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The cookbook as a responsive form

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this special edition of *Food and Foodways* is to examine the cookbook in a fresh light. Previous criticism of cookbooks has concentrated on how the cookbook reflects history, culture and social patterns of behavior. Cookbook criticism has revealed important food histories, unearthed significant cultural phenomena, and demonstrated new ways of understanding social connections and behaviors. This has ranged from recording courtly cuisines to the output of celebrity television chefs, and from the manuals of domestic science movements to individual, personal attachments to cookbooks. The essays in this special edition, however, consider the cookbook as a responsive form, as texts which galvanize or intervene or even resist cultural contexts. Each of the articles considers how a cookbook or small group of closely-related genre cookbooks has answered a set of circumstances. More than holding a mirror to society and culture, these cookbooks are shown to be culturally responsive too.

KEYWORDS

Cookbook criticism;
cookbook critique;
cookbook history;
cookbook interventions;
culture and cookbooks;
personal cookbooks

Introduction

The purpose of this special issue is to consider the cookbook anew. Each article in “Cookbook Politics” argues, in its own way, that cookbooks are not merely reflections of society, culture or history, but that they also make an intervention into those spheres, not passively, but as active responsive forms. By shifting the role of the cookbook from receptacle to response, this special edition offers a new turn in cookbook studies. The cookbooks selected for discussion in the following articles intervene in culture, they galvanize groups, they empower individuals, and they resist ideologies. Each of the essays builds upon previous work in the field of cookbook studies, and offers new ways of approaching the cookbook as a dynamic form.

Culturally embedded and historically profound, cookbooks speak to class, identity and nationhood, reminding us of past lives. As objects, they have the power to recall food memories with a physical presence uniquely

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their own. And, as the scholarship of print media expands, so cookbooks are acknowledged as one of the first books to have been printed and, centuries later, they retain a dominant position in publishing and book-selling marketplaces. In addition, the form of the cookbook can be ever more broadly defined. It may be something home produced, such as an early household book or scrapbook of magazine cut-outs, or a well-thumbed paperback edition of a classic, with “authority, style and innovation” (Sarah Benjamin 2013). The contemporary cookbook may be a glossy hardback, complete with flyleaf blurb and celebrity cover photo, or even an online foodsite or cookbook webpage.

Such diversity in content, form and audience has been reflected in the range of cookbook criticism, with different approaches to this expansive genre, expressed in at least five distinguishable ways. First, important and distinctive histories have been told through the cookbook, bringing significant past cookbooks to light and drawing important conclusions about food innovation, social trends, cultural meaning and developments in cookbook style. Of many different approaches, Stephen Mennell’s *All Manners of Food*, for instance, covers a vast food history, demonstrating how the cookbook’s early extravagant courtly cuisines of the Middle Ages developed into a more democratic domestic cookery of the twentieth century (Mennell 1985). Nicola Humble’s *Culinary Pleasures* offers a narrower social history of the twentieth century told through the cookbook. It accounts for the impact of two World Wars and cosmopolitan influences upon Britain’s cookbook landscape (Humble 2005). Laura Shapiro’s *Perfection Salad*, different again, is an important women’s history study, examining the American professionalization of cookery and the influence of domestic science in creating new fashions for food over the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Shapiro 1986).

Other critiques, secondly, have focused upon textual history and book context. Cookbooks have now acquired the status of being legitimate subjects of study, and Anne Bower has likened the breadth of study of the community cookbook to scholarly studies of patchwork quilts (1997, 4). Bower argues that community cookbooks, because of work in women’s cultural studies, have become increasingly, “readable, with great benefit to our knowledge of women’s experiences and discourse,” as recovered texts and metaphors (1997, 4-5 emphasis in original). Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor (2004, 153-5), for instance, discuss the cookbook’s cultural embeddedness and its revelations about gender, class and social change. They argue that gastronomic writing, from Brillat-Savarin to contemporary food magazine writing, as well as hybrid forms such as culinary history or romantic food fiction, has taken food seriously and “gesture[d] towards the myths, histories and memorable meals which lay beyond the home” (2004, 169). However, as Susan Leonardi (1989, 345) has noted, a

cookbook may overlap with numerous other kinds of texts, presenting itself variously as: narrative, autobiography, novel, journalism, even “mud-slinging.” Mary Anne Schofield’s (1989) collection demonstrates how the American cookbook has made cultural interventions ranging from fiction and poetry to history and religion. And Megan Elias (2017) has explored cookbooks in terms of U.S. national culture and identity from the perspectives of both mainstream habits and subcultural voices.

Third, food, inextricably linked to a sense of self, has long formed a means of expressing identity politics, and this has informed further studies of the cookbook. Warren Belasco (1989), for instance, has explored the radically new and alternative approaches of “countercuisine” cookbooks have influenced more radical food lifestyles. Katharina Vester (2015, 3-4) has considered how food discourses have produced and impacted upon American identities, where cultural representations of food, food power and ideologies create performative subject positions. Gendered identities are specifically considered in some texts, such as Innes’s *Cooking Lessons* (2001), and identity formation through feminist cookery, masculine cookery, lesbian and gay cookery has been discussed through focus upon particular cookbooks.

Fourth, the reading of cookbooks is often considered to engender a peculiarly personal, even intimate, relationship to the text. Cookbooks, it has been suggested, offer an “imaginary indulgence” and are devoured like novels (Worth, 64), and often read in bed (Cooke 2010). This suggests that cookbooks speak to us in unique ways, evoking meanings much deeper than mere lists of ingredients and techniques. “What you must understand” claims Rachel Cooke (2010) writing for *The Guardian*, “is that cookbooks are not just for those who cook – though if you do cook, it goes without saying that they are an essential part of your life’s quest”; in short, they are a “repository for [...] restlessness”, in this case the search for the ultimate lemon cake. Cooking from a recipe has been considered a “self-reflective process” involving a relationship between recipe givers and receivers, where one’s own skills and recipe interpretation must be assessed (Heldke 1992, 261-2).

Fifth, the cookbook has also received attention as a print media artifact of importance. As one of the earliest printed books, and now one of the largest sectors of the publishing market, the cookbook is a significant genre of print media scholarly attention. Early print editions, provenance of ownership, industry practices, distribution channels and bibliographic details have all underpinned cookbook scholarship (Mennell 1985; Warde 1997). However, Suzanne Worth (2015, 62), in outlining the extensive, aspirational landscape of cookbooks, considers the impact of the cookbook industry on the individual and warns that, “the cookbook industry sells us an image of lifestyles we do not have and a taste of restaurants we cannot afford to eat in.”

In 2003, Janet Floyd and I organized the articles for the collection, *The Recipe Reader* into three sections: “Traditions, Individual Interventions and Contemporary Contexts”, addressing broad issues around historical milieus, the impact of major figures and more recent developments regarding the recipe. The volume addressed narratives and questions central to the cookbook: “race”, imperialism and war. It examined the cultural significance of individual writers and discussed diverse and hybrid forms of recipes as they appeared in fiction and memoir, in feminist magazines, on television, and in narratives of migration. Writing the introduction, I argued that recipes produce a kind of narrative, and, more than this, that the recipe “reveals other stories too: of family sagas and community records, of historical and cultural moments or changes, and also personal histories and narratives of the self” (Floyd and Forster, 2003, 2). The recipe, here, was key to unlocking the meaning of food and foodways in all these diverse contexts. It provided a foundation for arguments about the significance of cookbook texts. Cookbooks, housing and structuring recipes, reflecting food histories, engaging assumed readerships, adopting a production style and a cultural position, and existing as material artifacts, support all this cultural work and more.

This approach provided a starting point for the conference “Cookbooks: Past, Present and Future” at the University of Portsmouth in 2019. In the opening talk, I took delegates for a short walk along my cookbook shelf. In sharing this autobiographical account, I relied upon ways of thinking about the cookbook that recall social interaction and cultural moments, conventions such as marriage, heterosexual gender-normative behaviors, cookbooks as products and mass-communication influencers, moments of self-reflexivity as well as personal history. What was most surprising and revelatory was just how accommodating and malleable my cookbooks were as a vehicle for revealing and hiding the self. Through the motley collection on my shelf, it was possible to narrate with ease aspects of life which may overlap with others: childhood, family history, friendships, chance encounters, aspirations, life stages, cultural influences, self-reflexivity as well as deeper interests in food history. The cookbooks on my shelf may be deeply personal, but I know that many others could construct a parallel narrative. The work performed by cookbooks in assisting memory is extremely powerful.

Homi Bhabha, writing about unpacking his own crate of books, asks: “Does the order of books determine the order of things? What kind of history of oneself and one’s times is coded in the collecting of books?” (Bhabha, 5, 1995). Aspects of my life are represented in those cookbook spines, and even more so in the spines long lost to wear and tear. For ease of accessibility, my cookbooks mostly live in the kitchen, but they occupy other spaces too. Some pretty ones, of the look-book variety,

occupy a more prominent shelf, some are in my study, for research reference, others, less used, are tucked away in cupboards. While the order of my cookery books – most frequently-used in the middle – simply reflects the recently cooked meals, a “history of myself” is very much contained on that modest shelf. They tell a version of my story that I am happy to repeat, it is one of the more easily related narratives of a life. And in telling my story through my cookbooks, I offer up my own “chaos of memories” (Benjamin 1955 (1999), 61-2).

My autobiographical account of my cookbook shelf followed the direction of some of the cookbook criticism outlined above, and echoed ways of understanding food contexts from *The Recipe Reader* (Floyd and Forster 2003). Different kinds of history could be traced through those books, including trends in cooking styles and food fashions, as well as a personal development in cooking skills. Some of my cookbooks I keep merely for their historical significance or their beautifully-written introductions. I was able to describe the social practice of cookbook gift giving in the UK, and point out the Christmas best-sellers on my shelf. It was also easy to see how the plethora and prominence of food programmes on British television was reflected in the number of hard-back tomes by celebrity chefs in my possession, some well-used, others hardly opened. My personal attachment to some of my cookbooks, I explained, was highly individual, even irrational, rooted in memories, emotions, aspiration and curiosity. And there was creativity too. At one time I might have written a personal cookbook, a process now made much easier with access to home publishing. And my scrapbooks of recipes reveal other reading habits too, across women’s magazines, newspapers, Sunday supplements and online food sites, but sadly, my scrapbooks are not properly indexed, and less useful for that. Like the rest of my cookbook shelf, there is no system, but this “chaos of memories”, intrinsically woven through my small cookbook collection, is precious to me.

Home, family, personal history and interests, ordinariness and the everyday are the outstanding features of my cookbook collection. While my cookbooks, accumulated haphazardly, have deep meaning for me, it was easy to see how this “history of oneself and one’s times” reflected the personal, social, historical and cultural directions of previous cookbook scholarship, recalling cookbook fashions and readership groups; authorial, celebrity and multi-media influences; personal histories and textual investigations; and print media contexts.

Yet, as the 2019 cookbook symposium got underway, so themes of history and community, issues of identity and media, and the future uses of cookbooks displayed a shift in scholarship focused upon the cookbook form. Rather than considering what the cookbook implies and reveals in terms of social history, some of these symposium papers focused upon

how cookbooks make an intervention in culture and politics. Cookbooks were seen less as records of socio-historical times past, and more as sites of cultural energy and assimilation in themselves. One paper traced the development of a specific Israeli cookbooks of different periods that charted national identity through a conscious change in print layout and typeface of cookbooks, another discussed oral history and powerful food connections evoked by library-based group cookbook reading. Some papers investigated cultural engagement through fiction, food fashions or art, while others considered the impact of the digital recipe on communities and computerized food lists in our future kitchen fridges. There was an emergent sense of the cookbook being actively involved in shaping culture, gathering people and groups together with purpose, and making an active statement. Cookbooks were seen as assuming a dynamic cultural agency, suggesting moments of cultural ambition, rather than passively holding a mirror to society as repositories of social history. It is this sense of the cookbook, as a participatory form, that has guided the essays in this collection, and that marks the intervention of this special edition as a new direction in the study of cookbooks.

In this special edition of *Food and Foodways*, cookbooks are argued to be generating group allegiances, or forming new alliances and processes. These new essays demonstrate that as well as looking back to historical situatedness, cultural signifiers and personal memory, cookbooks also galvanize action and promote activism. The essays in this collection examine the cultural and social arguments and events that have generated cookbooks and explore how cookbooks have spoken back to groups, be they readers, writers or communities. In discussing how cookbooks have responded to cultural arguments, it can be seen that cookbooks have a much more active role to play.

Taken together, these essays demonstrate range and diversity in the cookbook's potential for cultural responsiveness and interventions. Floyd takes an unconventional cookbook, already known for its disruptions of the form, *White Trash Cooking* (1986), and "explodes" our understanding of the provenance and cultural position of this remarkable text. Floyd firstly examines how *White Trash Cooking* (Mickler 1986), reflects and records the cooking and eating habits of the groups of people colloquially referred to as "White Trash", whilst also problematizing the term itself by questioning who truly belongs to this "caste" and the means by which a White Trash cooking tradition has been generated and assimilated. She draws attention to issues of visibility, belonging, and group exclusion as well as adherence. Floyd's analysis raises controversial issues of plagiarism, making shattering observations about recipe originality and ownership. The essay also reveals much about American class and race stratifications, questioning significant absences such as the influence of Black American

soul food. Other cultural influences emerge, for just as *White Trash Cooking* may bring the daily cookery of one community to the fore, so it only exists as a material artifact because of the intervention of other cultural connections and resources, owing much to the travel routes of gay communities in the Southern States, to traditions of rural photography and Southern poets, and being supported by small, independent publishers and privately wealthy individuals. *White Trash Cooking* may on the surface represent one community, but as a print artifact it responds to, and affects diverse groups of people. Through this broad range of influences, Floyd explores and explodes the very stability of the cookbook genre.

Charity Givens, in “Creating Community, One Byte at a Time”, interprets anew the cultural intervention made by the traditional charity or community cookbook. Community cookbooks, with their long-standing fund-raising purpose, importantly demonstrate the social sphere of the locally-produced cookbook, emanating from church groups, schools and more. They speak to specific groups of people, located in a moment of history. In this context, Givens considers the new role played by digital quarantine cookbooks in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Givens argues that as community cookbooks do not rely on the marketing props of more commercial cookbooks, so this was a form available to many during the pandemic. Additionally, digital community cookbooks were able to simulate the social cultures, people and places of older home-produced charity cookbooks, by reproducing these characteristics in new, digital ways. Importantly, the quarantine cookbook—in contrast to food blogs and vlogs that focused on individual stories and recipes—shared amongst members of its community essential knowledge of recipes, ingredients and methods. Digital quarantine cookbooks retained cultural elements of regional taste, as well as the sense of people cooking and eating together, but also varied their purpose, suggesting substitutions if food supply-chain difficulties caused shortages, or teaching those who had never previously cooked. As a form of digital print, quarantine cookbooks operated according to digital cultures: with curation and censorship still taking place, but with contributions accepted more immediately, and contents updated more quickly. However, there were disadvantages of this form too: a website might disappear, meaning that the recipes and community cookbook were lost for ever. Providing a window into the global pandemic, quarantine cookbooks offered an example of the responsiveness of a cookbook to the people and places of COVID-19, when usual forms of community were not allowed.

Kevin Geddes investigates how the cookbook was, rather controversially, at the center of developing and emerging television cookery policy, contributing to changing attitudes and policies regarding publishing within the BBC. The cookbook of the celebrity television show is now a

commonplace expectation, however, this was not always the case and attitudes toward social status and culinary capital changed dramatically over the postwar period. Outlining the diverse attitudes of postwar television cookery pioneers on the matter of publishing their recipes in cookbooks, and broader radio and printed listings, Geddes identifies how the cookbook performed a central role in revealing difficulties and effecting change. The publication of spin-off cookbooks was inhibited by the perceived problem of a public service corporation, such as the BBC, making a profit out of its enterprises. The idealism of the BBC in the period after the Second World War prohibited such commercialization, and early BBC policy banned commercial interests being generated from television appearances or even connections. The three television cooks of Geddes's article: Philip Harben, Marguerite Patten and Fanny Craddock, approached their media careers and book sales in different ways—publishing books outside the BBC, broadcasting on the radio, publishing in BBC listings magazines and BBC-produced leaflets, and the ultimate weapon: wielding audience letters. The cookbook was central to changing attitudes toward the cultural institution of the BBC.

My own essay investigates the political underpinnings of a genre of cookbooks that makes an almost inexplicable emergence in 1970s Britain: the country cookbook. This, a decade of highly processed foods ubiquitously available in supermarkets and utilized daily by busy working mothers, was also a decade of much opposition to the agri-industrial food complexes. By examining how countercultural movements addressed food-related issues of the moment, especially communal living, self-sufficiency and folk feminism, this discussion examines how rural approaches to food and rural food habits reinterpreted the philosophies of the countercultures. The cultural intervention of country cookbooks in 1970s Britain was in opposition to the impact of industrialization upon the individual. Country cookbooks offered a new kind of cultural intervention, one which offered a way of life away from the work-consumption cycle in an emulation of the enduring cultural trope of a peaceful, pastoral life. The country cookbook adopted an alternative feminist stance, offering power and purpose through its country-style old-fashioned recipes and advice. By drawing upon countercultures and offering a mainstream readership an imagined return to rural living, the country cookbook made its own cultural intervention: the dream of a life outside capitalism and the limitations of modern life.

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