

## **M/C Journal, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2013) - 'cookbook'**

### **Cookbook: A New Scholarly View**

**<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/688>**

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Our interest in this subject reflects the popular interest in all food-related media, which appears higher than ever. In terms of our own special interest in relation to this issue of *MC Journal*—cookbooks—they continue to be produced and purchased at an unprecedented rate. Cookbooks have also recently attracted considerable scholarly attention. Their significance has been assessed in literary terms, as well as for what they say about women's lives, the self, society, a particular historic period, national culture, and food making knowledge. The study of cookbooks has illuminated broad societal processes as well as intimate family memories. Equally, cookbooks are a wonderful example of material culture; they have historic and social value that make them important components of both institutional and personal collections. The cookbook itself, as an object, is also under transformation as the opportunities offered by new media and such changes in the publishing landscape as quality self-publication have expanded the possibilities of their use and value. This has, both been caused by, and prompted, a rethinking of traditional models.

In proposing this topic we, therefore, set out to explore the multifarious meanings of cooking literature in contemporary society. Areas of investigation include: writing, editing, and publishing cookbooks; celebrity chefs and their cookbooks; and, cookbooks and the media more generally whether this be in relation to print, or television, blogs, and new, and social media. This brings up issues of the process of production—what we could call “the art” of cookbook making—how they are written, illustrated, and designed—and the creative careers of these makers.

Cookbooks are also central to food heritage and national cultural history. Researching the professional biographies of their writers often involves adding new data and approaches to how we understand the past. These cookbooks are repositories of private and public memory and can also be explored in terms of the gastronomically inflected relationship between the information they contain, and what is (or is not) cooked and eaten.

In the past, cookbooks formed the core of the domestic science curriculum, but their intent was to provide more than a blueprint for a meal. Cookbooks may not reveal what anyone eats or even how they cook, but they can provide a range of insights into everyday life, domestic and personal aspirations and community relationships. A regional cookbook, a junior cookbook, a cookbook on bush tucker, cookbooks for diabetics and vegans, not only appeal to a particular community, they also announce both its existence and celebrate the shared identity of its audience.

In our feature article, Bronwyn Fredericks and Margaret Anderson discuss four recent examples of Indigenous Australian cookbooks, and their value as a low-cost strategy in broader interlinking public health interventions. Basing these books on western nutrition and food preparation models governed by public health initiatives clearly place the texts within the broader context of colonisation. In their analysis, the authors demonstrate the significance of cookbooks as a significant subject of inquiry,

and we thank them for their work on this important topic.

Other papers in the collection also concentrate on specific cookbooks as examples of historic change, changes in publishing and writing, and their use as well as their intent, which may not always be the same thing. How these texts are understood also changes over time, as Chairmaine O'Brien's example of "plain" cookery (and "plain" cookery books) in colonial Australia demonstrates. O'Brien brings into question the description of plain cookery and its broader implications. Colonial domestic habits and the cultural contexts in which they were formed is also the subject of Blake Singley's detailed analysis, using the manuscript cookbook of Phillis Clark.

Adele Wessell, as a contributing editor to this issue, posits how 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.

Rachel Franks considers cookbooks and cookery in popular fiction, focusing on crime novels, showing the importance of food, clearly beyond its role as sustenance. Lorna Piatti-Farnell also considers the cookbook as a textual medium, in her case, a haunted space, using the example of Joanne Harris's fictional treatment of the trans-generational cookbook in *Five Quarters of Orange*. Keeping with the theme of mourning, contributing editor Donna Lee Brien discusses food writing related to death and funeral rites as part of a broader tradition of special occasion cookbooks.

Recipes do not directly translate to the time or place of their origins. As Jillian Adams argues, cookbooks contain information about the food culture and the society that produces them. Her failed attempt at making cheddar cheese from a historic recipe shows the effect of changes and adaptations to that change. Leila Green and Van Hong Nguyen ask how the everyday lives of Vietnamese street market cooks are (mis)represented in cooking books published for an English-language readership.

Cookbooks can be understood as an educational tool for introducing foodways and cultures to readers, but they are also a means of maintaining existing power structures. Deana Leahy and Emily Gray make this point explicitly in their discussion of cookbooks as a pedagogical tool, and the increasingly levels to which governments intervene in the area of the health of its citizens. As Amy Brooke Antonio asserts, however, through her analysis of Pinterest, representations are never straightforward. As Antonio argues, there is also the potential for the empowerment which comes from the creation of virtual cookbooks, although these have also been charged with perpetuating a domestic ideology in which women have been confined to the home.

Emily Weiskopf-Ball also suggests that cookbooks can be used to construct personal narratives, and reflect the bonds both between individuals, and across generations. Drawing from her personal use of recipes handed down through generations, Weiskopf-Ball discusses their heritage value as an alternative to their use as tools of oppression. Sue Bond's paper on the evocative power of cookbooks in her task to reconstruct family stories also positions these texts as useful in writing memoir. Working within this tradition, Jim Hearn reflects on his own (food) memoir of being a chef to explore family histories and writing.

Even cookbooks that embrace domestic femininity can also be used to celebrate and

empower women, rather than simply provide instruction, as Carody Culver's analysis of Sophie Dahl's *Miss Dahl's Voluptuous Delights* (2010) and Nigella Lawson's *How to be a Domestic Goddess* (2000) illustrates. The use of humour and nostalgia to convey the recipes in these collections create distinct authorial personas and cultural ideas about food and femininity.

Gender is also the subject of Rosalina Pisco Costa's paper, in which she argues that cookbooks can become a means of encouraging men to do more domestic cookery. In the case of Portuguese middle class families, this has been, in part, facilitated by technological change and the transformation of the kitchen space. The alternate use of this space as an artist's studio is the subject of Ulrike Sturm's paper. Taken together, both articles explore the connections between space, place, and practice.

Dorothy Ann Cashman uses Irish cookery manuscripts as a way of accessing voices that provide both an alternative to dominant narratives in Irish history, and as sources for culinary and cultural history. Pauline Danaher is also concerned with Irish culinary history, and her paper focuses closely on the textbooks used at the Dublin Institute of Technology, and how these reflect broader trends. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire further affirms the value of cookbooks as socio-cultural and historic documents. His work in this collection is particularly instructive on approaches to reading cookbooks as historical sources, and the important influence that Barbara Ketcham Wheaton's workshops are having in this space.

Jen Longren discusses how the evolution of food blogs is just one part of the ongoing evolution of food-related media and recipe sharing technologies. She shows how food blogs provide a useful case study for understanding how our online and offline lives have become intertwined, as well as how the Internet has become a part of everyday life. Food blogs remind us that our relationships to food and technology, and our interactions with food-related media can help us understand the ways they both shape and reflect culture.

Brigita Orel's work on the possibilities in, and challenges of translating, recipes makes a contribution to our understanding of language and food, prompting questions about how well recipes can be translated across cultures, both in text and in their making. Her study of cookbooks as a means of expression is related to Moya Costello's argument that what holds us to narrative is good writing. In Costello's analysis, cooking, food writing, and wine making, are all forms of art.

Nollie Nahrung's piece reinforces Orel's point. Using the language of cookbooks, inscribed with meaning through their reconstruction in montage, Nahrung's contribution to this collection underlines how, far from being mere instructions for a meal, recipes in cookbooks can be read in multiple ways, and translate differently across time and cultures, and offer commentary from the personal to the societal level. Nahrung has also provided the wonderful cover image for this issue.

There are many linkages between, and across, these articles. We hope our readers find a pathway through the issue that sparks their interest further in the subjects raised. A number of authors have included images in their work. This and the significant number of articles in this issue proves, yet again, the flexibility, expansiveness, and power of *MC Journal's* digital publishing platform.

As editors, we would like to especially thank all the authors and reviewers of this large

issue. We were overwhelmed with abstracts, article pitches, and submissions, showing not only that this is a vibrant and expansive area of scholarship, but that there are a wide range of voices clamouring to be heard on the subject. We also sincerely thank the *MC Journal* team for continuing to support this wonderful venue for sharing ideas and scholarship, and especially Axel Bruns for his patient and generous support of new research, art, and the producers of this exciting material.