Becoming American in the kitchen: gender, acculturation, and American Jewish cookbooks, 1870s to 1930s

Description

**Title** Becoming American in the kitchen

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**Description** This thesis examines American Jewish cookbooks from the 1870s through the 1930s as artifacts of acculturation—in particular, the acculturation process of Jewish women as distinct from that of Jewish men. These cookbooks are gendered primary documents in that they were written by women and for women, and they reflect messages about women's place in society coming from the broad American cultural climate and from Jewish sources. In serving charitable ends, the cookbooks mirror the American Protestant notion that women's spirituality is expressed through good deeds of philanthropy. They also reveal lessons about health and hygiene directed at new immigrants to make them and their children accepted in mainstream society, and fads and fashions of hostessing that were being imitated by Jewish women. These elements of "becoming American" were more significant in the acculturation process of Jewish women than of Jewish men.

Cookbooks, particularly those of the fund-raising charitable variety, were instruments for building women's sense of community. Through community cookbooks, women in the sisterhoods of synagogues as well as in other philanthropic groups could assert control over a portion of the budget of the synagogue or charitable institution. The cookbooks are a window into what those female-centric communities were about. Beyond sharing recipes, the contributors to the community cookbooks shared humor, cooperative leadership, and, usually, lack of rabbinical input.

American Jewish cookbooks reflect varying ideological stances vis-à-vis kashrut. Some assert that kosher restrictions are no barrier to serving as elegant a meal as one's gentile neighbor, while others say that anything that is healthy is acceptable and not treyf (non-kosher). In general, the early cookbooks display a more lax attitude toward kashrut than most American Jewish cookbooks today and feature more distinctly treyf ingredients.

Cookbooks also reflect linguistic acculturation. As the immigrant Jewish population shifted from German to Eastern European, cookbooks—particularly commercial cookbooks promoting products—moved to Yiddish, then to Yiddish and English, and then (much later) to English translations of Yiddish cookbooks. The socio-economic status of the intended audience also played a role in the choice of recipes and of practical advice.

The voices of American Jewish women from a variety of religious, ideological, and socio-economic backgrounds can be heard in these cookbooks. Sometimes the voices are slyly anti-male and proto-feminist. This thesis argues that through the cookbooks Jewish women asserted their sphere of agency, which was in their kitchens, in the management of their homes, and in their sisterhoods. There they created their own women's communities and subcultures, which were uniquely Jewish, American, and female.

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For Jewish authors in America who did not write in English, their encounter with English words has tended to emphasize the untranslatability of certain American concepts into their language and culture. This chapter offers diverse illustrations of language encounters that often intersect. In Call It Sleep, Henry Roth celebrates English as a medium for modernist experimentation as it intersects with Yiddish and Hebrew. Davis, Marni. Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition. New York: New York University Press, 2012. Dearborn, Mary V. “Anzia Yezierska and the Making of an Ethnic American Self.”