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

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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 Quebecois: More Than Just Recipes,” “two weeks later, 363 e-mail responses had been received” (214). In 2004, 214 answers, it was clear that despite the increase in television cooking shows, Internet cooking shows, and YouTube how-to videos, cookbooks were not only still being used, but that people had strong opinions about their favourite ones.

Marquis’s essay provides concrete evidence that cookbooks are not meaningless objects. Rather, relevant quotations from the survey proves that they are associated with strong memories and are used to create bonds between individuals and across generations. Moreover, these quotations show how individuals use cookbooks to construct personal narratives that they share with others. In her practical analysis of foodmaking as a thoughtful practice, Lisa Heldke helps move the discussion of cookbooks 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 of the techniques required to achieve the desired results. Much as Susan Leonardi argues that recipe recommendations are “a context, a point, a reason-to-be” (340), Heldke advocates in “Recipes for Making” that recipes offer us ideas that we need to either accept or refuse. These ideas include, but are not limited to, what makes a good meal, what it means to eat healthy, what it means to be Italian or Vietnamese.

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

Personalised and family cookbooks are much different and much more telling documents than unpersonalised printed books or Internet options. Family cookbooks can also take any shape and form. We can define them as compilations that have been created by a single person or a small group of people. They evolve over time. They can be handwritten or typed and inserted into either a printed cookbook, scrapbooked, or bound in some other way. The Internet may also help here as book publishing services 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 often 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 not received the focus of much academic attention as food scholars generally analyse the texts within them rather than their 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 own collections or opting instead to turn to either printed books or their computers, can we see the importance and value of family cookbooks. In order to address this methodological problem, this essay explores a number of cookbook-related experiences that I have witnessed and/or been a part of in my own

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moving away from the theoretical and focusing on the practical, I aim to advance Heldke's ar recipe reading, like foodmaking, is a thoughtful practice with important lessons.

Learning to Cook and Learning to Live: What Cookbooks Te

Once upon a time, a mother and her two, beautiful daughters decided to make chocolate chip co took out all the bowls and utensils and ingredients they needed. The mother then plopped t down among all of the paraphernalia on the counter. First, they beat the butter using their Kitchen Aid mixer. Then they beat in the sugar. Carefully, they cracked and beat in the eggs dumped in the flour. They dumped in the baking powder. They dumped in the vanilla. And they the chocolate chips. Together, they rolled the cookies, placed them on a baking sheet, pat them fork, and placed them in a hot oven. The house smelled amazing! The mother and her dau looking forward to eating the cookies when, all of a sudden, a great big dog showed up at th mother ran outside to shoo the dog home yelling, "Go home, now! Go away!" By the time she g cookies had started to burn and the house stank! The mother and her two daughters took all making stuff back out. They threw out the ruined cookies. And they restarted. They beat the their super cool Kitchen Aid mixer. Then they beat in the sugar. Carefully, they cracked and bea Then they dumped in the flour. They dumped in the baking powder. They dumped in the vanil dumped in the chocolate chips. Together, they rolled the cookies, placed them on a baking she down with a fork, and placed them in a hot oven.

This story that my oldest daughter and I invented together goes on to have the cookies ruined neighbour before finally finding fruition in a batch of successfully baked cookies. This is a story together as we get her ready for bed. One person is always the narrator who lists the steps wh makes the sound effects of the beating mixer and the dumping ingredients. Together, we act out rolling the cookies, patting them, and waving our hands in front of our faces when the burnt c stunk up the house. While she takes great pleasure in its narrative, I take greater pleasure in the three years of age, she has 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 on the counter while I cleaned up a mess on the floor. By the time I got back to her, she had fini the dry ingredients in with the wet ones. I watched her from across the kitchen as she turned off Aid mixer, slowly spooned the flour mixture into the bowl, and turned the machine back on. S the batter mix until the flour had been absorbed and then repeated the process. While I am very t she did not try to add the vanilla or the chocolate chips, this experience essentially proves that o through simple observation and repetition. It is true that she did not have a cookbook in front she did not know the precise measurements of the ingredients being put into the bowl, and th she would not have been able to make this recipe without my help. However, this examples pro argument that foodmaking is a thoughtful process as it is as much 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 devel illiterate 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 essent in charge. My culinary instincts are good. I have been baking and cooking since I was a child a much a part of my life. We rarely buy cookies or cakes from the store because we make them fr Yet, I am a working mother who does not spend her days in the kitchen. Thus, my instincts need and guidance from written instructions.

Significantly, the handwritten recipe I was using that day comes from the personal cookbook tl evolving since I left home. In their recent works *Eat My Words* and *Baking as Biography*, Janet 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 person identity. In a slightly different way, Tye uses her own mother's recipes to better understand a pe no longer talk to. Through recipes, she is able to recreate her deceased mother's life and thus c her on a personal and emotional level. Although academics have traditionally ignored cookbo mundane and unprofessional, the work of these recent critics illustrates the extent to which provide an important way of understanding society and people's places within it. While this e begin to analyse the large content of my cookbook, this one scenario echoes these recent sch that personal cookbooks are a significant addition to the academic world and must be read th Heldke argues, for both the recipes's theory and for the practical applications and stories embe them.

In this particular example, Karena and I were making a chocolate a chip cake—a recipe that has down from my Oma. It is a complicated recipe because it requires a weight scale rather than me and because instructions such as "add enough milk to make a soft dough" are far from precise. I not just a meaningless entry I found in a random book or on a random website but rather a r narrative and an expression of my personal heritage. As Theophano and Tye have argued, recip to connect with family, friends, and specific groups of people either still living or long gone. B way to create and relive memories. While I am lucky that my Oma is still very much alive, I imagi someday use this recipe as a way to reconnect with her. When I serve this cake to my family n

will surely be reminded of her. We will wonder where this recipe came from, how it is different chocolate chip cake recipes, and where she learned to make it. In fact, the recipe already varies between homes. My Oma makes hers in a round pan, my mother in a loaf pan, and I in cups. Each person has a different reason for her choice of presentation that is intrinsic to her identity. Thus by sharing this recipe with my daughter, I am not only ensuring that my memories are being passed on but I am also programming into her character values such as critical thinking, the worthiness of homemade food, and the importance of family. Karena does not yet have her own cookbook but her preferences mean that some of the recipes in her collection are made more often than others. My cookbook continues to change and grow as I am prioritising foods I know my kids will eat. I am also shopping and surfing for children's recipe websites in order to find kid-friendly meals we can make together.

In her analysis of children and adolescent cookbooks published between the 1910s and 1950s, Sklar demonstrates that cookbooks have not only taught children how to cook, but also how to act. Through titles and instructions (generally aimed at girls), the recipe choices (fluffy deserts for girls and savory for boys), and the illustrations (of girls cooking and boys eating), these cookbooks have been a vehicle through which society has taught its youth about their future, gendered roles. Much research by scholars such as Laura Shapiro, Sonia Cancian, and Inness, to name but a few, has documented this gendered labour in the home. However, the literature does not always reflect reality. As this new research demonstrates, men do cook and they also influence family cookbook creation.

A while back, my husband spent quite a bit of time browsing through the World Wide Web to find a recipe for a venison marinade. As an avid "barbecuer," he has tried and tested a number of marinades over the years. Thus he knew what he was looking for in a good recipe. He found one, and it was a hit! Just recently, he tried to find that recipe again. Rather than this being a simple process, he knew exactly which recipe he was looking for, it took quite a bit of searching before he found it. When he was sure to write it down to avoid having to repeat the frustrating experience. Ironically, when I put the written recipe into my personal cookbook, I found that he had, in fact, already copied it (or

These two handwritten copies of the same recipe are but one place where my husband "speaks" and claims a place within, what I had always considered "my" cookbook. His taste preferences and preferred cooking style is very different from my own—I would never have considered a venison marinade worth finding never mind copying out. By reading his and my recipes together, one can see an assumed gender roles in our kitchen. This cookbook proves a practice opposite from the conventional where women cook to serve men which Inness and others have theorised from the cookbooks they have studied and forces food and gender critics to reconsider stereotypical dichotomies.

Another important example is a recipe that has not actually been written down and inserted into my cookbook but it is one my husband and I both take turns making. Years ago, we had found a recipe for a bacon-cheese dip online that we never managed to find again. Since then, we have been forced to use a different recipe and it has, in my opinion, never been as good. Both these Internet-recipe examples illustrate the negative drawbacks to using the Internet to find, and store, recipes. Unfortunately, the Internet is not static. It changes. Links are sometimes broken. Searches do not always yield the same results. Even if you use storing sites such as Allrecipes.com and Cooks.com, one must take the time to impute the information. There is no guarantee that the technology will work.

While authors such as Anderson and Wagner bemoan that traditional cookbooks only give one choice, most recipes, there are so many recipes online that it is sometimes overwhelming and difficult to choose. An amateur cook may find comfort in the illustrations and specific instruction, yet one who is experienced either have an instinct for what makes a good recipe or needs to be willing to spend time trying to find it. Of course the same can be said of regular cookbooks. Having printed texts in one's home requires one to go through them and still requires a sense of suitability and manageability. In both cases, the abundance nor a lack of choice can guarantee results. It is true that both the Internet and printed cookbooks such as *The Better Homes and Gardens* provide numerous, step-by-step instructions and illustrations that help people learn to make food from scratch. Other encyclopedic volumes such as *The Five Roads to Good Cooking*, like YouTube, videos break recipes down into simple steps and include visual aids that help a nervous cook. Yet there is a big difference between the theory and the practice. What in theory is simple still necessitates practice. A botched recipe can be the result of using different brands of ingredients, tools, or environmental conditions. Only practice can teach people how to make a recipe successful.

Furthermore, it is difficult to create an online cookbook that rivals the malleability of traditional printed cookbooks. It is true that recipe websites such as Cooks.com and Allrecipes.com do allow a person to save their favourite recipes found on their websites. However, unless the submitter takes the time to personalise the content, recipes can lose their ties to their origins. Bookmaking sites such as Blurb.com offer various options that do allow for personalisation. In her essay "Auntie Sylvie's Sponge Foodmaking, Cocooning, and Nostalgia," Sian Supski uses her aunt's Blurb family cookbook to argue that the marvel of the printed book is that it ensured that important family food memories will be preserved; yet once printed, even these memories become static documents. As Supski goes on to admit, she is a nervous cook and one can create a collection even this though this recipe collection is very special, it will never become personal because one cannot add to it or modify the content.

As the examples in Theophano's and Tye's works demonstrate, the personal touches, the added illustrations, and the handwritten alterations on the actual recipes give people authority, autonomy, and individuality.

Hardcopies of recipes indicate through their tattered, dog-eared, and stained pages which 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 cookbooks and personal foodways, once online, their anonymity and lack of personal connection strips them of their true potential. This is also true of printed cookbooks. Even those compiled by celebrity chefs such as Ray and Jamie Oliver cannot guarantee success as individuals still need to try them. These practices of recipe reading and recipe collecting advance Heldke's argument that theory and practice blend in activity. Recipes are not static. They change depending on who makes them, where they come from, and the conditions under which they are executed. As critics, we need to recognise 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, printed cookbooks are still a more useful and telling way to communicate information about our personal foodways. As this reflection on actual experiences clearly demonstrates, personal cookbooks tell us more than just food. They allow us to connect to the past in order to better understand who we are and the ways 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 illustrates how individuals alter over time as they come into contact with others. While printed cookbooks and recipe sites do 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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