Cookbooks for making history: As sources for historians and as records of the past

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How historians have often been compared with detectives; searching for clues as evidence of a mystery they are seeking to solve. I would prefer an association with food, making history like a trained cook who blends particular ingredients, some fresh, some traditional, using specific methods to create an object that is consumed. There are primary sources, fresh and raw ingredients that you often have to go to great lengths to procure, and secondary sources, prepared initially by someone else. The same recipe may yield different meals, the same meal may provoke different responses. On a continuum of approaches to history and food, there are those who approach both as a scientific endeavour and, at the other end of the spectrum, those who make history and food as art. Brought together, it is possible to see cookbooks as history in at least two important ways; they give meaning to the past by representing culinary heritage and they are in themselves sources of history as documents and blueprints for experiences that can be interpreted to represent the past.
Many people read cookbooks and histories with no intention of preparing the meal or becoming a historian. I do a little of both. I enjoy reading history and cookbooks for pleasure but, as a historian, I also read them interchangeably; histories to understand cookbooks and cookbooks to find out more about the past. History and the past are different of course, despite their use in the English language. It is not possible to relive the past, we can only interpret it through the traces that remain. Even if a reader had an exact recipe and an antique stove, vegetables grown from heritage seeds in similar conditions, eggs and grains from the same region and employed the techniques his or her grandparents used, they could not replicate their experience of a meal. Undertaking those activities though would give a reader a sense of that experience. Active examination of the past is possible through the processes of research and writing, but it will always be an interpretation and not a reproduction of the past itself. Nevertheless, like other histories, cookbooks can convey a sense of what was important in a culture, and what contemporaries might draw on that can resonate a cultural past and make the food palatable.

The way people eat relates to how they apply ideas and influences to the material resources and knowledge they have. Used in this way, cookbooks provide a rich and valuable way to look at the past.

Histories, like cookbooks, are written in the present, inspired and conditioned by contemporary issues and attitudes and values. Major shifts in interpretation or new directions in historical studies have more often arisen from changes in political or theoretical preoccupations, generated by contemporary social events, rather than the recovery of new information. Likewise, the introduction of new ingredients or methods rely on contemporary acceptance, as well as familiarity. How particular versions of history and new recipes promote both the past and present is the concern of this paper. My focus below will be on the nineteenth century, although a much larger study would reveal the circumstances that separated that period from the changes that followed.

Until the late nineteenth century Australians largely relied on cookbooks that were brought with them from England and on their own private recipe collection, and that influenced to a large extent the sort of food that they ate, although of course they had to improvise by supplementing with local ingredients. In the first book of recipes that was published in Australia, The English and Australian Cookery Book that appeared in 1864, Edward Abbott evoked the 'roast beef of old England Oh' (Bannerman, Dictionary). The use of such a potent symbol of English identity in the nineteenth century may seem inevitable, and colonists who could afford them tended to use their English cookbooks and the ingredients for many years, even after Abbott's publication.

New ingredients, however, were often adapted to fit in with familiar culinary expectations in the new setting. Abbott often drew on native and exotic ingredients to produce very familiar dishes that used English methods and principles: things like kangaroo stuffed with beef suet, breadcrumbs, parsley, shallots, marjoram, thyme, nutmeg, pepper, salt, cayenne, and egg. It was not until the 1890s that a much larger body of Australian cookbooks became available, but by this time the food supply was widely held to be secure and abundant and the cultivation of exotic foods in Australia like wheat and sheep and cattle had established a long and familiar food supply for English colonists. Abbott’s cookbook provides a record of the culinary heritage settlers brought with them to Australia and the contemporary circumstances they had to adapt to.

Mrs Beeton’s Cookery Book and Household Guide is an example of the popularity of British cookbooks in Australia. Beeton’s Kangaroo Tail Curry was included in the Australian cooking section of her household management (2860). In terms of structure it is important for historians as one of the first times, because Beeton started writing in the 1860s, that ingredients were clearly distinguished from the method. This actually still presents considerable problems for publishers. There is debate about whether that should necessarily be the case, because it takes up so much space on the page.

Kangaroo Tail Curry

Ingredients:
1 tail
2 oz. Butter
1 tablespoon of flour
1 tablespoon of curry
2 onions sliced
1 sour apple cut into dice
1 desert spoon of lemon juice
3/4 pint of stock
salt
Method:
Wash, blanch and dry the tail thoroughly and divide it at the joints. Fry the tail in hot butter, take it up, put it in the sliced onions, and fry them for 3 or 4 minutes without browning.

Sprinkle in the flour and curry powder, and cook gently for at least 20 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the stock, apple, salt to taste, bring to the boil, stirring meanwhile, and replace the tail in the stew pan. Cover closely, and cook gently until tender, then add the lemon juice and more seasoning if necessary.

Arrange the pieces of tail on a hot dish, strain the sauce over, and serve with boiled rice.

Time: 2-3 hours
Sufficient for 1 large dish.
Although the steps are not clearly distinguished from each other the method is more systematic than earlier recipes. Within the one sentence, however, there are still two or three different sorts of tasks. The recipe also requires to some extent a degree of discretion, knowledge and experience of cooking. Beeton suggests adding things to taste, cooking something until it is tender, so experience or knowledge is necessary to fulfill the recipe. The meal also takes between two and three hours, which would be quite prohibitive for a lot of contemporary cooks. New recipes, like those produced in Delicous have recipes that you can do in ten minutes or half an hour. Historically, that is a new development that reveals a lot about contemporary conditions.

By 1900, Australian interest in native food had pretty much dissolved from the record of cookbooks, although this would remain a feature of books for the English public who did not need to distinguish themselves from Indigenous people. *Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book and Household Guide* gave a selection of Australian recipes but they were primarily for the British public rather than the assumption that they were being cooked in Australia: kangaroo tail soup was cooked in the same way as ox tail soup; roast wallaby was compared to hare. The ingredients were wallaby, veal, milk and butter; and parrot pie was said to be not unlike one made of pigeons. The novelty value of such ingredients may have been of interest, rather than their practical use. However, they are all prepared in ways that would make them fairly familiar to European tastes. Introducing something new with the same sorts of ingredients could therefore proliferate the spread of other foods.

The means by which ingredients were introduced to different regions reflects cultural exchanges, historical processes and the local environment. The adaptation of recipes to incorporate local ingredients likewise provides information about local traditions and contemporary conditions. Starting to see those ingredients as a two-way movement between looking at what might have been familiar to people and what might have been something that they had to do make do with because of what was necessarily available to them at that time tells us about their past as well as the times they are living in.

Differences in the level of practical cooking knowledge also have a vital role to play in cookbook literature. Colin Bannerman has suggested that the shortage of domestic labour in Australia an important factor in supporting the growth of the cookbook industry in the late nineteenth century. The poor quality of Australian cooking was also an occasional theme in the press during the same time. The message was generally the same: bad food affected Australians’ physical, domestic, social and moral well-being and impeded progress towards civilisation and higher culture. The idea was really that Australians had to learn how to cook. Colin Bannerman (*Acquired Tastes*) 19) explains the rise of domestic science in Australia as a product of growing interest in Australian cultural development and the curse of bad cookery, which encouraged support for teaching girls and women how to cook. Domestic Economy was integrated into the Victorian and New South Wales curriculum by the end of the nineteenth century. Australian women have faced constant criticism of their cooking skills but the decision to teach cooking shouldn’t necessarily be used to support that judgement. Placed in a broader framework is possible to see the support for a modern, scientific approach to food preparation as part of both the elevation of science and systematic knowledge in society more generally, and a transnational movement to raise the status of women’s role in society. It would also be misleading not to consider the transnational context. Australia’s first cookery teachers were from Britain. The domestic-science movement there can be traced to the congress on domestic economy held in Manchester in 1878, at roughly the same time as the movement was gaining strength in Australia. By the 1890s domestic economy was widely taught in both British and Australian schools, without British women facing the same denigration of their cooking skills.

Other comparisons with Britain also resulted from Australia’s colonial heritage. People often commented on the quality of the ingredients in Australia and said they were more widely available than they were in England but much poorer in quality. Cookbooks emerged as a way of teaching people. Among the first to teach cookery skills was Mina Rawson, author of *The Antipodean Cookery Book and the Kitchen Companion* first published in 1885. The book was a compilation of her own recipes and remedies, and it organised and simplified food preparation for the ordinary housewife. But the book also included directions and guidance on things like household tasks and how to cure diseases. Cookbooks therefore were not completely distinct from other aspects of everyday life. They offered much more than culinary advice on how to cook a particular meal and can similarly be used by historians to comment on more than food. Mrs Rawson also knew that people had to make do. She included a lot of bush foods that you still do not get in a lot of Australian meals, ingredients that people could substitute for the English ones they were used to like pigweed.

By the end of the nineteenth century cooking had become a recognised classroom subject, providing early training in domestic service, and textbooks teaching Australians how to cook also flourished. Measurements became much more uniform, the layout of cookbooks became more standardised and the procedure was clearly spelled out. This allowed companies to be able to sell their foods because it also meant that you could duplicate the recipes and you could potentially taste the same. It made cookbooks easier to use.

The audience for these cookbooks were mostly young women directed to cooking as a way of encouraging social harmony. Cooking was elevated in lots of ways at this stage as a social responsibility. Cookbooks can also be seen as a representation of domestic life, and historically this prescribed the activities of men and women as being distinct. The dominance of women in cookbooks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attested to the strength of that idea of separate spheres. The consequences of this thought has been debated by historians: whether having that particular kind of market and the identification that women were making with each other also provided a forum for women’s voices and so became quite significant in women’s politics at a later date.

Cookbooks have been a strategic marketing device for products and appliances. By the beginning of the twentieth century food companies began to print recipes on their packets and to release their own cookbooks to promote their products. Davis Gelatine produced its first free booklet in 1904 and other companies followed suit (1937). The largest gelatine factory was in New South Wales and according to Davis: ‘It bathed in sunshine and freshened with the light breezes of Botany all year round.’ These were the first lavishly illustrated Australian cookbooks. Such books were an attempt to promote new foods and also to sell local foods, many of which were overproduced – such as milk, and dried fruits – which provides insights into the supply chain. Cookbooks in some ways reflected the changing tastes of the public, their ideas, what they were doing and their own lifestyle. But they also helped to promote some of those sorts of changes too.

Explaining the reason for cooking, Isabella Beeton put forward an historical account of the shift towards increasing enjoyment of it. She wrote: “In the past, only to live has been the greatest object of mankind, but by and by comforts are multiplied and accumulating riches create new wants. The object then is to not only live but to live economically, agreeably, tastefully and well. Accordingly the art of cookery commences and although the fruits of the earth, the fowls of the air, the beasts of the field and the fish of the sea are still the only food of mankind, yet these are so prepared, improved and
Beeton anticipates a growing trend not just towards cooking and eating but an interest in what sustains cooking as a form of recreation. The history of cookbook publishing provides a glimpse into some of those things. The points that I have raised provide a means for historians to use cookbooks. Cookbooks can be considered in terms of what was eaten, by whom and how: who prepared the food, so to whom the books were actually directed? Clever books like Isabella Beeton’s were directed at both domestic servants and at wives, which gave them quite a big market. There are also changes in the inclusion of themes. Economy and frugality becomes quite significant, as do organisation and management at different times. Changes in the extent of detail, changes in authorship, whether it is women, men, doctors, health professionals, home economists and so on all reflect contemporary concerns. Many books had particular purposes as well, used to fund raise or promote a particular perspective, relate food reform and civic life which gives them a political agenda. Promotional literature produced by food and kitchen equipment companies were a form of advertising and quite significant to the history of cookbook publishing in Australia. Other themes include the influence of cookery school and home economics movements; advice on etiquette and entertaining; the influence of immigration and travel; the creation of culinary stars and authors of which we are all fairly familiar. Further themes include changes in ingredients, changes in advice about health and domestic medicine, and the impact of changes in social consciousness. It is necessary to place those changes in a more general historical context, but for a long time cookbooks have been ignored as a source of information in their own right about the period in which they were published and the kinds of social and political changes that we can see coming through. More than this active process of cooking with the books as well becomes a way of imagining the past in quite different ways than historians are often used to.

Cookbooks are not just sources for historians, they are histories in themselves. The privileging of written and visual texts in postcolonial studies has meant other senses, taste and smell, are frequently neglected; and yet the cooking from historical cookbooks can provide an embodied, sensorial image of the past. From nineteenth century cookbooks it is possible to see that British foods were central to the colonial identity project in Australia, but the fact that “British” culinary culture was locally produced, challenges the idea of an “authentic” British cuisine which the colonies tried to replicate. By the time Abbot was advocating rabbit curry as an Australian family meal, back “at home” in England, it was not authentic Indian food but the British invention of curry power that was being incorporated into English cuisine culture. More than cooks, cookbook authors told a narrative that forged connections and disconnections with the past. They reflected the contemporary period and resonated with the culinary heritage of their readers. Cookbooks make history in multiple ways; by producing change, as the raw materials for making history and as historical narratives.

References


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