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Cookbooks and culinary culture

Abstract:

Culinary culture refers to the values, traditions, practices and beliefs of a community that shape the ways in which its members cook and eat. Cookbooks, as collections of recipes, represent an ideal source of information on culinary cultures – how and when food is sourced, prepared, cooked and eaten, and the values attributed to particular foods – but they can also lead to wrong conclusions. Fortunately, researchers have at their disposition a diverse range of written resources, including fiction and popular media, to complement the interpretation of cookbooks.

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Cookbooks are essentially collections of recipes, and recipes are essentially sets of instructions; they are written to instruct. From the manuscript compilations of medieval Europe to the full colour look-at-me titles from today's celebrity chefs, cookbooks and recipes have a practical vocation, primarily serving as user guides, more or less detailed, for the preparation of a particular dish.

Contemporary definitions of the recipe emphasise its utilitarian aspects as a means to an end, typically a finished dish to be presented at table and eaten. According to Allen, a recipe is 'a set of instructions – a game plan, if you will – that permits a reasonably competent cook to duplicate some dish dreamed up by the recipe writer' (1999). Similarly, Tomlinson analyses the recipe as a generic example of written instructions, composed of both internal instructions (detailing ingredients and method) and external instructions or 'metarules that underlie and inform the reader about how to read the recipe' (1986).

Yet there is more than one way to read a recipe, and more than one context in which to interpret it, as many scholars have pointed out. Modern recipes can represent more than a series of instructions; through the choice of vocabulary and syntax they can display (and promote) the persona and individuality of the celebrity chef author, as in these examples from Nigella Lawson's *Feast* (2004).

Bacon and Tomato Hash

'Tip the chopped tomato, with all its seeded, gluey interior, into the hot oily pan, which will cause a great spitting and sizzling, and stir for a couple of minutes'

Blakean Fish Pie

'Keep stirring until thickened - about 5 minutes, but I am too impatient to keep the heat very low –'

Similarly, there is more than one way to write a recipe. Changing from imperative to indicative allows recipes to represent a record or description of cultural practices while still providing sufficient instructions, as the following recipe illustrates:

One of the traditional dishes that is always eaten at the time of the olive harvest when the oil is at its sweetest and freshest is **Bruschetta** or **Fett'unta** as it is called by the Florentines, which literally means oiled slice. Silvana often serves it for lunch at this time of year. To make it she toasts thick slices of the saltless bread over a bright fire; she browns them quickly so they are golden and crisp outside and soft within. On the chopping block there are fat cloves of garlic which she halves and rubs vigorously over both sides of the toast. Laying the slices on a large plate she drenches them with warm olive oil and sprinkles on good pinches of coarse salt. ... The *bruschetta* can of course lend itself to additions, such as the paper-thin slices of black or white truffles so beloved of the Umbrians (Romer 1984).

Even from the earliest days of cookbooks and written recipes, the most basic instructions have included incidental detail which, when considered many centuries later, reveals surprising information about kitchens, ingredients and tastes, as in these examples from the fourteenth-century Catalan *Libre de sent sovi*:

Capitol LVI: Ginestrada ... And if you do not wish to add sugar, or if you are in a place where you cannot get sugar, add honey in place of sugar.

Capitol LXVIII: Perdiguat ... And add a lot of verjuice or vinegar.

Capitol CLVIII: Lesques de fformatge ... Put them in the pan with the fat that you make from fresh pork (Grewe 1979).

To the culinary historian, these almost throwaway lines suggest that sugar was not as readily available throughout medieval Catalonia as was honey; that medieval verjuice was equivalent to vinegar; and that fritters were perhaps more commonly eaten in winter, the season when pigs were slaughtered.

Such examples illustrate the dual personality of the recipe - in active service in the kitchen, it is a set of instructions; retired to the library, it becomes a potentially rich repository of historical, cultural and personal information. As Floyd and Forster note, Recipes, instructional or indicative, are not, of course, exclusively concerned with the more or less complicated production of routine meals ... they are also drawn into cultural debates around health and purity, about lifestyle and individualism, and into definitions of the national past, present and future (2004).

What holds true for the recipe is even more valid for the cookbook which, while in essence simply a series of recipes, can at the same time convey a kind of metanarrative, presenting a range of perspectives, beliefs and values. To this extent cookbooks are not only an invaluable and often indispensable resource for the culinary historian who is interested in culinary evolution but they can also enhance understanding of the food culture, and of culture in general, of past societies. As Claflin notes, 'the use of cookbooks as primary sources for social history ... is moving into the mainstream of food history' (2012). Cookbooks and recipes can illuminate past lives of women; community cookbooks, in particular, represent a 'unique resource for examining women's roles as community builders' (Messer et al. 2000). According to Gvion, cookbooks can 'narrate ethnicity', illustrating the means by which 'ethnicity is detached from its holders, modified by agencies of the dominant culture and reassigned an ethnic version' (2009) while Black considers the cookbook as a means to 'promote new forms of vernacular and embodied cosmopolitanism ... a mode of attachment beyond the local that implies both an openness and a sense of attentiveness toward different ways of life' (2010).

Perhaps most of all, cookbooks, through their recipes, document food culture and culinary culture. 'Culinary culture' is a vague and ill-defined term, as is 'culture' in general, though the Australian Government's interpretation of 'distinctive values, traditions and beliefs', in *Creative Australia – the national cultural policy*, is a useful catch-all (Australian Government 2013). By analogy, food or culinary culture could be described as the 'distinctive values, traditions and beliefs' relating to what and how a group sources food, cooks and eats. Scholarly literature does not necessarily distinguish 'food culture' from 'culinary culture', just as 'food' and 'culinary' seem often to be interchangeable when qualifying history; 'culinary', however, suggests a greater emphasis on aspects related to cooking.

Helen Leach summarises food culture as:

rules and principles that we learn, often unconsciously, as we grow up. They are passed down from one generation to the next. They guide our decisions and mark our identity. ... These unwritten rules relate to both foods and the composition of meals (2010).

Leach continues by outlining the specific areas governed by these rules, both as regards foods and meals.

1. Foods

What items are classified as edible

How foods should be combined into dishes

What equipment should be used to prepare and cook them

What are the properties and symbolic meanings of these foods

2. Meals

What dishes should be served, in what combinations, with what drinks, in what order, for particular occasions

Where and when meals should be served

With what utensils

How people should behave at meals (2010).

While Leach's definition seems to overlook the evolutionary aspects of food culture (over time, new foods might be added, technologies changed, meal structures simplified or elaborated), it is close to Messer et al.'s description of 'cultural cuisines':

the culturally elaborated and transmitted body of food-related practices of any given culture [which] includes descriptions of characteristic foods and their flavourings and textures, along with their symbolic combination in meals, menus, formats, and seasonal or lifetime cycles of ritual foods and eating (2000).

Whether food culture or cultural cuisines, cookbooks and recipes are naturally prime documentary resources for this kind of detail, though typically less informative in regard to symbolic meanings and table etiquette. They can also reveal ideas and values, which are implicit in both Leach's and Messer's understandings. For example, many Australian cookbooks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had an underlying theme of thriftiness. At a time when women - and women were the cooks and housekeepers - were financially dependent, typically on a husband, it was clearly important to demonstrate that the household allowance was used wisely. Cookbooks therefore encouraged household economy - not frugality but rather careful management of available and affordable resources, with minimum waste. These values were implicit in *Cottage Cookery* (1892), which 'Rita' began with these words:

I have always had in my mind an ideal school of cookery for the people, where they should be taught gratis to cook just whatever food they were able to buy ... And I would have had them taught to spend their coppers to the best advantage.

Women's pages in newspapers similarly promoted the value of kitchen economy, often contrasting the archetypal French *ménagère* with the rather more extravagant and wasteful English/Australian domestic cook (Santich 2004).

This reference to newspaper features serves as a reminder that cookbooks – the cookbooks available in a certain place at a certain time – are not necessarily the best guide to the culinary culture of the time and might even give a biased perspective. Unlike America, Australia produced very few cookbooks in the nineteenth century. Edward Abbott's *The English and Australian cookery book* was published in 1864 but, as a scrapbook of cuttings from a miscellany of mainly English and American sources, cannot be considered a representative Australian cookbook. After this came *The Australian cook* (1876) by Alfred Wilkinson, and the first of Mrs Rawson's volumes in 1878. The 1880s brought forth another half dozen or so Australian titles, but the burst of Australian cookbooks dates from the 1890s, including the *Cookery book of good and tried receipts*, commonly known as the *Presbyterian cookery book*, first published in 1895. Prior to the widespread availability of locally written and published cookbooks, the cookbooks available to Australians in the second half of the nineteenth century seem to have been predominantly English, as these lists from 1870 and 1890 demonstrate:

1870: ILLUSTRATED COOKERY BOOKS, &c, latest editions:-

Warne's Model Cookery, 3000 receipts
The New Cookery Book, by Anne Bowman
Good Cookery, by Lady Llanover
Dainty Dishes, by Lady Harriet St. Clair
Acton's Modern Cookery
Modern Domestic Cookery, by a lady
Somerville's Cookery and Domestic Economy
Beetons' Book, Household Management
 -----, *Dictionary of Everyday Cookery*
Smith's Vegetable Cookery
Rational Cookery
Smith's (Dr.) Practical Dietary
Comprehensive Pudding Book
Simpson's Handbook of Dining
Jarrin's Modern Confectioner
Soyer's Modern Housewife
Weatherley's Art of Confectionery, Sugar Boiling, &c.
Rundell's Domestic Cookery
Dinners and Dinner Parties
 W. R. PIDDINGTON, Importer, George-Street.
Sydney Morning Herald, 18 February 1870: 1

1890: BOOKS ON DOMESTIC ECONOMY, &c.

Eastlake's Hints on Household Taste
Enquirer's Oracle
Family Doctor
Fothergill's Food for Invalids
Family Medical Advisor
Francatelli's Royal Confectioner

Five O'Clock Tea
Gunter's Royal Cookery Book
Guide to the Worktable
Gunter's Modern Confectioner
Graham's Modern Domestic Medicine
Henderson's Practical Cookery and Dinner-giving
Handbook of Fancy Needlework
Heine's Handbook of Domestic Cookery
Hill's How to Make Pickles
Hooper's Everyday Meals
Hooper's Little Dinners
Hooper's Cookery for Invalids
Hooper's Good Plain Cookery
How I Managed My Children
Home Doctoring
How to Make Home Happy
Handbook Plain and Fancy Needlework
How We Managed Without Servants
Housekeeper's Guido to Preserve Meat, Fruit, &c.
House and its Furniture
Hostess and Guest
Howe's Art of Housekeeping
Jones's Puddings and Sweets
James's Our Servants
James's, Dr., Familiar Lectures on Food
Kingswood's Australian Cookery
Lewis's The Cook
Leach's, Mrs., Fancy Workbasket
Laundry Management
Ladies' Physician
Ladies' Knitting Book
Lady's Everyday Book
Modern Cookery, by a Lady
Management of Servants
Mother's Home Book
New Guide for Butlers, Chefs, &c
Needlework, Cutting Out, &c
National Training School for Cookery
Australian Town and Country Journal, 29 March 1890

Even though *Kingswood's* [sic] *Australian cookery* purports to be Australian it was written by Mrs Harriet Wicken who had trained (and taught) at the Kensington School of Cookery in London, where she had published the first edition of the *Kingswood cookery book* in 1885. The Australian edition, though much more comprehensive, continued this English style of cookery, with few modifications or adaptations to a different environment. Australian fish species, for example, were largely overlooked.

It would seem reasonable to assume that if these were the books available to Australians, these are the cookbooks that would have been used and that, consequently, Australian kitchens would have effectively replicated the practices current in England. But for some years previously, Australian cooks had expressed a desire for recipes and cookbooks more appropriate to Australian resources and lifestyle. *The Australian cook* in 1876 and *Australian plain cookery* (second edition 1882) responded to this need. In his preface to the former title, Alfred Wilkinson wrote:

In presenting this little work to the Australian public, I do so with the firm conviction that there exists a real want of such a book written especially for this part of the world, not that there is an insufficiency of Cookery books in circulation, but as, in the majority of cases they have been written especially for Europe, they only partially meet the requirements and resources of the Australian colonies (1876).

The author of *Australian plain cookery* expressed similar sentiments:

In these Colonies, Housekeepers with small incomes have long felt the want of a Cookery Book the receipts in which should not involve the use of costly ingredients, or culinary, or other utensils, beyond their means. The fact, too, that none of the cookery books procurable are written especially with reference to Australia, its different products and seasons, will, we hope, render his people's Edition of Popular colonial Cookery especially welcome to the Housekeeper, for whose use the Publishers have spared neither trouble nor expense compiling it ('Practical Cook' 1892).

Reviews recommending this latter book praised the fact that it was specially written for Australian seasons and ingredients.

The same theme is evident in newspapers. In 1890 the *Queenslander* began a series of 'short papers for Queensland housewives', noting that 'Admirable as are many of the English aids to housewifery – such as cookery-books, works on home decoration, and so forth – there are so many ways wherein our circumstances differ from those of our English cousins and even of our Southern neighbours that a brief "Handbook of Queensland Housewifery" can scarcely fail to be of use' (*Queenslander* 4 Jan 1890: 20). The following year a 'Mrs. H. of Mackay' used the pages of the *Queenslander* to request a 'recipe for mango chutney; not Mrs. Beeton's recipe' (*Queenslander* 12 December 1891: 1132).

This aspect of Australia's culinary culture – the desire in the second half of the nineteenth century for recipes which took account of Australian conditions – would clearly *not* be evident from a study of the cookbooks on sale in that period. The impressive sales figures achieved for Australian cookbooks from the 1890s is further confirmation that a long-existing need was now being satisfied. From 1895 to 1913 enough new cookbooks had been published in New South Wales, often in annual editions, to provide at least one Australian cookbook for one in every three adult women (Santich 2012).

This example shows that cookbooks alone, however informative, should be interrogated before their evidence can be accepted. 'Do cookery books tell the truth?' asked writer and publisher Tom Jaine; referring to English eighteenth-century

cookbooks, he notes that relying on these ‘as sole evidence of dietary patterns ... may lead down byways that ought never to have been explored’ (2004). Depending on the purpose of the research and the questions posed, a range of supplementary resources such as novels and short stories, letters and diaries, artworks and advertising might be used to corroborate or illuminate the findings from cookbooks. Searching these resources is typically more painstaking, the evidence sparsely scattered rather than gathered neatly between the covers of a cookbook, but the results often reward the effort (Santich 2000). Cookbooks might be particularly appropriate when the aim of research is to examine recipe evolution, or the way new ingredients and new technologies were incorporated, or to learn more of the role of both women and cooks within the household and within the community, but they might be less useful for a study of everyday domestic cooking practices and eating habits in a particular era.

In Australia, an invaluable supplementary resource for the study of culinary culture is the digitised newspaper archives available through Trove. Even before the wave of Australian cookbooks in the late nineteenth century, recipes had been published in newspapers and periodicals. It was not unusual for ephemeral publications in Australia to respond to local needs by supplying relevant information, whether relating to gardening or animal husbandry or domestic economy; since the 1850s women (and occasionally, men) used newspapers and magazines to request, offer and exchange tried and tested recipes. An advantage of newspaper archives is that they often provide earlier indications than cookbooks of new developments and trends in cooking.

Any study of Australian culinary culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should include not only cookbooks but also newspapers and magazines, from *Australian home journal* and *The home* in the early 1900s to *Epicurean* and *Australian gourmet* from the 1960s and the supermarket publications introduced in the 1990s, not neglecting gardening and home improvement magazines. Among popular women’s magazines the *Australian women’s weekly* holds pride of place. In 1960, when its weekly circulation averaged 800,000 copies, an average issue was read by half the female population of Australia (Santich 1995). Over that decade, one of four Australian homes read the *Weekly* (Sheridan 2000). The recipe features in this magazine, together with advertisements for food products, are particularly illuminating as regards Australians’ acceptance of convenience foods and of new cuisines. For example, an April 1960 feature, ‘Cooking the modern way’, showed readers how to use pre-prepared and convenience foods such as pastry mix, scone mix, frozen peas and canned and packet soups to prepare family meals (Santich 1995). In contrast, the almost contemporary *Margaret Fulton cookbook* (1968) tended to ignore these products. Sheridan’s study of the gradual acceptance of ‘ethnic’ foods, via the pages of the *Weekly*, suggests that from the 1960s the magazine (and its advertisers) encouraged cooks to experiment with a vast variety of cuisines, from ‘Continental’ to Asian (Sheridan 2000). In this example of what Alan Warde calls ‘routinization of the exotic’, Australians gradually accepted ‘other’ cuisines as normal and incorporated ‘ethnic’ recipes – albeit modified – into their everyday repertoire; the *Weekly* reveals the evolution of this process (1997). The culmination of this

‘routinization’ is perfectly illustrated in this 2012 week of menu suggestions for family meals.

Monday: Chicken & mushroom pies

Tuesday: Tuna & lemon orecchiette

Wednesday: Indian lamb pilaf

Thursday: One-pot Italian sausage rice

Friday: Lamb rissoles with minted pea mash (Taste *The Advertiser* 11 July 2012)

Conclusion

The interrogation of cookbooks is possibly the best way to discover what and how past societies – even only a generation past – ate and cooked, and why particular choices were made, leading to a deeper and richer understanding of food culture (or culinary culture), and of culture in general. Nevertheless, since reliance on cookbooks alone can result in a distorted view, a broad range of supplementary resources, such as popular media, should also be consulted.

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