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# Towards a Structured Approach to Reading Historic Cookbooks

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Cookbooks are an exceptional written record of what is largely an oral tradition. They have been described as “magician’s hats” due to their ability to reveal much more than they seem to contain (Wheaton, “Finding”). The first book printed in Germany was the Guttenberg Bible in 1456 but, by 1490, printing was introduced into almost every European country (Tierney). The spread of literacy between 1500 and 1800, and the rise in silent reading, helped to create a new private sphere into which the individual could retreat, seeking refuge from the community (Chartier). This new technology had its effects in the world of cookery as in so many spheres of culture (Mennell, *All Manners*). Trubek notes that cookbooks are the texts most often used by culinary historians, since they usually contain all the requisite materials for analysing a cuisine: ingredients, method, technique, and presentation. Printed cookbooks, beginning in the early modern period, provide culinary historians with sources of evidence of the culinary past.

Historians have argued that social differences can be expressed by the way and type of food we consume. Cookbooks are now widely accepted as valid socio-cultural and historic documents (Folch, Sherman), and indeed the link between literacy levels and the protestant tradition has been expressed through the study of Danish cookbooks (Gold). From Apicius, Taillevent, La Varenne, and Menon to Bradley, Smith, Raffald, Acton, and Beeton, how can both manuscript and printed cookbooks be analysed as historic documents? What is the difference between a manuscript and a printed cookbook? Barbara Ketchum Wheaton, who has been studying cookbooks for over half a century and is honorary curator of the culinary collection in Harvard’s Schlesinger Library, has developed a methodology to read historic cookbooks using a structured approach. For a number of years she has been giving seminars to scholars from multidisciplinary fields on how to read historic cookbooks. This paper draws on the author’s experiences attending Wheaton’s seminar in Harvard, and on supervising the use of this methodology at both Masters and Doctoral level (Cashman; Mac Con Iomaire, and Cashman).

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## Manuscripts versus Printed Cookbooks

A fundamental difference exists between manuscript and printed cookbooks in their relationship with the public and private domain. Manuscript cookbooks are by their very essence intimate, relatively unedited and written with an eye to private circulation. Culinary manuscripts follow the diurnal and annual tasks of the household. They contain recipes for cures and restoratives, recipes for cleansing products for the house and the body, as well as the expected recipes for cooking and preserving all manners of food. Whether manuscript or printed cookbook, the recipes contained within often act as a reminder of how laborious the production of food could be in the pre-industrialised world (White). Printed cookbooks draw oxygen from the very fact of being public. They assume a "literate population with sufficient discretionary income to invest in texts that commodify knowledge" (Folch). This process of commoditisation brings knowledge from the private to the public sphere. There exists a subset of cookbooks that straddle this divide, for example, Mrs. Rundell's *A New System of Domestic Cookery* (1806), which brought to the public domain her distillation of a lifetime of domestic experience. Originally intended for her daughters alone, Rundell's book was reprinted regularly during the nineteenth century with the last edition printed in 1893, when Mrs. Beeton had been enormously popular for over thirty years (Mac Con Iomaire, and Cashman).

### Barbara Ketchum Wheaton's Structured Approach

Cookbooks can be rewarding, surprising and illuminating when read carefully with due effort in understanding them as cultural artefacts. However, Wheaton notes that: "One may read a single old cookbook and find it immensely entertaining. One may read two and begin to find intriguing similarities and differences. When the third cookbook is read, one's mind begins to blur, and one begins to sense the need for some sort of method in approaching these documents" ("Finding").

Following decades of studying cookbooks from both sides of the Atlantic and writing a seminal text on the French at table from 1300-1789 (Wheaton, *Savouring the Past*), this combined experience negotiating cookbooks as historical documents was codified, and a structured approach gradually articulated and shared within a week long seminar format. In studying any cookbook, regardless of era or country of origin, the text is broken down into five different groupings, to wit: ingredients; equipment or facilities; the meal; the book as a whole; and, finally, the worldview. A particular strength of Wheaton's seminars is the multidisciplinary nature of the approaches of students who attend, which throws the study of cookbooks open to wide ranging techniques. Students with a purely scientific training unearth interesting patterns by developing databases of the frequency of ingredients or techniques, and cross referencing them with other books from similar or different timelines or geographical regions. Patterns are displayed in graphs or charts. Linguists offer their own unique lens to study cookbooks, whereas anthropologists and historians ask what these objects can tell us about how our

ancestors lived and drew meaning from life. This process is continuously refined, and each grouping is discussed below.

## Ingredients

The geographic origins of the ingredients are of interest, as is the seasonality and the cost of the foodstuffs within the scope of each cookbook, as well as the sensory quality both separately and combined within different recipes. In the medieval period, the use of spices and large joints of butchers meat and game were symbols of wealth and status. However, when the discovery of sea routes to the New World and to the Far East made spices more available and affordable to the middle classes, the upper classes spurned them. Evidence from culinary manuscripts in Georgian Ireland, for example, suggests that galangal was more easily available in Dublin during the eighteenth century than in the mid-twentieth century. A new aesthetic, articulated by La Varenne in his *Le Cuisinier Francois* (1651), heralded that food should taste of itself, and so exotic ingredients such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger were replaced by the local *bouquet garni*, and stocks and sauces became the foundations of French haute cuisine (Mac Con Iomaire).

Some combinations of flavours and ingredients were based on humoral physiology, a long held belief system based on the writings of Hippocrates and Galen, now discredited by modern scientific understanding. The four humors are blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. It was believed that each of these humors would wax and wane in the body, depending on diet and activity. Galen (131-201 AD) believed that warm food produced yellow bile and that cold food produced phlegm. It is difficult to fathom some combinations of ingredients or the manner of service without comprehending the contemporary context within they were consume

Some ingredients found in Roman cookbooks, such as “garum” or “silphium” are no longer available. It is suggested that the nearest substitute for garum also known as “liquamen”—a fermented fish sauce—would be *Naam Plaa*, or Thai fish sauce (Grainger). Ingredients such as tea and white bread, moved from the prerogative of the wealthy over time to become the staple of the urban poor. These ingredients, therefore, symbolise radically differing contexts during the seventeenth century than in the early twentieth century. Indeed, there are other ingredients such as hominy (dried maize kernel treated with alkali) or grahams (crackers made from graham flour) found in American cookbooks that require translation to the unacquainted non-American reader. There has been a growing number of food encyclopaedias published in recent years that assist scholars in identifying such commodities (Smith, Katz, Davidson).

## The Cook’s Workplace, Techniques, and Equipment

It is important to be aware of the type of kitchen equipment used, the management of heat and cold within the kitchen, and also the gradual spread of the industrial revolution into the domestic sphere. Visits to historic castles such as Hampton Court Palace

where nowadays archaeologists re-enact life below stairs in Tudor times give a glimpse as to how difficult and labour intensive food production was. Meat was spit-roasted in front of huge fires by spit boys. Forcemeats and purees were manually pulped using mortar and pestles. Various technological developments including spit-dogs, and mechanised pulleys, replaced the spit boys, the most up to date being the mechanised rotisserie. The technological advancements of two hundred years can be seen in the Royal Pavilion in Brighton where Marie-Antoinin Carême worked for the Prince Regent in 1816 (Brighton Pavilion), but despite the gleaming copper pans and high ceilings for ventilation, the work was still back breaking. Carême died aged forty-nine, “burnt out by the flame of his genius and the fumes of his ovens” (Ackerman 90). Mennell points out that his fame outlived him, resting on his books: *Le Pâtissier Royal Parisien* (1815); *Le Pâtissier Pittoresque* (1815); *Le Maître d’Hôtel Français* (1822); *Le Cuisinier Parisien* (1828); and, finally, *L’Art de la Cuisine Française au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* (1833–5), which was finished posthumously by his student Pluméry (*All Manners*). Mennell suggests that these books embody the first paradigm of professional French cuisine (in Kuhn’s terminology), pointing out that “no previous work had so comprehensively codified the field nor established its dominance as a point of reference for the whole profession in the way that Carême did” (*All Manners* 149).

The most dramatic technological changes came after the industrial revolution. Although there were built up ovens available in bakeries and in large Norman households, the period of general acceptance of new cooking equipment that enclosed fire (such as the Aga stove) is from c.1860 to 1910, with gas ovens following in c.1910 to the 1920s) and Electricity from c.1930. New food processing techniques dates are as follows: canning (1860s), cooling and freezing (1880s), freeze drying (1950s), and motorised delivery vans with cooking (1920s–1950s) (den Hartog). It must also be noted that the supply of fresh food, and fish particularly, radically improved following the birth, and expansion of, the railways. To understand the context of the cookbook, one needs to be aware of the limits of the technology available to the users of those cookbooks. For many lower to middle class families during the twentieth century, the first cookbook they would possess came with their gas or electrical oven.

## Meals

One can follow cooked dishes from the kitchen to the eating place, observing food presentation, carving, sequencing, and serving of the meal and table etiquette. Meal times and structure changed over time. During the Middle Ages, people usually ate two meals a day: a substantial dinner around noon and a light supper in the evening (Adamson). Some of the most important factors to consider are the manner in which meals were served: either *à la française* or *à la russe*. One of the main changes that occurred during the nineteenth century was the slow but gradual transfer from *service à la française* to *service à la russe*. From medieval times to the middle of the nineteenth century the structure of a formal meal was not by “courses”—as the term is now understood

—but by “services”. Each service could comprise of a choice of dishes—both sweet and savoury—from which each guest could select what appealed to him or her most (Davidson). The philosophy behind this form of service was the forementioned humoral physiology— where each diner chose food based on the four humours of blood, yellow bile, black bile, or phlegm. Also known as *le grand couvert*, the *à la française* method made it impossible for the diners to eat anything that was beyond arm’s length (Blake, and Crewe). Smooth service, however, was the key to an effective *à la russe* dinner since servants controlled the flow of food (Eatwell). The taste and temperature of food took centre stage with the *à la russe* dinner as each course came in sequence.

Many historic cookbooks offer table plans illustrating the suggested arrangement of dishes on a table for the *à la française* style of service. Many of these dishes might be re-used in later meals, and some dishes such as hashes and rissoles often utilised left over components of previous meals. There is a whole genre of cookbooks informing the middle class cooks how to be frugal and also how to emulate *haute cuisine* using cheaper or ersatz ingredients.

The number dining and the manner in which they dined also changed dramatically over time. From medieval to Tudor times, there might be hundreds dining in large banqueting halls. By the Elizabethan age, a small intimate room where master and family dined alone replaced the old dining hall where master, servants, guests, and travellers had previously dined together (Spencer). Dining tables remained portable until the 1780s when tables with removable leaves were devised. By this time, the bread trencher had been replaced by one made of wood, or plate of pewter or precious metal in wealthier houses. Hosts began providing knives and spoons for their guests by the seventeenth century, with forks also appearing but not fully accepted until the eighteenth century (Mason). These silver utensils were usually marked with the owner’s initials to prevent their theft (Flandrin).

## **Cookbooks as Objects and the World of Publishing**

A thorough examination of the manuscript or printed cookbook can reveal their physical qualities, including indications of post-publication history, the recipes and other matter in them, as well as the language, organization, and other individual qualities. What can the quality of the paper tell us about the book? Is there a frontispiece? Is the book dedicated to an employer or a patron? Does the author note previous employment history in the introduction? In his *Court Cookery*, Robert Smith, for example, not only mentions a number of his previous employers, but also outlines that he was eight years working with Patrick Lamb in the Court of King William, before revealing that several dishes published in Lamb’s *Royal Cookery* (1710) “were never made or practis’d (sic) by him and others are extreme defective and imperfect and made up of dishes unknown to him; and several of them more calculated at the purses than the Gôut of the guests”.

Both Lamb and Smith worked for the English monarchy, nobility, and gentry, but produced French cuisine. Not all Britons were

enamoured with France, however, with, for example Hannah Glasse asserting “if gentlemen will have French cooks, they must pay for French tricks” (4), and “So much is the blind folly of this age, that they would rather be imposed on by a French Booby, than give encouragement to an good English cook” (ctd. in Trubek 60). Spencer contextualises Glasse’s culinary Francophobia, explaining that whilst she was writing the book, the Jacobite army were only a few days march from London, threatening to cut short the Hanoverian lineage. However, Lehmann points out that whilst Glasse was overtly hostile to French cuisine, she simultaneously plagiarised its receipts. Based on this trickling down of French influences, Mennell argues that “there is really no such thing as a pure-bred English cookery book” (All Manners 98), but that within the assimilation and simplification, a recognisable English style was discernable. Mennell also asserts that Glasse and her fellow women writers had an enormous role in the social history of cooking despite their lack of technical originality (“Plagiarism”).

It is also important to consider the place of cookbooks within the history of publishing. Albala provides an overview of the immense outpouring of dietary literature from the printing presses from the 1470s. He divides the Renaissance into three periods: Period I Courtly Dietaries (1470–1530)—targeted at the courtiers with advice to those attending banquets with many courses and lots of wine; Period II The Galenic Revival (1530–1570)—with a deeper appreciation, and sometimes adulation, of Galen, and when scholarship took centre stage over practical use. Finally Period III The Breakdown of Orthodoxy (1570–1650)—when, due to the ambiguities and disagreements within and between authoritative texts, authors were freer to pick the ideas that best suited their own. Nutrition guides were consistent bestsellers, and ranged from small handbooks written in the vernacular for lay audiences, to massive Latin tomes intended for practicing physicians. Albala adds that “anyone with an interest in food appears to have felt qualified to pen his own nutritional guide” (1).

Would we have heard about Mrs. Beeton if her husband had not been a publisher? How could a twenty-five year old amass such a wealth of experience in household management? What role has plagiarism played in the history of cookbooks? It is interesting to note that a well worn copy of her book (Beeton) was found in the studio of Francis Bacon and it is suggested that he drew inspiration for a number of his paintings from the colour plates of animal carcasses and butcher’s meat (Dawson). Analysing the post-publication usage of cookbooks is valuable to see the most popular recipes, the annotations left by the owner(s) or user(s), and also if any letters, handwritten recipes, or newspaper clippings are stored within the leaves of the cookbook.

## **The Reader, the Cook, the Eater**

The physical and inner lives and needs and skills of the individuals who used cookbooks and who ate their meals merit consideration. Books by their nature imply literacy. Who is the book’s audience? Is it the cook or is it the lady of the house who will dictate instructions to the cook? Numeracy and measurement is also important. Where clocks or pocket watches were not widely

available, authors such as seventeenth century recipe writer Sir Kenelm Digby would time his cooking by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Literacy amongst protestant women to enable them to read the Bible, also enabled them to read cookbooks (Gold). How did the reader or eater's religion affect the food practices? Were there fast days? Were there substitute foods for fast days? What about special occasions? Do historic cookbooks only tell us about the food of the middle and upper classes?

It is widely accepted today that certain cookbook authors appeal to confident cooks, while others appeal to competent cooks, and others still to more cautious cooks (Bilton). This has always been the case, as has the differentiation between the cookbook aimed at the professional cook rather than the amateur. Historically, male cookbook authors such as Patrick Lamb (1650–1709) and Robert Smith targeted the professional cook market and the nobility and gentry, whereas female authors such as Eliza Acton (1799–1859) and Isabella Beeton (1836–1865) often targeted the middle class market that aspired to emulate their superiors' fashions in food and dining. How about Tavern or Restaurant cooks? When did they start to put pen to paper, and did what they wrote reflect the food they produced in public eateries?

## Conclusions

This paper has offered an overview of Barbara Ketchum Wheaton's methodology for reading historic cookbooks using a structured approach. It has highlighted some of the questions scholars and researchers might ask when faced with an old cookbook, regardless of era or geographical location. By systematically examining the book under the headings of ingredients; the cook's workplace, techniques and equipment; the meals; cookbooks as objects and the world of publishing; and reader, cook and eater, the scholar can perform magic and extract much more from the cookbook than seems to be there on first appearance.

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