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

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 dishes, 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 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.

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’ (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, breadcumbs, 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 wheats 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 too 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 dessert 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 fulfil the recipe. The meal also takes between two and three hours, which would be quite prohibitive for new cooks. New recipes, like those produced in Delicious 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 collection of Australian recipes but they were primarily a selection of Australian recipes 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 goose pie. The novelty value of such ingredients may have been of interest, 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. Stating who these recipes were familiar to people and what might have been something that they had to do to 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 19th century. The poor quality of Australian cooking was also an aspect of the theme in the period 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 and the spread of newspapers and magazines that provided growing interest in Australian cultural development and the cause 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 19th century. Cookbooks were a form of advertising and quite significant to the history of cookbook publishing in Australia. The audience for these cookbooks were mostly young women directed to cooking as a way of encouraging social harmony. The promotion of these cookbooks was not only to sell their foods because it also meant that you could duplicate the recipes and they 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 historians have described the domestic activities of men and women as being distinctly different by gender. In cookbooks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the food was largely prepared for the British public rather than the women who were designated to cooking. 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 dressed by skill and ingenuity 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. They also helped to promote some of those sorts of changes too.

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 these trends. 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 for what purposes, and women how to cook. Domestic Economy was integrated into the Victorian and New South Wales curriculum by the end of the 19th century. Domestic science had become 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 they could potentially taste the same. It made cookbooks easier to use.

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Historians, to the best of their abilities, work with primary sources to understand the past on its own terms, not through the modern-day lenses. For example, if one were only to study the Crusades through modern-day books they would not be able to understand what would motivate a knight to travel across the world and engage in warfare against Muslims in his own words. A secondary source is a book about history. Scholars will spend just as much time with secondary sources as they will with primary sources since they attempt to understand how other scholars interpret obscure events and may disagree with their analyses.

1. Introduction: Historians and source criticism
   The concept of a historical source. The rise of source criticism and the making of history as an academic field.

   Historical source criticism in the late 19th.

   6. Diaries, letters, memoirs
      Letters and diaries of great men as sources for political and intellectual history.


References


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cookbooks; history; food writing