Experiencing Reality through Cookbooks: How Cookbooks Shape and Reveal Our Identities

Emily Weiskopf-Ball

Introduction

In October of 2004, La Presse asked its Quebecois reading audience a very simple question: “What is your favourite cookbook and why?” As Marie Marquis reports in her essay “The Cookbooks Quebec More Than Just Recipes,” “two weeks later, 363 e-mail responses had been received” (214) answers, it was clear that despite the increase in television cooking shows, Internet cooking YouTube how-to videos, cookbooks were not only still being used, but that people had strong allegiance to their favourite ones.

Marquis’s essay provides concrete evidence that cookbooks are not meaningless objects. Rather relevant quotations from the survey prove that they are associated with strong memories and are used to create bonds between individuals and across generations. Moreover, these quotation individuals use cookbooks to construct personal narratives that they share with others. In her philosophical analysis of foodmaking as a thoughtful practice, Lisa Heldke helps move the discussion of cooking forward by explaining that the age-old dichotomy between theory and practice merges in food preparation (206). Foodmaking, she explains through her example of kneading bread, requires both a theoretical understanding of what makes bread rise and a practical knowledge required to achieve the desired results. Much as Susan Leonardi argues that recipes require a context, a point, a reason-to-be” (340), Heldke advocates in “Recipes Making” that recipes offer us ideas that we need to either accept or refuse. These ideas include, limited to, what makes a good meal, what it means to eat healthy, what it means to be Italian or vegan.

Cookbooks can take many forms. As the cover art from academic documents on the nature, role of cooking and cookbooks clearly demonstrates, a “cookbook” may be an ornate box filled cards (Floyd and Forster) or may be a bunch of random pieces of paper organised by divider and held together by a piece of elastic (Tye). The Internet has created many new options for recipe sharing. Websites such as Allrecipes.com and Cooks.com are open access forums where people upload, download, and bookmark favourite foods. Yet, Laura Shapiro argues in Something from the Oven that the mere presence of a cookbook in one’s home does not mean it is actually used. Why? Cookbooks tell us a great deal about the culinary climate of a given period [...] what they can’t sense of the day-to-day cookery as it [is] genuinely experienced in the kitchens of real life” (xxi)

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Personalised and family cookbooks are much different and much more telling documents unpersonalised printed books or Internet options. Family cookbooks can also take any shape or form as they are compiled that have been created by a single person or a small group of individuals. They can be handwritten or typed and inserted into either cookbook, scrapbooked, or bound in some other way. The Internet may also help here as book websites such as Blurb.com allow people to make, and even sell, their own printed books. These can be personalised with pictures and scrapbook-like embellishments. The recipes in these personal collections are shared by contact with other people as well as printed and online publications. Also impacting these individual realities such as gender, race, class, and work. Unfortunately, these documents have a focus of much academic attention as food scholars generally analyse the texts within them rather than focusing on practical and actual use. In order to properly understand the value and role of personal cookbooks in our daily lives, we must move away from generalisations to specific case studies, looking at people in relationship with them, who are actually using and compiling their collections or opting instead to turn to either printed books or their computers, can we see the relevance of a family cookbook. In order to address this methodological problem, this essay reviews a number of cookbook-related experiences that I have witnessed and/or been a part of in my own life.
Learning to Cook and Learning to Live: What Cookbooks Teach Us

Once upon a time, a mother and her two, beautiful daughters decided to make chocolate chip cookies. They took out all the bowls and utensils and ingredients they needed. The mother then plopped them down among all of the paraphernalia on the counter. First, they beat the butter using their Kitchen Aid mixer. Then they stirred in the sugar. Carefully, they cracked and beat in the eggs. They dumped in the flour. They dumped in the baking powder. They dumped in the vanilla. They dumped in the chocolate chips. Together, they rolled the cookies, placed them on a baking sheet, pat them down with a fork, and placed them in a hot oven. The house smelt amazing! The mother and her daughter looked forward to eating the cookies when, all of a sudden, a great big dog showed up at the door. The mother ran outside to shoo the dog home yelling, "Go home, now! Go away!" By the time she was back, cookies had started to burn and the house stank! The mother and her two daughters took all the cookies back out. They threw out the ruined cookies. And they restarted. They beat the sugar, the flour, the baking powder, the vanilla, and the chocolate chips. Together, they rolled the cookies, placed them on a baking sheet, and put them in the oven. The house stank up the house. While she takes great pleasure in its narrative, I take greater pleasure in the fact that, at the time she was writing this story, she had a rudimentary understanding of how a basic recipe works.

In fact, only a few months ago I observed this mixture of knowledge and skill merge when I had the counter while I cleaned up a mess on the floor. By the time I got back to her, she had finshed the dry ingredients in with the wet ones. I watched her from across the kitchen as she turned off the mixer, slowly spooned the flour mixture into the bowl, and turned the machine back on. She then poured milk into the flour mixture, put the bowl on the table, and went to the living room to watch TV. While I am very particular about the amount of milk she puts in, she did not try to add the vanilla or the chocolate chips, this experience essentially proves that one can learn through simple observation and repetition. It is true that she did not have a cookbook in front of her, that she did not know the precise measurements of the ingredients being put into the bowl, and that she did not have the right equipment. However, this experience proves that one can learn foodmaking is a thoughtful process as it is about instinct as it is about recipe. Once she is able to read, my daughter will be able to use the instincts that she has developed in her early years to help her better understand written recipes.

What is also important to note about this scenario is that I did have a recipe and that I was essentially the one in charge. My culinary instincts are good. I have been baking and cooking since I was a child and it is very much a part of my life. We rarely buy cookies or cakes from the store because we make them from scratch. Yet, I am a working mother who does not spend her days in the kitchen. Thus, my instincts need prompting and guidance from written instructions.

And what if you were to begin to analyse the large content of my cookbook, this one scenario echoes these recent scholarly claims that personal cookbooks are a significant addition to the academic world and must be read thoughtfully, as Heldke argues, for both the recipe’s theory and for the practical applications and stories embedded within it. Heldke argues, for both the recipes’s theory and for the practical applications and stories embedded within them.

Significantly, the handwritten recipe I was using that day comes from the personal cookbook that has been handed down in the family. I have been using it for years to help her better understand written recipes. Once she is able to read, my daughter will be able to use the instincts that she has developed in her early years to help her better understand written recipes.

In this particular example, Karena and I were making a chocolate chip cake—a recipe that has been passed down from my Oma. It is a complicated recipe because it requires a weight scale rather than measuring cups, and because instructions such as “add enough milk to make a soft dough” are far from precise. Yet, I am a working mother who does not spend her days in the kitchen. Thus, my instincts need prompting and guidance from written instructions. In their recent works Eat My Words and Baking as Biography, Janet Theophano and Diane Tye analyse homemade, hand-crafted, and personal cookbooks to show that these texts are the evolving since I left home. In their recent works Eat My Words and Baking as Biography, Janet Theophano and Diane Tye analyse homemade, hand-crafted, and personal cookbooks to show that these means through which we can understand individuals at a given time and in a given place. The example, analyses old cookbooks to understand the impact of social networking in identity looking at the types of recipes and number of people who have written themselves into the books, she shows that cookbook creation has always been a social activity that reveals personal identity. In a slightly different way, Tye uses her own mother’s recipes to better understand a person she can no longer talk to. Through recipes, she is able to recreate her deceased mother’s life and thus understand her on a personal and emotional level. Although academics have traditionally ignored cookbooks mundane and unprofessional, the work of these recent critics illustrates the extent to which these texts provide an important way of understanding society and people’s places within it. While this begins to analyse the large content of my cookbook, this one scenario echoes these recent scholars that personal cookbooks are a significant addition to the academic world and must be read thoughtfully, for both the recipes’s theory and for the practical applications and stories embedded within them.

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and the handwritten alterations on the actual recipes give people authority, autonomy, and independence. As the examples in Theophano’s and Tye’s works demonstrate, the personal touches, the added comments, become static documents. As Supski goes on to admit, she is a nervous cook and one can conclude that ensured that important family food memories will be preserved; yet once printed, even these treasures risk

Nostalgia,” Sian Supski uses her aunt’s Blurb family cookbook to argue that the marvel of the Internet has

options that do allow for personalisation. In her essay “Aunty Sylvie’s Sponge Foodmaking, Cookbooks and

content, recipes can lose their ties to their origins. Bookmaking sites such as Blurb.com are attractive

favourite recipes found on their websites. However, unless the submitter takes the time to personalise the

cookbooks. It is true that recipe websites such as Cooks.com and Allrecipes.com do allow a person to store

Furthermore, it is difficult to create an online cookbook that rivals the malleability of the personal

tools, or environmental conditions. Only practice can teach people how to make a recipe successfully.

While authors such as Anderson and Wagner bemoan that traditional cookbooks only give on

most recipes, there are so many recipes online that it is sometimes overwhelming and difficu

choice. An amateur cook may find comfort in the illustrations and specific instruction, yet one o

either have an instinct for what makes a good recipe or needs to be willing to spend time trying t

course the same can be said of regular cookbooks. Having printed texts in one’s home requires

to go through them and still requires a sense of suitability and manageability. In both cases abundance nor a lack of choice can guarantee results. It is true that both the Internet and printc

such as The Better Homes and Gardens provide numerous, step-by-step instructions and ill help people learn to make food from scratch. Other encyclopedic volumes such as The Five Ro
to Good Cooking, like YouTube, videos break recipes down into simple steps and include visual i

a nervous cook. Yet there is a big difference between the theory and the practice. What in theory simple still necessitates practice. A botched recipe can be the result of using different brands of
tools, or environmental conditions. Only practice can teach people how to make a recipe succes

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Hardcopies of recipes indicate through their tattered, dog-eared, and stained pages which recipes have been tried and have been considered to be worth keeping. While Internet sites frequently allow comment on recipes and so allow cooks to filter their options, commenting is not a requirement. Suggestions left by others do not necessarily reflect personal preferences. Although they do social, recipe-networking trend that Theophano argues has always existed in relation to cookbook and personal foodways, once online, their anonymity and lack of personal connection strips their true potential. This is also true of printed cookbooks. Even those compiled by celebrity chefs su-ray and Jamie Oliver cannot guarantee success as individuals still need to try them. These recipes, reading and recipe collecting advance Heldke’s argument that theory and practice blend in this activity. Recipes are not static. They change depending on who makes them, where they come from, and on the conditions under which they are executed. As critics, we need to recognize this blending of theory and practice and read recipe collections with this reality in mind.

Conclusion

Despite the growing number of blogs and recipe websites now available to the average cook, personal cookbooks are still a more useful and telling way to communicate information about ourselves and our foodways. As this reflection on actual experiences clearly demonstrates, personal cookbooks teach us more than just food. They allow us to connect to the past in order to better understand who we were and that the Internet and modern technology cannot. Just as cooking combines theory and practice, reading personal and family cookbooks allows critics to see how theories about foodmaking play out in actual kitchens by actual people. The nuanced merging of voices within them influences over time as they come into contact with others. While printed cookbooks provide their own narrative possibilities, the stories that can be read in personal cookbooks prove that reading them is a thoughtful practice worthy of academic attention.

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Experiencing Reality through Cookbooks: How Cookbooks Shape and Reveal Our Identities, burozem, based on what causes intense colluvia.

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