

Reading and Writing Recipe Books 1550-1800

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Reading and Writing Recipe Books, 1550–1800 includes 11 rigorously documented essays addressing a genre that began to attract attention following Susan Leonardi's 1989 article, 'Recipes for reading: Summer pasta, lobster a la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie'.⁽¹⁾ The editors, Michelle DiMeo and Sarah Pennell, seek to demonstrate how far the study of medical/culinary recipe books has come in the past 25 years, offering an array of approaches – for example, literary, archaeological, historical, and linguistic – that not only consolidate that progress but also showcase the potential for future research. The product of their efforts is at once fascinating (who would have made the connection between recipes and women's poetic lives?) and exasperating (let's hope that *Reading and Writing* does not, by its impressive rigor, authorize some approaches over others, and define the field by limiting the enquiries that academics undertake). In this review, therefore, I would like to describe what is exciting about this collection, but also discuss its limitations, pointing to what has been left out or not sufficiently emphasized with regard to both form and function in the early modern recipe book.

First, however, what precisely was a recipe book – and for that matter, a recipe – during the early modern period? The fact that there was no single embodiment of either is crucial for understanding what preoccupies the essays in *Reading and Writing*, which recur continually to basic genre-defining issues such as how these texts were produced and what kind of knowledge they encompass. Recipes could be oral, or perhaps inscribed only on fugitive pieces of paper; in virtually all cases, they lacked the detailed, careful instructions that today we take for granted. They covered medical, household, and culinary topics, following the 'huswife' between stillroom and kitchen. They could be hand-written collections passed down within families, citing contributions by numerous individuals and often continually amended in a variety of hands.

They could also be printed, in many cases mimicking – but also seeking to outdo – the manuscript collections beloved by those who owned (and trusted) them. Hand-written texts copied the printed, and vice versa, creating a fluid exchange among the semi-private and aggressively public worlds of advice that frequently pivoted on the keeping and revelation of ‘secrets’.

The coexistence of manuscript and print, and the diverse motivations and contexts behind each, make the period 1550–1800 fundamentally different from our own ‘reading’ and ‘writing’. Recipe books could thus be vastly more personal (insofar as they were hand-written) and, in the words of the editors, could provide a ‘life-register’ of an individual’s and by extension household’s daily life. The printed versions could provide regulatory advice that allowed readers to measure themselves against, and perhaps aspire to, potentially feasible norms. They could open up a world of recipes and, like the early novel, tempt readers to accept the word of someone they had never heard of.

Given the fluid, expansive compass of the genre, derived in part from routine copying and multiple inscriptions, several essays in *Reading and Writing* address the question of ‘authorship’, a perennial enquiry applied to texts of this period. We learn, for example, that manuscript recipe books make it hard to distinguish among those who originated, contributed, and merely owned a recipe, such that calling the compiler of a manuscript its ‘author’ would be anachronistic. We learn further that by studying these texts in context with letters and memoirs, we can establish the compilers’ ‘knowledge networks’, and obtain a more nuanced purchase on the origin and function of recipes in a given text. This is useful information, but *how* useful in terms of helping define the genre? It uncovers in yet another context what we already knew about this period: authorship is fraught with ambiguity, corresponding only occasionally with originality and often resonating with the authorization of a group; it was rarely anything that would have prompted proprietary notions. A few years ago, I taught a copyright course where I showed that 17th- and 18th-century approaches to authorship were coming back – probably to an enthusiastic reception – in the form of sampling, mash-ups, the Creative Commons, and the wholesale downloading of texts. I used old cookbooks and culinary manuscripts, along with Renaissance plays and Defoe’s pseudonymous broadsides, to illustrate just how difficult it was to tie any of these texts to a person. My point here, as it was then, is that while ‘authorship’ is a necessary enquiry regarding any early modern text, what is special about authorship in recipe books such that we can obtain new insights into this function and, in fact, advance our understanding of such books?

To answer this question, I would suggest that instead of focusing on ‘networks’ of contributors, which establishes a relationship limited to exchange, scholars should situate both manuscript and printed texts within a context of ‘community,’ both real and imagined. From a 21st-century point of view – but more importantly, from that of our forebears – the sources of recipes, and the nature of anyone’s proprietary relationship to them, are far less important than reading/writing a text that stands in for the authorizing presence of whomever the compiler knows, trusts, or thinks she ought to trust even if the recipe was flat out copied. Indeed, here is where manuscripts and printed texts converge, since the printed text sought to situate the reader within a community – which she could *only* imagine – presided over by an expert who collated, vetted, and improved recipes from sources outside the reader’s personal network but within a community of recipe writers with shared domestic interests. Considered from this perspective, authorship emerges at every level (the individual recipe writer, the one who passes it along, or the compiler) as a status connoting privileged access; to be the first to write a recipe, if such a thing could ever be, would allow one to claim access to a communal experience enhancing one’s judgment as to what works in the stillroom or in the kitchen, personalized to take the most immediate advantage of such experience. It would also allow one to claim that one is the sum of one’s own experience, continually accessing memory rather than inventing from sudden (perhaps suspect) inspiration.

Thankfully, while some essays in *Reading and Writing* may present recipe books generically – more like ‘texts’ than a specific kind of text – in other instances just the opposite is true: they explore how readers in that place at that time would have consumed these books. Jayne Elizabeth Archer’s essay, ‘The “Quintessence of Wit”: poems and recipes in early modern women’s writing’, argues that recipe books ‘helped facilitate the process by which housewifery was transformed into women’s literacy and authorship’, allowing women to use the recipe form as a poetic device, expressing intimate desires; the recipe was a

model of stored knowledge, ‘operating at the interface between mind and matter’, whose rhetoric women could deploy to remodel the material world. Thus just as a ‘quintessence’ (distillation) could be restorative, so poems as ‘recipes’ addressed issues that concerned women: unrequited love, fear of aging, and preservation of one’s reputation. Archer’s analysis offers a version of authorship emanating directly from women’s engagement with recipe books, showing how these books enabled women to address the world (even if only one other woman) in a new way. This is the best kind of historicizing scholarship, allowing us to understand recipe books as they were actually used.

Another essay displaying this sensitivity is Anne Stobart’s “‘Let her refrain from all hot spices’”: medicinal recipes and advice in the treatment of the King’s Evil in seventeenth-century south-west England’. Here we read a recipe, never incorporated into a book perhaps because of its outspokenness, in which Bridget Boscawen (1666–1708) openly voices disagreement with her doctors, convinced of what is right in her own case: ‘I complaine onely of there preprosorous [preposterous] order of things and concluding of my disses [disease] and cures according to there own conceites [conceits] and prescriptions unto which I shuld never yeald’. It was common for women to use manuscript recipe books to record all manner of household and personal items, but it was highly unusual to record within the confines of a recipe itself one’s objections to its utility. The outcrop of this woman’s strong sense of self – expressed as a desire for self-preservation – allows us to see, again, how recipes and their consumers interacted.

During this period, recipes and recipe books were intended to instruct readers in how to make something healthful or tasty, albeit they could wander off (primarily in manuscript) in idiosyncratic directions. My main concern with *Reading and Writing*, therefore, is that the essays do not sufficiently attend to this fundamental, pedagogical impetus, and to the corresponding challenges that readers faced in trying to apply recipe books’ instructions. We get no concrete sense of how women (and sometimes men) actually read and learned from these texts. How was it possible to follow a recipe that could be maddeningly imprecise, and what assumptions did writers make about readers’ experience and capacities? Did they even make assumptions, or were they unequipped to ponder epistemological issues that affect any effort to ‘translate’ hands-on craft into abstract lesson? How did the printed text convince readers that its own instruction, premised on the imagined community that it contrived, was worth the price and commitment of time? And how did all those printed texts *compete* for readers’ interest? While the essays feature much discussion of the term ‘probatum est’ (often appended to recipes that apparently worked), I waited in vain for in-depth examinations of pedagogy and marketing, phenomena that were increasingly intertwined as print culture took off. Thus while each essay in *Reading and Writing* is instructive, more than a few leave behind the whiff of the lamp. They tell us more than we might think to ask about these texts, but are reticent as to issues that anyone who ever tried to use an old recipe would naturally want to know.

Gilly Lehmann’s essay, ‘Reading recipe books and culinary history: opening a new field’, is a case in point. It analyzes changes in culinary styles during the earlier part of the period, and by reference to the visual arts detects a transition from Mannerist to Baroque as new dishes came into fashion. Accordingly, I now know how to identify Mannerist cuisine (a love of forms and patterns, and of sugar throughout the meal), but am still no better able to understand how cooks made sense of the instructions. The same might be said of Francisco Alonso-Almeida’s ‘Genre conventions in English recipes, 1600–1800’, which is a tour de force of linguistic analysis but ventures only fleetingly into the kitchen or stillroom. The essay offers a good anatomy of a recipe’s structure (its ‘genre conventions’) and how it could help guide readers. But once a reader found a recipe and was helped to judge its efficacy, what then? We are left uncertain.

Indeed, in keeping with this reluctance to grapple with how readers reproduced recipes, Alonso-Almeida asserts that recipe books were (and are) ‘discourse colonies’, lacking the temporal and logical devices common to narrative (perhaps we might think of them as ‘picaresque’?). In artifacts of this type, the whole does not depend on the unity of its parts, many of which can be rearranged or eliminated without loss of meaning; unity becomes an abstraction, derived from the text’s ‘intention and utility’. But is such an approach helpful? To reduce recipe books’ discourse to crowding atoms that might have escaped from a Margaret Cavendish poem is an example of how scholarly ingenuity – and it *is* ingenious to find a model for the genre’s unfixed form – can deflect our attention outwards, and overwrite recipe books’ particular

unifying structure and devices. Indeed, these texts did strive for a type of internal unity appropriate to their use: many proceeded through the calendar, and were organized further by the order of a meal. They boasted of helpful indices and, latterly, of cross references (Alonso-Almeida dismisses such references, but in recipe books they are very useful). Hannah Glasse logically featured a recipe for bread next to one for ale, since yeast rising off of one was necessary to produce the other. Such efforts – primarily pedagogic, but also intended to best the competition – would have been understood in the 17th and 18th centuries. My point, therefore, is that as modern readers we want to learn how these books actually *operated*, that is, how they sought to instruct contemporary readers *at the point of reproduction* and whether such efforts made sense under contemporary domestic conditions. To slot these books into an all-purpose anti-narrative form simply begs the question.

Lauren Winner's essay, 'The Foote sisters' *Compleat Housewife*: cookery texts as a source of lived religion', ventures into a kitchen in colonial Virginia, and imagines a group of illiterate slave cooks pretending to follow their mistress' directions as she reads from a recipe book. This is an interesting idea, albeit it finesses the necessity to learn to cook from a book. Instead, it posits a parallel culinary culture in which slaves 'probably knew more about what went into preparing a decent-tasting meal than their owners'. How did they know? They certainly did not prepare fine cuisine for themselves, so someone with access to the Big House must have taught them. Would that we had been told how this occurred. Winner is much more forthcoming on colonial Virginians' use of cookbooks to create meals that followed, in a comfortable rather than obsequious way, Anglican dictates regarding Lenten sacrifice. This part of the essay offers a striking (if unintended) parallel to the discussion of slaves, since it demonstrates women displaying the same ability to circumvent the male establishment (the Church, but also husbands and fathers-in-law) as slaves displayed towards their owners. Winner's essay thus provides a wonderful sense of how recipe books were –and were not – used in a colonial household. Unfortunately, we are left with an intimation of lingering culinary knowledge that was somehow (though we are not told how) communicated to those who actually cooked.

The best examination of how early culinary texts were produced and marketed is Margaret Ezell's 'Cooking the books, or, the three faces of Hannah Wooley', which examines how the bibliographic entanglements of Wooley's texts reveal publishers' efforts to exploit an author's name and image. Ezell looks at repeated editions and additions, possibly by Wooley but perhaps not, resulting in a densely layered textual accretion that represents not so much Wooley's latest inventions as 'a handy compendium of a long period of accumulated knowledge and skill ... involving the use of a recognizable image or images to stand in for those author attributes'. She looks at various portraits in overlapping, perhaps pirated editions. Whose face is really on the book, who had a hand in putting it on the book, and thus whose book really is it? By raising these questions, Ezell gets to the heart of an emerging publishing industry where the author's personality becomes a node in a network of people involved in making and marketing a book. One need only read the prefaces to Defoe's novels, a Gaston-and-Alphonse routine among authors, editors, and printers, to realize how this network could be exploited in any number of (lucrative if evasive) directions. Finally, Ezell raises the issue of celebrity authorship, already apparent with Robert May's *The Accomplisht Cook* (1660), where an author's name and image help sell the contents. Though Ezell situates Wooley's texts within a commercial arena that encompassed much more than recipe books, she nonetheless demonstrates how we cannot comprehend such books – what sort of recipes are offered, and where they came from – unless we attend to their mode of production. This is one of the most useful essays in *Reading and Writing*, and I hope it sets a standard for complementary efforts.

In closing, I would like to recommend some further directions that recipe book studies could pursue. Except for the slaves in Lauren Winner's essay, we get little sense from *Reading and Writing* of whether the lower classes read recipe books. In fact, by the late 18th century, several texts were aimed at the 'poor', often in conjunction with promoting vegetarianism. Others promoted soup or the use of 'substitutes'. These books were in many cases overtly political, seeking to offer the poor an alternative, cheaper diet to one based on white bread and meat (when they could get it). The politics of food in this period – epitomized in titles like *Primitive Cookery* (1767) – is a huge issue, and one that deserves intense study. In this regard, the emergence of niche texts is important, as recipe books began appealing to various segments of the

population (for example, some people wanted a vegetarian diet). Finally, how about all that advice in recipe books on combatting kitchen ‘poisons’ (for example, seeping from chipped copper pots), trussing and carving, and the etiquette of serving guests? Martha Bradley’s *The British Housewife* (1756) even tried to help women relax. Recipe books sought to be consulted in an array of contexts, all open to investigation.

Thus while *Reading and Writing* is immensely engaging, it only partly points the way to further scholarship. What it does do, however – and quite brilliantly – is demonstrate that recipe books can bear the weight of rigorous scholarship. This in itself should mark the arrival (in Gilly Lehmann’s words) of a ‘new field’.

Notes

1. Susan J. Leonardi, ‘Recipes for Reading: Summer pasta, Lobster a la Riseholme, and Key Lime pie’, *PMLA*, 104, 3 (1989), 340–7. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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