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Unconventional Recipe Books: Cuisine and Cultural Identity

Cultural Anthropology Preliminary Report

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Research Question

Recipes are sacred. Take Coca-Cola, for example—an American beverage company that closely guards their recipe in a heavily secured vault in The World of Coca-Cola's museum. Recipes have transcended the handwritten, worn, and stained piece of paper of the kitchen drawer, and proven to be a valuable commodity while instilling cultural pride and identity. With globalization and technology continuing to reshape the landscape of how recipes are shared, the ways and reasons people consume food are undergoing a transformation, and hold the ability to mold thought and culture. “According to the World Travel Association (WTFA) 2022 Report, 34% of tourists visit places that attract them in terms of cuisine” (Grand View Research). The WTFA 2023 report also states that culinary culture exposes tourists to different ways of life, which is crucial for fostering socio-political awareness.

My study attempts to analyze how unconventional food is perceived, shared, and valued in contemporary culinary culture, informed by personal, cultural, and emotional experiences. How can agricultural availability influence a country's cultural national cuisine? American cuisine has been criticized for lacking a distinct food culture, but can the United States' culinary identity be understood as a reflection of its melting pot of diverse influences?

Background Information

Recipe books have shifted from being rare, elite resources to becoming widely accessible tools for home cooks and professional chefs. They have adapted to reflect changes in technology, culture, and the way people approach cooking and consuming food. Through the forces of globalization, we now have unimagined access to food products from opposite ends of the world as well as countless recipes to go along downloaded in the palm of our hands. With this level of dissemination and access, we have a treasure trove of material to analyze and understand culture in new and fascinating ways. This level of access begs the question of why cookbooks are relevant today. These cookbooks often serve as dynamic repositories of knowledge and memory, transcending the mere dissemination of recipes to encapsulate the social, emotional, and experiential contexts in which food is prepared and shared.

In the history of American cookbooks “many recipes that circulated amongst white and wealthy families came from black slaves” (UCLA HCI), well documenting the origins of diverse influences. The first cookbook written by an American in 1796, *American Cookery*, has an inscription stating that this cookbook has been “adapted to this country and all grades of life” (Staves). By reading between the lines, we can pull back the curtain to see that cookbooks hold hidden ideologies, and in fact all grades of life are never fully represented. Although the makings of an American food culture were

influenced by black slaves, the barriers to literacy and freedom prevented them from fully participating and receiving credit for their contributions.

Utilizing texts from authors such as Darra Goldstein and Arjun Appadurai, we can trace the ways in which globalization and the availability of food resources can influence our food choices and consequently, a country's cuisine. For many years, New World potatoes were considered the devil's food in Russia. By the 1800s, potatoes drenched in French béchamel sauce started to become Russian because of the forced cultivation and availability of potatoes in the country. Recipes, like that of Russian cookbook author Elena Molokhovets, demonstrate an unadulterated view of the writer's class and culture through food choices and recipe descriptions. They work similarly to texts like Jeffrey Pilcher's "¡Que Vivan los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity" where we see how cuisines can hide cultural assumptions about class and national identity. Mexico's first cookbook "El Cocinero Mexicano", published in 1831, excluded recipes associated with the poor, although these foods were prepared for the rich in secret. Pilcher states, "Cookbook authors help unify a country by encouraging the interchange of foods between different regions, classes, and ethnic groups, and thereby building a sense of community within the kitchen" (2). Cookbooks and their authors have the power to shape the ways we interact and the foods we consume, enforcing cultural narratives placed by governing bodies and upheld by consenting citizens.

Methodology

My research methodology relied on a qualitative approach. I utilized small n research to provide an in-depth look at a non-orthodox cookbook author as opposed to a large-scale statistical analysis. The data was derived from both an analysis of video footage, and its accompanying transcription, sourced from my interview with Valerie Dutton, a 6 time published author. Her works are varied, and include romantic fiction, mystery, and her recipe book. My questions followed a semi-structured format, with the deviation of two added questions.

To ensure ethical conduct, I had Valerie confirm her willingness to participate at the beginning of the interview. Facilitating an interview over the internet came with its challenges. I had to remind Valerie to place her laptop far enough for me to analyze any non-verbal communication. When I combined her body and hand movements with verbal communication, I was able to grasp the wider message Valerie tried to convey.

When it came time to set up the interview, I took to Instagram where I made a general call and posted a story, asking if anyone could connect me with a recipe book author. A friend from Virginia Tech reached out, connecting me with a childhood friend's mother. I texted Valerie and scheduled an interview for the following day. Given the unusual and quick way we connected, I planned for our interview to take place over the video conferencing platform, Zoom. We both used our Macbook laptops. An hour before

the interview started, it dawned on me to confirm Valerie was in the same time zone as me. This is where she told me she would be doing the interview from her home office in Trenton, MI while I conducted it in my guest room in Brooklyn, NY. We interviewed on March 5th at 8:30 PM.

Analysis

Having the chance to interview Valerie was a unique opportunity that brought to light ways unconventional cookbooks can inform our understanding of food culture. Her recipe book, “50+ 1 Weird Recipes: Dare to try them all”, is a combination of recipes she had acquired through her childhood community as well as her role as a mother.

Our global economic climate has advanced to the point where virtually any ingredient is available, but at a cost. However, this has only been the case for a small portion of modern history. According to Watson in, “Church Cookbooks: Changing Foodways on the American Prairie”, “European cookbooks, which called for ingredients that could not easily be obtained in North America or failed to instruct cooks on the use of New World foods, were not very useful”. European migrants settling in the American Midwest had to make do with what was available. As both Watson and Valerie point out, cornmeal was a staple and a key component of the diet for many American farm families. Valerie specifically draws on how this idea of food availability played out in her home state of Michigan:

When I was growing up, whenever there was a [bridal] shower, all the older women, well all of us would bring a recipe for the new bride and she brought a corn cob jelly recipe. I just thought that was the weirdest sounding thing and I made it with my aunt and it was entirely without flavor, but it was recipes like that that were probably from a deprivation era so I just thought you know they were really using whatever they had on hand, to you know, spice up dinner just a little bit.

What Valerie discussed is a point in history where the ingenuity of prepared foods, met the lack of resources, shaped by the deprivation of the past. Today, fusion foods often emerge from the conditions of capitalist food availability. With an abundance of resources, the past necessity to “spice up dinner” has taken on a new tone of fun and excitement.

The act of fun that thematically runs through Valerie’s interview and work, along with unconventional recipe books, can be radical acts in and of themselves. It opens the doors to innovation and the creation of food and culture through communal connections. For example, Valerie recalled her neighborhood block parties where women made weird food as an icebreaker and had everyone guess what the secret ingredient was. Like many Americans, not knowing distant generations is normal, let alone your neighbor.

Here, I suggest an icebreaker is a uniquely Western concept to gain entry into a new community.

In an American society that praises individualism Valerie describes her motivation to write her recipe book as bringing people together. On multiple occasions, she explains that, “[the recipes] generated so much chatter so that was just fun for me” and that, “funny foods or unusual foods are just a great way to get people to talk and um so there's a bonding process”. Humor has a funny ability to connect people, and breaking norms regarding what has to be in a food item is the way that many cuisines and dishes are created in the first place.

Scholar Arjun Appadurai describes the ways that cookbooks standardize and designate authentic dishes like biryani, which vary widely from region to region to promote a pan-Indian identity. As Weiskopf-Ball notes in Lisa Heldke's work *Recipes for Theory Making*, “recipes offer us ideas that we need to either accept or refuse”. Unconventional recipe books that employ ideas like fun, accept that food is hybrid and dynamic, and can hint more towards the lived reality of the ways we eat and our actual American food culture. Cookbooks like Valerie's hold the ability to disrupt the often culturally homogenizing forces of cookbooks and reflect a more authentic lived experience.

As Valerie states, “when you call something weird it might be a family tradition, you know, make sure that you realize it's all in fun and and um weird is actually wonderful”, showing us that we can only feel food is “weird” if there's an established standard. This idea aligns more closely with the variations in regional cuisines like the infinite number of recipes for biryani. While fusion foods are often looked down upon, in embracing the idea of weirdness, we embrace a more authentic view of American food culture because America is a fusion of “weird” connections and foods that have allowed it to be the tangled melting pot it is claimed to be.

Difficulties

Upon starting the interview, Valerie's dog insisted on sitting on her lap. I did not consider this to be too distracting with the first half of the interview focusing on general “who are you” questions. As this was my first time meeting her, I felt nervous and thus felt the need to accommodate her pet; this was a huge mistake. About 30 minutes into the interview, her dog chewed up shoes she received hours before. It was a significant distraction, consuming both our focus and valuable time. Time is especially valuable when you are paying for it, which leads me to what I believe illustrates my unpreparedness. Zoom displayed a message that my free 40 minutes were coming to an end. I panicked and promptly subscribed to a month of pro services, ignorantly assuming that would extend our time. Consequently, that was not the case. We then agreed to end before the 40 minutes were up so she could tend to her pet while I

arranged another Zoom link. I also struggled with our rapport. On multiple occasions, Valerie was unsure if she was answering “correctly”. I did not feel comfortable enough to push her answers to address my questions more deeply. Instead, I accommodated her hesitancy, too.

While I reflect on my role, deciding on a research question within days before I needed to conduct an interview was my procrastination at center stage. I gave myself almost no time to rehearse my questions and overall conduct as an interviewer. Furthermore, I should have familiarized myself with Zoom and its limitations. My questions, however, were thoughtful and intentionally ordered to tell a story by building off of the previous questions. Unfortunately, I do not believe that was translated since, being over-consumed with her dog making another mess, I rushed through the second half of my questions.

Relevance

The article, “Experiencing Reality through Cookbooks”, states that personalised and family cookbooks have not been studied extensively in an academic context:

Personalised and family cookbooks are much different and much more telling documents than either unpersonalised printed books or Internet options . . . Unfortunately, these documents have not been the focus of much academic attention as food scholars generally analyse the texts within them rather than their practical and actual use. (Weiskopf-Ball)

Personalized and family cookbooks possess a distinct and more revealing nature compared to impersonal printed cookbooks or digital alternatives, as they carry the unique imprint of personal history, cultural identity, and familial traditions. However, despite their potential significance as objects of cultural and social inquiry, these documents have largely been overlooked in academic food studies. This lack of attention to the practical, lived experience of using such cookbooks highlights a gap in current food scholarship, which tends to prioritize theoretical or textual analysis over the embodied, everyday practices associated with cooking and family life. Researching non-traditional cookbooks can illuminate cultural generalizations at play such as nationality and class in a way that addresses this gap in this academic discipline.

In “Listening to People”, Lareau discussed Kat’s phrase the “4 R’s” as a response to critics. For this research, I highlight replicability, as this interview thread can and should be done again, expanding the scope to other unorthodox and personalized cookbook authors across other cuisines. By exploring this topic through the lens of other cultures, I can further determine which values hold true across disparate cultures. In evaluating the reasons these books are produced, we can round out academia’s understanding of how cookbooks shape culture and cuisine.

Appendices

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Interview Questions

Prepared questions (10):

1. What is your educational background and did it influence your personal journey as a "foodie" and cook?
2. What compelled you to gather your recipes and formally publish them?
3. How did you become a published cookbook author and what kinds of challenges did you face?
4. How did you arrive at your finished recipes? Was researching and testing an integral part in accomplishing this?
5. What does it mean to you to share your recipes? Before publishing "50 +1 WEIRD RECIPES: DARE TO TRY THEM ALL!", how, if at all, were you sharing your recipes?
6. Based on the title of your book, what can you say about unconventional recipes? How would you argue their place on our dinner tables, restaurants, and book stores?
7. How do you think food trends (such as fusion cuisine) impact the acceptance of unconventional dishes?
8. Many people find "weird" foods to be humorous and/or entertaining. Do you think food can be a form of humor, and if so, what does that say about the culture that consumes it?
9. How do you think food plays a role in shaping cultural identities or traditions, and how is this reflected in the recipes you've included in the book?
10. The popular Disney movie, *Ratatouille*, concludes with a scene where the revered food critic is humbled by a childhood dish formerly made by his mother. Are there particular foods in your book that are tied to significant personal memories and how do these recipes serve as a form of cultural memory or storytelling?

Additional questions from interview (2):

1. Your book, it was the color yellow and red. What was behind the choice for your book to be those colors?

2. Is it safe to say that you have developed some sort of reputation for bringing those recipes?

Transcript

Jennifer Gerhards: So before we get started I just want to make sure that I have confirmation that you're okay to do this interview

Valerie Dutton: Yes absolutely.

JG: I wanted to start off with asking what is your educational background and did it influence your personal journey as a foodie and cook

VD: So my educational background is in journalism. I got a degree in mass communications and I don't know if it influenced my um interest in food, but it certainly influenced my interest in writing about things that were interesting and fun and brought people together and so that was what was behind um doing this cookbook. It was quite a process to um gather the recipes and to um really honor the people in my life that I'd gotten the recipes from.

JG: What compelled you to gather your recipes and then formally publish them?

VD: Well I had over the years come up with some really crazy recipes. When I was in elementary school I remember the women gathered round um there was a series of graduation parties that were happening on the Block and everybody you know just went to all of the The Neighbors graduation parties. It was such a community when I grew up and the women were Whispering over the secret ingredient in the meatball sauce and it turns out that it was grape jelly that had been added to the barbecue sauce that the meatballs were in and that that just took off like a wildfire and so that was like one of the first recipes that I had that was from my mom but it wasn't until I started coming up with some other recipes as I was getting older and had my own household that um it occurred to me that I should pull them all together so when I really when it dawned on me how fun these weird recipes were. um was when I had a hints like just a look on someone's face you know when they figured out what the secret ingredient was. I had so much fun doing that and gathering up the recipes and going to my mom's friends who were older at that point and they all knew me growing up and getting recipes from them and I just I really am so pleased with the way it turned out because I mean they got recipes from my relatives and from Neighbors and from my mom's church friends and just having that history all in one little book is just very meaningful to me

JG: Your book it was the color yellow. What was the choice for having your color to be yellow

VD: um just because it was bright and cheerful and jumped out that was it

JG: McDonalds picked red because its supposed to stimulate hunger and yellow is associated with happiness so it's very interesting that you chose those colors without even um like knowing that

JG: how did you become a published cookbook author and what kinds of challenges did you face

VD: the way that I got here is because I'm a writer anyways I was a staff writer for years and now I do editing so that's my profession and I've been writing even when it wasn't my nine-to-five job I've always done projects so I've written a couple of romances please don't look them up um I've done um a mystery I've done this um cookbook. I realized that I had just set aside some of the weirdest recipes that I've run across over the past several years I thought you know that just would be so much fun to pull it all together so the challenges are making sure that people are okay with using their recipes because some of these come from families or um like a the church cookbook that um was my from my mom's church I wanted to make sure that I didn't step on anybody's toes and made sure that I had permission and then um and also when you call something weird and it might be a family tradition you know have to make sure that you realize it's all in fun and and um weird is actually wonderful right um and then to I I made sure that I tried each recipe out

JG: you were speaking about like the church specifically um one of my books specifically talks about how uh recipes in this country have been large in part derived from church cookbooks so thank you for providing me that story

VD: oh my goodness if you want the tastiest food you go to a church cookbook but that made me think about a recipe that I got from my grandmother's neighbor so my grandma was a farmer she and my grandfather had a farm in Pennsylvania and her neighbor um gave my cousin's wife a recipe for her wedding shower so that was something that I I don't know if it that still goes on in in your generation but when I was growing up when there was ever a shower all the older women well all of us would bring a recipe for the new bride and she brought a corn cob jelly recipe so

I just thought that was the weirdest sounding thing and I made it with my aunt and it was entirely without flavor but it was recipes like that that were Drive probably from a deprivation era so it was that corn cop jelly but I just thought you know they were really using whatever they had had on hand to you know spice up dinner just a little bit

JG: so what does it mean to you to share your recipes um before publishing if at all were you sharing your recipes?

VD: I would go to every family event with a new dish and make everybody try it and make everybody guess and Not only was that like an icebreaker at at some of the family reunions and parties but I really wanted to know what people thought were good *I don't know if I answered your question correctly.*

JG: no you did you did uh the first part of the question was what does it mean to you to share your recipes like is there some kind of like emotional connection there or you're just like just having

VD: I had a ball I just had so much fun I like to bake I don't like to cook but I really like to bake. It generated so much chatter so that was just fun for me

JG: is it safe to say that you have developed some sort of reputation for bringing those recipes

JG: based on the title of your book what can you say about the unconventional recipes how would you argue their place on our dinner tables restaurants and bookstores?

VD: well I think that there are stories that go with so many of these recipes and I think that it's it's kind of just fun to have something different and they're all tasty all of these um these dishes are are tasty and I think that for instance with the the dill pickles that's something that um is very preponderant in Polish recipes so there are a lot of dill pickles in the recipes that I have there's dough pickle soup there's a dough pickle pasta there's um oh excuse me what are you doing oh my God I just got brand new shoes and she ate them okay

JG: i'm sorry about that

VD: I can't even believe it okay but if you um if I was wondering like why is it that dill pickles are so much a part of the the Polish food I had um a book signing recently and there was a woman there I was talking about the D pickle soup recipe that I had and I was um she laughed because she said that she had in her family a dull pickle soup that that was you know something that had been in her family for a Generations since she was polish we have a very strong Polish Community in this area in Michigan and um I was thinking about that I was looking it up and I guess that um dill pickles are something that well cucumbers were very inexpensive in in Poland and and uh so it was very frequently used to um you know enhance food and then the pickling was something that they did all the time like that was just something that they do with their um all of their vegetables and so um it just it kind of links to that uh polish culture and so excuse me she's on this other shoe. I just am so disappointed in you and I have to say I'm very upset with you just cannot get over that she is usually not like that so oh I'm so sorry

JG: oh no it's problem also I just got a notification that this is going to run out so let me just quickly sign up for this sorry

VD: no problem you are so bad

JG: this is so terrible I'm sorry

VD: that's okay I see that I've got eight minutes left on this end would you have to start over again

JG: um no I'm just it says if I can just sign up I can get the full hour but but it's no problem I should have thought about this before

VD: oh that's okay it sounds like you've been running around

JG: I don't know why it's not letting me sign up yeah thank you for your patience I'm so sorry this is happening okay okay I think we're okay okay hopefully there should be no more interruptions

VD: you fixed it because this says that got we've got six minutes and 45 seconds

JG: yeah it said I fixed it but I don't we might have to not like start over but just. My really interesting questions I'm not even I I don't know if I can like get out of zoom and then go back into it but if anything I could probably

VD: end now and then just call me back immediately

JG: yeah let me let me see if if not like I can probably yeah let me just end now and then I'll call back in like a moment when I have this um figured out

VD: so you send me another link

JG: yes

VD: okay okay

JG: thank you so much I'll be right back

VD: okay sounds good

JG: many people find weird foods to be humorous Andor entertaining do you think food can be a form of humor and if so what does that say about the culture that consumes it

VD: well I think that like I had said earlier it can be an breaker it can cause so much conversation and when something is distinctly weird like the dill pickle chips um dipped in chocolate it it is humorous it it is funny there are also some cookies that I serve at my book signings um I just pick them deliberately because there's so unusual and they get people talking and laughing about it because it's not anything that they would expect but it's a black pepper cookie and it's actually like a shortbread but it has ground pepper in it and you don't feel the heat on the first bite or maybe even the second bite but it builds up and it's funny it's funny because it's so unexpected and I have to warn people because I don't want them to suddenly have their mouth on fire without realizing that it's coming but yeah I just think that um funny Foods or unusual foods are just a a great way to get people to talk and um so there's a bonding process and that's I really love my book signings because I get to have these wonderful Conversations with people who just come up and um you know try a cookie yeah

JG: how do you think food plays a role in shaping cultural identities or traditions and how is that reflected and the recipes you've included in your book

VD: well I think we talked a little bit about D pickle and I was thinking about um I don't know how this really plays into it but I was in um Taiwan many years ago and I was

asked to try um stinky tofu and I had tried absolutely everything that had been presented in front of me and I could not do that one thing I was it was almost like a test that um I was there to visit my cousin who was working there and she had a group of friends who were just so kind about including me and everything and and uh exposing both of us to their families and their Traditions but it was it was really a test I think and I couldn't pass it I just the stinky tofu reminded

Me of the smell of a pig sty it was it was that pungent and that sharp and so overpowering and I just couldn't do that but I think that the the people who presented it to us that was just part of their Norm so yeah

JG: the popular Disney movie Ratatouille concludes with the scene where the revered food critic is humbled by his childhood dish formerly made by his mother are there particular Foods in your cookbook that are tied to significant personal memories and how do these recipes serve as a form of cultural memory or storytelling

VD: oh that's a good one. let's see let me just look

through I have so many memories of baking with my mom or getting things ready for Christmas day or the days that families would come over and those were more traditional recipes that we use so I didn't include most of those in my weird recipes but was a very different feel but I think of her when I see the corn cob jelly recipe that I mentioned earlier because that was Mrs McCall's corn cob jelly and Mrs Mcall was the neighbor of my mom's mom my grandmother when they lived on the farm and Mrs Mcall um did the books she helped my grandma with the books because not only did my grandma and grandpa run the farm but they had um rental homes and then I just found out that my uncle's best friend was um Mrs McCall's brother I and I knew of my uncle's best friend but I had no idea that Mrs McCall and and uh his name was vale um we're I don't know that I'm answering your question very well Jennifer but I think about my mom all the time when I do a Christmas breakfasts and do the traditional meals that we have and when my family comes to visit I always do the the extended family Christmas party is here the day after Christmas and my mom hasn't been with us for about three Christmases but I always think of her because she was the one that always initiated the parties and always had the appetizers that her grandsons love the best or you know when I visited home when I was in college she always had the meals that were my favorite at the time I would never eat it now but it was um cornfed brisket and I just think that she always made a link between her love for her family and how she prepared their food for them and I think that's probably across the board in all cultures right Mom kind of um gravitate towards the kitchen and and doing the foods that what it stands for their

love for their family and so I feel like even if not many of her recipes are in my cookbook I feel like when I'm in the kitchen so often um I feel like I'm stepping into my mom's role

VD: listen if there's anything that you need to Circle back and have me fill in holes um I was extremely distracted there because I just got these shoes today they just were delivered today and they are going to be thrown away today

JG: I'm so sorry about that

VD: can't believe it she do she never does that anyways if there are any holes that you need me to fill in please feel free to reach out and let me know

JG: thank you. it was nice to meet you

VD: all right sweetheart nice to meet you too

JG: have a good night and I'm sorry about your shoes again bye bye