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 Cookbook Quebeccers Prefer: More Than Just Recipes," "two weeks later, 363 e-mail responses had been received" (214). From the answers, it was clear that despite the increase in television cooking shows, Internet cooking sites, and YouTube how-to videos, cookbooks were not only still being used, but that people had strong allegiances to their favourite ones.

Marquis's essay provides concrete evidence that cookbooks are not meaningless objects. Rather, her use of relevant quotations from the survey proves that they are associated with strong memories and have been used to create bonds between individuals and across generations. Moreover, these quotations reveal that individuals use cookbooks to construct personal narratives that reflect the foods eating as they share with others. In her philosophical line, Heldke helps move the discussion of cooking and, consequently, 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, "affords both a theoretical understanding of what makes bread rise and a practical technique that is required to achieve the desired results" (xxi). The same conclusion can be applied to recipe websites.

Cookbooks can take many forms. As the cover art on academic documents on the nature, role, and value 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 dividers and held together by a piece of elastic (Tye). The Internet has created many new options for recipes and cookbook project sites. Websites such as Allrecipes.com and Cookin' Up a Storm allow people to easily upload and download, and bookmark favourite recipes. 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. While "popular cookbooks tell us a great deal about the culinary climate of a given period [...] what they can't convey is a sense of the day-to-day cookery as it is [genuinely experienced in the kitchens of real life]" (xxii). The same conclusion can be applied to recipe websites.

Personified and familial cookbooks are much different and much more telling documents than either unpersonalled printed books or Internet options. Family cookbooks can also take any shape or form but I define them as compilations that have been created by a single person or a small group of individuals as she/he/they evolve over time. They can be handwritten and typed and inserted into cookbooks, scrapbooked, or bound in another way. The Internet may also help here as cookmaking sites such as Blurb.com allow people to make, and even sell, their own printed books. These can be personified with pictures and scrapbook-like embellishments. The recipes in these personal collections are influenced by contact with other families and direct publications. Also impacting these works are individuals such as genes, race, class, and work. Unfortunately, these documents have not been 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 cookbooks in daily lives, we must move away from generalisations and focus on case studies. Only by looking at people in relationship with them, who are actually using and compiling their own recipe 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 analyses a number of cookbook-related experiences that I have witnessed and/or been a part of in my own home. By moving away from the theoretical and focusing on the practical, I aim to advance Heldke's argument that recipe reading, like foodmaking, is a thoughtful practice with important lessons.

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 plucked the two girls down among all of the paraphernalia on the counter. First, they beat the butter using their super cool Kitchen Aid mixer. Then they beat it in the sugar. Carefully, they cracked and beat in the eggs. Then they dumped in the flour. They dumped in the baking powder. They dumped in the vanilla. They dumped in the baking powder. 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 smelled amazing! The mother and her daughters were looking 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 with a fork, and placed them in the oven. They threw out the ruined cookies. They started all over again. They beat the butter using their super cool Kitchen Aid mixer. Then they beat it in the sugar. Carefully, they cracked and beat in the eggs. Then they dumped in the flour. They dumped in the baking powder. 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.

This story that my oldest daughter and I invented together goes on to have the cookies ruined by a chatty neighbour before finally finding fruition in a batch of successfully baked cookies. This is a story that we tell together as we get ready for bed. One person always says that narrator who lists the steps while the other makes the sound effects of the beating mixer and the cracking and breaking of eggs. Together, we act out the story by rolling the cookies, patting them, and waving our hands in front of our faces when the warm cookies have stuck up the house. While she takes great pleasure in her narrative, I take greater pleasure in the fact that, at 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 emerge when I had to leave her on the counter while I cleaned up a mess on the floor. By the time I got back to her, she had finished mixing the dry ingredients in with the wet ones. I watched her from across the room as she turned off the Kitchen Aid mixer, slowly spooned the flour mixture into the bowl, and turned the machine back on. She watched the batter mix until the flour had been absorbed and then repeated the process. While I am very thankful that she did not try to add the vanilla or the chocolate chips, this experience essentially proves that she 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 at her age she would not have been able to make this recipe without my help. However, this example proves Heldke's argument that foodmaking is a thoughtful process to read and an activity to be able to use the instincts that she has developed in her illiterate years to help her understand written recipes.

What is also important to note about this scenario is that I 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 hours in the kitchen. Thus, my instincts need prompting and guidance from written instructions.

Significantly, the handwritten recipe I was using that day comes from the personal cookbook that has been evolving since I left home. In their recent works Eat My Words and Baking as Biography, Janet Theophano and Diane Tye analyse home-based, hand-crafted, and personal cookbooks to show that these texts are the means through which we can understand individuals at a given time and in a given place. Moreover, for example, analyses old cookbooks to understand the impact of social networking in identity making. By looking at the types of recipes and number of people who have written themselves into these women's books, she shows that cookbook creation has always been a social activity that reveals personal and social identity. It is 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 connect with her on a personal and emotional level. Although academics have traditionally ignored cookbooks as being mundane and unprofessional, the work of these recent critics illustrates the extent to which cookbooks provide an important way of understanding society and people's places within
In this particular example, Karena and I were making a chocolate a 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 spoons. One of the ways that add "enough milk to make a soft dough" are far from precise. The recipe is not just a meaningless entry I found in a random book or on a random website but rather a multilayered narrative and an expression of my personal heritage. As Theophano and Tye have argued, recipes are a way to connect with family, friends, and specific groups of people. It is one of the reasons why the internet is not a book. It changes. But recipes are sometimes broken. Searches do not always yield the same results. Even with recipe-storing sites such as Allrecipes.com and Cooks.com, one must take the time to impute the information and there is no guarantee that the technology will work.

While authors such as Anderson and Wagner bemoan that traditional cookbooks only give one version of most recipes, there are so many recipes online that it is sometimes overwhelming and difficult to make a choice. An amateur cook may find comfort in the instructions online and this is not always the case. Rather than be picky about where he found it, he was sure to write it down to avoid having to repeat the frustrating experience. This time, he was sure to write it down to avoid having to repeat the frustration. He found one, made it, and it was a hit! Just recently, he tried to find that recipe again. Rather than this being a simple process, after all he knew exactly which recipe he was looking for, it took quite a bit of searching before he found it. This time, he was sure to write it down to avoid having to repeat the frustration. In some cases, recipes can become static documents. As Supski goes on to admit, she is a nervous cook and one can conclude that even this thought this recipe going to be willing to spend time trying them out. Of course the same can be said of regular cookbooks. Having printed texts in one’s home requires the patience to go through them and still requires a sense of suitability and manageability. In both cases, neither an 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 step-by-step instructions and illustrations to help you make food to order," from scratch. Other encyclopedic volumes such as The Five Roses: A Guide to Cooking, like YouTube, videos break recipes down into simple steps and include visual tools to help a nervous cook. Yet there is a big difference between the theory and the practice. It is true that even the most experienced cook may appear step by step to make food to order, from scratch. But recipes are sometimes broken. Searches do not always yield the same results. Even with recipe-storing sites such as Allrecipes.com and Cooks.com, one must take the time to impute the information and there is no guarantee that the technology will work.

As the examples in Theophano's and Tye's works demonstrate, the personal touches, the added comments, and the handwritten alterations on the actual recipes give people comfort, autonomy, and independence. Handcopies of recipes indicate through their牵头t, dog-eared, and stained pages which recipes have been tried and discarded and are just as worth keeping. While internet sites frequently allow people to comment on recipes and so allow cooks to filter their options, commenting is not a requirement and the suggestions left by others do not necessarily reflect personal preferences. Although they do continue to support the idea that "Theophano argues has always existed a trend that cookbook creation 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 Rachel Ray and Jamie Oliver cannot guarantee that a recipe is no one will try them. These examples of recipe 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 recipes are down into simple steps and include visual tools to help a nervous cook. Yet there is a big difference between the theory and the practice. It is true that even the most experienced cook may appear step by step to make food to order, from scratch. But recipes are sometimes broken. Searches do not always yield the same results. Even with recipe-storing sites such as Allrecipes.com and Cooks.com, one must take the time to impute the information and there is no guarantee that the technology will work.

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Conclusion

Despite the growing number of blogs and 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 about more than just food. They allow us to connect to the past. In this essay, I have attempted to explore how our understanding of who we are today is contingent on our ability to decipher everyday recipes as a history of foodmaking and gender play out in actual kitchens by actual people. The nuanced merging of voices within them illustrates that individuals over time as they come into contact with others. While printed cookbooks and online sites do provide their own narrative possibilities, the stories that can be read in personal and family cookbooks prove that reading them is a thoughtful practice worthy of academic attention.

References


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While some books explore our genetic inheritance and popular television shows celebrate ancestry, this is the first book to explore how everything from DNA to emotions to names and the stories that form our lives are all part of our human legacy. This book shows how trust is inherited in Africa, silence is passed down in Tasmania, and how the history of nations is written in our DNA. From fateful, ancient encounters to modern mass migrations and medical diagnoses, Kenneally explains how the forces that shaped the history of the world ultimately shape each human who inhabits it. The Invisible H and finally, we develop our self-views through these judgements. But we do hold some power, of course, over how our personalities are shaped. And we do have a say in how we choose to define ourselves, and thus — how much we let outside opinions leak substance into our self-image. Selecting carefully the people we surround ourselves with and the dimensions we base our confidence on can often make all the difference. Finally, the main thing to take away from the theory of the looking-glass self is to recognize that our self-esteem doesn’t form only as a result of self-knowledge, or how much we identify an experience that shaped your identity. Describe this event or experience and then explain the impact it has had on how you answer the question, “Who am I?” Previous Lesson. Next Lesson. What Shapes Your Identity? Through a poem-writing activity, students broaden and deepen their understanding of identity. Add or Edit Playlist. Lesson 3 of 10. How Do Others Define Your Identity? Students draw on a contemporary parable to explore how identity is formed by our own perception as well as other people’s perception of us. Add or Edit Playlist. Lesson 4 of 10. What Aspects of Our Identities Do We Show to Others? Through a mask-making activity, students learn that they can conceal or reveal aspects of their identity. Add or Edit Playlist. Lesson 5 of 10.