When I was a graduate student in the Boston University Gastronomy program, Ken Albala assigned an intriguing final exam question in the course “A Survey of Food History:” to compare and contrast two Chicken Fricassée recipes.

While it may appear at first glance that Francois Massialot’s recipe, “Poulets en Fricasée au Vin de Champagn” from *Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* (1748), is the culinary superior of Poppy Cannon’s “Chicken with White Wine and White Grapes” from *The Can-Opener Cookbook* (1953), such an assumption ignores the complexity of each recipe as a unique product of a particular time and place. As Anne Bower contends, a cookbook can be read as a “fragmented autobiography” (Bower 1997: 32) that reveals unique details not only of the author’s experience, but also those of his or her time. Cannon’s recipe in particular fulfills Bower’s assertion that the main theme of cookbooks is the “breaking of silence” (1997: 46-47), as it reveals the struggles and desires of the 1950s American housewife.

**Examples of Period Food Trends**

First published in 1691 and in revised additions throughout the early eighteenth century, *Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* featured *haute cuisine*, a new culinary tradition first articulated in seventeenth century France. Rather than the strong, heavily spiced flavors that had previously characterized European court cuisine, *haute cuisine* featured harmonious flavors, derived from the foods themselves. For example, the “Poulets en Fricasée” recipe does not include exotic spices or sugar, but instead showcases the flavors of the new cuisine with a sauce based on butter, aromatics, such as the onion and mushrooms that accompany the chicken, and sparse use of salt and parsley.

American cuisine of the 1950s also emphasized simplicity, though in a different way. Following World War II, manufacturers sought domestic markets for products, such as ready-made foods, that had been developed for military use during the war. Home economics texts, women’s magazines, product-sponsored recipe booklets, and advertising alike aggressively promoted processed “convenience foods” as time and energy saving wonders, suited to simplify the busy housewife’s labors.

**Specific Types of Food Systems**

Massialot’s recipe depends upon a food system that is more intimately connected to nature and Cannon’s one that is more industrialized. While Cannon simply instructs the reader to “open and empty a can of chicken fricassee,” Massialot’s recipe requires far greater investment of time and intimacy with the dish’s main ingredient. His recipe calls for one to work from whole chickens and connects the reader to the animals in a possessive, familiar way, calling them “your chickens.” Like a senior surgeon gently guiding one through a new procedure, Massialot instructs the reader to gut the chickens, remove their skin, and states exactly where and how to cut.
Conversely, *The Can-Opener Cookbook* places distance between the cook and the chicken. It instead depends upon the technology of mass produced canned goods, which were, and are, a legacy of the Second Industrial Revolution. Canned foods first provisioned Napoleon’s troops in the early nineteenth century. By the end of the century, however, canning had been industrialized on an international scale. Coupled with nineteenth century advances in transcontinental transportation, canning played an increasing role in changing the way Americans ate. And, processed foods were strongly promoted following World War II. Cannon’s twentieth century recipe embodies these converging effects with the first ingredient, “canned chicken fricassee.”

**Unique Ways of Communicating**

Massialot’s recipe builds upon the legacy of *haute cuisine* and the Apollonian codification of French cuisine, cooking methods, kitchen organization, and recipes. American recipes also experienced a codification of sorts at the turn of the century. Fanny Farmer of the Boston Cooking School aggressively promoted cooking with scientific accuracy, down to the fraction of a teaspoon, the legacy of which is clear in Cannon’s recipe. Massialot offers no specific amounts for ingredients, using phrases such as “some,” “a little,” and “a bit,” which depend upon a chef’s intuition, sensory involvement, and experience. Cannon, on the other hand, spells out for the reader at the beginning of the recipe exactly what ingredients are needed. Throughout the recipe, she qualifies specific amounts, such as “4 tablespoons” and “½ teaspoon,” ensuring that even the novice housewife with minimal cooking experience could make the recipe with ease.

**The Intended Audience**

Massialot worked extensively in court kitchens and this popular cookbook packaged that knowledge for the upper middle class of seventeenth century France. Cannon, however, provided recipes for middle-class housewives of mid-twentieth century America. Cookbooks for busy American housewives were not new, however. For example, Hannah Glasse’s *The Art and Ease of Cooking* (1747) was one of the first cookbooks printed in the American colonies, instructing housewives on how to feed their families in accordance with English tradition.

Poppy Cannon’s *The Can-Opener Cookbook* is unique, however, in that it acknowledges the challenges of the housewife who also works outside of the home. In the 1950s, increasing numbers of middle class women remained in, or joined, the workforce, which affected cooking and eating practices, as well as American society more generally. In her chapter on Poppy Cannon in *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in the 1950s America*, Laura Shapiro reveals that it was these women who Cannon sought to serve, stating, “At the center of Poppy Cannon’s culinary life was an American housewife, and she just got home from work” (2004: 89).

**The Authors**

As a thoroughly experienced chef, Massialot’s recipe exudes a calm confidence as it communicates culinary insight, gained from courtly kitchen experience. Cannon speaks with a straightforward confidence as well, as she endeavors to bring busy housewives into the fold of quick and easy gourmet cooking. Shapiro states that Cannon, “Had always considered herself far above the marshmallow-salad school of quick cooking, because her business was imitating great cuisine” (2004: 107). This is evident as her recipe offers a quick version of a gourmet dish. Indeed, Cannon was proud to be called “the original gourmet in a hurry” (quoted in Shapiro 2004: 111).

**National Identity in Recipes**

Massialot provided a French recipe for a French audience at a time when French cuisine was becoming more democratized and increasingly viewed as a unifying element of French culture. Alternatively, Cannon’s recipe is an example of an “ethnic” dish portrayed as part of American cuisine, which is largely the product of immigrant cuisines. Some contend that this resulted in “Americans lack[ing] a sense of having a national cuisine that unites them across ethnic and regional boundaries” (Gvion 2009: 56). With regard to French cuisine, Americans have considered it both something to be emulated, as well as
something to avoid at different times throughout the twentieth century. Cannon’s recipe both elevates French cooking as the height of elegance, but also devalues it by Americanizing it. For example, while the ingredients include canned chicken fricassee, the recipe title has been thoroughly Americanized to the simple (and rather boring) “Chicken with White Wine and White Grapes.”

While she Americanized the dish for her readers, Cannon was fully literate in the world of fine dining and French cuisine. Like other epicures of the day, Cannon had traveled extensively in Europe, publishing *Eating European at Home and Abroad* in 1961. As wife to both Claude Philippe, a culinary powerhouse of the Waldorf-Astoria, and Walter White, a prominent civil rights leader, Cannon had considerable gastronomic experience. Thus, her statement, “Much of the difference between just cooking and epicurean cooking is the difference in the way the food is served” (quoted in Shapiro 2004: 125), was based upon a wealth of knowledge. This recipe demonstrates Cannon’s faith in presentation, as the “serving time” instructions dictate, “For the utmost in elegance serve with wild rice or saffron rice,” but she is also quick to assure the reader that such an effort can be simple and quick, since wild rice “can be bought canned and ready for heating.”

**Conclusion**

Massialot provides clear instructions for crafting a culinary masterpiece that builds upon what many consider to be the preeminent haute cuisine of the world, for all time. But Cannon’s French-inspired meal from a can is one that endeavors not only to make cooking dinner easier for the workingwoman, but also assists her in crafting the ideal of the gourmet meal for two. Cannon valued romance in both her personal life and career, which is evident in her recipes. This recipe also serves as a “breaking of silence” (Bower 1997: 46-47) as it expresses the inner conflict and hopes of many housewives in the 1950s. For many women at that time, cooking dinner may have been a daily act of not only wifely and maternal love, but an act to erase the pain and suffering of the war. As films like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) tell the story of men coping and adjusting in post-World War II America, Poppy Cannon’s recipes tell part of the women’s side of the same story. Even when newly burdened with the stress of working outside the home, a speedy (but gourmet) meal from a can ensured that a woman could still serve a dinner that would nourish her family. She could feed them physically and emotionally, with nutrients, epicurean presentation, and genuine love — easing the memory of a painful past and looking to the future with hope.

**References**

I'm Emily Contois, Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tulsa. Click through this site to learn more about my work.

**INSPIRATION**

Find something you're passionate about and keep tremendously interested in it.

– Julia Child

**WORDPRESS**

**MORE INSPIRATION**

Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.

– Helen Keller

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1 tablespoon vegetable oil, 2 (3 pound) whole chickens, cut into pieces, 2 onion, peeled and sliced into rings, 6 baking potatoes, peeled and quartered, 2 teaspoons dried parsley, 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, 2 (14.5 ounce) cans fat-free chicken broth, 1 (10 ounce) package frozen green peas.

Heat oil in a large pot or Dutch oven, over medium-high heat. Briefly brown chicken pieces in batches. When all of the pieces have been browned, return them all to the pot and cover with a layer of sliced onions, and then potatoes. Season with pepper and sprinkle with parsley. Pour the chicken broth over everything. Cook over medium-low heat until the chicken is tender and the vegetables are cooked through.

Chicken Fricassee Face-Off: 18th Century Haute Cuisine versus 1950s Can-Opener Cooking. Published by Emily Contois. When I was a graduate student in the Boston University Gastronomy program, Ken Albala assigned an intriguing final exam question in the course “A Survey of Food History:” to compare and contrast two Chicken Fricasée recipes. While it may appear at first glance that Francois Massialot’s recipe, “Poulets en Fricasée au Vin de Champagn” from Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois (1748), is the culinary superior of Poppy Cannon’s “Chicken with White Wine and White Grapes” from The Chicken Fricassee Recipe serve 6. Step 1: In a casserole or skillet, cook the carrots and onion in butter for 5 minutes over moderate heat. Cut the chicken in about 10 pieces. Add the cut-up chicken in the skillet. Turn it every minute for 4 minutes until slightly golden yellow. Step 2: Lower heat, cover and cook very slowly. Turn the chicken once while cooking. Step 3: Add salt, pepper and flour on both sides of the chicken. Cover and cook...