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 meals, 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 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 introduction of new ingredients or methods and the way they follow.

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 substituting 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 Oh’ (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, breadcrumbs, parsley, shallots, marjoram, thyme, nutmeg, pepper, salt, cayenne, and egg. It was not until the 1880s that a much larger study would reveal the circumstances that separated that period from the changes that followed.

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 so 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 desert 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 fulfill the recipe. The meal also takes between two and three hours, which would be quite prohibitive for many contemporary 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 produced a selection of Australian recipes but they were part of a still Australian 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 made of pigeons. The novelty value of such ingredients may have been of interest, but it shouldn’t necessarily be used to support that judgement. Placed in a broader framework is possible to see the support for a modern, scientific approach to food preparation as part of both the elevation of science and systematic knowledge in society more generally, and a transnational movement to raise the status of women’s role in society. It would also be misleading not to consider the transnational context. Australia’s first cookery teachers were from Britain. The domestic-science movement there can be traced to the congress on domestic economy held in Manchester in 1878, at roughly the same time as the movement was gaining strength in Australia. By the 1890s domestic economy was widely taught in both British and Australian schools, without British women facing the same denigration of their cooking skills.

Other comparisons with Britain also resulted from Australia’s colonial heritage. People often commented on the quality of the ingredients in Australia and said they were more widely available than they were in England but much poorer in quality. Cookbooks emerged as a way of teaching people. Among the first to teach cookery skills was Mrs Rawson, author of The Antipodean Cookery Book and the Kitchen Companion first published in 1885. The book was a compilation of her own recipes and remedies, and it organized food preparation for the ordinary household. It included directions and guidance on things like household tasks and how to cure diseases. Cookbooks therefore were not completely distinct from other aspects of everyday life. They offered much more than culinary advice on how to cook a particular meal and can similarly be used by historians to study people’s ideas and to make conclusions from the books. She included a lot of bush foods that you still do not get in a lot of Australian meals, ingredients that people could substitute for the English ones they were used to like pig weed.

By the end of the nineteenth century cooking had become a recognised classroom subject, providing early training in domestic service, and textbooks teaching Australians how to cook also flourished. Measurements became much more common, the layout of cookbooks became 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.

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 historically the activities of men and women were described as distinct. In cookbooks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attested to the strength of that idea of separate spheres. The consequences of this thought has been debated by historians: whether having that particular kind of market and the identification 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 refreshed with the liquid light of a great idea found.’ 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. 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 not only live but to live economically, agreeably, tastefully and without British women facing the same denigration of their cooking skills.

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 those things. The points that I have raised should’t necessarily be used to support that judgement. Placed in a broader framework is possible to see the support for a modern, scientific approach to food preparation as part of both the elevation of science and systematic knowledge in society more generally, and a transnational movement to raise the status of women’s role in society. It would also be misleading not to consider the transnational context. Australia’s first cookery teachers were from Britain. The domestic-science movement there can be traced to the congress on domestic economy held in Manchester in 1878, at roughly the same time as the movement was gaining strength in Australia. By the 1890s domestic economy was widely taught in both British and Australian schools, without British women facing the same denigration of their cooking skills.
Using Historical Sources. Historians get their information from two different kinds of sources: primary and secondary. Primary sources are first hand sources; secondary sources are second-hand sources. For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. An interpretation is the how an historian makes sense of some part of the past. Like a good story, well done history reveals not only the past, but something about the present as well. Great historians help us to see aspects of the past and about the human condition which we would not be able to find on our own. C. Historians often disagree on interpretations.