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Food for the people: studying *The Australian women's weekly* cookbooks

Abstract:

Magazines both reflect and influence communities of readers who have shared values, interests and lifestyles. Australians traditionally have been avid readers of magazines, and those magazines that feature food – what Australians eat and in what ways – represent a robust sector of the commercial, newsstand magazine market. This is especially so of one of the nation's highest circulation magazines, *The Australian women's weekly* (*AWW*), which is in its eightieth year of publication. Much has been said about the profound effect of *AWW* on the nation's culinary identity and practices. This commentary typically includes some acknowledgment of *AWW* not only as a magazine but also as a publisher of highly successful cookbooks for at least thirty years. However, little extended scholarly attention has been given to the singular contribution made by the *AWW* cookbooks, as a genre in their own right, to national culinary culture. This paper takes a step toward redressing this gap in scholarship, and it advocates further research to that end. It begins by situating the *AWW* cookbooks within the Australian magazine publishing industry and identifying their distinctive features. It then explores the cultural significance of the cookbooks, in part through an overview of illustrative examples, and highlights the potential of further research to augment understanding of Australian culinary culture.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Food writing – Magazines – Cookbooks – *Australian women's weekly* – Publishing

Introduction

Commentary on the magazine industry typically notes the avidity of Australians as readers (Bonner 2010) and the resilience of the Australian market even in times of economic uncertainty (MPA 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Food has a special place in the industry. Since *The Australian women's weekly* (*AWW*) began in 1933, food has featured in the content of mass-market, general-interest magazines targeted primarily at women. More recently, food has come to represent a discrete and robust sector of the special-interest magazine market. Bonner attributes this success to the symbiotic relationship between lifestyle and food: 'Rather than serving just to keep us alive and hopefully giving us pleasure, food now speaks of how we see ourselves and how we would like others to see us' (2010: 186). In early 2013, food and entertainment magazines collectively had some 4 million readers (MPA 2013b).

Hardly surprising, then, is that cookbooks have long been a publishing offshoot of prominent magazine titles. Women's magazines, including *Woman's day* and *AWW*, were '[t]he chief protagonists in the postwar period' for the publication of cookery books (Dunstan & Chaitman 2007: 334). Since then, more specialised magazines such as *Family circle*, *Better homes and gardens* and *Australian gourmet traveller* have published cookbooks. Despite this apparently prolonged and profound influence, magazine cookbooks are somewhat neglected sources for the study of Australian culinary heritage. An obvious choice for such research is the iconic *AWW*, which in 2013 is in its eightieth year of publication, yet little extended scholarly attention has been given to the singular contribution made by the *AWW* cookbooks, as a genre in their own right, to national culinary culture.

This paper takes a step toward redressing this gap in scholarship, and it advocates further research to that end. It begins by situating the *AWW* cookbooks within the Australian magazine publishing industry and identifying their distinctive features. It then explores the cultural significance of the cookbooks, in part through an overview of illustrative examples. By doing so, the paper highlights the potential of further research to augment understanding of the formation and transformation of Australian culinary culture.

The Australian women's weekly and its cookbooks

The reputation of *AWW* as an iconic and influential title, as well as a publishing phenomenon, is well established. In 2011 and 2012, the National Library of Australia held an exhibition, 'In every home: *The Australian women's weekly* (1933–1982)', which described the magazine as 'an extraordinary record of Australian popular culture' that 'has held up a mirror to our changing society since 1933' (NLA 2013a).¹ National Library of Australia resources for students and teachers feature *AWW* as one of Australia's 'treasures' and note that in the 1960s, it was the highest circulation magazine per head of population in the world (NLA 2013b). Aimed at women from the ages of 25 to 54, *AWW* continues to be widely read in Australia, with a circulation of 459,175 and a readership of 2,290,000 (Bauer Media Group 2013).

Food and cooking have always been prominent both on the pages of *AWW* and in

publications under its parentage. As early as 1937, the magazine discovered the appeal of supplementary publications dedicated to cookery when it printed a selection of prize-winning recipes in a free book for readers, after which a similar initiative boosted sales of the magazine considerably. Such early successes led not only to further ‘lift-out’ cookery supplements but also to cookery books under the auspices of, yet sold separately to, the magazine (Bannerman 2008: 27). Today, each issue of *AWW* contains a substantial cookery section, and food-related content is prominent on the magazine’s website (ninemsn 2013a) including through the cookbooks page with cookbook galleries and slideshows (ninemsn 2013b).

That *AWW* is conscious and proud of its contribution to national culinary culture is seen in a coffee-table book (Ekberg 2008) commemorating the magazine’s seventy-fifth birthday. The section ‘The weekly & food’ confirms the *AWW*’s influence on national culinary culture, including through testimonials from celebrity chefs. While this section foregrounds the magazine itself, occasionally cookbooks are mentioned. Neil Perry says:

when I think about *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, I think about how it has helped shape the way we eat today. The magazine and its cookbooks have kept Australians up to date with the trends in food in this country for more than half a century, making foolproof, good cooking possible for every household (qtd in Ekberg 2008: 242).

The sub-section ‘New-look old favourites’ is headed, ‘*The way we eat has changed over the past 70 years, largely influenced by The Weekly and the huge Australian Women’s Weekly cookbook library*’ (Ekberg 2008: 248). The website for the seventy-fifth birthday (ninemsn 2009) also primarily featured the magazine but acknowledged the cookbooks.

While such plaudits are expected, especially in a promotional context, the longevity of *AWW* cookbooks confirms their ongoing influence. Several have been reprinted or updated over decades, notably *The big book of beautiful biscuits*, which was reprinted 14 times between 1982 and 2003 before a ‘special collectors’ edition’ (AWW 2013) was published. Reprinting of more recent titles suggests that the series remains robust; for example, *The weekend cook* of 2004 was reprinted the following year (AWW 2005b), and *Good food fast: lose weight – feel great* (AWW 2005a), originally published in 2001, was reprinted in 2004 (twice) and 2005.

By the 1970s, the cookbooks had adopted a format characteristic of titles in *AWW*’s Home Library series: paperback, approximately 120 pages and liberally illustrated in colour. These books were, and remain, inexpensive (in 2013, \$12.95 online) and are sold through major retail outlets, including some supermarkets, and newsagents. Also distinctive is the emphasis given in the books (and the parent magazine) to reliability through testing, a longstanding *AWW* practice:

For more than 50 years, *The Australian Women’s Weekly* Test Kitchen has been creating marvellous recipes that come with a guarantee of success. First, the recipes always work – just follow the instructions and you too will get the results you see in the photographs. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they are delicious – created by experienced home economists and chefs, all triple-tested and, thanks to their straightforward instructions, easy to make (AWW 2002: 1).

AWW also has cookbooks in other formats, ranging from pocket-sized paperbacks distributed with regular issues of the magazine to relatively expensive and lavishly produced hardbacks, but overall these are books produced for, and welcomed by, a mass market.

The *AWW*'s influence on culinary culture is also confirmed by scholarship from various disciplinary perspectives (for example, Bannerman 1998, Noah & Truswell 2003, Schneider & Davis 2010, Sheridan 2000). Here, however, the focus tends to be on the magazine itself rather than the cookbooks. Occasionally, *AWW* scholars remark upon the contribution made by the books, but in passing; for instance Sheridan, in drawing attention to the role of the *AWW* cookery editor and her 'glamorous' job, says that '[a] further dimension to the cookery editor's influence was added by the *Weekly* publishing its own cookery books' (2002: 91); Schneider and Davis, in their work on *AWW*'s modelling of healthy eating, mention that 'advice on food and eating is offered in a series of cookbooks' (2010: 287, n2). Bannerman (2008: 27) acknowledges that the *AWW* 'home library' of cookbooks 'made it easy for cooks to build a collection around their particular interests' and describes the books as '[B]right and colourful ... fun to browse, their recipes carefully chosen for popular appeal and simplicity of use', yet his primary interest similarly is the magazine itself. The overall picture that emerges is one of recognition of the contribution made by the cookbooks but scope to extend studies of them in their own right.

Such studies potentially are a rich field of research because the cookbooks have qualities that distinguish them from the regular magazine issues, whether from the perspectives of reader (and cook) or scholar. Magazines both reflect and influence communities of readers who have shared values, interests and lifestyles, and they do so through periodic publication that represents an ongoing conversation with readers. Cookbooks, on the other hand, provide a more durable 'snapshot' or repository of culinary practices anchored in time and place. This is particularly so of *AWW* cookbooks, which have been 'staples' for Australian home cooks for decades and because of that provide unique primary source material, whether collectively or selectively. Even an examination of single volumes can be illuminating, as demonstrated by Risson's (2013) work on the *Children's birthday cake book*.

To further illustrate the potential value of research on *AWW* cookbooks, four brief examples are presented here. Each describes a book and identifies some distinctive features of it, but no attempt has been made to canvass the many disciplinary or interdisciplinary possibilities inherent in closer analyses. Just as magazines lend themselves to interdisciplinary enquiry, a defining characteristic of magazine studies as a field (Latham & Scholes 2006), so too do their cookbooks. The cookbooks selected do, however, span different decades (the 1940s, 1960s, 1980s, 2000s) and have differing formats and purposes (a hardcover containing everything the home cook needs; a magazine insert 'cook book' for the 'working woman'; a paperback 'cooking class' on exotic cuisine; and two paperbacks based on lifestyle).

1940s: *Frances Thompson cookery book*

Published by *AWW* in 1940, the *Frances Thompson cookery book* is a ‘compilation of 487 specially tested recipes covering every branch of home cooking’ (Thompson 1940: title page). Thompson, Director of the Canadian School of Home Science, had run Schools of Home Science in Australia in 1939. Her book opens with a letter from ‘Toronto, 1940’ to her ‘Dear culinary cousins’ (1940: v). Thompson admires local cookery books and the Australian interest in cookery but wants to offer her own ‘collection of simple everyday recipes which have proved extremely popular with both English and Canadian housewives’ because of her ‘disappointment’ that many of these recipes had been ‘unsuccessful’ in Australia (1940: v). She adds that the recipes themselves were unlikely to have been flawed; rather, ‘it was more probably the difference in ingredients and in the method of measuring them’ (1940: v), hence her adjustment of recipes for Australian cooks.

AWW relied on overseas expertise for the content of ‘complete’ cookbooks published from the 1950s (Dunstan & Chaitman 2007: 334), and the *Frances Thompson cookery book* can be seen as an earlier example. Also typical of *AWW* cookery books of this era are modest production values (Dunstan & Chaitman 2007: 334–35) appropriate to the books’ utilitarian nature. Most of the 212 pages of *Frances Thompson* comprise unillustrated recipes, with occasional tables (for example, one of vitamins and their sources) or lined pages for notes.

Apart from the insights intrinsic to these features of the book, as well as the recipes themselves and their arrangement in sections, Thompson’s introduction of each section sheds light on culinary attitudes and trends of the time, as some examples show. She says it is ‘fun’ to ‘play the role of both hostess and cook ... when a sense of cookery is combined with a sense of humour’; indeed, ‘the hostess’ can enjoy ‘endless opportunity to show her artistic skill’ with appetizers and Hors d’Oeuvres (1940: 1). Her introduction to ‘Fish’ expresses relief (‘thank goodness’) that ‘we are gradually getting away from far-too-heavy lengthy meals’ and warns against ‘the pernicious habit of frying [fish]’ (1940: 19). In ‘Salads’, Thompson asks readers to ‘remember that a salad, like everything else in life, is more appealing if attractively dressed’ and assures ‘that there is no longer any need for your menfolk to “sniff” at a salad!’ (1940: 103). ‘Eggs’ instructs that eggs may be substituted for meat but depending on their price (1940: 123). The ‘Leftovers’ section will hopefully be useful for ‘newlyweds and small families, where only one joint is purchased during the week’ (1940: 131). ‘Sandwiches’ can be ‘a stand-by for the unexpected guest’ and ‘give a wonderful vent for originality’ (1940: 191).

1960s: *The working woman’s cook book*

The working woman’s cook book was published as a sixteen-page insert in *AWW* on 27 April, 1966. It was compiled by Leila Howard, a prestigious food editor for over fifteen years. In the 1960s, Howard ‘became interested in forms of European cuisine that were both exotic and yet compatible with the Anglo suburban kitchen, and even with daily family menus’ (Sheridan 2002: 92), which is seen in *The working woman’s cook book* in recipes for Fried Eggs Provencale, Biscotten Torte and Brandied Steak

au Poivre, among others. As Sheridan (2002: 102) observes, the book recognises that Australian women were not exclusively housewives. It explicitly admits that women can combine two roles – ‘If you’re a working woman and a housewife, too, the recipes in this cook book will help you, however busy your daily schedule’ (Howard 1966: 2). Despite that, *The working woman’s cook book* falls short of abandoning the ideal of marriage: it includes recipes ‘for one’, but no mention is made of ‘career’ or ‘single’ women.

The premise here is that women are busy and time is limited. From its very first issue, *AWW* strove to save readers time in the kitchen (Bannerman 2008: 81), a concern that recurred across its cookbooks and is obvious in such later titles as *Meals from the freezer: good food for busy people* (AWW 2000) and *Cooking in 10 20 30 40 minutes* (AWW 2012). Resonant today is such content in *The working woman’s cook book* as advice on ‘time-savers’ and sections headed ‘Meals in thirty minutes’, ‘Meals you can prepare – the night before’, ‘Quick cakes and biscuits’ and ‘Easy – and economical, too’, but closer reading shows the book to be grounded in its time. Rarely today would it be necessary to tell readers that ‘Great time- and labor-savers for the busy woman in the preparation of meals are canned, packaged, and quick-frozen foods, available in almost endless variety’ (Howard 1966: 2), nor would it be necessary to give instructions on how to freeze and reheat bread. Similarly, the serving of canned turkey soup as a ‘light luncheon for an unexpected guest’ (Howard 1966: 14) now seems unusual.

1980s: *Italian cooking class cookbook*

In her work on *AWW* post-war, Sheridan observes that the biggest change to food-related content ‘was the vast variety of cuisines that the hostess was encouraged to try out’, including through recipes printed in special supplements on European food and Asian cookery in 1971 (2002: 104). This widening of the culinary repertoire was advocated through, and facilitated by, the cookbooks, which by now had assumed an overtly didactic function through ‘cooking class’ titles on exotic cuisine, such as the *Chinese cooking class cookbook* (AWW 1988a). The ‘cooking class’ titles continued in subsequent decades, and expanded to include Japanese, Thai and Italian, among others.

Sampled here is the *Italian cooking class cookbook* (AWW 1981). It has 105 recipes over 128 pages. On the left page is a recipe with ‘how-to’ photographs; on the right is a lavish photograph, reflecting technological advances that enabled ‘full-colour illustrations on every glossy page at a price that undercut even the strictly utilitarian lines’ (Bannerman 2008: 27). Recipes are placed in a cultural context but only in a generalised way: ‘In Italy, dishes vary according to the region. In this book, we have drawn from all regions and the wide range of recipes represents Italian cooking at its best’ (AWW 1981: title page). At times, contextual information for recipes is hardly peculiar to Italian food (‘Italian soups can be clear and light or thick and hearty but, whatever the type, good flavour is all-important’ (AWW 1981: 10)), yet names of many dishes are provided in Italian as well as English, and quite specific advice is given on how to eat some dishes (as with the recipe for Brodo (AWW 1981: 20),

which gives variations of the basic broth). Moreover, some recipes are sourced from Italian restaurants (as with Pescatore, from La Tavolaccia in Glebe (AWW 1981: 26)). The success of the *Italian cooking class cookbook* in integrating exotic cuisines into mainstream Australian home dining was proven by the book's republication in 1988 and 1998, and as a 'best of' version around 1995.

2000s: *The essential barbecue cookbook* and *Good food fast: lose weight – feel great*

Also seen from the 1980s are *AWW* cookbooks based on particular lifestyles or methods of cooking, or a combination of them. Representative are *Light and luscious summertime cookbook* (AWW 1986), *Microwave cookbook 2* (AWW 1988b), *The barbecue cookbook* (AWW 1991) and *Dinner party cookbook* (AWW 1990). Two relatively recent titles are *The essential barbecue cookbook* (AWW 2002) and *Good food fast: lose weight – feel great* (AWW 2005a).

According to a slideshow commemorating *AWW*'s seventy-fifth birthday (ninemsn 2009), the original *Barbecue cookbook* of 1984 was inspired 'by Paul Hogan's famous quip "Throw another Shrimp on the barbie"'. The underlying sentiment – of enjoying casual outdoor dining – persists in the 2002 version: Australians 'love to cook outdoors!' because of the 'great weather and the abundance of first-rate produce available year round' (AWW 2002: 2). Such recipes as Ginger Tuna with Wasabi Drizzle and Tunisian Prawns with Coriander Potatoes suggest, though, that Australians have moved beyond tossing shrimps on backyard barbies. Also notable is that the four opening pages, 'Barbecue basics', give illustrated technical information on the selection, operation and maintenance of barbecue equipment.

Good food fast synthesises concerns around health and lifestyle through recipes based on nutrition, weight loss and easy preparation. It too is didactic, opening with illustrated pages on maximising 'incidental exercise' whether 'at home', 'shopping', 'at work' or 'in the car' (2005a: 4–5). Photographs on these pages of a mother with daughters (and laundry) and a career woman (with briefcase, rapidly ascending steps) represent the target readership and echo the recognition in *The working woman's cook book* (Howard 1966) of women's dual roles. Recipes also indicate *AWW*'s ongoing role in expanding the culinary repertoire of Australian households; for example, the recipe for Lamb Chermoulla with Chickpea Salad explains what chermoulla is and how it is used, and that for Phad Thai gives advice on Thai noodles.

Concluding comments

These examples suggest that *AWW* cookbooks lend themselves to focused research projects within the broad field of culinary culture, such as those relating to particular foods, techniques or trends, but they also suggest possibilities in, for example, gender studies and leisure studies. Extending beyond culinary culture is research founded in the creative industries, and writing and publishing. Not only could *AWW* cookbooks be examined as a publishing phenomenon, but they also could be used to extend work done by Brien (2008) on the role of magazines in the careers of women food writers

and, by extension, food editors. While this paper advocates research on *AWW* cookbooks in their own right, another approach would be to examine cookbooks alongside contemporaneous issues of their parent magazine or even competitor titles, to gain a more multifaceted view of the shaping of culinary culture.

A possible impediment to such research is the ephemeral nature of some *AWW* cookbooks from past decades. Access to primary sources can be challenging in magazine studies generally in Australia (Williamson 2010), even though research on some major titles has been facilitated by digitisation, including of *AWW* issues from 1933 to 1982 through the National Library of Australia's online repository Trove. Cookbooks produced and disseminated by magazines, including as flimsy inserts (as was *The working woman's cookbook*), may not be commonly held in either private or other collections, although the National Library of Australia has several. These difficulties arise from the very qualities that have made *AWW* cookbooks so consistently attractive, including their relatively low cost and easy accessibility. These are books to be used, discarded if they become outdated or replaced with later editions. Having said that, personal experience and conversations with colleagues and friends during the preparation of this paper suggest that there are more old *AWW* cookbooks on kitchen shelves than might be thought.

Magazines are essentially rhetorical texts: put simply, they function persuasively, to engender certain views of self and community, and also certain actions, beliefs and values. *AWW* cookbooks distil the rhetorical function of the magazine as purveyor of contemporary culinary culture. They also acknowledge contexts, including social and economic, that influence the translation of culinary trends into the vernacular. In other words, and consistent with *AWW*'s status as a general-interest mass-market title, the cookbooks are cookbooks for the people. This is seen in the cookbooks overviewed in this paper, which acknowledge through their content such matters as observing household economy, accommodating the entry of women into the workforce, choosing and maintaining a barbecue, and losing weight. This pragmatism, along with the enduring accessibility of the *AWW* cookbooks, has led to what can only be seen as an unparalleled influence on national culinary culture.

Endnote

1. To accompany the exhibition, the National Library of Australia published recipe cards for the 'delicious retro treats' of *AWW*'s American Fudge (Brittle) (1937), Casserole Rabbit, Corn and Tomato (1944), Ginger Beer (1951), Pineapple Crunch (1960) and Pussycat Cake (1978). These can be downloaded from <http://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/in-every-home-the-australian-womens-weekly> (accessed 23 September 2013)

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