering voice in this paper's coverage of the many cuisines that have found a home in Southern California with the recent death of journalist and author Barbara Hansen. She died at age 90 on Jan. 28, a day after being taken off life support at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center following a fall she suffered late that month. Hansen, who left her job at The Times in 2006 but wrote articles for the paper through 2017, was a much-loved journalist and active social media correspondent who inspired a range of personalities, including celebrity chef Jet Tila, writer-ent curator Bill Esparza and novelist Kim Fay, who modeled a key character in her 2022 bestseller "Love & Saffron" after Hansen.

"Before the debut of the late Jonathan Gold and his Counter Intelligence column, Angelenos discovered the international cuisines of L.A. by way of Barbara," Fay said last year at Culver City's Village Well Books & Coffee during an interview with Hansen to promote "Love & Saffron." "She created the Border Line food column at the Los Angeles Times beginning in 1974... chronicling L.A.'s Mexican food scene, including the newspaper's first recipe to be printed in Spanish. But even before Border Line, Barbara was a champion for the city's international flavors. In the single year of 1969 she wrote about Israeli consul dinners, kosher caterers, L.A. soul food and the cuisines of Egypt, Haiti, the Philippines, Colombia, Portugal, Nicaragua, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Honduras, all with recipes."

In addition to continuing her freelance writing for L.A. Weekly, *Savuer*, *Bon Appétit* and other publications after leaving The Times, Hansen maintained two websites, *Table Conversation* and *EatMx*, the latter focused on Mexican cuisine. She was also a big Instagram fan and had a devoted following that might have made her the most popular 90-year-old food influencer. "I think Instagram is fun," she told Fay. "It's full of life and it's an immediate contact with people."

"She loved and covered food right up to the end," said her

friend and fellow writer and historian Gerry Furth-Sides, who edits the website *Local Food Eater*. The day before Hansen's fall, the two were together for a pulao rice demonstration at the downtown L.A. location of Sridhar Sambangi's South Indian restaurant *Banana Leaf* — "a restaurant she inspired," Furth-Sides said, after Hansen took daylong cooking lessons at Sambangi's home and encouraged him to open a place of his own.

On the way to the rice lesson at *Banana Leaf*, Furth-Sides said, she and Hansen stopped at Jons Fresh Marketplace, "where the manager, Jay, caught up with her because he found the apricot leather she loved, and she was so happy."

Hansen was planning to write a guide to the Indian restaurants of Venice Boulevard (an update of a story she wrote for L.A. Weekly in 2018) for *Westways* magazine and had been planning to lead a culinary excursion of the area this summer for *Melting Pot Food Tours*.

It doesn't surprise me that Hansen, a James Beard Award winner for her 2003 Times story "Mezzal: Good Drink, Bad Rap," never really retired from food writing. I had the privilege of working with her when I was deputy food editor and then food editor of this paper in the late 1990s, and witnessed her tireless enthusiasm for exploring restaurants — especially if



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— BARBARA HANSEN