

American Association for State and Local History

Learning by Pinches and Dashes: Using Cookbooks as Research Documents

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Source: *History News*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (SPRING 1997), pp. 22-25

Published by: American Association for State and Local History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42652412>

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Learning by Pinches and Dashes:



Using Cookbooks as Research Documents

In 1937, *Sunset Magazine* published the *Hostess Handbook for Western Homes*. With articles on home entertaining and a collection of Sunset readers' recipes, the *Hostess Handbook* self-consciously promoted an informal western lifestyle. Buffet suppers, "particularly adapted to western home entertaining," were encouraged.

A polenta party "from San Francisco's sprawling Italian colony," and a Mexican dinner show local ethnic influences, while reader recipes such as pickled figs, tomatoes stuffed with fresh water chestnuts (from the Chinese markets), and avocado ring mold make use of the region's produce. As they describe home entertaining etiquette, the articles reveal social conventions and relationships. Some of the audience clearly had servants such as a

butler, maid, or gardener, while others did not. Photographs illustrate food arrangements and table settings. Text and illustrations indicate the technology used during the period; for instance, oven temperatures are given both in degrees and as slow, moderate, and hot; icebox cookies and frozen desserts are numerous; "how-to" drawings show hand-cranked egg beaters, rather than electric mixers.

This picture of an emergent lifestyle and cuisine we now know as "California" becomes clear only when the *Hostess Handbook* is compared to other sources and subjected to critical analysis. Yet it illustrates the wealth of

information that cookbooks have to offer. Cookbooks are primarily about food—how we acquire, prepare, serve, consume, and think about food.

Because food touches on so many aspects of our lives, cookbooks tell us about many aspects of our history and culture. They tell us what foods have been eaten by different cultural groups. They contain ideas about nutrition. Cookbooks describe what technology was used to process and cook food, in and out of the home. They illustrate how kitchens and dining rooms were furnished, how food was presented, how tables were set, and the customs for dining. They

show us how housework has changed over time. Insights into the roles of family members and servants may be gleaned from cookbooks and they provide information on social events and customs such as parties, luncheons, and gift giving.

While there are a variety of other sources of information about the history of food, such as diaries, letters, advertisements,



The cover of *The House-keeper's Almanac: and Good Wife's Receipt Book* (Philadelphia, 1842) shows an early view of an American kitchen.
Photo courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

by Jane C. Busch

account books, newspapers, magazines, prints, paintings, inventories, travel accounts, and novels, references to food in these sources are sporadic and often cryptic. And although archaeology and oral history provide valuable information, cookbooks—devoted to the topic of food—are indispensable.

To interpret cookbooks effectively, we need to understand how they were created and used. Manuscript recipe books and printed cookbooks are fundamentally different. Manuscript recipe books are repositories of family recipes kept by the female head of the household. Often these recipe books were inherited: the Ashfield recipe book was kept by three generations of Ashfield women in New York City and New Jersey from the 1720s to the late eighteenth century. For the most part, manuscript recipe books contain recipes that the family actually used. They tend to contain more complex recipes requiring greater precision, such as desserts and preserves, rather than everyday dishes that did not follow specific recipes. Over time, manuscript recipe books have become less common while printed cookbooks have proliferated. In the twentieth century, recipes on file cards have replaced recipe books, though not entirely. My great Aunt Flo's recipe book, kept from the 1930s to the 1960s, is predominated by cakes, pies, and cookies, much like a nineteenth-century recipe book. Many versions of date and nut bars and lemon pie reflect her taste and her era.

In contrast to manuscript recipe books, printed cookbooks are prescriptive. The author offers a collection of recipes and the user picks and chooses among them, such that some are prepared repeatedly, others not at all. With rare exceptions, printed cookbooks are written to sell something, most often the cookbook itself. However, advertising cookbooks are usually given away to sell a

product, such as gelatin or gas stoves. Cookbooks may also be written to promote certain ideas, such as eating less fat.

Critical analysis allows us to interpret these prescriptive publications. To begin with, we should look in the cookbook and elsewhere for evidence of its popularity. How many editions were printed? How many copies were in each printing? Are they showing up in used bookstores? *The Joy of Cooking*, the best selling cookbook of all time, is found relatively infrequently in used bookstores, suggesting that people keep them and use them until they're in tatters. Is the condition of a cookbook well-used or pristine? Was a cookbook published in Philadelphia

inscribed by an owner in St.

Louis? Testimonials and book reviews may also indicate a cookbook's popularity.

Consider the author's background and purpose. Is the author trying to sell a product, raise money, or introduce new ideas? The *Unity Inn Cook Book* (1924), published by the Unity School of Christianity in Kansas City, Missouri, was compiled "with one purpose in view—to offer a collection of receipts which will be of service in arranging a vegetarian menu for each meal in the day." An introductory discussion of the relation between vegetarianism and regeneration further illuminates this cookbook's purpose.

With the author's intentions in mind, we can separate the cookbook's explicit and implicit messages. The explicit messages—to sell a product, or reform cooking practice—tell about the author but are less likely to reflect actual foodways accurately. The implicit messages in a cookbook



While it promotes the use of Marshmallow Fluff for sandwich fillings, The New "Yummy Book" shows a bridge party table setting.

Devil's Food

Submitted by Ruby Rogers

My mother, Ethelyn Louise Rogers, made this dessert on special occasions, and my older sister continues this tradition today. As we were raised by church-going parents who reared us on both the Old and New Testaments, we were understandably intrigued by the name as well as the richness of this dessert!

½ cup shortening
1 tsp. soda
1¼ cups of sugar
1 cup of sour (sweet) milk
2 eggs
2 Tbsp. cocoa
1 cup sifted Softasilk
1 tsp. vanilla
½ tsp. salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream shortening and sugar thoroughly in a mixing bowl. Blend in well-beaten eggs. Sift flour, salt, and soda together. Mix flour mixture and milk alternately into eggs. Add cocoa and vanilla, and mix again. Pour into a 9" cake pan. Bake for 30 minutes at 350 degrees.

Ruby Rogers is on the AASLH Council and is director of the department of public programs at the Cincinnati History Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio.

will be less affected by the author's agenda. For example, *The Art of Cooking and Serving* (1929), published by Procter & Gamble, states clearly its agenda to promote the use of Crisco shortening. The reader would be wise to suspect that most cooks did not prepare scrambled eggs, hollandaise sauce, and peanut butter sandwiches with Crisco. But chapters on table service, kitchen equipment, and meal planning would be more representative of contemporary practice.

Cookbook authors may reveal how their prescriptive advice varies from the usual custom. Frequently they exhort their audiences to do things differently, or contrast their own way of doing things with the way others do them. In *The American Frugal Housewife* (1832), leading authority Lydia Maria Child wrote about making gravy: "Most people put a half a pint of flour and water into their tin-kitchen, when they set meat down to roast. This does very well; but gravy is better flavored, and looks darker, to shake flour and salt upon the meat..."

Consider as well the intended audience of the cookbook, and the relationship of that audience to the author. Is the cookbook directed to a specific social class or

ethnic group? Did this audience buy and use it? Helen Gurley Brown wrote that her *Single Girl's Cookbook* (1969) was designed to be a complete, basic cookbook with simple recipes to help every single girl lead a happier, lovelier life. Surely it is significant that Brown was editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and author of *Sex and the Single Girl*, and that she was married when she wrote the cookbook.

Like all historical documents, cookbooks must be analyzed in the context of time and place. How were cookbooks used at the time the cookbook was published? In the eighteenth century few people owned printed cookbooks. At present, an estimated 1,500 cookbooks are published each year and many people are likely to have cookbook collections. What time period is represented by the recipes in a cookbook? Many of the recipes in the Ashfield recipe book were a century or more old when they were inscribed. American eating habits have tended to be conservative, although they have become

less so in the late twentieth century. Despite some authors' attempts to introduce new methods or ideas, cookbooks usually reflect established practice more than innovation. Finally, information derived from a cookbook should be verified and amplified through comparison with other cookbooks and other types of documents. General Electric's *Electric Refrigerator Menus and Recipes* (1927), featuring frozen desserts and salads, shows the possible uses of an electric refrigerator; the frozen salads, mousses, and icebox cakes in many cookbooks of the 1930s confirm that the appliances were indeed used as General Electric proposed.

Cookbooks may be interpreted at different levels to reveal information about both their creators and their users. To the extent that a cookbook is written by an individual, it reflects that person's beliefs, values, and tastes. Hannah Glasse's statement in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (London, 1789) that "few servants there are, that know how to roast and boil

to perfection," may tell us something about English servants; it certainly gives us Hannah Glasse's opinion of English servants. In *Trader Vic's Book of Food and Drink* (1946), Trader Vic presented his point of view with relish: "The Emily Post stuff is not for me. I frankly don't give one good goddam whether the fork is on the left side of the plate or underneath it...." Cookbooks written by celebrities and authorities may be a source of biographical information. Advertising cookbooks published by companies to sell food products or kitchen equipment contain information about those companies, contributing to our knowledge of business history, including local business history that is often poorly recorded.

There also exists a host of community cookbooks, which are published by a local group such as a church, club, or museum in order to raise money. With recipes submitted by group members, these cookbooks represent closely that community's foodways and values. It may be surprising to find that *Out of Vermont Kitchens*, published by two Vermont churches in 1939, includes recipes for Chinese chop suey as well as baked beans with maple sugar. Although community cookbooks are most often linked to a specific locale, they may also represent a regional or national community linked by a common cause or belief. Such is the *Blue Book of Cooking* (1938), created by the community of University of Michigan alumni. Advertisements and historical sketches, sometimes included in community cookbooks, offer additional information about the community. The *Blue Book*, for example, contains photographs of University of Michigan buildings.

Because community cookbooks are marketed primarily within the community, creators and users overlap to a large degree. However, there has been less overlap in recent decades, as community cookbooks are sold to tourists or even distributed to a national market. A friend who lives in New Market, Virginia, recently gave me a copy of *Beyond Parsley*, published by the Junior League of Kansas City, Missouri. She purchased the book in Door County, Wisconsin, and sent it to me in East Lansing, Michigan.

When we turn our attention to cookbook users, we can look for insight into broad

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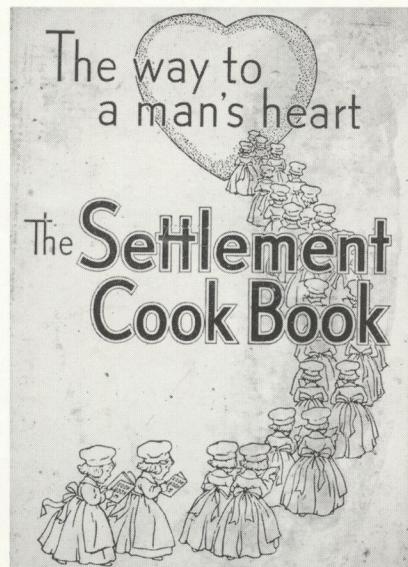
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cultural patterns or into the tastes of individual households. To interpret broader trends, we need to examine and compare many cookbooks. Subsequent editions of best-selling cookbooks such as *Better Homes and Gardens* are particularly useful for showing cultural changes. Cookbooks document the nineteenth century shift from open hearth to stove cooking, and the twentieth century

shift to simpler meals. They allow us to trace the movement and development of different foods, including traditional foods such as cornbread or popular foods such as Chicago deep dish pizza. Repeated occurrences of a recipe are a measure of its popularity. Cookbooks help us to track the adoption of a new technology, such as the oven thermostat, or a new technique, such as baking with baking powder.

Examining cookbooks in the context of an individual household offers insights about that family's customs and history. The Mel and Carrie Kehn cookbook collection, for example, includes a type-script World War II army cookbook that tells of Mel Kehn's stint as an army cook; cookbooks focusing on topics such as cooking with arthritis suggest challenges the couple faced in their later years. Cookbooks are part of a family's system for preparing food, linked to other artifacts in that system; for instance, a car for grocery shopping, knives for chopping, and a stove for cooking. Cookbooks are also part of a set of kitchen furnishings, and in the twentieth century are most likely part of a set of other cookbooks. (Trader Vic counted thirty-five volumes in his cookbook library.) Like any set of artifacts, these collections can be analyzed to reveal the tastes and interests of the household that assembled them.

Customized cookbooks reveal even more about their users. Cooks personalize their



This well-used copy of *The Settlement Cook Book* speaks of its time as well as of its owner.

'42 Lafayette, LA" (figure 3). Written inside the covers are names and page numbers of recipes, perhaps those the owner referred

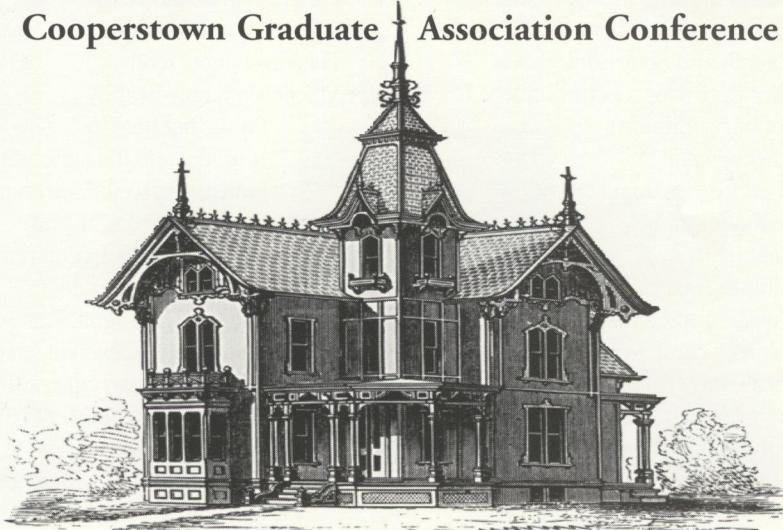
cookbooks by writing notes in them and inserting clippings and handwritten recipes. This practice is recognized and encouraged by publishers who include blank pages for notes, or use three-ring binders so pages can be added. In this way, a printed cookbook takes on some of the qualities of a manuscript recipe book. My copy of *The Settlement Cook Book* (23rd edition, 1940), is inscribed "Lenore Heller, summer '41 Selma, Ala., summer

to frequently. There are only a few clippings: recipes for stewed mushrooms, for baked beans, and a suggested diet for anemic people. In other cookbooks, owners have noted the date a dish was prepared, or whether a recipe was good.

Cookbook research is as rich and complex as the people who create them. The rewards are great, particularly since the thorough researcher does not just read, but cooks and eats as well. ↗

Jane C. Busch is historic preservation planner for the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office. She found her collection of more than 700 cookbooks to be a great resource when she taught material culture studies at the Cooperstown Graduate Program for History Museum Studies. For this essay she has drawn on the writings of Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Henry Glassie, Sandra Oliver, and Michael Schudson. The author can be reached at the Michigan Historical Center, 717 W. Allegan St., Lansing, MI 48918-1800; (517) 335-2729.

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