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**SOMEONE'S IN THE KITCHEN: THE VALUE OF HOME COOKING TRADITIONS
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

A Dissertation in

American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

With the proliferation of convenience foods, preparing complex recipes from scratch appears to be unpopular with Americans who declare that they are “too busy to cook.” “No one cooks anymore” has become the opening line of the obituary for traditional American home cooking in the twenty-first century. At the same time, home cooking is a multi-billion dollar industry including cookbooks, kitchen gadgets, high-end appliances, specialty ingredients and much more. Cooking-themed programming proliferates on television, inspiring a wide array of celebrity-chef branded goods even as self-described “foodies” seek authenticity by pickling, preserving, and canning foods in their own home kitchens. Obviously, home cooking is a hot topic.

This dissertation is not an effort to prove that Americans still cook at home. Instead, I argue that the death of home cooking narrative represents a site of struggle where Americans work through key aspects of national identity including race, gender, and class. Drawing on a wide array of “texts”—cookbooks, advertising, YouTube videos, and more—I peel back the layers of the death of home cooking narrative to reveal how massive changes in food production and kitchen technologies transformed cooking at home from an odious chore into “home cooking,” a concept imbued with deep meanings associated with home, family, and community missing from the twenty-first century. Furthermore, I contend that by emphasizing present-day decline while invoking a nostalgic past as the path to a triumphant future, home cooking’s mourners follow the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad. I posit that by relying on idealized imagery, modern-day Jeremiahs seek to establish a singular definition of “real” home cooking while reinforcing its symbolic significance. However, these arguments only serve to emphasize the gap between everyday cooking experiences and the ideal—a gap filled by

advertisers who use the same imagery to peddle convenience products as the solution to America's cooking problems. Ultimately, this dissertation analyzes current discourse and, in the process, offers a counter-narrative that includes the complexities of daily practice which incorporate tradition *and* convenience while reinforcing the necessity of a more nuanced discussion of the past, present, and future of American home cooking.

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Above all, this journey would not be possible without God’s great mercy and love. I am truly grateful for the blessings that He has provided. All glory is His.

In October 2008, as my husband and I made the return trip New Hampshire after visiting Penn State Harrisburg for the first time, we passed the time during the nine hour trip by listening to the radio. Reports of the stock market’s horrendous collapse peppered the news. As the numbers became more and more alarming, I turned to my husband and asked, “Should we really try this? Quit our jobs, move hundreds of miles, just so I can get a PhD?” He did not skip a beat before replying, “Let’s go for it!” Throughout this process his unwavering encouragement has uplifted and sustained me. Whenever I felt a task was nearly impossible—studying for the comprehensive exam, presenting a paper at a national conference, finishing a chapter draft—he responded with a brief but heartfelt, “Jen, you *can* do this! I know you can.” During a particularly frustrating period of writer’s block when I spent more time staring at a blank page than writing, a tiny pink post-it note appeared on the edge of the computer screen that included

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In 2007, I noticed an intriguing course offering at Plymouth State University: “Foodways: Where Food, History, and Culture Meet” and signed up right away. From the first class I was hooked. I credit Millie Rahn, the dedicated folklorist who taught the course, as my

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Central Pennsylvania—with food-centers Hershey and Lancaster—seemed like the perfect place to nourish my burgeoning interest in foodways. I was already considering applying to the Penn State Harrisburg’s American Studies Master’s degree program when the announcement for the launch of the PhD program appeared on the school’s homepage with the note that it was accepting applications for the Fall 2009 semester. I knew I just *had* to apply. I made the right decision. The program has allowed me to grow as both a scholar and a teacher by providing a supportive environment that encouraged both professional development and personal enrichment.

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The lessons that I learned at the Penn State Archives translated into skills that I could utilize in my own research and I employed them while exploring the cookbooks housed as part of the Food and Cookery collection held at the New York University's Fales Library. I am indebted to the Fales Library's dedicated archivists and staff both for establishing and maintaining such an amazing collection of culinary materials, but also for facilitating my access to the cookbooks that were such an integral part of my research. During the time I spent poring over the pages of cookbooks, staff members attentively answered my questions and assisted me in locating another volume to add to my pile. Their friendly professionalism showed how much they valued the work that they did in managing the collection.

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Portions of this dissertation have previously been presented at conferences or published and I have benefited from the feedback of a wide-ranging group of scholars who commented on my work. I presented a version of chapter 4 under the title “Want to Cook? Buy this Book!: How Cookbook Sell Comfort and Create America’s Convenience Cooks” at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Food and Society in Bloomington, Indiana. I also presented portions of Chapter 6 as “Baking, Broiling and Video Blogging: Tradition and Innovation in YouTube Cooking Videos” at the 2012 Eastern American Studies Association Annual Meeting at Rutgers University. Also, the portion of Chapter 6 related to online recipe-sharing websites received an “Honorable Mention” in the 2011 American Folklore Society’s Foodways Section’s Sue Samuelson Award and was published under the title “Grandma’s Gone Global: Recipe Transmission from the Kitchenette to the Internet” in the journal *Digest*.

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Input from each these sources helped to create the final recipe for this project. As the lead “cook” for this dissertation, I hope you that you take pleasure in savoring the finished “dish.” *Bon Appétit!*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: IN THE KITCHEN WITH GRANDMA



Figure 1: Me and Grandma, c. 1983

The wooden spoon leaves blue swirls in its wake as I stir fresh blueberries into the golden yellow batter. I am in my kitchen mixing up a batch of blueberry muffins. The teal green ceramic bowl sits amid the remnants of ingredients that formed the basis of the batter: broken shells from two eggs, a measuring cup with a few drops of milk pooled at the bottom, a dusting of flour radiating out from the spot where I plopped the bag down a little too hard. Off to the side, a yellowing index card, well-worn and crinkled, bears a single word at the top scrawled in my grandmother's recognizable handwriting—"muffins."

Afternoons spent baking blueberry muffins with my grandmother loom large in my childhood memories. An excellent cook, my grandmother delighted in sharing her knowledge with me and my sister. Patiently guiding us through the intricate steps on the recipe card, we always celebrated the final result as if it were a dish made for a king—whether the cake was

lopsided, the blueberry muffins burnt, or more chocolate chips ended up melted on my hands than in the cookies.

When my grandmother passed away, I inherited her recipe box—a dark green metal tin with the “Andes Candies” logo decorating the outside. Inside, the box contained a mish-mash of recipes: handwritten cards with “From the Kitchen of M. Hughes” emblazoned on the top; clippings from various newspapers and magazines; carefully folded cuttings from cardboard and plastic packaging of a stunning variety of food products ranging from frozen broccoli to prunes. Tucked inside next to long, complicated recipes—for roast duck, lamb, and beef—“fancy” dishes that my grandmother would have served only at family celebrations—there were simple recipes like “impossible hamburger pie” carefully cut from the back of a Bisquick box. The mixture of recipes followed no perceptible order or pattern revealing the fact that my grandmother was an eclectic cook.

As I searched through the recipe box, I was most interested in locating my grandmother’s blueberry muffin recipe. However, I did not find one recipe—I found four! There were two clipped from newspapers: “Old-Fashioned Blueberry Muffins” that listed “frozen blueberries” and “grated orange peel” among its ingredients and “J.M.’s Blueberry Muffins” that used fresh blueberries but not the grated orange peel. There were two handwritten cards: “Jiffy Blueberry Muffins” which included blueberry pie filling and the card that said only “Muffins” (with the note “Fannie Farmer Cookbook” in the upper right corner) and provided directions for adding fresh blueberries to the batter. The four recipes all came from different sources and included different types of blueberries: fresh, frozen, and even canned. Which of these recipes was *THE* recipe that I remembered from my childhood? As I mulled over the possibilities, I realized that what I was searching for did not exist. When we made blueberry muffins, my grandmother and I

did not follow one set recipe. Sometimes we baked from scratch, taking the time to select fresh blueberries, ice cold milk, and real butter. Other times, we used a *Jiffy* boxed mix including weirdly hued “blueberry” fragments while swirling in margarine and skim milk. Baking blueberry muffins with my grandmother was not a singular experience, defined by one recipe. The memories blurred together because what mattered was not the recipe, but the moment.

My grandmother’s recipe box offers insight not only into my grandmother’s experiences as a home cook, but parallels the history of American home cooking in the twentieth century with all of its complexity, creativity, and contradictions. I interpret my grandmother’s recipe box as a representation of the strategies that she, and other women, successfully employed to negotiate the changes they found in a rapidly evolving American food landscape. Drawing on the lessons learned from generations of home cooks, women like my grandmother also adapted to the flood of new convenience foods that appeared on the market in the decades following World War II. In my memories, meals made by my grandmother were filled with variety—much like her collection of blueberry muffin recipes. My grandmother’s cooking constantly evolved as she reacted to changes, incorporated new ingredients and redefined herself as a home cook. Much like other women, she was capable of preparing a host of complicated dishes from scratch, but was also comfortable relying on convenience products that made kitchen jobs more manageable.

My reading of my grandmother’s recipes as a reflection of successful strategies for managing the complexities of modern meal preparation, however, clashes with the tale of American home cooking that I found in many popular books on the subject. For these writers, my grandmother’s recipe box does not represent a melding of the old and the new, a balancing act of convenience and continuity. Instead, the jumble of recipes—especially the recipes clipped from boxes, off the side of soup cans, and bearing brand names like Bisquick and Campbell’s—

symbolize the havoc unleashed on the American food system, and kitchen, by industrialized food processors during the latter half of the twentieth-century. My grandmother's choice to vary her blueberry muffin making between preparing a recipe from scratch with fresh blueberries versus choosing to rely on a *Jiffy* boxed mix is not regarded as simple flexibility but instead symbolizes the slow demise of traditional home cooking.

Much of the dialogue addressing food and cooking in the twenty-first century revolves around the idea that home cooking traditions are disappearing as Americans embrace the convenience offered by mass-marketed, prepackaged and convenience foods and turn away from the drudgery of the kitchen. In this vision, home cooks are losing the ability to make meals as processed foods and kitchen technologies, such as microwaves, food processors, and bread machines, shift the work away from the cook. America's kitchens supposedly gather dust—or worse are littered with take-out containers—as Americans give up on making dinner for themselves and rely more and more on fast food restaurants and ready-made supermarket meals. The constant repetition of the phrase “no one cooks anymore” has become the opening line of the obituary for traditional home cooking in twenty-first century America.

In this dissertation, I argue that the pervasive nature of pronouncements that the demise of at-home meal preparation is imminent represent an outgrowth of anxiety related to the pressures of modernity. I contend that the drive to get Americans back to the kitchen characterizes an effort to corral the complexities of the twenty-first century that otherwise seem out-of-control into a manageable form. In this dissertation, I am more concerned with the meaning of the message than its veracity. To test the form and function of the “death of home cooking” narrative in twenty-first century American culture, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of four primary text types. Three types serve as examples of the “death of home cooking” narrative

including: lamentations of the loss of home cooking such as Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Ann Vileisis' *Kitchen Literacy*, and Kathleen Flinn's *Kitchen Counter Cooking School*; best-selling cookbooks; and the use of "homestyle" terminology used by convenience services and products that offer "just like homemade" food without cooking at home. One text type, specifically online cooking content including recipes posted to recipe-sharing websites and YouTube cooking videos, provides an example of a counter-narrative that offers a glimpse of the complexities and continuities of twenty-first century cooking practices. For each, I identify how the "death of home cooking" narrative functions within the text by isolating the key patterns of the narrative; evaluate how the form, content, and style of the text supports or subverts those patterns; and highlight the underlying strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. In order to provide insight into the cultural significance of the "death of home cooking" narrative, I support my analysis by consulting poll data; carrying out archival research using the cookbook collection at the New York's Fales Library; and conducting ethnographic field research at the Dream Dinners meal preparation service. Under scrutiny, these texts reveal a very similar pattern: decrying the current decline of cooking in America; harkening back to a golden age of "real" home cooking; insisting that their own solution is the pathway to bring the present more in line with the past. Moreover, a troubling undercurrent of moral judgment that identifies non-conformists and non-cooks as deviant permeates some of the discourse. Online cooking content stands in opposition to this model by illustrating the multitude of knowledge, influences, and meanings that home cooks bring to the kitchen each time they make meals. Ultimately, I contend that the "death of home cooking" narrative fails to achieve the goal of returning Americans to the kitchen because the rhetoric relies on a simplistic definition of "real" home cooking that resists the multifaceted reality of home cooking practices. To attain a true

understanding of the value of home cooking traditions in twenty-first century America, it is necessary to move beyond simply declaring the imminent death of at home meal preparation to a more nuanced discussion of the complexities and continuities of cooking at home.

The Death of Home Cooking

Messages that contain the message that home cooking is in danger of disappearing bombard Americans. Public health officials warn that Americans rely too heavily on pre-made, packaged products and fast foods that are high in fat, calories, and cholesterol which contribute to the growing obesity epidemic including adverse health outcomes like heart disease and diabetes while nutritionists advocate home cooked meals made from fresh ingredients as a healthier option.¹ Environmentalists highlight the deleterious effects of expansive agribusinesses that have grown ever larger as they feed America's addiction to convenience through an overreliance on corn and cattle while champions of a sustainable food system urge a return to seasonal foods that are raised locally and prepared at home.² Politicians point to meals eaten "on the run" instead of at the family table as a contributing factor to the breakdown of the family which they claim leads to increases in divorce rates, violent crimes and teen pregnancy even as religious leaders of numerous faiths exhort the power of the "family meal" as a source of strength and continuity.³ Celebrity chefs and cookbook authors tout the reliability of "quick and easy" recipes projecting the message that Americans wish to spend as little time in the kitchen as possible while self-styled "foodies" set themselves apart by seeking authenticity in the meals they consume by restoring old-time preparation methods like pickling, canning, and preserving

¹ Jennifer M. Poti and Barry M. Popkin, "Trends in Energy Intake Among US Children by Eating Location and Food Source, 1977-2006," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 111 (2011): 1156-1164.

² Oran B. Hesterman, *Fair Food: Growing a Healthy, Sustainable, Food System for All*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

³ Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals: How Eating Together Makes Us Smarter, Stronger, Healthier and Happier* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press L.C., 2005).

foods in their home kitchens.⁴ Thus the underlying message of much of the discourse surrounding food and cooking in the twenty-first century is that Americans are “too busy to cook” and have ceded their dinner making duties to big corporations that turn out salty, sugary, fatty chemical laden fast foods and convenience products designed to tickle the taste buds and please the palate and that this trend must be reversed in order to save traditional home cooking.⁵ Name brand authors churn out dozens of best-selling books chocked full of advice on how to break America’s addiction to mass-produced convenience foods by returning to a simpler, slower, more sustainable model based on fresh ingredients and home cooked meals.⁶

What is worse than Americans losing the desire to cook, say the multitudes of experts, is that they are rapidly losing the *ability* to cook. “Deskilling” is the buzz word.⁷ Preparation methods and cooking techniques once the sole property of the home kitchen have been outsourced to factories, restaurants and supermarkets by consumers content to allow corporations to do the work for them.⁸ Meats come pre-cut in plastic packaging or even piping hot and ready-to-serve; vegetables arrive frozen, doused in butter needing only a few minutes in the microwave; sauces, soups, and side dishes come dehydrated, boxed, and require only the

⁴ Christine M. Mitchell, “The Rhetoric of Celebrity Cookbooks,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43, no. 3 (2010): 524-539.

Ken Albala and Rosanna Nafziger, *The Lost Art of Real Cooking: Rediscovering the Pleasures of Traditional Food One Recipe at a Time*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2010).

⁵ Paul Roberts, *The End of Food*, (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

⁶ For Example: Katherine Gustafson, *Change Comes to Dinner: How Vertical Farmers, Urban Growers, and Other Innovators are Revolutionizing How Americans Eat*, (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2012).

Sandor Ellix Katz, *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved: Inside America’s Underground Food Movements*, (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006).

Barbara Kingslover, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

⁷ Rachel Engler-Stringer, “Food, Cooking Skills, and Health: A Literature Review,” *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 73, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 141-145.

⁸ Les Gofton, “Convenience and the Moral Status of Consumer Practices,” In *Food Choice and the Consumer*, ed. David W. Marshall, 152-181, Glasgow: Blackie Academic & Professional, An Imprint of Chapman & Hall, 1995, 178.

addition of boiling water.⁹ Trends in food marketing and packaging, relying on terms like “quick,” “easy,” and “ready in minutes,” appear to support the idea that what Americans want is food that takes as little time and effort to prepare as possible.¹⁰ As the microwave oven and the ubiquitous take-out container dominate the kitchen, it appears that Americans no longer take time to learn how to cook the old-fashioned way—from scratch—anymore.¹¹ Moreover, critics wail, once these skills are gone, they may be gone forever.¹² A future where no one remembers how to pluck a chicken, knead bread dough, or make fruit preserves seems bleak indeed, especially when the replacements are factory-raised, plastic-wrapped chicken parts, spongy, chemical-laden white “bread,” and artificially flavored corn syrup “jelly.”

Trends in food consumption and meal preparation seem to support the idea that Americans have abandoned the kitchen. According to the National Restaurant Association, the restaurant industry’s share of the American food dollar increased from a mere 25% in 1955 to a whopping 48% in 2012 indicating that more and more Americans choose to eat meals away from home.¹³ In fact, restaurant sales increased from \$379 billion in 2000 to \$631.8 billion in 2012 and now represent a staggering 4% of U.S. gross domestic product.¹⁴ When Americans do choose to eat at home, they increasingly turn to dishes that require very little preparation time and only low level cooking skills. Snacking is on the rise, with consumers turning more and

⁹ Leon Rappoport, *How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2003), 187.

¹⁰ M.J.J.M. Candel, “Consumers’ Convenience Orientation Towards Meal Preparation: Conceptualization and Measurement,” *Appetite*, 36, (2001): 15-28.

¹¹ Jennifer L. Iannolo, “Food and Sensuality: A Perfect Pairing,” In *Food & Philosophy: Eat, Drink, and Be Merry*, ed. Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 246.

¹² JoAnn Jaffe and Michael Gertler, “Victual Vicissitudes: Consumer Deskillling and the (Gendered) Transformation of Food Systems,” *Agriculture and Human Values*, 23 (2006): 147.

¹³ National Restaurant Association, *2012 Restaurant Industry Pocket Factbook*, 2012, http://www.restaurant.org/pdfs/research/PocketFactbook_2012.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.

more to high calorie foods and energy drinks to ease their in-between meal cravings.¹⁵ Moreover, conflicting priorities—work, school, hobbies, family duties—all influence the time and effort that Americans are willing to spend cooking since striking a balance between the demands of daily life and eating and sharing meals with the family often requires tradeoffs between spending time cooking versus using that time for other important activities such as work, childcare, and leisure.¹⁶

What appears to be a surge in popularity for many products related to food and cooking suggests the counter-argument that interest in home cooking is experiencing a revival.¹⁷ Belt-tightening in response to the economic slowdown that began in earnest in 2008 has meant that many families have turned to cooking meals at home instead of relying on expensive take-out and restaurant meals.¹⁸ Moreover, a 2006 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that the percent of adults indicating that they enjoy cooking “a great deal” actually *increased* from 32% in 1989 to 34% in 2006.¹⁹ American popular culture reflects this burgeoning interest in cooking. While other areas of the publishing industry have experienced sluggish or declining profits, cookbooks continue to enjoy increasing sales.²⁰ On television, the Food Network launched the spin-off cable channel appropriately named “The Cooking Channel” in 2010 which offers a wide variety of old and new cooking programs from classics such as *The French Chef* and *The Galloping Gourmet* to more recent shows like *Bitchin’ Kitchen*. Perhaps the most telling

¹⁵ Carmen Piernas and Barry M. Popkin, “Snacking Increased Among U.S. Adults Between 1977 and 2006,” *The Journal of Nutrition*, 140, (2010): 325-332.

¹⁶ Margaret M. Jastran et al. “Eating Routines, Embedded, Value Based, Modifiable, and Reflective,” *Appetite*, 52, (2009): 127-136.

¹⁷ Amanda Watson Schnetzer, “The Golden Age of Cooking,” *Policy Review*, 97, (October/November 1999): 53-65.

¹⁸ Mike Hughlett, “Home cooking, familiar brands gain in popularity during recession,” *The Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 2009, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/chi-sat-trading-downjan24,0,4794730.story>

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, *Eating More, Enjoying Less*, (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, April 19, 2006).

²⁰ “Printed Cookbook Growth Driven by Trend Toward Eating In, Celebrity Chefs,” *Book Business*, October 31, 2011, <http://www.bookbusinessmag.com/article/printed-cookbook-growth-driven-trend-toward-eating-in-celebrity-chefs-25024774/1#>

indication of the popularity, and profit potential, for television cooking programming occurred in 2011 when the ABC television network stunned loyal fans by replacing the long-running soap opera *All My Children* after nearly forty years on the air with a cooking-themed talk show named *The Chew*.²¹ The growing size of the American kitchen that is adorned with high-end stainless steel appliances, decked out in a catalog of specialty gadgets, and filled to capacity with gourmet ingredients seems to indicate that cooking continues to be important to Americans. Hordes of new specialty shops and restaurants have opened to cater to self-identified “foodies” who search out new or exotic eating experiences both at home and in restaurants with an emphasis on local, seasonal, and “authentic” ingredients.²² The foodie trend has spilled over into the mainstream as even Wal-Mart Supercenters have begun stocking “organic” foods.²³

The apparent widespread popularity of food and cooking does nothing to silence the doomsayers; quite the opposite, in fact, as critics interpret many of these phenomena as signs of the disappearance of “real” home cooking. Naysayers regard cookbooks and television cooking programs as a type of voyeurism and insist that these forms of entertainment do not serve as evidence of increased kitchen activity, but instead can be taken as an indication that Americans get their thrills through vicarious food preparation rather than doing the work themselves.²⁴ Similarly, critics are adamant that America’s penchant for luxury kitchens and fancy appliances is more about displaying status than serving dinner and that the majority simply gather dust as

²¹ Lorraine Ali, “Food Rules, Once the Province of How-To Cooking Shows, Food Media Has Extended its Reach—But Has it Become Too Big?” *Adweek.com*, <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/food-rules-134932>

²² Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

²³ Melanie Warner, “Wal-Mart Eyes Organic Foods,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/12/business/12organic.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

²⁴ Signe Rousseau, *Food Media: Celebrity Chefs and the Politics of Everyday Interference* (London: Berg, 2012).

they go unused.²⁵ The same critique is leveled at “foodies” who are accused of using food as a marker of status—cooking and eating “real” food becomes a form of snobbery.²⁶

The commentators’ ability to read doom and gloom into just about every scenario piqued my curiosity. If, as they claim, most Americans are deeply *uninterested* in traditional home cooking, why is there such a widespread audience not only for food books and cooking programs, but for the critics’ own pronouncements of the end of home cooking as well? If all Americans really want are quick and easy solutions to the problem of daily meal preparation, why do the terms “homemade” and “from scratch” continue to hold such an allure that they are plastered on everything from cookie mixes to frozen dinners? Why are home cooks stigmatized for using labor-saving appliances and convenience products when the same is not true for other household chores? After all, no one mourns the loss of washing clothes or scrubbing the floor by hand. My instinct is that if home cooking traditions no longer hold meaning for modern-day Americans as the mourners proclaim then there should be no audience for laments of its loss—only celebrations of its replacements. The widespread, vociferous nature of the mourning of at-home meal preparation indicates that home cooking still holds significance in the twenty-first century.

Expressions of alarm about the perceived imminent demise of home cooking are the manifestation of an identity crisis. Americans struggle to adapt to shifting gender roles, changing definitions of the family, widening distance between producers and consumers in the food system, increased mobility, both in terms of careers and physical location, and other major changes that accelerated as the twentieth-century rolled into the twenty-first century. In this

²⁵ Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Culture History of American Advertising*, Second Edition, (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 346.

²⁶ David Kamp, *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 360.

dissertation, I uncover the ways in which the “death of home cooking” narrative holds appeal for Americans as a way to process the costs modernity and adjust to a growing sense that they have lost connections to family, community, and tradition. I propose that the “death of home cooking” narrative conforms to a long-standing rhetorical tradition—the Jeremiad. Utilized by preachers and politicians throughout American history, this form of rhetoric is intended to awaken its audience to the need for reform by highlighting how far the present has fallen away from the ideal of the past. However, I demonstrate that the same standardized form that often makes the Jeremiad powerful also stifles its ability to create the desired change. Drawing on a wide variety of texts from popular culture, folk culture, consumer culture, internet culture and more, I peel back the layers of discourse to highlight the need for a more nuanced reading of American home cooking practices in the twenty-first century.

Therefore, this dissertation is not an effort to prove that Americans are cooking at home. Instead, I endorse the idea that the power, and beauty, of home cooking traditions comes from their complexity and that, perhaps more than any other practice, home cooking is a powerful vessel that Americans fill with meaning because it represents *both* the unbroken continuity of the past *and* the adaptability to meet current needs. By fixating on the idea that home cooking is disappearing, mourners undermine the impact of their own message by establishing a singular definition of “real” home cooking and relegating all other practices to the guilt-ridden margins. In this dissertation, I advocate for a more nuanced discussion of home cooking practices—one that recognizes the multiplicity of meaning that Americans bring into the kitchen each time they make meals.

At the same time, this dissertation is not an effort to silence the critics of the modern American food system who often trumpet the death of home cooking as evidence of wider

problems with food production, distribution, and consumption. Such critiques are necessary, especially in regard to sustainable agriculture, equitable access to food, and health. However, as this dissertation illustrates, food experts often position themselves as valiant heroes arriving just in the nick of time to rescue Americans from nasty habits such as over-reliance on convenience products and addiction to fast food by reinstating vanishing traditions by eating only locally produced foods and cooking from scratch. Ultimately, however, the tone of these arguments undermine the mission of rescuing home cooking by enhancing the distance between the “real” life that Americans experience in their day-to-day efforts to fix dinner and the “ideal” life described in the critics’ laments. This simultaneously increases both the symbolic power of “home cooking” *and* the anxiety Americans feel when faced with failure to meet the idyllic image. As this dissertation reveals, food manufacturers swoop in and take advantage of the tension by appropriating the language of “homemade,” “from scratch” and “just like Mom used to make” as ways to promote the very same products that mourners blame for the death of home cooking—frozen foods, boxed mixes, and even fast food—as alternative methods for bridging the gap between the experience of the real and the promise of the ideal.

Defining Home Cooking

The argument that traditional American home cooking is disappearing rests on a very narrow definition of “real” home cooking. In this static vision, the only type of meal preparation that can be considered “authentic” occurs at home, is orchestrated by a member of the family (usually a woman, though critics are quick to renounce gender bias), incorporates fresh ingredients, requires complex kitchen skills, and draws from a litany of complicated traditional and creative recipes. In the 2011 *Kentucky Fresh Cookbook*, author Maggie Green offers an excellent example of a limited vision of “real” home cooking by drawing the distinction between

the negative impact of convenience and the benefits of preparing meals from scratch.²⁷ The cookbook's introduction is worth quoting at length because it represents a succinct rendition of the key themes of the death of home cooking narrative.

Green begins by explaining that cooking is no longer a necessity, "Canned goods, frozen foods, packaged meals, and quick-serve restaurants have changed the landscape of the modern kitchen. With an abundance of ready-to-eat food available at any time and at any price, no one *needs* to cook anymore...Cooking has become something someone else does for us. We complain of being too tired to cook, too liberated to cook, too busy to cook, too educated to cook, and unable to cook. And guess what? We don't have to cook."²⁸ Green then notes that choosing *not* to cook the right way comes at a high price, "Despite the abundance of readily available food, we still experience malnourishment, obesity, disordered eating, hunger, and loneliness. Food and drink are abused, leading to chronic illness, social disorders, and environmental concerns. Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and alcoholism are the price Kentucky, and most of the nation, pays for this abundance of food and drink."²⁹ On the flip side, Green argues that, by cooking at home from scratch, she and her family—and society in general—reaps the benefits, "Cooking fresh meals is a conscious decision to nourish ourselves and others with wholesome ingredients, rather than relying on prepared food. When I choose to cook using seasonal ingredients instead of assembling a meal from the contents of boxes and jars, I become acquainted with those ingredients, and cooking becomes a social endeavor, a way for people I care about to gather together and share a freshly prepared meal."³⁰

²⁷ Maggie Green, *The Kentucky Fresh Cookbook*, (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Green's writing mirrors the pattern of discourse found almost identically throughout "death of home cooking" rhetoric. Although levels of detail and emphasis shift, commentators all express the superiority of handmade, homemade food and underscore the idea that "real" home cooking avoids over processed, manufactured ingredients so abundant in the modern, industrialized food system. Anything that falls outside this small window of proper meal-making is presented not only as a poor choice on behalf of the individual cook, but as a contributing factor to the mortality of home cooking traditions with equally disastrous results for individual home cooks, their families, and society as a whole.

According to proponents of from scratch meal preparation average Americans lack the time, skill, and confidence to cook the "right" way—at home, from scratch using fresh ingredients. "Real" home cooking, they say, is disappearing because American refuse to take interest in the task and would rather allow others to do the cooking for them. According to critics, Americans have been "duped" into over-reliance on pre-packaged foods, boxed mixes, and frozen dinners by multi-billion dollar food companies that have spent decades indoctrinating home cooks with the idea that cooking is too difficult and time-consuming and that they should let someone else do the hard work.³¹ The literature presents non-cooks and cooks that do include boxed mixes, frozen foods and take-out meals in their repertoire as woefully ignorant and in need rescue from their over-reliance on processed foods. Of course, the majority of analysts present themselves and their methods as the path to redeeming home cooks and saving traditional home cooking.

While home cooking's defenders often focus on the need to increase proficiency and confidence in the kitchen, the most common barrier to home cooking appears not to be lack of

³¹ Barry Glassner, *The Gospel of Food: Why We Should Stop Worrying and Enjoy What We Eat* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 84.

skill, but lack of time. In a 2009 joint Associated Press, iVillage poll, 43% of respondents indicated that being “too busy to cook” was the obstacle that prevented them from making a home-cooked dinner half of the time or more compared to only 11% who pointed to the idea that they “don’t know how to cook” as the problem standing in the way of homemade meals half the time or more.³² The sense of a “time crunch” infuses American experiences in the kitchen as they contend with competing demands and search for solutions that will allow them to feed their families.³³ The need to ease the time burden associated with at home meal preparation appears in the propensity for cookbooks to include the terms “quick and easy” in the description of their recipes. In fact, alongside expected categories like “organic cooking,” “outdoor cooking” and “regional and international” in its “Cookbooks, Food, and Wine” section, Amazon.com includes “Quick & Easy” as its own, separate sub-heading that offers the promise of over 5,000 results. To the alarm of home cooking proponents, food manufacturers constantly develop new and ingenious ways to make eating faster and food more portable. In her article, “Grab and Go: A Restless Nation Tanks Up,” Maggie Jackson illustrates the ways in which corporations like Dunkin’ Donuts and convenience stores cater to time-strapped consumers by developing “handheld, bite size, and dripless food” that allows Americans to eat “on the run—all day long.”³⁴ These products, however, only serve to *increase* the sense that time is moving faster and life is spiraling out control. In his book, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, Stephen Kern provides an excellent example of how changes in technology influences how individuals experience the pace of life as he explains the impact of the invention of the automobile on

³² Associated Press/iVillage/Gfk Poll, Nov, 2009, Retrieved Nov-29-2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

³³ Jennifer Jabs and Carol Devine, “Time Scarcity and Food Choices: An Overview,” *Appetite*, 47 (2006): 196-204.

³⁴ Maggie Jackson, “Grab and Go: A Restless Nation Tanks Up,” *Gastronomica*, 8, no.3 (Summer 2008): 32.

someone who had previously only travelled by horse.³⁵ Kern notes that the effect is “both an acceleration and a slowing.” While “the new journey is faster,” the individual’s perception of horse travel becomes “something it had never been—slow.”³⁶ Therefore, “the impact of the automobile and all the accelerating technology was at least two-fold—it speeded up the tempo of current existence and transformed the memory of years past, the stuff of everybody’s identity, into something slow.”³⁷ Therefore, the compact cereal bar (complete with “milk”) for breakfast, the GoGurt squirtable yogurt tubes dropped in the lunch bag, and the handheld pizza pocket for dinner all serve to add to the perception that the old varieties—a bowl of cereal and milk, a sandwich with a cup of yogurt on the side, and a multi-course dinner are all too time consuming for the new, faster pace of daily existence.

Reclaiming a slower pace of life and alleviating the stress of modern living are important benefits that home cooking proponents insist will accompany a return to the kitchen. As Maggie Green exclaims, “When I cook, I give myself permission to slow down and say no to the busyness of the world. Even though the world around me doesn’t slow down, I do as I chop, listen to the radio, and cook. As a result, my children slow down too, and as we move through at least part of the day a bit more slowly, it heightens our awareness of one another and the time we spend together.”³⁸ Taking the time to cook from scratch is worth the time and effort involved, the writers insist, because the panic over the need to put something, *anything*, on the table, the rush to gulp down whatever junk is available, and the sense that something vital has been lost will all disappear. Instead, the act of cooking from scratch transforms the kitchen into a refuge from the pressures of modern life, the meal becomes a time to bond with family, and the ingredients forge

³⁵ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 129.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Green, *The Kentucky Fresh Cookbook*, 2.

connections between the cook, the family, the community, and the land where the food originated. Cookbook author and *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman captures the expansive nature of this promise in the title of his 2011 book *Cooking Solves Everything: How Time in the Kitchen Can Save Your Health, Your Budget, and Even the Planet*.³⁹ Bittman reassures readers that “cooking is a basic, essential, worthwhile and even enjoyable task” and that it will “change your life for the better.”⁴⁰ According to Bittman taking time to cook the right way will “pay you back in spades every single time you do it.”⁴¹ The rapid change American food system reinforces the dissonance between the perceived slowness of the past and the rapidity of the modern experience, opening the opportunity for home cooking proponents to offer traditional home cooking as a way to recapture what was lost.

The notion that home cooking solves the problems of modern life is most prominent in relation to the claim that homemade food will help to restore the family meal. The sense that “no one cooks anymore” is intertwined with the idea that the family meal is disappearing—an idea equally alarming to home cooking’s supporters. Cookbooks with titles like *The Family Dinner Fix: Cooking for the Rushed* and *Whatever Happened to Sunday Dinner?* hint at the perceived difficulty of trying to create family meals under time pressure while pointing to the concept that there was once a time when families *did* eat together on a regular basis.⁴² For advocates, reinstituting the ritual of the family meal is worth the time and effort because the practice reunites members of the family, strengthens bonds, and creates continuities. As Janet Peterson reassures readers in her cookbook *Family Dinners*, “The effort spent in preparing healthful and

³⁹ Mark Bittman, *Cooking Solves Everything: How Time in the Kitchen Can Save Your Health, Your Budget, and Even the Planet* (San Francisco, California: Byliner, 2011).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sandi Richard, *The Family Dinner Fix: Cooking for the Rushed*, (New York: Scribner, 2007).
Lisa Caponigri, *Whatever Happened to Sunday Dinner?: A Year of Italian Menus with 250 Recipes that Celebrate Families*, (New York: Sterling Epicure, 2012).

tasty meals and then gathering the family around the table to enjoy them together is one of the best investments any family can make.”⁴³ Pronouncements of the benefits of eating dinner together as a family draw their strength from studies that buoy the claims. Supporters often cite the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) yearly report on the “Importance of Family Dinners” which has “consistently found a relationship between children having frequent dinners with their parents and a decreased risk of their using drugs, drinking or smoking, and that parental engagement fostered around the dinner table is one of the most potent tools to help parents raise healthy, drug-free children.”⁴⁴ Family meals are also valued as a way to improve family communication, socialize children, boost the dietary quality of the foods served during mealtime, and even enhance young children’s language usage.⁴⁵ A myriad of factors—including lack of cooking skills, lack of time, and lack of interest—prevent American families from sitting down to supper.⁴⁶ The tension between the idyllic picture of calm, happy families sharing platters of homemade food and the harried, though often monotonous process, of making meals on a nightly basis adds to stress, especially for parents who seek the benefits of the family meal but must also contend with the barriers preventing its execution. The “death of home cooking” narrative offers a lone solution to the quandary of balancing the demands of daily life and the desire for dinnertime connections—simply spend more time and effort in the kitchen engaged in “real” home cooking and the family meal will surely follow.

⁴³ Janet Peterson, *Family Dinners*, (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2006), 3.

⁴⁴ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, *The Importance of Family Dinners VIII*, (New York: Columbia University, 2012): i.
<http://www.casacolumbia.org/upload/2012/2012924familydinnersVIII.pdf>

⁴⁵ Mary Story and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, “A Perspective on Family Meals: Do They Matter?” *Nutrition Today*, 40, no. 6 (November/December 2005): 261-266.

⁴⁶ Elinor Ochs, Merav Shohet, Belinda Campos, and Margaret Beck. “Coming Together at Dinner: A Study of Working Families,” in *Workplace Flexibility: Realigning 20th-Century Jobs for a 21st-Century Workforce*, ed. Kathleen Christensen and Barbara Schneider, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010): 57-70.

Home Cooking is Dead...Long Live Home Cooking

If there is only one definition of “real” home cooking, where does my grandmother’s cooking—represented by her eclectic collection of recipes—fit within this schema? The answer is that her style and methods do not align with such a small set of acceptable practices. Although some of her dishes could be considered “from scratch” and she often used fresh ingredients, more often than not, my grandmother interwove creativity and continuity, convenience and tradition, in her daily meal preparation routines. By first limiting the definition of the correct way to prepare meals and then insisting that all home cooks conform to that definition, critics shut my grandmother, and many other home cooks, out of the “real” kitchen.

Although a limited definition of “real” home cooking may seem well-suited to the goal of “getting Americans back to the kitchen” to reap the benefits of “from scratch” food by prodding them away from convenience products and toward more complex recipes, I contend that the format of this message restricts more than transforms. By forcing the idea of “real” home cooking to conform to a short-sighted vision of pastoral farm life, dominated by a grandmotherly figure standing in front of the stove, critics establish barriers that non-sanctioned food practices rarely overcome. Within the framework of “real” home cooking and proper family meals, society’s elites are able to create a vision of the kitchen that aligns with established power structures in a way that appears seamless and natural. This fits within the theory of “cultural hegemony” suggested by Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci.⁴⁷ For Gramsci, society’s elites typically do not reinforce their power simply through the threat or use of force, but instead rely on consent from members of lower social strata.⁴⁸ Elites garner adherence to their

⁴⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

⁴⁸ Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, Foundations in Popular Culture, Volume 7 (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2000), 3.

worldview by promulgating the notion that their beliefs are natural, unquestionable, and overwhelmingly beneficial—not only for the elites, but for every member of society—while at the same time imbuing ideas that fall outside the mainstream with negative attributes such as tastelessness, irresponsibility, or unworthiness.⁴⁹

Elites are especially adept at shaping cultural products—especially popular culture like books, magazines, music and other entertainments—in ways that buttress their own power by incentivizing individual commitment to established ideas and power structures through promises of pleasure or popularity. In his influential analysis of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century world's fairs, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at International Expositions, 1876-1916*, historian Robert Rydell underscores the way in which these cultural events helped the private financiers and government officials involved in planning and executing these massive celebrations of American progress assert and maintain their own vision and power. Rydell argues that “world's fairs performed a hegemonic function precisely because they propagated the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of political reality.”⁵⁰ The displays provided a singular vision of the meaning of progress and its relation to American identity—a relationship deeply rooted in the values of the powerful organizers and influential companies that sponsored the events.⁵¹ Within the excitement of the world's fairs, elites tamed the uncertainty and anxiety emerging from the rapid changes taking place during industrialization into exhibits that reinforced the superiority of the established order of Western civilization, especially in

⁴⁹ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review*, 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 572.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Rydell, *All The World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

relation to traditions of the past and less advanced cultures—themes that influenced the ways in which Americans came to view modernization.⁵²

An example of the world's fair's power to influence public opinion can be found in the events' treatment of food and cooking. Food vendors peddled new wonders, from flavored soda to popcorn, which emphasized the desirability of processed foods underscoring a message that valued products manufactured in factories over foods grown in nearby fields.⁵³ Displays such as the "New England Kitchen" at the World's Colombian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 provided a stage for new ideas about the importance of nutrition and standardized cooking methods that later coalesced into the Home Economics movement.⁵⁴ The emphasis on processed foods, science-based nutrition, and standardized cooking techniques merged with the overall emphasis on manufacturing prowess as evidence of American progress. Fairgoers, amazed by the wonders around them, soaked in the underlying vision that infused the exhibits which then influenced their own worldview, even to the point of influencing the choices of non-fairgoers.⁵⁵ Cultural products in the twenty-first century serve a similar function as the world's fairs as they offer powerful elites a stage on which to display certain values and beliefs in a way that seems natural. In this way, the dominant agenda gains the veneer of acceptability and respectability that encourages buy-in from less powerful members of society—even when following that agenda goes against their best interest.⁵⁶

The "death of home cooking" narrative serves as a "hegemonic discourse" by establishing a single definition of "real" home cooking that strengthens existing power structures

⁵² Simon J. Bronner, ed, *Folklife Studies from the Gilded Age: Object, Rite, and Custom in Victorian America*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 252.

⁵³ Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 99.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁶ Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 573.

while undermining practices and beliefs that fall outside the mainstream. The “death of home cooking” narrative relies on the foundational idea that all Americans should value the skills and knowledge that go into making meals from scratch with the underlying assumption that the only inevitable and acceptable reaction to the near-extinction of at home meal preparation is the push to rescue traditional home cooking before the practice disappears. However, the aura of common sense inevitability that pervades laments over the loss of home cooking traditions masks a troubling undercurrent of elitism that decrees that only certain types of home cooking practices meet the criteria of authenticity while all others are castigated as deviant. Proponents of the benefits of home cooking present the kitchen as a place of rewarding, relaxing pursuits, not the site of unpleasant messes and unceasing toil. This pleasant vision of home cooking obscures the hard work, sweat, and dissent that have been the hallmarks of home cooking practice for generations while not-so-subtle power plays related to gender, race, and class are served up with a sweet coating of nostalgia. Reliance on an idyllic image of the past also reveals how society’s elites reshape the images that they utilize to mold popular opinion; where the world’s fairs emphasized industrialized food and denigrated traditional cooking techniques, twenty-first century imaginings of the kitchen place value on reclaiming old-fashioned techniques and rescuing kitchen traditions from the evils of convenience. The dominance of this discourse, however, erases the possibility that manufactured foods may have benefits for the individuals who use them. The fact that only certain points of view are valued within the “death of home cooking” narrative reveals that, in the twenty-first century, this rhetoric acts as a “hegemonic discourse.” The platform may be a television cooking program, a popular cookbook, or an advertisement for a name-brand frozen dinner, but the result is the same—a rhetoric that silences

dissenters and reinforces established hierarchies of male over female, whites over minorities, native-born over immigrant, rich over poor.

Elites take a risk when imposing hegemony indirectly through cultural discourse. They require approval from non-elites who have the opportunity to withdraw their cooperation by favoring another discourse or establishing their own opposing narrative.⁵⁷ Therefore, recognizing the existence of counter-narratives or alternative visions that undermine the dominance of the “death of home cooking” narrative is essential. The most powerful rebuttal of the simplistic vision of “real” home cooking presented in the “death of home cooking” narrative is to underscore the complexities of the American kitchen. The fact remains that there is no one true form of “real” American home cooking—as a multicultural nation, there are many versions of home cooking drawn from a wide variety of ethnic traditions that are all equally “real” and “American.” Hasia Diner offers a hint of the complexities of the immigrant experience and ethnic cuisine in America in her book *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* in which she traces the experiences of three immigrant groups in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Diner reveals that while American abundance contrasted sharply from the scarcity back home for immigrants at the time, Italian, Irish, and Jewish groups each adapted to the American culinary landscape in different and unique ways. For Italian immigrants, the contrast between deprivation and indulgence marked their sense of fulfillment and success in American so that food became “symbolic of their communities and of American abundance...Food embodied where they had come from and what they had achieved.”⁵⁹ Italian immigrants took food as an all-encompassing symbol of Italian-American identity, even resisting

⁵⁷ Ibid., 574.

⁵⁸ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003)

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83.

efforts by native-born elites to eliminate traditional foods and preparation methods from their repertoire.⁶⁰ For Irish immigrants, who had also experienced severe hunger, food took on a different meaning. In fact, food had been so scarce in Ireland that it played very little role in Irish identity. In fact, according to Diner, “food would continue to be a palpable absence in their articulation of Irishness, an absence they brought with them to America.”⁶¹ While Irish immigrants nearly erased food completely from their identities, for Jewish immigrants, food represented a site of struggle over continuities and changes related to their religious and cultural identities. Diner notes that, for Jewish-Americans, “America’s food, like its culture as a whole, represented something they wanted to embrace. But in doing so, they upset boundaries between sacred and ordinary, Jewish and non-Jewish.”⁶² For Jewish immigrants, food became a contentious object that included conflicts over what it meant to be Jewish, what it meant to be American, and what it meant to be Jewish-American. The diversity of experiences in these three immigrant groups is repeated in the narratives of countless others who have ventured from foreign lands—Asia, Africa, Australia, South America, Central America, and more—to America’s shores as immigrants. In contrast to the simplistic vision of the “death of home cooking” narrative, these immigrant stories reveal that the only consistency in American food experiences and cooking practices is complexity.⁶³

⁶⁰ For an example of efforts to erase traditional foods from the homes of Italian immigrants, see: Phyllis H. Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America: A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers, and Physicians*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶³ Lynn Christy Anderson, ed., *Breaking Bread: Recipes and Stories from Immigrant Kitchens*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Linda Murray Berzok, *Storied Dishes: What Our Family Recipes Tell Us About Who We Are and Where We’ve Been*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011).

Sherrie A. Inness, *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: Women and Ethnic Food*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

Capturing the complexity of the immigrant experience as a way to undermine the “death of home cooking” narrative constitutes a separate study but is related to the overall argument of this dissertation. The connection is revealed in the way that I focus on the complexities of home cooking and expose the limitations of the “death of home cooking” narrative by picking apart its reliance on the binary opposition between either cooking from scratch or a box. I focus on the way that home cooks resist the simplistic construction of “real” home cooking by engaging in a hybrid form of meal making that incorporates both from scratch methods and boxed mixes based on the home cooks’ own needs and skills. This also allows me to select and analyze specific texts that represent this form of counter-narrative—in particular recipes posted to online recipe-sharing websites and YouTube cooking videos—that put the flexibility of home cooking practices on full display in an entirely new venue. I argue that online cooking content unsettles the binary opposition between cooking from scratch or a box by revealing how home cooks seamlessly maneuver between multiple methods in their daily meal making.

The complexity of home cooking practices is underscored by influential British food scholars Tim Lang and Martin Caraher in their article “Is There a Culinary Skills Transition?: Data and Debate from the UK about Changes in Cooking Culture.” Lang and Caraher suggest that cooking in western societies may not be in decline as the “death of home cooking” narrative suggests.⁶⁴ Instead, they put forward the idea that there “may never have been a golden age of cooking skills” to begin with and that cooking skills are always “adapted to external variables.”⁶⁵ Variables include women working outside the home, increased availability of pre-packaged foods, and intrusion of microwaves into the kitchen.⁶⁶ Lang and Caraher take into account the

⁶⁴ Tim Lang and Martin Caraher, “Is There a Culinary Skills Transition?: Data and Debate from the UK about Changes in Cooking Culture,” *Journal of the HEIA*, 8, no. 2 (2001): 2-14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

idea that home cooks are adapting to new demands and new products and that this has led to “the creation of consumers with a mix of dependency and levels of skill.”⁶⁷ For Lang and Caraher the failure to take into account the multifaceted landscape of the modern kitchen and home cooks’ varied levels of experience and knowledge leads directly to the ineffective nature of messages aimed at improving health by encouraging home cooking.⁶⁸ While Lang and Caraher recognize the importance of acknowledging the complexity of influences on culinary skills, the article continues to valorize scratch cooking over the use of convenience products noting that while microwaves and take-away meals have given women a margin of control over time spent in the kitchen, these choices are cause for “pessimism” over the future of cooking.⁶⁹

Home cooks, however, make decisions based on a wide variety of motivations, drawing on a multitude of influences, and utilizing many types of skills each time they choose to cook (or decide *not* to cook.). A preference for using frozen foods and boxed mixes rather than assembling meals from fresh ingredients represents a “trade-off” as home cooks utilize convenience products as one strategy to deal with conflicting demands.⁷⁰ Therefore, convenience foods—so abhorrent to proponents of “real” home cooking—can be viewed as a coping mechanism that allow home cooks to feed the family while fulfilling other responsibilities. John R. Thompson labels convenience foods a “temporal tactic for managing life.”⁷¹ In essence, Thompson argues, that by buying products like rotisserie chickens, consumers are “*buying time*

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁰ Christina M. Bava, Sara R. Jaeger, and Julie Park, “Constraints Upon Food Provisioning Practices in ‘Busy’ Women’s Lives: Trade-Offs Which Demand Convenience,” *Appetite*, 50 (2008): 486-498.

⁷¹ John R. Thompson, “Dinner Time Discourse: Convenience Foods and Industrial Society,” in *Food as Communication/Communication as Food*, ed. Janet M. Cramer and Lynn M. Walters, (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 180.

from the grocery store” that the home cooks use “as a means of constructing identity in the kitchen and restoring a semblance of traditional family time.”⁷² In effect, convenience products become the bridge between the busyness of real life and the idyllic images of happy families gathered around the table to share a home cooked meal. While proponents of from scratch meal preparation view shortcuts like rotisserie chickens as a failure on the part of the home cook, consumers decide for themselves whether or not they are willing to accept convenience products as part of their food routines based on their own needs, values, and self-identification as a “cook.”⁷³ Moreover, the way that home cooks view meal preparation, and themselves as cooks, does not remain static but shifts according to the individual cooking event—sometimes drudgery, sometimes leisure, sometimes from scratch and sometimes from a box—home cooks create the meaning of the meal at the moment that it is made.⁷⁴

Tension arises when simple food choices become entangled with moral judgments, especially when specific food choices cause consumers to imbue themselves and others with negative attributes like laziness.⁷⁵ In 1950, market researcher Mason Haire conducted an experiment where he asked women to evaluate sample shopping lists and describe the type of person who compiled the list. The lists were identical except that some included regular coffee while others contained instant coffee. Respondents identified the list-maker that included instant coffee as “lazy and a poor planner.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, the buyer with regular coffee on the

⁷² Ibid., 190, 191.

⁷³ Gary Davies, “Time, Food Shopping and Food Preparation: Some Attitudinal Linkages,” *British Food Journal*, 99, no. 3 (1997): 80-88.

⁷⁴ Sarah Daniels, Ignace Glorieux, Joeri Minnen and Theun Pieter van Tienoven, “More than Preparing a Meal?: Concerning the Meanings of Home Cooking,” *Appetite*, 58 (2012): 1050-1056.

⁷⁵ Mia Ahlgren, Inga-Britt Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall, “Attitudes and Beliefs Directed Toward Ready-Meal Consumption,” *Food Service Technology*, 4 (2004): 163.

⁷⁶ Brian Mullen and Craig Johnson, *The Psychology of Consumer Behavior*, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1990), 93.

list was described as more “oriented to home and family.”⁷⁷ In 1995, Richard Steim and Carol Nemeroff found similar results when they conducted a survey of nearly 300 students who were asked to assess one of four profiles that included general descriptions of the imaginary person based on a list of their attributes and food choices. Some of the profiles consisted of “good” foods and others “bad” foods.⁷⁸ Steim and Nemeroff discovered that respondents judged the profiles of individuals that consumed “good” foods in a more positive light than the profiles of people that consumed “bad” foods even when the two profiles were the same in every other aspect including gender, height, weight, and level of physical activity.⁷⁹ Slipping toward these types of moral judgments is made easier by the way in which the “death of home cooking” narrative frames proper at home meal preparation as adhering to a stagnant litany of characteristics: prepared from scratch, using fresh ingredients, employing complicated techniques and recipes—while ignoring the possibility of multiplicities of meaning created by the variety of influences and experiences informing home cooks.

In this dissertation, I seek to reframe the discussion surrounding home cooking by shifting attention away from the supposed collapse of tradition to the complexities and continuities in the kitchen. Where home cooking’s mourners paint a picture of home cooking in decline based on a fixed understanding of “real” home cooking rooted in the unchanging practices of the past, I envision a different reading based on the resiliency of tradition and the variety of meanings that flex and change over time as different generations adapt old methods to new situations. By highlighting the key elements of the “death of home cooking” narrative, bringing to light the way that this rhetoric functions in a variety of “texts,” and offering a sample

⁷⁷ Sidney J. Levy and Dennis W. Rook, *Brands, Consumers, Symbols and Research: Sidney J Levy on Marketing*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 457.

⁷⁸ Richard I. Stein and Carol J. Nemeroff, “Moral Overtones of Food: Judgments of Others Based on What They Eat,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, no. 5 (May 1995), 484

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 486-487.

counter-narrative in the form of online cooking content shared by everyday home cooks, I provide a more balanced definition of “real” home cooking.

The Meaning(s) of Home Cooking

In this dissertation, I take aim at the underlying assumptions that undergird the “death of home cooking” narrative in an effort to underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of the meanings that Americans bring to the process of making meals. I draw inspiration for the framework of my analysis from a wide variety of sources. While Food Studies, Nutrition, and Family and Consumer Science could all contend to serve as a base for studies related to meal preparation, research related to the practice and meaning of home cooking defies disciplinary boundaries. In fact, home cooking is a topic of interest for scholars in a wide range of disciplines: Agriculture, Archaeology, Anthropology, Biology, Chemistry, Communication, Composition and Rhetoric, Environmental Studies, Folklore, Food Studies, Literature, Nutrition, Philosophy, Psychology, Public Health, Sociology, Women’s Studies and many more. Interest in home cooking within these disciplines varies in intensity and engagement with other disciplines. However, even disciplines where home cooking research is a rare curiosity can offer significant insight for the overall understanding of the topic. Sorting through the numerous scattered, yet valuable, studies is much like navigating a maze with many fascinating twists and turns that lead away from the main route. Some side trips encourage wandering in the wilderness while others double-back to the correct path having provided an interesting side trip that only enhances the overall journey. Within my own foray into the literary labyrinth related to home cooking research, there were certain works that informed my own analysis of the “death of home cooking” literature. In the section below, I describe how these researchers have inspired my re-thinking of the “death of home cooking” narrative by providing examples of studies that

interrogate widely held assumptions about the meanings of food and the practice of home cooking while suggesting alternative readings of commonly held beliefs.

In her influential work, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Work from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan refutes the idea that labor-saving appliances rescue women from the drudgery of housework.⁸⁰ While she acknowledges that the quality of life has improved with inventions like the washing machine, Cowan argues that women's time spent on chores has not changed. Moreover, Cowan suggests that many of the items that claim to help women avoid the drudgery of housework, actually resulted in lessening the amount of labor contributed to the home by men and children, while having no effect, or even increasing, women's work. For example, Cowan proposes that the introduction of store bought flour actually *increased* the amount of work for women while decreasing the husband's labor. Cowan maintains that "the advent of industrialized flour brought with it a profound shift in the responsibilities and time allocations of the two sexes vis á vis their work in their own homes: men's share in domestic activity began to disappear, while women's share increased. Thus, housework was becoming truly 'women's work'—and not an obligation shared by both sexes."⁸¹ This trend was not isolated in the distant past, but continued as manufacturers introduced more and more labor-saving devices with the promise that they would save women's time and effort. The problem was that these items were "built on the assumption that a full-time housewife would be operating them."⁸² This effectively chained women to the home, whether they were housewives or employed outside the home, because someone had to cook, do dishes,

⁸⁰ Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1983).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 211.

and wash laundry, tasks that typically fell to women.⁸³ Cowan's research unravels claims that appliances made life easier for American women. In so doing, she creates a template for questioning the assumptions that undergird strongly held beliefs that is useful in assessing the "death of home cooking" narrative. The long history of cooking as "women's work" suggests uncomfortable undertones to the argument that the de-skilling of American home cooks harms families and society particularly since this assessment places the blame for complex problems like obesity primarily on women.

In a similar vein, in her book *Something From the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, historian and food writer Laura Shapiro re-evaluates the supposition that women quickly and willingly adopted convenience products in the years following the second World War.⁸⁴ The prevailing assessment is that post-war housewives flocked to buy boxed mixes, frozen foods, and new varieties of canned foods. Shapiro reveals that while the food industry, which had ramped up production of new types of preserved foods during the war, shifted their focus to luring housewives to buy their products by promising them that these new items would save them time and energy in the kitchen, housewives were not so eager to try barely recognizable foods. Drawing upon cookbooks, magazine advertisements, and newspaper cooking columns, Shapiro illustrates that, to the food producers' chagrin, women were reluctant to adopt the factory-made goods. Instead of buying the products that were "supposed to be the housewife's dream...the housewife was wide-awake and leafing through her recipe file."⁸⁵ Despite claims "that women weren't cooking; they didn't want to cook, they had no time to cook, they had quit cooking long ago," the reality was that "straight through the 1950s women

⁸³ Ibid., 213.

⁸⁴ Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

kept cooking. Willingly, haphazardly, in a lousy mood or a panic, sometimes with enjoyment and sometimes hardly noticing the food—they cooked.”⁸⁶ Shapiro’s analysis challenges the idea that American women were pawns of the food industry. Instead, by consulting evidence of the women’s own accounts of their cooking practices, she underscores the reality that the post-war food landscape was a much more complex battleground where women also exerted power as they made day-to-day choices about what foods to feed their families.

In the more recent study *Reconnecting Consumers, Producers, and Food: Exploring Alternatives*, Moya Kneafsey and her team of researchers reveal that the relationship between alternative food producers and consumers continues to be complex.⁸⁷ They explain that the food system is often seen as two, opposite, trends: the growing sense of a widening gap between consumers and producers called “disconnection” and the desire to create closer ties through “reconnection.” However, the researchers insist that the two are not mutually exclusive and instead exist as intertwined concepts writing that, “Crucially, we want to establish that discourses and practices of ‘reconnection’ have emerged *in relationship with*, rather than simply ‘in opposition to’ discourses and practices of ‘disconnection’ in the food system.”⁸⁸ This complexity grows out of the equally complex identities of the individuals who engage in “alternative” food practices. As the writers explain, “Food consumers are too often the focus for both public policy and private markets, as those who need to be persuaded to ‘act differently’ ...there is, nevertheless, a good case for simply recognizing consumers primarily as *people*, with all the complexity and sometimes contradictory identities, motives thoughts, and practices this implies, and not simply as entities defined only by their consumption.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁷ Moya Kneafsey et al. *Reconnecting Consumers, Producers, and Food*. (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

Participants choose to engage in alternative food practices based on a range of motivating factors, and their reasons change over time and according to a wide variety of priorities. The researchers proclaim that the results of their study lead to a “rethinking” of “notions of convenience and choice” because they “reveal the complex and nuanced ways in which practices are logical and meaningful to the people who carry them out.”⁹⁰ While consumers who choose to pursue alternative food practices may be more inclined to become engaged with the food that they eat, these findings have implications for conceptualizing even less involved home cooks as participating in the food system “on their own terms.”⁹¹ This is an especially potent argument in terms of the “death of home cooking” narrative which seeks to define home cooks based on a very narrow set of criteria which does not take into account the wide variety of motivations, talents, and needs that influence the choice of whether or not to cook at home.

Frances Short’s ethnographic study of home cooks in *Kitchen Secrets: The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life* illustrates the multifaceted meanings and skills that home cooks bring to bear each time they enter the kitchen revealing that even everyday meal preparation represents an interweaving of a wide range of influences and attitudes.⁹² In reading about home cooking, Short was troubled by the limitations of the academic and popular dialogue surrounding the idea that there is a need to “get people cooking” which she believes conceptualizes cooking in “a dichotomized and limited way.”⁹³ Through in depth interviews and observations of home cooks in the United Kingdom, Short discovered that real home cooks regard “cooking” as a pliable term. While the ingredients (fresh versus convenience products), methods (complex versus simple), and motivations (special occasion versus daily meal) changed, the act of making meals

⁹⁰ Ibid., 136

⁹¹ Ibid., 157.

⁹² Francis Short, *Kitchen Secrets: The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life*, (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

⁹³ Ibid., 119.

was still regarded as “cooking.” Short’s study reveals that “cooking cannot be viewed as neatly fitting into two ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ types.”⁹⁴ For Short, and for the home cooks she interviewed and observed, “cooking” applied to a wide range of activities—not just those sanctioned as “real” cooking by critics. Writes Short, “whether they are whipping up a favourite family recipe for chocolate brownies, mixing yesterday’s leftovers into a can of soup with a spoonful of soy sauce and reheating it in the microwave, meticulously recreating a famous chef’s signature dish for a romantic night in or hurriedly grilling some chicken nuggets before the babysitter arrives, home cooks use a whole range of perceptual, conceptual, creative, organizational, and emotional skills.”⁹⁵ Short’s study underscores the ways in which home cooks utilize multiple sources of knowledge, skills sets, and types of ingredients while still naming the result “cooking.”

David Sutton labels this malleability of cooking skills and practices—the fluctuation of influences between traditional and modern sources—as “hybridity.” In “Cooking Skill, the Senses, and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge,” Sutton explores the tension between tradition and modernity and how these concepts influence home cooks’ experiences in food preparation. Sutton uses in-depth interviews and observations to discover how two home cooks—“Georgia” and “Jane”—conceptualize the act of cooking.⁹⁶ What Sutton discovers is that, even though each woman draws on a different set of skills, expectations, and life experiences, both utilize a mixture of tradition *and* modernity in their cooking practices. Both are “a hybrid of practices, judgments, and values in relation to cooking.”⁹⁷ Georgia and Jane’s

⁹⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁶ David Sutton, “Cooking Skill, the Senses, and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge,” In *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Philips, (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 87-118.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 109.

cooking philosophies and practices reveal that “‘tradition’ isn’t static, but is infinitely adaptable.”⁹⁸ For Georgia and Jane, “tradition” and “modernity” do not clash in the kitchen, they co-mingle into a “combination of influences” from which each cook creates her own, individual “hybrid” form of cooking.⁹⁹ As such, Sutton insists that the current dialogue surrounding tradition and modernity in the kitchen misses the point and what is needed are “new narratives” that “avoid the opposition between loss of traditional knowledge or recuperation and invention.”¹⁰⁰ Though his study is limited to the cooking practices of two women, I find Sutton’s notion of “hybridity” particularly compelling. The idea that home cooks reinvent their cooking practices and bring a wide variety of types of knowledge into play each time they cook challenges the “death of home cooking” narrative that establishes a singular definition of “real” home cooking as from scratch, including only fresh ingredients, and requiring time and effort on the part of the cook.

The idea that “real” cooking has multiple meanings is reinforced in the article “Between Mothers and Markets: Constructing Family Identity Through Homemade Food” in which Risto Mosio, Eric J. Arnould, and Linda Price interrogate the many meanings that interweave in the word “homemade.”¹⁰¹ Through in depth interviews, the researchers explore the ways in which respondents constructed the meaning of home cooking in their lives. Mosio, Arnould, and Price begin by emphasizing the fact that the term “homemade” is packed with important meanings related to family, happiness, cherished memories, and continuities between generations.¹⁰² Within the “death of home cooking” narrative, homemade is placed in opposition to factory-

⁹⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰¹ Risto Moio, Eric J. Arnould and Linda L. Price, “Between Mothers and Markets: Constructing Family Identity Through Homemade Food,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4, no.3 (2004): 361-384.

¹⁰² Ibid., 365-367.

made convenience products. However, Mosio, Arnould, and Price reveal that “homemade” does not necessarily refer only to from scratch dishes made from fresh ingredients. Instead, homemade foods can be “at least partially manufactured, produced, packaged, and distributed through the market, rather than crafted from scratch.”¹⁰³ These foods can still be labeled as “homemade” because they have had at least some intervention by a home cook.¹⁰⁴ In fact, “from scratch” is also a malleable term—and can change depending on individual experience, age, and family influence. Mosio, Arnould, and Price note that for middle-aged participants in the study, “Homemade is discursively constructed as ‘made from scratch’ even if production processes would entail the use of Hamburger Helper or other kitchen aids, ‘time savers’ or the like. In fact, it is more accurate to say that the notion of ‘made from scratch’ varies from one situation to another.”¹⁰⁵ This is contrasted against the attitudes of older participants who require “authentic and fresh ingredients” for the meal to be considered “homemade.”¹⁰⁶ The flexibility of the meaning of “homemade” for home cooks reinforces the intractable nature of the “death of home cooking” narrative which has no room for cooking practices that include convenience products.

Complexity, hybridity, and flexibility play no part in the vision of home cooking presented by its mourners. Instead, they push a limited definition of “real” home cooking based on a stagnant vision of an idealized past. In her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz refutes the idea of an idyllic period of togetherness and harmony built around a traditional nuclear family.¹⁰⁷ Coontz argues that there was no golden age when families were unified and stable since “families have always been in

¹⁰³ Ibid., 367.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 370.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 373.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 380.

¹⁰⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1992).

flux and often in crisis; they have never lived up to nostalgic notions about ‘the way things used to be.’”¹⁰⁸ While this does not lessen the anxiety that something has gone wrong with modern families, Coontz insists that only through a balanced understanding of the past can modern families hope to find a solution for the most pressing problems of the time. Coontz declares that “to find *effective* answers to the dilemmas facing modern families, we must reject attempts to ‘recapture’ family traditions that either never existed or existed in a totally different context.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, these nostalgic notions of the past only serve to increase the dissonance between the present and the past and serve to increase feelings of unworthiness and guilt.¹¹⁰ This is especially unwarranted because the perfect past never existed—the people who lived in those times were just as unhappy and anxious with the state of their families and the future of society as modern-day people are in the present.¹¹¹ This analysis has particular traction for the analysis of the “death of home cooking” narrative since it relies on an idealized image of a past golden age as a core argument for the idea that from scratch meal preparation is disappearing. Coontz’s work supports the notion that in order to effectively evaluate the current state of home cooking, and formulate solutions for problems in the food system, a balanced approach is needed that takes into consideration the complexities of the kitchen and multiplicities of the identities of home cooks while resisting the urge to measure current practices against an imagined past.

Viewing “cooking” as a range of skills, attitudes, and beliefs instead of a singular, static definition rooted in a nonexistent past and conceptualizing home cooking practice in terms of “hybridity” underscores the necessity of reevaluating the major tenets of the “death of home cooking” narrative. In this new portrait of home cooking, convenience products, kitchen

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 257.

gadgets, and simple cooking techniques no longer represent a tearing down of tradition, but a natural process of adaptation and renewal necessary to meet the current demands of a new generation of home cooks. In this dialogue, cooking from scratch serves as only one option among many and the past, present, and future of home cooking are no longer at odds.

Moving from “Real” Home Cooking to Home Cooking Reality

In the following chapters, I seek to inject complexity into the dialogue surrounding home cooking traditions in the twenty-first by underscoring the inflexible simplicity inherent in the “death of home cooking” narrative. Beginning with the next chapter titled “From Great Grandma’s Hearth to Mom’s Microwave: The Transformation of American Home Cooking,” I lay the foundation for my argument by tracing the key moments in the history of American cooking that transformed the chore of cooking at home into “home cooking” a idea infused with symbolic meaning related to home, family, community, and the strength of the nation as a whole. I argue that a “fractured food landscape” developed out of the changes that were sparked by the Industrial Revolution and accelerated through the development of an increasingly consumer-driven economy; the resulting uncertainties and anxieties opened the door for the “death of home cooking” narrative that promised a solution to America’s kitchen woes through a return to traditional cooking practices. In Chapter 3, “Just Like Grandma Never Made: Lamenting the Loss of Home Coking in America,” I reveal the ways in which the “death of home cooking” narrative conforms to the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad by claiming that home cooking is in a state of decline from an idealized past and proposing that the only solution is to return to past kitchen practices. I highlight the weaknesses of this pattern which not only prevents home cooking advocates from accomplishing their goal of getting Americans back into the kitchen but increases the anxieties related to food and cooking. In Chapter 4, “From

Grandma's Recipe Box: How Cookbooks Sell Comfort and Help Create America's Consumer Cooks," I suggest that commercial cookbooks' rhetoric follows the prototype of the "death of home cooking" narrative and promises to provide fulfillment in the kitchen through what I identify as "comfort cooking." In Chapter 5, "Brand Name "Grandma": Selling Tradition to American Home Cooks," I identify the ways in which convenience products like the meal preparation service Dream Dinners and Stouffer's lasagna appropriate the same language and imagery as the "death of home cooking" jeremiad in order to sell their products. Moreover, despite the fact that these products are often cast as the villain in the demise of at home meal preparation, I argue that Americans use these products in complex ways that destabilize the "death of home cooking" narrative. In Chapter 6, "Grandma's Gone Global: Home Cooking Traditions Move From the Kitchenette to the Internet," I continue the theme of home cooking continuities and complexities by pinpointing the variety of ways that online cooking content both replicates and adapts traditional cooking practices such as sharing stories with recipes and teaching cooking through observation. I focus on recipe-sharing websites and YouTube cooking videos as a form of counter-narrative, rebuffing the "death of home cooking" jeremiad by underscoring the ways in which home cooks change and adapt meal preparation strategies and kitchen traditions to meet their own needs. I conclude with "In the Kitchen with...Dad?: Continuity and Change in Twenty-First Century Home Cooking," in which I discuss my dad's transformation from disinterested non-cook into confident cook as he began making meals for the family after his retirement. This story support the overall aim of this dissertation—to highlight the deep complexities that infuse home cooking practices and to destabilize the efforts of "death of home cooking" Jeremiahs to control the form and direction of home cooking discourse and practice in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 2

FROM GREAT GRANDMA'S HEARTH TO MOM'S MICROWAVE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN HOME COOKING

Only two generations ago all cooks used garden produce, dairy milk, and fresh meat. Now it is a rare cook who takes the time to search out fresh ingredients, not that they can always be found. Meals go straight from the freezer to the microwave. Dinner in ten minutes or less. The changes—from the cream Grandpa skimmed off his cow's milk to lighten his coffee, to Carnation Coffee-made Non-Dairy Creamer—have been so gradual, so quiet, that nobody has noticed.

And maybe it's time we did.

Vince Staten
*Can You Trust a Tomato in January?*¹

Grandma Ritchings, my father's mother, began her recipe for fried chicken with an egg. However, she did not crack the egg and allow the glistening whites and golden yolk to slide into a waiting mixing bowl to form the basis of a delectable crust. Instead, she watched and waited patiently until the mother hen's diligence was rewarded when a squeaking chick hatched. Then, my grandmother fed and watered the fluffy soft yellow chick until it matured into an egg-laying hen. It was not until the hen's best egg-laying days were over, or the family had a particular hankering for fried chicken, that she ended the squawking chicken's life. Then came the laborious task of plucking, cleaning, and cutting up the bird before it could be battered and popped into the frying pan. And, for most of my grandmother's life, she did not have the luxury of an electric stove; instead she finessed an ill-tempered, old-fashioned cookstove that required almost constant care to assure the heat remained at the correct temperature. When the family

¹Vince Staten, *Can You Trust a Tomato In January: The Hidden Live of Groceries and Other Secrets of the Supermarket Revealed At Last*, (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 17.

finally sat down to enjoy the delicious fried chicken dinner that my grandmother had prepared, the finished dish represented not just hours, but months, of my grandmother's labor.

My own experience with cooking a nice chicken dinner for my family is much different than my grandmother's process. I do not look for my chicken in the barnyard, but in the supermarket meat section. Instead of searching out the least productive egg-layer, I am faced with an amazing array of chicken choices: farm-raised free-range; certified organic; brand-named fresh; generic frozen; and even rotisserie chicken that is already cooked—hot and juicy, ready for the table. Budget-conscious, I usually choose the lowest priced option, typically only buying whole chickens when they go on sale. The chicken comes shrink-wrapped, not squawking, with the internal organs nicely packaged in a small bundle I can either set aside for another recipe or discard at my discretion. When I get the bird into my kitchen, I carefully unwrap and wash it. I do not fry my chicken since a constant barrage of warnings describing the dangers of fried foods have programmed me since childhood to shy away from the frying pan and opt for oven-roasted chicken instead. Roasting the chicken is a simple matter of setting the bird in a pan, sprinkling on a few spices, and placing it in the pre-heated oven. With the chicken in the oven, I diligently clean the kitchen with anti-bacterial spray and wait for the moment that the internal temperature of the chicken reaches the recommended 165°F as I am cognizant of the ever-present danger of foodborne illnesses which might be lurking in uncooked chicken juices. While the chicken roasts, I whip up a side dish like buttery noodles or steamed broccoli—sometimes fresh, but often from a box. When my family sits down to enjoy the delicious oven-roasted chicken dinner that I cooked, the finished meal represents only a few hours of my time spent shopping and preparing the meal. In fact, if I am in a rush or not in the mood to cook, I can always opt for a piping hot rotisserie chicken or any one of the dozens of varieties of frozen

dinners—like Marie Callender’s “Herb Roasted Chicken,” a complete meal with chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn—that takes under ten minutes to heat in the microwave.

The vast difference in time, effort, and knowledge required to produce dinner for the family from my grandmother’s fried chicken to my own oven-roasted chicken highlights the rapid transformation of home cooking in America. Even my grandmother’s temperamental cookstove represented a major improvement from the hearth fires over which early American women cooked. Key changes to food production, transportation, and preparation ignited by the Industrial Revolution accelerated in the twentieth century. These shifts wrenched cooking practices away from home cooks and placed culinary authority in outside experts and manufactured products. Written recipes took the place of the generations-old tradition of teaching kitchen knowledge through observation and story-telling. Experts—from professionally trained home economists to celebrity chefs—replaced the wisdom of mothers and grandmothers with laboratory-tested, audience-approved cooking methods. Advertisers promised home cooks that they no longer needed to worry about the unpredictability of their own skills when they could rely on the perfection of new wonder-foods and labor-saving devices which assured that dinner turned out right night after night after night. In just a few generations, cooking transformed from an unavoidable daily chore for almost every woman to a pleasurable hobby for anyone with an interest in food.

Most histories of cooking in America trace the factors that contributed to this massive change in food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption: the industrialization of agriculture; the rise of mass production of food and appliances; the development of food branding and advertising; the improvement of transportation routes and distribution methods and

much, much more.² Historians also outline the major cultural shifts that accompanied these developments: disintegration of family farms; increased reliance on convenience products; deepening anxieties related to food sources; upheaval due to changing gender roles and expectations and much, much more. However, as cooking practices underwent a revolutionary transformation, American attitudes regarding the *meaning* of home cooking also began to realign. In this chapter, I zero in on how the transformation of the American food system and home kitchen led to a reimagining of the meaning of “home cooking.” Labor—sweaty, tiring, unending toil over an open hearth—transformed into an outlet for leisure time as what was previously a low-status, meaningless, menial job became a high-status hobby. I demonstrate that, as home cooking became more of a choice than a chore, the power of “home cooking” crystallized with symbolic significance related to home, family, community and other traditional elements of society seemingly under assault by the rush of modern life. While home cooked food has always had the power to evoke memories and elicit strong emotions and while some home cooks may have gained renown for their skill at the stove, the daily duty of making dinner was often overlooked as unremarkable and mundane. However, after the decision *not* to cook became a viable dinnertime solution, “home cooking” gained a coating of nostalgia as the memory of kitchen drudgery faded. As an idealized image, the kitchen of the past cemented as a focal point of American discontent, bearing the brunt of anxiety over the price of modernity and paving the way for the popularity of the “death of home cooking” narrative that dominates food-related discourse in the twenty-first century.

² As a more detailed overview of cooking trends by era consult *The Warmest Room in the House: How the Kitchen Became the Heart of the Twentieth Century Home* by Steven Gdula or *A Thousand Years Over A Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told Through Food, Recipes, and Remembrances* by Laura Schenone. For deeper historical analysis and context, I would suggest *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* and *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, both by Harvey Levenstein; *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* and *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, both by Laura Shapiro; *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* by Warren Belasco.

Home is Where the Hearth Is

In 1796, when Amelia Simmons wrote *American Cookery*, the first cookbook by an American for Americans, there was no connection between the act of cooking and the ideas of convenience or leisure—there was only the daily chore of producing every meal from scratch. In fact, during the early years of colonial America, the open hearth was not only at the center of many homes it was at the core of women's lives. Making meals meant constant diligence: hovering near the sweltering fire to keep it burning at the best temperature (not too high and not too low); moving heavy pots and adjusting roasting meats to assure they received the correct amount of heat (not too much and not too little); timing the cooking process with precision so that the finished dish could be retrieved from the flames at the right moment (not underdone and not overdone).³ Manipulating hot metal implements over an open hearth included the risk of burns and the danger that at any moment a hot ember or spark could set the woman's long skirts on fire or lead to terrifying moments where toddlers or young children escaped the mother's watchful eye and toppled into the burning flames.⁴ Cooking, therefore, was hot, dirty, dangerous, time-consuming work that was an unrelenting daily duty for most women.⁵

Many cooks simply skirted the complexity of cooking by relying on one-pot meals, like casseroles, stews and other concoctions whose ingredients could be thrown in a pot and left bubbling over the fire while the women tackled other chores.⁶ Even relying on simpler preparation methods and single-pot meals required masterful skills not only to create delicious

³ Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 3.

⁴ Priscilla J Brewer, *From Fireplace to Cookstove: Technology and the Domestic Ideal in America*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 14.

⁵ Steven Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House: How the Kitchen Became the Heart of the Twentieth Century Home*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 4.

⁶ Richard Pillsbury, *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 54.

dishes, but to make sure the food was edible at all. Simmons' cookbook offered no salvation from the drudgery or danger of cooking over the open hearth. For example, Simmons' instructions for roasted veal ask the preparer to take the meat and "lay the leg on skewers, with a gentle fire render it tender."⁷ Simmons' quote conjures the image of a lone woman wrestling a chunk of meat onto a sharp skewer, maneuvering the raw flesh into place over the hot flames, and then enduring the heat of the flames while monitoring the roasting meat. Despite Simmons' description, there is nothing "gentle" about this picture and it reveals difficulty and dirtiness of everyday cooking over an open hearth. Accordingly, what *was* notable about Simmons' cookbook were not innovative cooking technologies or labor-saving techniques, but adaptations that incorporated both English-origin recipes and local ingredients.⁸ Even with Simmons' guidance, it was still the skill of the cook, not the quality of the ingredients or the workmanship of kitchen implements that assured tasty meals for the family.

Acquiring such important skills was no simple matter; for young girls, learning to cook meant spending years observing more experienced women—mothers, grandmothers, female relatives and neighbors—as they demonstrated open-hearth cooking methods and shared traditional recipes and stories in the kitchen. While cookbooks and other written recipes did exist, observation and oral transmission represented the most important methods for passing kitchen skills and recipes from one generation to another.⁹ In the early days of cooking in America this traditional knowledge gave the cook the skill to assure that recipes resulted in high

⁷ Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, Michigan State University Library.
<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/coldfusion/display.cfm?TitleNo=1>

⁸ Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 234.

⁹ Marcie Cohen Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 9.

quality food for the family.¹⁰ Secure in the knowledge passed on to them from generations past, women cooked with confidence borne of experience.

Industrial Revolution and Industrious Women

Then the Industrial Revolution changed everything—both inside and outside of the American kitchen. As massive factories ramped up output of manufactured products, the rhythms of daily life were inextricably altered. Time now adhered to the hands of the clock as daily life was regimented according to the needs of the assembly line as workers exchanged their labor for payment based on the time spent on the factory floor.¹¹ Many of the goods once made by women in the home—textiles, clothing, preserved foods, and more—now shifted to the factories. More importantly, many young women followed the work, moving from farms to factories. After they moved miles away from family and friends, these young women spent all day in a factory standing in front of a machine. The long distance from home and the vast number of hours spent working meant that there was no longer a chance to spend quality time observing cooking and learning skills in the kitchen.¹² The new demands of paid work on young women's time and the distance from family members broke down the traditional model of oral and observational transmission of kitchen knowledge and recipes.

Moreover, when those same women finally left the factory floor to get married and start families of their own, they found a radically different kitchen that required a new array of skills. The forces of the Industrial Revolution that reshaped American society and American families also reshaped the nature of home cooking with the introduction of mass-produced metal stoves

¹⁰ Mary Drake McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie: American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century*, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 17.

¹¹ Jarice Hanson, *24/7: How Cell Phones and the Internet Change the Way We Live, Work, and Play*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 9-10.

¹² Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 16.

that replaced the open hearth. Although the fire was now enclosed, making cooking less dangerous, the work remained hot, dirty and difficult. New forms of drudgery simply replaced the old as the cookstoves required constant cleaning and maintenance to stay in good working order.¹³ While mothers and grandmothers could offer common sense advice and some of the kitchen wisdom of old could still be applied to new situations, many women found that it was only through “trial and error” that they were able to master the cookstove.¹⁴

At the same time, multiple burners meant that women were no longer limited to one pot at a time; they could now produce meals made up of many dishes and courses.¹⁵ Fancy “sautés, sauces, and soufflés” could now be prepared in addition to, or even in place of, the old standbys of soups, stews, and other one-pot meals.¹⁶ This was more of a curse than a blessing as home cooks dealt with increased standards for multi-course meals that were a lot more complex to plan and prepare.¹⁷ Therefore, this new generation of women needed to develop their own tips and tricks to deal with the changing demands for complicated meals, difficult cooking techniques, and the daily drudgery of keeping the kitchen clean and functioning. Even amidst such rapid technological transformations, the knowledge, skill, and confidence of the home cook remained the determining factors that either assured a delicious dinner or sent the entire undertaking hurtling toward disaster.

For a cadre of newly educated middle-class women dazzled by the technological and scientific advances of the Industrial Revolution, the chaos and never-ceasing threat of impending doom each time a home cook entered the kitchen seemed at odds with the streamlined

¹³ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁴ McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 13.

¹⁵ Cindy J Dorfman, “The Garden of Eating: The Carnal Kitchen in Contemporary American Culture,” *Feminist Issues*, 12, no.1 (Spring 1992): 22.

¹⁶ Reay Tannahill, *Food In History*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988), 322.

¹⁷ Pillsbury, *No Foreign Food*, 54

organization of the industrialized workplace and magnificent certainty of scientific inquiry. These women yearned to find a way to combine superior scientific knowledge with the standardized practices of the factory floor in order to replace the problems of unpredictability in the kitchen with efficiency and consistent, reliable results.¹⁸ The women's desire to remold the American kitchen coalesced in the Home Economics movement which gained steam at the turn of the century and was formalized with the establishment of the American Home Economics Association in 1909.¹⁹

Home economists abhorred the possibility of failure in the kitchen and preached the perfectibility and predictability of cooking using their methods.²⁰ The Home economists' main tool to combat the unpredictability of home cooking was the standardized, written recipe. In place of haphazard, handed-down kitchen techniques based on family lore and trial and error, the written recipe was a "formula" that promised the same result every time as long as the home cook followed the instructions to the letter.²¹ With the force of their convictions behind them, the home economists set out to reconstitute the American kitchen into their ideal workspace. The main goal of the Home Economics movement was to transform every American kitchen into a "laboratory" where the daily necessity of feeding the family could be tamed in the form of step-by-step recipes that captured the latest scientific discoveries about nutrition and digestion.²²

Speaking with confidence in the superiority of their methods, home economists promulgated their ideas across the country by traveling on lecture tours, publishing their ideas in the pages of magazines and cookbooks, and opening cooking schools that attracted hundreds of

¹⁸ Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁹ Jean Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch: Reclaiming the Pleasures of the American Hearth*, (New York: Free Press, 2003), 84.

²⁰ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 81.

²¹ Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking*, 23.

²² Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House*, 12.

students.²³ Wrenching authority for kitchen know-how away from traditional sources of knowledge such as mothers and grandmothers, home economists claimed power over the kitchen for themselves so that the voice of the expert became more trustworthy than the cook's "individual judgment."²⁴ Home economists pronounced the tips and tricks, hints and strategies, lore and legacy passed on from generation to generation as outmoded and unnecessary with the availability of written recipes.²⁵ While they did not succeed in completely remolding American cooking to match their vision, home economists succeeded in leaving a legacy of "precise measurements, standardized cooking equipment, and up-to-date knowledge about cooking methods" along with the requirement of "strict adherence to the recipe."²⁶ By mid-century, American cooks had been trained to put their trust in recipes and outside experts, not in their own skills gained from family lore and personal experience.

The trouble with ceding authority over the production and preparation of food to industrial manufacturers and home economists was that the origins and contents of the nation's food became increasingly obscured and mysterious. With reports of foreign objects in canned foods, strange flavored fruits and oddly colored meats, milk mixed with chalk and bread made more of sawdust than actual flour, fears of contamination and adulteration plagued the earliest days of the industrialized food system.²⁷ Even as increased awareness of sanitation and safety improved the quality of processed foods and reduced reports of unhealthy and unpalatable products, suspicion of the food industry remained rampant. Such fears seemed justified with the publication of *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair in 1906. Although a work of fiction, the book's

²³ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 7.

²⁴ McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 35.

²⁵ Jan Whitaker, "Domesticating the Restaurant: Making the Anglo-American Home," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 100.

²⁶ Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking*, 65.

²⁷ Tannahill, *Food in History*, 292-293.

descriptions of the unsanitary conditions of Chicago's meat-packing plants produced a furious outcry from American consumers leading to the passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906.²⁸

Changing Responsibilities from Home Cook to Consumer

Even with increased government oversight easing some consumers' fears about the American food supply, food manufacturers needed a way to attract buyers to their products and away from their competition. In the past, shop owners and grocers used the power of their reputations to assure customers of the safety and quality of the unnamed, unmarked products they sold.²⁹ As competition increased, food manufacturers sought to make a name for themselves—establish a brand—by connecting their product to “intangible” ideas like health, purity and nature.³⁰ An excellent example of developing a brand and then linking that brand with a certain set of ideals is the cooking product Crisco. A vegetable oil shortening, first developed by Ivory-soap producers Proctor & Gamble in 1911, Crisco was offered as an alternative to lard in baking and frying. That women did not necessarily want or need an alternative to lard—especially a strange, slippery, oddly white substance—was hardly a consideration as Proctor & Gamble pushed the product forward. Advertisements, product demonstrations for home economists' cooking schools, and cookbooks all exhibited Crisco's unique characteristics as “a ‘pure food’ that was produced under controlled, predictable, and advanced technological conditions.”³¹ By linking their product to ideas like purity and science,

²⁸ Smith, *Eating History*, 161.

²⁹ Nancy F Koehn, “Henry Heinz and Brand Creation in the Late Nineteenth Century: Making Markets for Processed Food,” *The Business History Review*. 73, no.3 (Autumn 1999): 364.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

³¹ Carolyn M Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 181.

Proctor & Gamble successfully introduced Crisco as a reliable brand and gained a following of enthusiastic American cooks.

As more and more brands clamored for the attention of home cooks and shoppers, the nature of cooking knowledge began to shift away from doing the work at home to making the correct choices in the store. This was especially true once Clarence Saunders opened the first self-service Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Memphis, Tennessee in 1916.³² Self-service stores meant that shoppers no longer needed to rely on grocers and shop keepers to make selections for them; instead it was the shopper's responsibility to move through the aisles and select products for themselves.³³ Since shoppers now had to rely more on their own knowledge of the products instead of leaning on the recommendations of the store employees, food manufacturers needed to assure that their names were recognizable and their attributes readily apparent. Companies did so through identifiable packaging and widespread advertising to create a name that was immediately familiar.

The new role for women—as consumers rather than producers—was driven home by the publication of Christine Frederick's *Selling Mrs. Consumer* in 1929. Frederick's writing cast women in the key role of purchasing goods for the home and kitchen as part of the burgeoning consumer society. Advancing the ideals of budgeting, bargain shopping, and product comparison as vital know-how for every housewife, Frederick made the case that selecting the right products in the store led to unparalleled rewards for the shopper and the shopper's family.³⁴ By the 1920s, home cooks were adapting to a world where “intelligent buying...easily became a more important domestic function than intelligent cooking and cleaning.”³⁵

³² Laura Byrne Paquet, *The Urge to Splurge: A Social History of Shopping*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), 66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Strasser, *Never Done*, 256.

³⁵ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 212.

In the new reality of consumerism, the wisdom of mothers and grandmothers seemed even more outdated, out-moded, and out of touch. Shoppers needed new guides to usher them through store aisles and toward the most affordable, high-quality products. Emblematic of the era was Betty Crocker—a totally fictional character, at first “little more than a signature on the bottom of a letter, a recipe, or advertisement,” invented by the Washburn Crosby Company in October 1921 to help sell Gold Medal Flour to anxious housewives who were unsure of how to properly use the product.³⁶ Betty Crocker took the place of mothers and grandmothers in dispensing helpful hints and guidance to home cooks to help them navigate the new consumer-driven landscape.³⁷ By turning to Betty Crocker for advice, these cooks cemented the centrality of the food industry, and consumerism, at the heart of the new kitchen while divesting themselves of the kitchen know-how and self-confidence that had been the hallmark of generations of home cooks.

When the dual crises of the Great Depression and World War II hit one after the other, shopping became secondary to preserving the nation. The home cook was recruited to do battle on the home front by producing healthy, delicious meals while making do with less food, fuel, and other key essentials. In the name of patriotism and duty to country, housewives resurrected skills that had been disappearing, like preserving fruits and vegetables, canning jams and jellies, and “putting up” pickles and relishes. The hero of the Great Depression was the “housewife who stayed within her budget” who safeguarded her family from “fiscal ruin” while assuring healthy meals made it to the table every day.³⁸ During World War II, the same need to feed the family

³⁶ Susan Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America's First Lady of Food*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸ Sherrie A Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*, (Iowa City: University Press of Iowa, 2001), 115.

transformed into “a patriotic duty” as women were recruited as warriors on the Homefront.³⁹

Whether on the factory floor or in the kitchen (saving fats, conserving foods, and keeping their families fed despite rationing), wartime rhetoric insisted that women’s skills were indispensable to the war effort.⁴⁰ Pamphlets, posters, and other propaganda asserted the idea that home cooks could help the nation win the war by making sure to feed their families the right foods, in the right amounts, following the correct rationing procedures.⁴¹ In these times of crisis, propagandists placed the fate of the nation and their families’ well-being on the ability of the American homemaker to provide healthy, nutritious meals even when faced with food shortages and rationing.⁴² Thus, the value of home cooks to the war effort was tied firmly to their abilities in the kitchen—cooking, canning, and conserving became badges of courage, commitment, and the capability of the American housewife in times of crisis.

Magic Mixes and Push Button Kitchens: Cooking in Post-World War II America

Once the war ended and the crisis was over, advertisers, food producers, appliance manufacturers and others changed the way that they portrayed home cooks. American women reverted back from capable cooks to hopeless housewives requiring the guidance of appliance manufacturers and food producers on how best to equip the kitchen and feed the family. American women were once again valued not for their ability to whip up delicious dinners from scraps of meat and leftovers, but for their buying power in the marketplace. The message was loud and clear: American housewives did not need to spend time cooking when they could simply *buy* the right appliances and mixes to do the work for them instead. The American

³⁹ McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 69.

⁴⁰ Amy Bentley, *Eating For Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*, (Champaign, IL: University Illinois Press, 1998), 3.

⁴¹ Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 87.

⁴² McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 54-55.

housewife could spend her time better by taking care of her husband and children, participating in social activities and clubs, and, of course, spending money wisely.

For in post-World War II America, the kitchen stopped being a battlefield and became a symbol of the progress, prosperity, and power of the United States. In July 1959, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev played host to then Vice President Richard Nixon for a tour of Moscow—the capital of the Soviet Union and the heart of worldwide Communism. At the opening of the “American National Exhibition,” a showcase that included a complete model of an American home, the two men engaged in back and forth banter that pitted American capitalism against Soviet communism.⁴³ Dubbed the “kitchen debate” since the most heated exchange took place over the merits of the model kitchen filled with new appliances—Nixon extolled the virtues of consumer goods that “make things easier for our women” while Khrushchev dismissed the vast array of appliances as “gadgets we will never adopt.”⁴⁴ The fact that representatives of the two most powerful nations on earth placed the center of female domesticity—the kitchen—at the core of their tussle over political power may seem strange, especially since the realms of public and private have traditionally been kept separate. However, the encounter reinforces the notion that in post-war America, the home and particularly the kitchen had become an important symbol of American power and progress in the world. It was only natural for Vice President Richard Nixon to extol the virtues of the American political and economic system in terms of the kitchen—for in the 1950s, the kitchen was at the center of the American Dream.

The centrality of the home and kitchen for the post-war American Dream was reinforced only a month later, when on August 15, 1959, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran a cover that showed

⁴³ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Revised and Updated Edition, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 21.

⁴⁴ Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen On TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 276.

a loving couple dreaming about their future together. In the starlit sky above their heads appeared a swirl of new products: a house, cars, a television, and a vast array of kitchen appliances from a stove and refrigerator to a coffee maker, toaster, and hand mixer. This image demonstrated the promise of post-war prosperity: the idea that anyone could attain the American dream of upward mobility and home ownership.⁴⁵ From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, America's purchasing power entered a golden age as American men and women married at higher rates and younger ages compared to earlier generations, divorced less, and produced children in such large numbers that the era became known as the "baby boom."⁴⁶ The ranch-style homes of cookie-cutter suburban developments like Levittown in Pennsylvania represented the prosperity and stability lacking in the Great Depression and War years and offered a buffer-zone from the alarming threat of nuclear annihilation and social unrest lurking just outside the front door.⁴⁷ A gleaming kitchen filled with brand new appliances signaled that the American family had finally attained the American dream and that America's political and economic structure as a whole was the most powerful on earth.

While the modernizing kitchen was at the center of the American home—and the American dream—the home cook was no longer portrayed as central to the kitchen. In post-World War II America, home cooking and home cooks were once again undergoing a process of redefinition. In place of the skills of home cooks, appliance manufacturers and food producers emphasized the promise of gleaming gadgets and convenience foods as the heart of the American kitchen. Advertisements increasingly assured women that the wonders of products like electric mixers and boxed cake mixes offered them freedom from the kitchen drudgery endured by their

⁴⁵ Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-4.

⁴⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 4-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

mothers and grandmothers. One of the ways in which manufacturers appealed to American women was by emphasizing the idea that the post-war kitchen represented a break from the hot, dirty, time-consuming work of the past.⁴⁸ Advertising for new-fangled kitchen technologies emphasized the modernity of sleek designs and the ease of use of the new appliances. The Frigidaire “Kitchen of the Future” in the 1956 General Motors short film production “Design for Dreaming,” depicted cooking as a simple matter of pushing buttons. Smiling broadly, the woman, wearing a striped apron over a fancy ball gown, danced around the kitchen demonstrating the built-in blender, revolving refrigerator, and futuristic, dome-shaped oven that all operated perfectly at the push of a button. As the “oven” baked a cake a record speed, the woman demonstrated all the leisure pursuits she would now have time to pursue by donning costumes for tennis, golf, and swimming. The implication was that the appliances could do all the work while freeing the woman to enjoy herself. While the advertisers promised a shift away from the toil of the kitchen of the past, the assumption continued to be that women would remain in the home and in charge of the kitchen. Free time meant the opportunity to engage in social activities—not work—and kitchen appliances made cooking easier—for women—not for men.

At the same time appliance manufacturers emphasized the benefits of gadgets in the kitchen, food producers attempted to attract the home cook’s attention by emphasizing the benefits of using their new products. Portrayals of the latest frozen, freeze-dried, and boxed foods also emphasized the changes these products brought to the kitchen with speedy preparation methods and uniform flavors. Frozen foods, cake mixes, pre-packaged products all offered convenience, predictable results, and the promise of saving time in the kitchen. Advertisers and food producers assured women that they no longer needed to slave all day over a hot stove. Instead, opening a can of condensed soup, pouring it over a dish of green beans created a

⁴⁸ Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 143.

delicious casserole that could be followed up by a delectable cake made from a mix in a combination that made a meal just as satisfying as a one prepared from scratch. Moreover, women could still find fulfillment in that soup and green bean concoction. Advertisers and food manufacturers emphasized that combining mixes, canned foods, and other convenience products in new and interesting ways constituted “creative cooking,” and provided an outlet for women’s culinary skills through interesting flavor combinations and pretty decorative flourishes.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most iconic image of post-war convenience foods, however, was the TV Dinner that was introduced by Swanson in the early 1950s. Swanson found success by tying the frozen meal to the popularity of the television set—a link complemented by the design of the box which appeared to be a television set with a program featuring the turkey dinner on the screen.⁵⁰ TV dinners were marketed as the ultimate convenience product; consisting of turkey, gravy, potatoes, and vegetables, the meal claimed to be a complete dinner like Mom’s home cooking that could be popped in the oven and left no messy clean-up afterwards.⁵¹

While Swanson may have found an audience for the TV dinner, for the rest of the food industry, the trouble was that American housewives weren’t buying it—quite literally. As culinary historian Laura Shapiro convincingly demonstrates in her book *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, many of the products food manufacturers introduced with great fanfare simply fell flat as the average American housewife continued “leafing through her recipe file.”⁵² While some new convenience products did gain a following—like TV Dinners, frozen orange juice, frozen vegetables, and cake mixes—many languished

⁴⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁰ Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 191.

⁵¹ Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House*, 86.

⁵² Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 20.

untried on store shelves.⁵³ Far from matching the idyllic image so prevalent in advertising and popular culture, the average American woman was under stress, overwhelmed, and ill-equipped to navigate the massive changes in the marketplace. Despite the celebration of cooking skills so prevalent in propaganda, the Great Depression and World War II represented twin disruptions that meant many young women had missed their “apprenticeship at the stove”—they did not have the chance to learn cooking skills from their mothers and grandmothers.⁵⁴ Moreover, many of the skills that they may have managed to learn were unrelated to the convenience products and new technologies available in the modern kitchen. It did no good to learn the tricks to tell when a coal stove was hot enough to cook when coal stoves had been replaced by electric. Similar to the turn of the century when women left farms for factories, many post-war women had moved away from their families in order to live in the new suburban developments—leaving them feeling isolated and alone in the face of the seemingly unending demand that they be examples of perfect wives and mothers.⁵⁵ At the same time, old standards of what it meant to be a “good cook,” left women unwilling to adopt new convenience products for fear that these mixes and frozen foods would give them the appearance of being lazy or incompetent in the kitchen.⁵⁶

In order to convince women that it was acceptable to use the new convenience products, the food industry needed to shift the definition of cooking so that it no longer referred only to from scratch recipes, but included the newer frozen foods and mixes as well. In place of the demanding preparation methods of past generations, advertisers portrayed cooking in the 1950s as a simple process of merely “combining packaged ingredients in inventive and imaginative

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 207-209.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁶ Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 60.

ways.”⁵⁷ Most importantly, the new products underscored the idea that women could not rely on their own skills in the kitchen to assure that their families ate delicious, healthy meals because their own skills too often led to disasters. Instead women were urged to put their faith in convenience products and modern appliances which would always assure the same, predictable results.

With products that promised a home-cooked meal, like the TV dinner, which required very little cooking, food manufacturers sought to shift the burden, and the skill, away from the home cook and to the product itself. Similar to the way that home economists insisted that women place their trust in the perfectibility and predictability of written recipes in place of their own judgment and skills, food manufacturers in the 1950s and 1960s proclaimed that home cooks no longer even needed to worry about recipes—they could now count on frozen foods and boxed mixes to assure that meals came out perfectly every time. No longer did cooks need to rely on the skills passed down from grandmothers and mothers, when they could trust the technology of the kitchen to assure perfect meals. Most importantly, advertising tied the kitchen to scientific and technological advances of the modern age. With the help of labor-saving appliances and convenience foods, cooking would no longer be a chore; it would be a joy!

Resistance and Revolution

While the food industry promised unlimited benefits from its newly developed processed, frozen, and dehydrated convenience foods, Americans began to have a sneaking suspicion that all was not right with their dinner. In November 1959, just days before Thanksgiving, the country experienced a terrifying food scare when the federal government announced that the nation’s cranberry crop had been contaminated with a weed-killing chemical that scientists

⁵⁷ Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking*, 176.

demonstrated could cause cancer in rats.⁵⁸ The announcement set off a national panic and families banned cranberries and cranberry sauce from their holiday tables. It took the cranberry industry years to recover from the resulting drop in demand for their product. American suspicions of the dubious safety of their food supply seemed to be confirmed in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* in which she highlighted the disastrous impact of pesticides, like DDT, on the environment and on human health. The book set off a firestorm of response and ignited the environmental movement. For many, the fact that chemicals, like pesticides and fertilizers, were *not* safe as advertised served as a shocking revelation and led to the realization that they had placed their faith in the wrong hands. The cranberry scare and *Silent Spring* both refuted food producers' pronouncements of the promise of technological progress which had given chemical companies the responsibility for safeguarding America's health with their pesticides, fertilizers, and artificial flavorings. For a growing number of Americans, the only answer was to turn their backs on the national food industry and go natural.

In fact, consuming "natural" food, as opposed to the "unnatural" products containing artificial flavors and preservatives was one way that the counter-culture began to distance itself from the values and policies of previous generations.⁵⁹ As Baby Boomers rejected the conventions of their parent's generation with social movements and protests against the war in Vietnam, food became one way in which they could express their political and social beliefs. For hippies, what they ate became not just a meal, but a symbol of their identity. Eating came with social responsibility to the planet Earth and to the human body.⁶⁰ While their parents seemed enamored with chemical laden convenience products, members of the counter-culture embraced

⁵⁸ Angus Kress Gillespie, "Cranberries," in *Rooted In America: Foodlore of Popular Fruits and Vegetables*, ed. David Scofield Wilson and Angus Kress Gillespie, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 81.

⁵⁹ Warren J Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, Second Updated Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

natural, organic and vegetarian lifestyles. An expression of this turn toward expressing political beliefs through cooking natural foods can be found in *The Moosewood Cookbook* by Mollie Katzen. Published in 1977, the cookbook reflected the philosophy that Katzen embraced while living in a commune.⁶¹ Katzen's work became popular and her food philosophy spread so that "for many who read *The Moosewood Cookbook*, the word 'casserole' no longer implied 'tuna-noodle,' but 'broccoli-cheese-brown rice,' or some such whole-grain, high-dairy variation."⁶² The emphasis on natural foods infused the counterculture as big pots of brown rice became a staple at sit-ins and protests—the food itself serving as "a symbol of the protest against the establishment and of a commitment to the poor and disenfranchised."⁶³ For this generation, food was a form of social justice. Counter-culture adherents recognized that there was indeed power in consumption and exercised that power by refusing to purchase processed foods.

Tall, gangly, and somewhat awkward in both her movements and timbre of her voice, cookbook author and celebrity chef Julia Child (1912-2004) may seem like an unlikely rebel. However, her cooking show *The French Chef* which premiered on PBS in 1962 represented a radical departure from the food rhetoric of the day. For over a decade, food producers and advertisers had promulgated the idea that the ultimate goal was to get in and out of the kitchen as fast as possible—and that only labor-saving appliances and "convenience" foods assured that meals would be both delicious and quick to prepare. French cooking was especially fraught with an aura of impenetrable complexity and elitism. However, by emphasizing the idea that anyone could cook delicious, nourishing food, Child made French cooking accessible, winning not only loyal viewers for her television cooking show but converts to the stove proven by increased

⁶¹ Ibid., 95.

⁶² Stephanie Hartman, "The Political Palate: Reading Commune Cookbooks," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, 3, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 32.

⁶³ Barbara Haber, *From Hardtack to Homefries: An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 2.

enrollments in cooking classes and the accounts of grocery store managers who claimed to run out of ingredients based on the recipes Child demonstrated on her latest episode.⁶⁴ In particular, Child's enthusiastic style was engaging as she whipped up complex French dishes and encouraged home cooks that they could do the same. With an affable on-screen personality made up of an infectious sense of humor, willingness to make mistakes, and constant encouragement, Child hoped to "dispel the fog of intimidation around French cooking."⁶⁵ Most importantly, Child did not imbue her cooking with an aura of perfectibility, but instead emphasized that mistakes were just part of the joy of cooking. This was a much different message than the perfection portrayed in cooking literature of the day and appealed to American home cooks.

As the 1960s rolled into the 1970s and 1980s, the influences that had shaped the preceding decades only accelerated. More and more women entered the workforce, with a 29 percent increase in female labor force participation between 1940 and 1950—numbers that only continued to grow by 39 percent in the 1960s, and 41 percent in the 1970s.⁶⁶ In particular, mothers left home and entered the labor force in large numbers with a 400 percent increase in working mothers between 1940 and 1960.⁶⁷ Torn between new pressures at work and the demands of family life, these women faced what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild first identified in 1989 as the "Second Shift"—the daily grind at work followed by the nightly need to make dinner.⁶⁸ For this generation of working women, relying on the boxed mixes and frozen foods they had grown up eating represented a welcome opportunity to save time and money.⁶⁹ In

⁶⁴ Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House*, 123-124.

⁶⁵ Laura Shapiro, *Julia Child* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 120.

⁶⁶ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 162-163.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁶⁹ McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 113.

response to these demographic changes, the food industry continued introducing new products aimed at meeting the needs of this new class of consumers. Hamburger Helper is an excellent example. Introduced in 1971 these “meal kits” contained everything necessary to stretch one pound of hamburger into a main dish for the whole family with the added bonus that the entire meal could be whipped up in 20 minutes.⁷⁰ Hamburger Helper also embodied the worst accusations critics could throw at processed foods—chemical-laden factory flavors loaded with salt, sugar, and other unknown and unpronounceable industrialized ingredients—there was nothing homemade, and barely anything cooked, with Hamburger Helper.⁷¹

“Convenience” took on added meaning as the microwave gained a permanent spot on the counter in a growing number of American homes with the promise of speedy meal preparation and unlimited food choice.⁷² By the 1970s, 10 percent of American homes had a microwave and food producers started to recognize a ready-made-market for their ready-made-foods, adjusting food packaging and ingredients to accommodate the requirements of the device.⁷³ Quick, easy, and with no messy clean up, the modern microwave was the antithesis of the old-fashioned open hearth. For critics, the microwave represented a cataclysmic blow to American home cooking. Merely “heating up” foods—nuking frozen meals, reheating leftovers, and popping popcorn—could not be classified as *real* cooking.⁷⁴ With an emphasis on highly processed, manufactured products, microwaves encouraged grazing and snacking in place of traditional, sit-down

⁷⁰ Carolyn Wyman, *Better Than Homemade: Amazing Food that Changed the Way We Eat* (New York: Bristol Park Books, 2004), 20.

⁷¹ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Near a Thousand Tables: A History of Food* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 20.

⁷² Gerry Schrepf, *Kitchen Culture: Fifty Years of Food Fads: From Spam to Spa Cuisine* (New York: Pharos Books, A Scripps Howard Company, 1991).

⁷³ Smith, *Eating History*, 207.

⁷⁴ Lydia Zepeda, “Carving Values with a Spoon,” in *Food & Philosophy: Eat, Drink, and Be Merry*, ed. Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 38.

dinners.⁷⁵ The home cook had been replaced by an “operator.”⁷⁶ With microwaving food as simple as pressing a few buttons to warm a slice of leftover pizza, even children could be trusted to make their own meals.⁷⁷ By giving all family members the ability to eat whatever, wherever, whenever they wanted, the microwave supposedly exacerbated the breakdown of the family meal.⁷⁸ It is no wonder that home cooking mourners point to the microwave oven as a primary culprit in the “death of home cooking.”⁷⁹

In a counter-trend, so-called Yuppies embraced gourmet cooking at home. Favoring high-quality ingredients and high-end appliances, a high level of disposable income permitted these newly minted gastronomes to display their fine tastes in the accoutrements that littered their kitchen counters and refrigerators shelves. In 1975, *Gourmet* magazine gave the Cuisinart food processor a good review and the appliance soon became “the cooking gadget of the decade.”⁸⁰ The Cuisinart food processor served two purposes for quality-conscious Yuppies. First, it was a handy helper for budding gourmet cooks as it “saved time in chopping, dicing, and otherwise cutting recipe ingredients.”⁸¹ Second, the high status of the item added an allure of privilege to the proud owner which was reinforced by the flood of copycat imitators that appeared for the budget-conscious middle-class so that putting a real Cuisinart on display on the kitchen counter reinforced the elite nature of the Yuppie lifestyle.⁸² By 1984, the entrenched cadre of gourmets, gourmands, and others interested in savoring the quality, flavor, and freshness

⁷⁵ Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food, and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 149.

⁷⁶ Susan Ormrod, “‘Let’s Nuke the Dinner’: Discursive Practices of Gender in the Creation of a New Cooking Process,” in *Bringing Technology Home: Gender and Technology in a Changing Europe*, ed. Cynthia Cockburn and Ruža Fürst-Dilić, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), 51.

⁷⁷ Rappoport, *How We Eat*, 46.

⁷⁸ Alex McIntosh, “The Family Meal and Its Significance in Global Times,” in *Food in Global History*, ed. Raymond Grew, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 230.

⁷⁹ Stephen Michaelides, “The Death of Home Cooking,” *Restaurant Hospitality*, 77, no.9 (September 1993): 20.

⁸⁰ Steven P Schnaars, *Managing Imitation Strategies: How Later Entrants Seize Markets from Pioneers*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 96.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

of a wide variety of foods—both “American” and ethnic—gained their own guidebook with the publication of Ann Barr and Paul Levy’s *The Official Foodie Handbook: Be Modern-Worship Food*. The “foodie” mindset grew into more than just a gourmet food movement—it came to encompass an entire philosophy of producing, cooking, and consuming food that emphasized savoring the entire eating event.⁸³

By the 1990s, the opportunities *not* to cook blossomed with an even wider array of on-the-go options as the quality and quantity of convenience products improved and expanded. Something as simple as a morning cup-o’-joe transformed into a whirlwind of seemingly limitless choices as gourmet-coffee shop Starbuck’s grew from a mere 100 store to over 3,000 across the nation and introducing Americans to the wonders of the grande mocha frappuccino.⁸⁴ Coffee was not the only staple to up the ante and go fancy during the 1990s—chocolate, ice cream, and even pizza got a gourmet twist as Americans sought out “natural,” “organic,” and “exotic” foods.⁸⁵ The increasing variety meant that, for Americans who had very little interest or skill in the kitchen, avoiding cooking was easier than ever.

At the same time, American’s interest in cooking—not as a chore but as a pastime or hobby—increased exponentially. Americans decked out their kitchens in high-end appliances, an endless array of gadgets from bread makers to food processors, granite countertops and beautifully finished cabinets—creating a “culinary playground” equal to the kitchens of elite chefs.⁸⁶ With the premiere of the Food Network on cable in 1993, cooking programs moved from a tiny niche market on PBS to a nationwide juggernaut capturing the rapt attention of

⁸³ Johnston and Baumann, *Foodies*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ David Brooks, *Bobo’s in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: A Touchstone Book, Published by Simon & Schuster, 2000).

millions of viewers.⁸⁷ Far from the deep drudgery of the past, the Food Network emphasized the *entertainment* value of the culinary experience, drawing in viewers with exuberant hosts and luscious shots of delectable foods.⁸⁸ The proliferation of food media like the Food Network led to the accusation that Americans spent more time lazing on the couch than cooking and those enormous, restaurant quality kitchens sit empty as Americans “choose to watch instead of cook.”⁸⁹

The Twenty-First Century Fractured Food Landscape

In just a few generations, the ceaseless toil of the kitchen ceased being toil and cooking at home became just one option among many that Americans could choose from in order to answer the question “what’s for dinner?” In fact, the hallmark of the twenty-first century American kitchen is choice—an overwhelming, unending, bewildering over-abundance of options available every day for every meal. This confusing matrix of mealtime variety leads to what I identify as America’s “fractured food landscape.” Conflicting food messages vie for consumers’ attention: fast food versus slow food; natural food versus processed food; convenience foods versus from scratch traditional foods; gourmet foods that allow diners to savor complex flavors versus on the go meals that commuters wolf down in the car and barely taste; healthy foods that prevent the onset of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease versus high-fat, high-calorie snacks temptingly available on every gas station, convenience store, and supermarket shelf. On a daily basis, a “bewildering array of food choices” tantalizes Americans with clashing promises about what foods taste good and what foods are good for them.⁹⁰ There is no better symbol of the fractured

⁸⁷ Smith, *Eating History*, 271.

⁸⁸ Frederick Kaufman, *A Short History of the American Stomach* (Orlando, FL: Mariner Books, A Division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2009), 13-16.

⁸⁹ Kathleen Collins, *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2009), 202.

⁹⁰ Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, Revised Edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 209.

food landscape than the “Organic Bistro” brand frozen dinner—a bewildering mix of the “on-the-go” food culture that demands the speed and efficiency of a frozen meal with the added emphasis of healthy, “organic” ingredients favored by foodies and others hoping to delight in the foods they consume. As an attempt to bridge the gulf between “gobble, gulp, and go” eating on the run and the slow enjoyment of “real” food, the “Organic Bistro” seems to hold two conflicting food philosophies in one neat package—vacillating between the “quick and easy” promise of microwavable meals and the deep yearning for healthy, natural, “organic” foods associated with a bygone era of *real* cooking. As the “Organic Bistro” brand proves, in the twenty-first century there is a food for every taste and a philosophy for every food—even a muddled middle-ground that attempts to reconcile the fractured food landscape.

The result of the fractured food landscape is a deep fissure of unease that runs through much of the discourse related to food and cooking in the twenty-first century. Even as Americans chow down on a staggering array of fast foods, processed foods, and frozen dinners, there is a sense that the massive changes in food production and distribution, kitchen technologies, and the shifting demographics of the home have come at the price of kitchen traditions and cooking skills that once served as an anchor for families, connections for communities and ties between individuals. Faced with a bewildering array of food choices—and a loud cacophony of voices trumpeting conflicting messages ranging from the food manufacturers extolling the merits of microwavable meals to politicians decrying the destruction of the family dinner—it is no wonder that Americans express deep anxieties about the current state of the home kitchen.

The widespread visibility of the “death of home cooking” narrative grows out of the same tensions that made the “Organic Bistro” frozen meal possible. The massive changes in food

production, distribution, preparation, and consumption that have helped to shape the modern fractured food landscape have also fed fears that, with the disappearance of home cooking, something precious is on the verge of being lost forever. American apprehension over the “death of home cooking” is aggravated by the nostalgic veneer that has glossed over the real history of American home cooking. The image of grandma happily turning fresh-picked berries into jars of jam, filling baskets full of homemade bread, and setting a pie to cool on the kitchen windowsill has been imbued with a powerful aura of a golden age of home, family, and community. The tension between the convenience of mass-produced foods and the control offered by home cooking highlights the struggle between tradition and modernity in the twenty-first century American home. The seemingly irreconcilable split between the desire *not* cook and the hope of keeping home cooking alive reveals a fissure in American culture—one that emerges in the obituary of American home cooking.

What is so attractive about the death of home cooking narrative—and the reason why pronouncements of the imminent demise of home cooking pop up in so many diverse places—is that the rhetoric establishes a framework for tying the pieces of the fractured food landscape back together into a unified whole. The staggering complexity of the history of American home cooking is recast as a simple story of the triumph of the industrialized food system that ignores the fact that cooking at home was back-breaking labor for much of human history in favor of an idyllic picture of a time and place where “home cooking” provided everything that now seems to be missing in the fast-paced, busy lives of modern day Americans. The “death of home cooking” narrative promises that Americans can regain control of their food supply, waistlines, and families just by returning to the kitchen and relearning how to cook. With a dividing line between a golden age when *real* cooks made *real* food for *real* people and today’s fake,

industrialized, manufactured junk food, critics promise that the American food system can be healed by a return to the idealized kitchen of the imagined past.

However, as this brief history of cooking in America reveals, the only consistency in the story of the American kitchen is its complexity. While the industrialization of the American food system and the availability of labor-saving appliances have transformed home cooking practices over the past two hundred years, the takeover of the kitchen has not been without periods of resistance. Despite appearances, the death of home cooking is not inevitable. Counter-trends have always existed that undermine the forces that seek to replace home cooking traditions. The mere fact that Americans put so much value on discussions of the death of home cooking reveals just how much they continue to value meal-making practices.

In the next chapter, I will unravel the key components of the “death of home cooking” narrative: the reliance on an idealized past, the scorn for the fallen state of the modern-American home cook, and the promise of a better future through a reawakening of earlier cooking practices. In so doing, I expose some of the inconsistencies and flaws in the argument that at home meal preparation is disappearing. By unsettling the prevalent rhetoric of the slow and steady evaporation of home cooking traditions, I set the stage for my argument that there is a counter-narrative—one where home cooking emerges not as a disappearing relic but as a vibrant activity that continues to hold meaning for Americans—whether or not they choose to cook on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 3

JUST LIKE GRANDMA NEVER MADE: LAMENTING THE LOSS OF HOME COOKING IN AMERICA

The dinner hour is dead. No one cooks anymore, especially not on weeknights. A typical family dinner is grab-and-go, takeout, frozen dinners or- best-case scenario - leftovers. And why not? Takeout is just as good as homemade.

Don't you believe it - any of it.

Jane Dornbusch
Boston Herald – October 21, 1998¹

In his *New York Times Magazine* article “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” popular food writer Michael Pollan added his voice to the multitude of writers, scholars, and politicians decrying the “decline and fall of everyday home cooking” in America.² Citing a myriad of contributing factors—from the increased availability of convenience products to the shifting demographics of the American household as more women sought full time employment—Pollan and other critics lament what they see as the rapid replacement of traditional, from scratch cooking with the inferior practice of cooking from a box, or, even worse, not cooking at all. As an idea, “the death of home cooking” is so pervasive in food-related discourse that it has transitioned from the realm of mere conjecture to seemingly undeniable fact.³ However, Pollan’s own article hints at the complexity of today’s home cooking practices. While the overall direction of the article is to push the reader to the conclusion that Americans today have lost the art of “real” cooking by arguing that from scratch cooking has been replaced by the passive practice of simply watching others cooking on television and relying on convenience products

¹ Jane Dornbusch, “Midweek Meal Check-in-You’re Really Cooking!” *Boston Herald*, October 21, 1998, Page 49.

² Michael Pollan, “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 2009.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/magazine/02cooking-t.html?hp>

³ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, xv.

and fast foods, the internal contradictions in the article underscore the multiplicity of meaning found in the American kitchen. Pollan reveals how his own mother effortlessly alternated between cooking difficult recipes gleaned from Julia Child's *The French Chef* and serving Swanson TV dinners. From Pollan's mother's ability to pick and choose which types of foods she wanted to serve—from boeuf bourginon to frozen convenience foods—to couch potatoes basking in the entertainment offered by the Food Network, Pollan's article reinforces the impossibility of pinning the practice and meaning of home cooking to a simple statement like “no one cooks anymore.”

Pollan is not alone in his assessment of the demise of American home cooking. For decades a growing cacophony of voices has been raising the alarm regarding the vanishing practices of home cookery and the correlated disappearance of the family meal. Politicians and parents, public health officials and professional cooks, and a slew of other experts have all pointed to the increased availability of highly-processed convenience foods as well as the increased number of two-parent working families as trends pushing American cooking and eating habits into a dangerous zone that threatens the health of individual Americans, the stability of American families, and the overall welfare of American society. In this chapter, I contend that these critics serve as modern day “Jeremiahs,” named for the Biblical figure who lamented his nation's decline and prophesized its imminent end unless the people returned to God's covenant. American religious and political tradition has a long history of invoking the rhetoric of the Jeremiad: lamenting society's decline, forecasting imminent doom, and insisting that the only hope for the future is to recapture the past. The Jeremiad is an emotionally charged form of rhetoric that uses a dire warning of calamity to move people out of complacency and into action. The death of home cooking narrative aligns with this long-standing rhetorical tradition as

home cooking's mourners point to the decline of from scratch meal preparation, point to an idealized past as an example of "real" cooking, and advocate for a return to the kitchen. Within this model, critics amplify modern American anxieties by over-emphasizing the implications of the death of home cooking. This evaluation of cooking skills points to the disappearance of kitchen knowledge as a primary contributing factor to the health crisis of the obesity epidemic, the disintegration of the American family, increases in violent crime, and even global warming; the fate of the world apparently rests in the kitchen. Not to worry! These modern-day Jeremiahs point to the not-so-distant past when American home cooks had intimate knowledge of their food because they grew it, harvested it, and prepared it themselves. This picture of the past offers an idealized image of Americans' relationship to their food, minus the dirt, sweat, and hard physical labor that made daily meal preparation a laborious chore. Americans today, they promise, can live healthier, happier, more fulfilling lives if only they would start cooking again! This pattern plays on American fears by ramping up panic over serious problems in today's society; easing the alarm by providing a soothing portrait of a better alternative gleaned from a past golden age; and offering the reassurance that fixing today's problems is a simple matter of returning to the way it used to be. This rhetoric has been successful, particularly in driving popular discourse surrounding food and cooking as scores of food writers, cookbook authors, and even industrialized food manufacturers have conjured up big sales by invoking the "death of home cooking."

In this chapter, I offer a detailed critique of the "death of home cooking" jeremiad. First, I describe the background of the "American" jeremiad and argue that the "death of home cooking" narrative gains power from the longstanding legacy of this rhetorical form. Next, I analyze three specific "death of home cooking" texts: Michael Pollan's bestseller *The*

Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals; Ann Vileisis' *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need To Get It Back*; and Kathleen Flinn's award-winning *Kitchen Counter Cooking School: How a Few Simple Lessons Transformed Ten Culinary Novices into Fearless Home Cooks*. These three texts represent some of the most influential works related to food and cooking in the past decade—selling millions of copies, gaining widespread media attention, inspiring discussions in book clubs and classrooms, and garnering accolades. At the same time, they also serve as excellent examples of the rhetoric of the “death of home cooking.” Instead of distilling rhetorical patterns from a multitude of “death of home cooking” jeremiads, I chose to focus on three specific texts as a way to dissect the precise rhetorical strategies utilized within each book in order to evaluate a particular aspect of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. Specifically, Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* serves as an access point for analyzing the argument that the present state of food and cooking is in decline; Vileisis' *Kitchen Literacy* provides an example of the creation of an idealized past; and Flinn's *Kitchen Counter Cooking School* represents a packaging of hope for the future. In each case, I not only describe how the strategies utilized by the author align with the jeremiad's pattern, but also highlight how that choice ultimately weakens the overall argument. Moreover, I contend that the “death of home cooking” jeremiad moves into dangerous territory when proponents begin to claim moral authority by associating “good” cooking with “good” living and insisting that anything that deviates from their narrow definition of “real” home cooking is immoral. I take up this issue through an analysis of the chapter titled “Virtue” in Anthony Bourdain's book *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*. I conclude with a more general analysis of the form and function of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad and I make the case that the hyperbolic rhetoric that infuses the “death of

home cooking” jeremiad is actually counter-productive. While Jeremiahs claim that their objective is to get Americans back to the kitchen, the language, arguments, and imagery they use to achieve their goal serves to increase anxiety while imbuing the idea of home cooking with highly charged emotion related to home, family, and community. Ultimately, I assert that what is needed in discourse related to traditional American home cooking is a more nuanced discussion that takes into account the continuities of the kitchen, the complexities of cooking practices, and the primacy of real home cooks in shaping the meaning of cooking in their own lives and in twenty-first century America.

Judging by This Jeremiad, Dinner’s Done For

The word “jeremiad” is not typically batted about in everyday conversation, but the rhetorical form has played a large role in American religious and political discourse for centuries, becoming so influential in public discourse that Americans may recognize the pattern, even without knowing its name. Derived from the name Jeremiah—the Biblical prophet best known for sounding the warning of impending doom if his people did not recommit to their covenant with God. Subsequent jeremiads conform to the pattern of Jeremiah’s lamentations. All “Jeremiahs” proclaim the idea that today’s society has gone terribly wrong and is at risk of further decline; point to a past Golden Age that lived up to the ideal; and lay out a plan for the future, while issuing a call to action to place society back on the right track.⁴

While mournful diatribes against the downfall of society are almost universal across cultures, countries, and centuries, the specific form of the jeremiad has had particular traction in the United States.⁵ In the early days of the colonies, Puritan preachers pounded their pulpits as

⁴ Andrew R Murphy, “Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics: The American Jeremiad and the Power of the Past,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 7, no.1 (March 2009): 132.

⁵ Andrew R Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

they convinced their congregations that their society had fallen away from the grand mission that had brought them across the sea to a new land and that they would face dire consequences if they did not conform once again to God's plan. Famed historian Perry Miller identified the increasing frequency of the jeremiad in Puritan preaching as a symptom of an identity crisis prompted by the burgeoning awareness that, despite the rightness of their "errand into the wilderness," the rest of Europe was not inclined to follow the Puritan's lead. Simultaneously, they were adjusting to the new demands of the American "frontier" including "adaptations to the environment, expansion of the frontier, mansions constructed, commercial adventures undertaken."⁶

Ultimately, Miller's saw the jeremiad, this "mounting wail of sinfulness, this incessant and never successful cry for repentance," as a manifestation of the Puritan redefinition of their mission as they "launched themselves upon the process of Americanization."⁷

Even as Puritan influence began to fade, the jeremiad remained a popular strategy within American political discourse. Increasingly secular in nature, the jeremiad nevertheless stayed consistent in its declaration of the disintegration of the present, invocation of an idealized past, and urging for repentance to assure a brighter future. According to Kurt W. Ritter, in the modern American jeremiad of political tradition, "the Puritan's carefully proscribed religion has been replaced by the ambiguities of a civil religion—the American dream. Its sacred texts are no longer the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah, but those of Jefferson, Lincoln, and even Harry Truman."⁸ Ritter makes clear that even though the message is framed in political rather than religious terms, the "theme remains fundamentally intact. Americans are warned that they have deviated from the abiding principles of the American dream; their present suffering is a sign of

⁶ Perry Miller, "Errand Into The Wilderness," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 10 no.1 (January 1953): 11.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kurt W Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal*, 31, no.3 (1980): 158.

their infidelity to the past.”⁹ In place of a minister, it is a political figure that “offers to lead the people through repentance back to their fundamental national values and, thereby, restore America to its former greatness.”¹⁰ Politicians employ the tactic of sounding a dire warning that Americans are straying from their ideals and that the nation’s destiny is in peril all while assuring voters that their vision, and not their opponent’s empty promises, is what points the country back in the right direction.¹¹

This form may seem tailor made for a conservative political message that celebrates the founding fathers while castigating the current generation for falling away from America’s ideals. Mark Stephen Jendrysik, an academic specializing in American political thought, challenges this notion in his book *Modern Jeremiahs: Contemporary Visions of American Decline* arguing that the modern jeremiad is a favorite rhetorical formation for *both* conservatives *and* liberals alike.¹² “Indeed,” writes Jendrysik, “today we face a culture on both the right and the left that predicts and indeed looks forward to coming disaster.”¹³ However, it might be that the two sides of the political spectrum emphasize different aspects of the jeremiad. Jendrysik points to Richard Posner’s suggestion that, “liberals look to an improved future compared to a dismal past, while conservatives compare an ideal past to a dismal future.”¹⁴ The fact that politicians and pundits across the political spectrum utilize the jeremiad is striking because it indicates that Americans are receptive to this rhetorical form regardless of the content of the message. In fact, the jeremiad

⁹ Ibid., 158-159.

¹⁰ Ibid., 159.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mark Stephen Jendrysik, *Modern Jeremiahs: Contemporary Visions of American Decline* (Lanham: Lexington Books, a Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008).

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

is so pervasive in American discourse that Americans are seemingly pre-programmed to respond to its form.¹⁵

Puritan ministers haranguing their congregations centuries ago or pontificating politicians on the nightly news may seem worlds away from nutritionists nay saying nachos or celebrity chefs castigating non-cooks, but these declarations are nearly indistinguishable rhetorically. In fact, declarations that Americans are rapidly losing touch with their kitchen skills and cooking abilities fit snugly within the tradition of the American jeremiad. Today, mourners of American home cooking express deep dissatisfaction with modern cooking practices while pointing to the past (particularly the rural farm kitchen) as a model for future improvement. Celebrity chefs, nutritionists, food writers and others take the place of the Puritan ministers or political pundits in pointing to American decline—at least in the kitchen.

The Microwave Murdered Mom's Home Cooking

The first characteristic of a jeremiad is that they announce societal decline and point to the many ways in which the present fails to adhere to an ideal.¹⁶ The “death of home cooking” narrative conforms to this structure by insisting that “no one cooks anymore” and, as a result, kitchen skills and cooking abilities have experienced a period of rapid deterioration. Furthermore, these critics warn that, should the current state of decline continue, the important traditions, skills, and knowledge associated with the kitchen might disappear forever. For the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs, today’s kitchen represents a battleground for the hearts and minds of America’s home cooks and it is a war that they are afraid of losing for the true casualty would be America’s kitchen heritage, traditions, and skills that could be irretrievably lost.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

Michael Pollan's bestselling book *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* is best known as a significant appraisal of the modern American industrialized food system in which he eviscerates the corn-addicted mass production of convenience foods and advocates for food that is locally sourced, seasonally produced, and home cooked.¹⁷ The last characteristic is significant since bubbling just below the surface of Pollan's macro-analysis of the food system is a micro-analysis of how that food system plays out in the American kitchen, especially as a factor in the disappearance of home cooking. In fact, Pollan has since declared that, as his research into food manufacturing intensifies, he has found that the way manufacturers "process food is the result of people not cooking food for themselves and letting corporations cook" and, therefore the only way to solidify change is to "take back control over that process—that really important process."¹⁸ The kernel of Pollan's epiphany—the idea that home cooking is vital to the health of the food system and needs to be rescued before it disappears—is apparent throughout *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. As Pollan takes the reader on his journey from a fast food meal eaten on the go to a homemade dinner assembled from ingredients he hunted, gathered, and foraged himself, Pollan both assesses the source of the food, and, at the same time, also critiques how that food reached the table.

As the title claims, Pollan's book is the story of four meals: a McDonald's hamburger eaten on the go in a speeding automobile; an "organic" roasted chicken purchased at Whole Foods; a grass-fed "organic" chicken straight from the farm where Pollan had time working; and a pork loin from a wild pig that Pollan killed while on a hunting trip.¹⁹ What is significant about the book is that only one of the meals—the fast food hamburger—was cooked by someone other

¹⁷ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).

¹⁸ Krista Harris, "An Interview with Michael Pollan," *Edible Santa Barbara*, Winter 2010.

<http://www.ediblecommunities.com/santabarbara/winter-2010/michael-pollan.htm>

¹⁹ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 109-119; 173-184; 262-273; 391-411.

than Pollan himself. By featuring the meal preparation process so prominently in his discussion of the meals, Pollan links the decline of the food system with the disappearance of home cooking; *The Omnivore's Dilemma* becomes a jeremiad not only about industrialized agriculture, but also of the sad state of American home cooking in the twenty-first century.

While Pollan spends the majority of his book outlining the major shifts in food production that moved primary responsibility for feeding the nation away from family farms and into the hands of industrial corporations, he also explains that American food preparation and eating habits have also suffered. Drawing on the results of a study of American families that documented their nightly dinner rituals, Pollan characterizes the current state of the American kitchen this way:

Mom, perhaps feeling sentimental about the dinners of her childhood, still prepares a dish and a salad that she usually winds up eating by herself. Meanwhile, the kids, and Dad, too, if he's around, each fix something different for themselves, because Dad's on a low-carb diet, the teenager's become a vegetarian, and the eight-year-old is on a strict ration of pizza that the shrink says its best to indulge (lest she develop eating disorders later on in life). So over the course of a half hour or so each family member roams into the kitchen, removes a single-portion entrée from the freezer, and zaps it in the microwave. (Many of these entrées have been helpfully designed to be safely 'cooked' by an eight-year old). After the sound of the beep each diner brings his microwavable dish to the dining room table, where he or she may or may not cross paths with another family member at the table for a few minutes.²⁰

By highlighting the disintegration of the family meal—each family member heating a different meal in the microwave and eating at different times—Pollan serves his overall purpose of underscoring the fragmentation of the American food system. At the same time however, he makes the case that this also represents a form of pseudo-cooking that resulted from the food corporations' take-over of the American appetite. As the American food system declined, so too did the American kitchen. Part and parcel of industrialized food system is a redefinition of meal

²⁰ Ibid., 302.

preparation that revolves around the microwave and makes “‘cooking’ something even a small child could do.”²¹ This account is very similar to the meal that he and his family ordered from McDonald’s and consumed in the car. Pollan portrays both circumstances as meaningless. He characterizes his son’s McNuggets and his own hamburger as something that is not really food—it is “not-food.” They wolf down the meal in moments; this is not eating. And the meal was assembled—it is created and not cooked. Pollan emphasizes the emptiness of industrially produced meals writing:

Perhaps the reason you eat this food quickly is because it doesn’t bear savoring. The more you concentrate on how it tastes, the less like anything it tastes. I said before that McDonald’s serves a kind of comfort food, but after a few bites I’m more inclined to think they’re selling something more schematic than that—something more like a signifier of comfort food. So you eat more and eat more quickly, hoping somehow to catch up to the original idea of cheeseburger or French fry as it retreats over the horizon. And so it goes, bite after bite, until you feel not satisfied exactly, but simply, regrettably full.²²

There is no sense of satisfaction from this food, and even though his family eats in the same car, there is little chance to connect as a family. It is a hollow experience, lacking flavor to the food and missing any real significance.

The meals that Pollan makes for himself, his family, and friends as part of this journey are all much different from the picture that he painted of the industrialized meal; setting up an opposition between the negative aura of the fragmented industrial meal and the personal fulfillment and sense of connection that Pollan gained from cooking for himself and his family and friends. In each circumstance, he creates a vivid picture of the process of procuring and preparing the food and the connections forged while consuming the meal. Take, for example, the description of the roast chicken he prepared from ingredients purchased at Whole Foods. Pollan explains, “I roasted the bird in a pan surrounded by the potatoes and chunks of winter squash.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 119.

After removing the chicken from the oven, I spread the crinkled leaves of kale on a cookie sheet, sprinkled them with olive oil and salt, and slid them into the hot oven to roast. After ten minutes or so, the kale was nicely crisped and the chicken was ready to carve.”²³ This short account forms the image of Pollan busily at work in the kitchen and provides the sense of the golden-roasted meat and the crispy kale. This *is* food—food made edible through Pollan’s efforts in the kitchen. And, through his story of making this meal, Pollan reasserts the significance of cooking at home.

The decline of home cooking is most apparent in Pollan’s final chapter where he cooks “the perfect meal” and contrasts that dish with the industrialized hamburger that he had consumed in the car. This is also the chapter that lingers longest on the cooking process as Pollan shares both the joys, and the fears, of making an ambitious menu, from scratch, for his friends and family. For this meal, Pollan hunted for the meat, gathered the vegetables, and foraged for other ingredients (including creating a yeast starter for bread by setting flour and water on his counter and letting nature take its course). As he describes planning the menu, he is obviously enthusiastic about the idea of creating a delicious dinner from the foods he gathered himself. It is not until the night before that he begins to worry that he may not be able to pull off such an ambitious plan, writing:

On Friday night, when I made a to-do list and schedule for Saturday, it hit me just how much I had to do, and, scarier still, how much of what I had to do I had never done before, including bake a wild yeast bread, pit a gallon of cherries, make a galette, and cook a wild pig two different ways, I also hadn’t toted up until now how many total hours of oven time the meal would require, and since braising a pig leg at 250 degrees would take half the day, it wasn’t clear how exactly I could fit in the bread and the galette. For some reason, the very real potential for disaster hadn’t dawned on me earlier, or the fact that I was cooking for a particularly discriminating group of eaters, several of them actual chefs. Now, dawn on me it did, and it left me feeling more than a little intimidated.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 174.

²⁴ Ibid., 402.

With this ambitious list of tasks and a rising sense of anxiety, Pollan injects the possibility that he might fail at his undertaking. Pollan has not created an idealized image of the kitchen. Indeed, the meal does not fall into place perfectly. Pollan exclaims, “in reality the day was a blizzard of harried labors, missing ingredients, unscheduled spills and dropped pots, and throes of second-guessing.”²⁵ At one point, Pollan considers giving up, taking the easy route and serving the cherries whole instead of as part of a pastry. What Pollan realizes is that through the cooking process the food transforms, not just into a pastry, but into a meaningful expression of his appreciation for his friends and family. As Pollan explains, “a bowl of Bing cherries is nice, but to turn them into a pastry is surely a more thoughtful gesture, at least provided I managed not to blow the crust. It’s the difference between a Hallmark card and a handwritten letter.”²⁶ Pollan makes clear that it is the act of cooking that adds meaning to the food.

Despite the hard work, stress, and potential for disaster, cooking a meal from scratch, at home, is worth it because the process leads to the reward of sharing a meal with family and friends. Pollan describes the time spent eating the food he had prepared and engaging in conversation with his friends and family as a near religious experience. Writes Pollan:

The stories, like the food that fed them, cast lines of relation to all these places and creates living (and dying) in them, drawing them all together on this table, on these plates, in what to me began to feel a little like a ceremony. And there’s a sense in the meal had become just that, a thanksgiving or a secular seder, for every item on our plates pointed somewhere else, almost sacramentally, telling a little story about nature or community or even the sacred, for mystery was very often the theme. Such storied food can feed us both body and soul, the threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 403.

²⁶ Ibid., 403-404.

²⁷ Ibid., 407-408.

This meal—the sense of connection to nature, the food, and the community—represents the antithesis of the themes of alienation, ignorance, and disintegration that dominated the book. Cooking by hand, from scratch, using the ingredients gathered from nature made the significance of the meal possible.

For Pollan, the story of the industrialized food system includes the loss of important traditions—chief among them is home cooking. Pollan does not advocate eliminating fast food completely, nor switching to a scenario in which Americans rely solely on food they grow for themselves—neither solution is realistic.²⁸ The solution, instead, rests in a deep *knowing* of food—as Pollan’s story of cooking and serving the “perfect meal” illustrates, cooking creates that sense of understanding the food that is being cooked. As Pollan insists:

For countless generations eating was something that took place in the steady context of a family and a culture, where the full consciousness of what was involved did not need to be rehearsed at every meal because it was stored away, like the good silver, in a set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes... imagine for a moment if we again knew, strictly as a matter of course, these few unremarkable things: What it is we’re eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in a true accounting, it really cost.²⁹

This understanding of the meals we eat grows out of the process of fixing fresh foods for ourselves in our own kitchens—cooking is what makes food meaningful and meaningful food fixes the food system. While *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is the story of a broken food system, it is also the story of the death of home cooking and a dire cry to reclaim its legacy.

Even as he critiques the American food system, and despite garnering a huge following for his books, Pollan’s own work has come under fire. In a review for *The Atlantic* titled “Hard to Swallow: The Gourmet’s Ongoing Failure to Think in Moral Terms” B.R. Myers lambasts Pollan for endorsing the pleasure of food while ignoring the cost, especially in relation to

²⁸ Ibid., 411.

²⁹ Ibid., 412.

Pollan's rejection of vegetarianism.³⁰ Myers notes that Pollan establishes himself as "the final authority for judging the rightness of all things culinary," even as he spouts what Myers identifies as spurious arguments in favor of hunting game and eating meat.³¹

The tendency to claim authority while over-simplifying the evidence becomes even more troubling when the popularity of Pollan's work is taken into account. Laura B. DeLind also questions Pollan's influence in her article "Are Local Food and the Local Food Movement Taking Us Where We Want to Go? Or Are We Hitching Our Wagons to the Wrong Stars?"³² For DeLind, Pollan is a "super star" in the local food movement so influential that his argument "almost single-handedly fills the local food bandwagon."³³ DeLind argues that, as a hero in the local foods movement, Pollan can "make (or cause to be made) commandment-like statements that become difficult to challenge."³⁴ For DeLind, Pollan's pronouncements are not treated merely as suggestions or as one possible solution among many, but instead are regarded as "*the* answer" to the nation's food problems.³⁵ The influential nature of Pollan's writings is problematic because the popularity of his ideas squeezes out other solutions and has the possibility of becoming "divisive, exclusionary, and hegemonic."³⁶ This may mean that a single source holds undue influence over the discussion of food and cooking in America.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and his other books on food, Pollan advocates for reshaping the American food system by spending food dollars more wisely; food producers, he assumes, will follow the money so that increased demand for local products and organic foods will push

³⁰ B.R. Myers, "Hard to Swallow: The Gourmet's Ongoing Failure to Think in Moral Terms," *The Atlantic*, September 2007, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/09/hard-to-swallow/306123/1/>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Laura B. DeLind, "Are Local Food and the Local Food Movement Taking Us Where We Want to Go? Or Are We Hitching Our Wagons to the Wrong Stars?" *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28 (2011): 273-283.

³³ Ibid., 279.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

aside highly processed foods by sheer profitability. The most common criticism of Pollan's solution—and one that can be applied to the “death of home cooking” narrative—is that it is elitist. In this critique, Pollan, and other activists like him, “place hopes for progress in the hands of a wise and benevolent upper-middle-class while delivering more by way of individual self-righteousness than meaningful political change.”³⁷ Certainly, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is infused with moments where Pollan seems oblivious to his own upper-middle-class perspective: he compares the price of the Polyface organic chicken as on par with the one he purchased from Whole Foods declaring “this is not boutique food;” he mulls over which Virginian wine to buy for the local meal he is cooking for friends finally deciding on a twenty-five dollar Viognier since the high price was “a sign of confidence on somebody's part;” and he describes “dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium rare” while reading Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*.³⁸ For Pollan, paying a little bit more to cook and eat the right foods is worth it because his food purchases express his beliefs about reforming the food system. However, his choices—higher-priced chicken, expensive wine, and a fancy steak dinner—all represent luxuries out of reach for many Americans. In “Why Eating Well is ‘Elitist,’” Pollan sidesteps the claim that his food philosophy is “elitist.”³⁹ He contends that it is the food system itself that is “elitist”—infused with subsidies that make calorie-dense junk foods cheaper than healthier fresh fruits and vegetables and thereby systematizing inequality. He urges his readers to imagine themselves faced with the choice of cheaper high-calorie foods and expensive fresh foods—of course the junk food wins resulting in the fact that “the most reliable predictor of

³⁷ Chad Lavin, “Pollanated Politics, or, The Neoliberal's Dilemma,” *Politics and Culture*, 2 (2009), <http://www.politicsandculture.org/2010/10/27/pollanated-politics-or-the-neoliberal%E2%80%99s-dilemma/>

³⁸ Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 262, 263, 305.

³⁹ Michael Pollan, “Why Eating Well is ‘Elitist,’” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2006, <http://pollan.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/05/11/why-eating-well-is-elitist/>

obesity is one's income level."⁴⁰ For Pollan, the only way to reform the food system is to force farm policies and market changes "through public action" to assure that fresh becomes more affordable than processed foods.⁴¹

It is telling that Pollan phrases his imaginary food-choice scenario as "let's say you live on a fixed income, and struggle to keep your family fed."⁴² The "let's say" creates a distance between the inner circle that contains Pollan and his readers and the millions of Americans who do not have to imagine what it is like to live and eat on a fixed income because it is their daily reality. Moreover, Pollan's claim that the system is elitist—not his solution—does little to dismiss the critique because, by the end of the article, he reinforces the idea that the power to change was reserved for those who have the means to "vote with their forks."⁴³ Moreover, by presenting the choice to buy convenience foods as inevitable based on instinct and income, Pollan strips low-income buyers of any power over their choices. This imbalance of power—and not simply Pollan's own upper-middle-class lifestyle—is what makes his argument elitist. Sociologist Barry Glassner calls Pollan, and his fellow food activists, to task for focusing their attention on problems of "abundance and excess calories" arguing that hunger is a much more pressing problem for the world's food supply.⁴⁴ Glassner argues that when millions of Americans suffer from hunger and food insecurity, "well fed" Americans need to gain "some humility about matters of concern to the privileged."⁴⁵ Glassner's assessment opens the door for other readings of the food system that Pollan seems unable to recognize. For example, Pollan views his family's meal at McDonald's as the epitome of the negative aspects of the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Barry Glassner, "Read On: A One-Word Response Hunger," in *The Gospel of Food*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

industrialized food system. For some low-income families, however, “a meal at a fast-food restaurant is a special treat.”⁴⁶ There is no room in Pollan’s assessment of the modern food system for a situation where a trip to a fast food restaurant represents a positive experience and he is incapable of acknowledging that the mass production and distribution of food that made the fast-food meal cheap may also help to feed millions of Americans who might otherwise go hungry. Pollan’s unwillingness to acknowledge his own biases and blindness, especially when it comes to class, undermines his authority. Glassner further unsettles the hierarchy that places Pollan and his fellow food system critics as the purveyors of “right” eating when he exclaims “can we please stop preaching to the poor about their diets?”⁴⁷

The “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs also seek to wield a similar power—determining what constitutes “real” home cooking and devaluing anything that does not fit within their vision. From scratch meal preparation is regarded as the gold standard while simply “heating things up” is categorized as undesirable.⁴⁸ For doomsayers, the outcome of the industrialization of food production and distribution has been a disaster for the American home cook. Impersonal, over-processed, and ultimately dehumanizing—the price of “convenience” is the potential loss of hundreds if not thousands of years of kitchen know-how and cooking skills. “Real” cooking uses fresh ingredients not boxed, canned, or frozen; “real” cooking takes time and effort and is not “quick and easy;” “real” cooking is done with love and care and not in a rush to do something else. Just as nature is aligned against the artificiality of industrialization, so too is “real” cooking the binary opposite of convenience products created in laboratories and sold shelf-ready in the supermarket. Therefore, “real” cooking is aligned closely with “real” food—forging connections between the people who consume the food and the land that produced it.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Zepeda, “Carving Values with a Spoon,” 37-38.

Anything that falls outside this singular definition of “real” cooking is classified as “non”-cooking. Moreover, “non”-cooking practices—utilization of convenience products, reliance on “quick and simple” preparation methods, and overuse of the microwave—are often used as proof that “real” cooking is in grave danger. “Death of home cooking” Jeremiahs are oblivious to the role of income and class on home cooking choices. Moderate and low-income families often struggle with access to healthy foods and finding the time to cook when dealing with inflexible work schedules and sometimes utilize convenience foods as a coping strategy to meet dinnertime demands.⁴⁹

Therefore, in limiting the definition “real” cooking, the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs actually obliterate the reality of cooking. Everyday home cooks bring a wide variety of expectations, experiences, skills, and even ingredients into their cooking on a daily basis. The fact that home cooks bring a multiplicity of meanings to the process of making meals is illustrated by the uncertain meaning of “from scratch.” The “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs rely on a standard understanding of “from scratch” as referring to meals that include only fresh ingredients but home cooks bring their own meanings to the term. In 1992, *Prevention Magazine* and the Food Marketing Institute conducted a survey in which respondents were asked to define the term “from scratch.”⁵⁰ A fair assumption would be that the majority would identify “from scratch” as meaning “entirely at home with fresh foods.”⁵¹ However, the results were fairly evenly split with 48% agreeing that “from scratch” meant “entirely at home with fresh foods” and 44% indicating that “from scratch” could mean “mostly at home with some prepared and

⁴⁹ Christine E. Blake et al. “Employed Parents’ Satisfaction with Food-Choice Coping Strategies, Influence of Gender and Structure,” *Appetite*, 52, (2009): 711-719.

⁵⁰ Public Knowledge And Concern Regarding Good Nutrition, Jan, 1992, Retrieved Nov-29-2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

⁵¹ Ibid.

packaged foods.”⁵² “Death of home cooking” Jeremiahs might point to these results as evidence of the decline of at home meal preparation while underscoring the idea that Americans have grown complacent and are too ready to accept convenience products in their kitchens. I would argue, however, that in adapting the definition of “from scratch,” the respondents exhibited power over the meanings that they bring to the kitchen. Cooking does not represent a static situation in the kitchen based on established definitions of from scratch and convenience. On a daily basis, home cooks choose whether or not they will integrate convenience products into their meals or cook wholly from fresh ingredients, making their choices based on the pattern of the day’s activities, the preferences of their family members, and their own needs. Instead of falling into one stagnant category, home cooks are constantly adapting and readapting the definition of “from scratch” and redefining “real” cooking.⁵³ Home cooking, it turns out, is not a matter of choosing *between* tradition and modernity in the kitchen, but constitutes a complicated interweaving of both that takes place each time a cook makes a meal.

For many Americans, choosing whether to cook from scratch or from a box simply represents different approaches to the problem of making meals. In the article, “Trying to Find the Quickest Way: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of Time for Food,” Jennifer Jabs and her team of researchers, interviewed thirty-five low-income, employed mothers.⁵⁴ The research team sought to discover how these women juggled time constraints with food provisioning and preparation. The mothers reported a variety of approaches to dealing with a wide range of issues that limited the time that they were able to spend on preparing meals. Some challenges included

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Martine Stead, Martin Caraher, Wendy Wrieden, Patricia Longbottom, et al. “Confident, Fearful, and Hopeless Cooks: Findings from the Development of a Food-Skills Initiative,” *British Food Journal*, 106, no.4 (2004): 281.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Jabs et al. “Trying to Find the Quickest Way: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of Time for Food,” *Journal of Nutritional Education Behavior*, 39, (2007): 18-25.

including busy work schedules, family responsibilities, child care, household chores and more.⁵⁵ The researchers condensed this variety into three patterns that they labeled “timestyles” including “active,” “reactive,” and “spontaneous.”⁵⁶ In order to make their timestyles work, the mothers used different strategies including planning ahead, coordinating different activities and demands, and prioritization so that the most important tasks were accomplished first.⁵⁷ The paradigms impacted the women’s food choices in different ways—some prioritized making meals from fresh ingredients while others sacrificed cooking in order to spend more time with the family or to pick up more hours at work. The research team indicates that choosing to spend time cooking means that these busy mothers may not have time for other important duties noting that “the mother must give up time spent on something else in order to cook.”⁵⁸ The ramifications of spending time in the kitchen are not small as the choice may mean a drop in income for the family, less quality time spent with the children, and the loss of any type of relaxation or leisure for the women themselves. Therefore, these women are not duped into buying convenience foods. Instead, they use fast foods, frozen foods, and other products to meet specific needs as they navigate the conflicting priorities within their daily lives. The researchers explain, “the current study suggest that mothers recognize that convenience food and fast food may not be the most healthful food choice, but these types of food help them meet their priority of feeding their families in a timescarce environment.”⁵⁹ While the death of home cooking Jeremiahs see convenience foods as the primary culprit in the disappearance of home cooking, these women are empowered to “do something else such as supervise their children’s homework

⁵⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

or relieve their own feelings of strain by giving them time to read a magazine or take a bath.”⁶⁰

The “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs claim the authority to evaluate these choices and condemn them as a symptom and a cause of the decline of from scratch meal preparation. However, simply condemning these women as “dupes” who have been tricked into a convenience food addiction does not capture the complexity of these women’s experiences and leads them to feel guilty about the choices they make. In so doing, the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs can also be seen as “elitists” unable to modify their formulation of “real” home cooking to account for the underlying complexities of kitchen experiences. This rigid adherence to a single vision of proper meal preparation blinds the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs and prevents middle-ground responses to the need to feed the family while dealing with other problems and priorities that are the daily reality of most Americans. This is particularly true when it comes to home cooks from low-income families who are under increased pressure to juggle multiple demands while experiencing limited access to healthy foods. Therefore, the researchers suggest that “there is a need to develop healthful, affordable, child-acceptable, quickly prepared food that would help others like these feel good about the way they feed their families.”⁶¹ The death of home cooking jeremiad leaves no room for this type of solution. Instead they offer vague promises that a return to the kitchen of the past is the only answer for America’s problems.

There’s Promise in the Past

In the “death of home cooking” jeremiad, the only solution that rescues home cooking rests is to reclaim the kitchen practices of the past. Once upon a time, their story goes, there was a era when Americans lived in harmony with nature, growing ingredients that were then lovingly

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

prepared from scratch and enjoyed by the whole family. In this idyllic past, life was simpler, food was healthier, and good, home-cooked meals helped families and communities to remain connected to each other. Jeremiahs press for a return to this nostalgic, idealized past—a golden age when kitchen skills were passed on as a living legacy and cooking was done the right way.⁶² Moreover, by rejecting modern food, Jeremiahs insist that Americans will not only cook better, more delicious food, but create better lives for themselves and their families. The goal is to recreate the perfect past even amid the demands of today's hectic lifestyle. Just like the mythic cooks of the past, Americans today can find the peace, fulfillment, and joy in the kitchen. For “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs, the past offers the best hope for the future.

Ann Vileisis' book *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get It Back* offers an excellent example of how the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs construct an idealized past as part of their efforts to reform American home cooking. Even the book's title matches the pattern of the jeremiad, simultaneously hitting all the high points of the genre: noting that Americans today have “lost knowledge,” hinting that there was a time when Americans possessed a deeper understanding of food, and underscoring the need to reclaim what has been lost. Vileisis sets out to demonstrate the factors that contributed to the fact that “most of us have little idea where our foods come from, who raised them, and what went into making them.”⁶³ For Vileisis the “drift towards indifference” begins with the influences of industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism on the modern food system.⁶⁴ Taken together, the pressures of industrialized food processes, increased marketing of manufactured products, and physical distance from farm to table led to a “modern food

⁶² Phil Lyon, Anne Colquhoun and Emily Alexander, “Deskilling the Domestic Kitchen: National Tragedy or the Making of a Modern Myth?” *Food Service Technology*, 3, no.3-4 (September/December 2003): 168-169.

⁶³ Ann Vileisis, *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get it Back* (Washington: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2008), 3

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

sensibility” that has been marked by “an unspoken covenant of ignorance between shoppers and an increasingly powerful food industry.”⁶⁵ According to Vileisis, this ignorance of the origins of food and lack of familiarity with the kitchen led to the “characteristic uneasiness about not-knowing and not-wanting-to-know our foods.”⁶⁶ Vileisis underscores that the fact that “most of us...know very little about what we eat...and...many of us don’t even *want* to know” was not always the case.⁶⁷ Vileisis argues that, unlike the twenty-first century when food and cooking are shrouded in mystery, there was a time when “everyone sitting at the table knew exactly where the foods came from”⁶⁸

To prove her point that people in the past had “a consciousness about cookery very different from our own,” Vileisis uses the example of Martha Ballard a wife, mother, and midwife who lived in Maine in the late eighteenth-century and kept a detailed diary about her daily life.⁶⁹ According to Vileisis, Martha had a deep and enduring connection to her food—the type of connection missing in the modern food system—because the fruits and vegetables that appeared on her family’s plates and the meats that graced the table were from her own garden or raised and slaughtered by Martha’s own hand. Vileisis makes the significance of this connection clear when she describes Martha baking bread from the grain that her husband, Ephraim, had grown. Vileisis notes:

In her diary, she noted with particular satisfaction baking bread from wheat grown by her husband: ‘I have Sifted our flower & Bakt, it makes a fine bread indeed.’ As her hands plunged into the sticky sponge of dough, as she kneaded in the wooden trough hewn by her son, as she formed loaves and set them to rise, and as she pulled the hot fragrant bread from her oven, Martha knew exactly where her flour came from. The flour was not an anonymous powder. She knew the curves of the fields where the wheat grew, the hardened muscles of her husband’s arms

⁶⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12

⁶⁹ Ibid., 13.

that cut it, and the coursing waters of Bowman's Brook that ground it between millstones. Her mind, hands, and palate could discern how bread made from grain grown by Mr. Ballard differed from grain grown on a farm up the Kennebec at Sevenmile Brook. Whether you or I could taste the difference between these crusty loaves she baked, we can never know, but for Martha, a deep sense of place was a fundamental part of cooking and eating.⁷⁰

In her vivid descriptions of Martha's movements as she makes the bread, Vileisis underscores the importance of the link between Martha and the foods she cooked and ate. Every detail reinforces the link between the bread and Martha's home and family. The motions of Martha's hands and body as she kneads the dough and forms the loaves creates the sense that baking bread is a visceral act that cements the union between Martha's body and the land. Vileisis also emphasizes that this "sense of place" that was so "fundamental" to Martha's cooking is missing from today's cooking.⁷¹ Unlike Martha, the flour that Americans cook with today *is* an "anonymous powder."⁷² And, where Martha's taste buds were sensitive enough to discern that the flour came from grain harvested from her husband's fields, Vileisis hints that such an ability to "taste the difference" may be lacking today.⁷³

Vileisis' description of Martha Ballard's intimate understanding of her food is central to her overall argument that industrialization, urbanization, and other modernizing factors have fundamentally altered modern Americans' relationship to food. However, the picture that Vileisis paints of Martha's daily life producing food for her family is idyllic. It is a story where "day after day...she spread manure, planted seeds, pulled weeds, noticed sprouts, and then picked, cooked, and savored the first peas and string beans of the season."⁷⁴ But instead of highlighting the fact that these tasks were relentless (day after day), physically demanding

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

(planting seeds, pulling weeds), and unavoidable if Martha's family were to survive, Vileisis uses these details to emphasize that Martha "knew the complete stories of her foods."⁷⁵ Vileisis glosses over the nitty-gritty details of feeding the family off the fruit of the land—the toil, the drudgery, the fear that the crop might fail or the chickens might stop laying eggs—in favor of portraying the beauty and intimacy provided by first-hand knowledge of the sources of food.

The fact that Vileisis deemphasizes negative aspects of the daily grind of making dinner is readily apparent in her description of Martha's trips back and forth to her gardens and barns. While Vileisis admits that "these walks wore a woman's body," the emphasis is not on the hardship, but on the fact that the walks "also drew her attention to the land and animals she tended."⁷⁶ For Martha this meant that she "knew exactly where to look for eggs laid by a furtive red hen, where wild grapevines hung from oaks, and where the muskmelons sweetened best in a warm spot against the barn. The details of the place were part of her everyday life, her work, and the meals she prepared."⁷⁷ By dismissing the toll that the hard work of gardening, tending animals, and other duties related to making food for the family took on Martha's body, Vileisis indicates that the knowledge of food was worth the hardship. The implication is that, despite the difficulties associated with raising her own food, Martha possessed something valuable that is disappearing from modern-day America—the deep understanding of the source of her own food.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich provides a much more nuanced portrait of Martha's life in her influential book *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary 1785-1812*.⁷⁸ In her detailed reading of Martha's diary, Ulrich embeds Martha's experience in a web of complexity that included the demands of her work as a midwife, the social ties to family, friends,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1991).

and community members, and the rhythms of daily life. The Martha that emerges in Ulrich's rendering did not have time to meander down the garden path, lovingly milk the family cow, or savor the taste of freshly baked bread—she was too busy fording rivers to reach laboring women; overseeing a bustling household of daughters and other hired women; and negotiating the many hardships that set her world spinning at different periods in her lifetime.

In fact, Ulrich's portrait of Martha as the matron of a busy household of women hints at a much different reading of Martha's diary entry "'I have Sifted our flower & Bakt, it makes a fine bread indeed'" than Vileisis offers. While Vileisis reads the entry as evidence of Martha's deep connection to the foods she made for her family—a connection forged because she did so much of the work herself—Ulrich's book makes clear that "whenever possible, she delegated routine housework to others."⁷⁹ In fact, once her daughters were old enough to help in the home, much of Martha's time was spent overseeing their work, and the work of hired help, in both weaving textiles *and* cooking, baking, and preserving foods for the family. However, once Martha's daughters were old enough to leave her home for families of their own, the work of the home fell on Martha's shoulders. As Ulrich writes, Martha had "defined herself as a 'gadder,' as a woman who left home, frequently, to care for her neighbors. Yet she was also a housewife, a dutiful and productive housewife, who had more than enough work to accomplish at home. Those two impulses were resolved in the first ten years of the diary by the presence of her daughters. The trials she faced after 1795 not only demonstrate the importance in her own life of her career as a midwife, but they show what it meant to regulate one's work to the rhythms of mothering."⁸⁰ The year 1795 was important because that was the year Martha's last remaining daughter got married

⁷⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 220.

and left for her own home and leaving Martha without the help for household chores that she had grown used to enjoying.

Ulrich makes clear that, far from a satisfying reward, the labor of the home was a source of mental, physical, and emotional hardship for Martha, especially as her body began to age at the same time as her helpers disappeared. After one particularly taxing round of deliveries, Martha returned home to find the house “up in arms.” Ulrich writes:

Martha prayed not for ease or for release from her burdens, but for *strength*, for the physical ability to continue the work she had done for so long. It was strength to endure to the end of the race she had asked for in November. It was strength she now called for, twice in a single entry. She was only a few weeks short of her sixty-first birthday. Her body ached. The attacks of colic were coming more frequently. She had no one to preserve order at home when she walked out under the stars to serve her neighbors: ‘find my house up in arms.’ The image is a curious one, as though the floorboards, pothooks, and bedsteads had risen against her. It was not her husband and sons who were disturbed. If they had been at home at all, they had gotten their supper or breakfast themselves, leaving the platters and mugs, unmade beds, and stiffening socks behind them. It was no human enemy but Martha’s *house* that had taken up arms against her.⁸¹

The fact that Martha herself “Sifted our flower & Bakt” may not have been as satisfying and rewarding as Vileisis made the activity appear, especially since the phrase came from an entry dated July 31, 1810—two years before Martha’s death and many years after her daughters left for their own homes and she began her long struggles with housework.⁸² Perhaps Martha *had* to bake the bread because no one else was available to take on the work instead. Ulrich’s multi-layered depiction of Martha’s life complicates Vileisis’ somewhat simplistic reading of Martha’s relationship to the origins of her food. While Martha may have benefited from an intimate knowledge of the ingredients that went into her family’s meals as Vileisis insists, Ulrich’s work demonstrates that feeding the family was also frustrating, exhausting, back-breaking work that Martha often happily entrusted to others.

⁸¹ Ibid., 218-219.

⁸² Vileisis, *Kitchen Literacy*, 248.

The idealized image of the past that “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs use to bolster their argument that home cooking is dying is significant because it helps to create a distorted picture of history. The fact is that the mythic, idealized past that these writers, commentators, scientists, and even scholars refer back to is one that *never really existed*. Rachel Lauden drives this point home in her article “A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food.”⁸³ Writing as a trained historian, Lauden dismisses accounts of “a past sharply divided between good and bad, between the sunny rural days of yore and the grey industrial present.”⁸⁴ She argues that this “fable of disaster, or fall from grace, smacks of more wishful thinking than of digging through archives. It gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and natural versus processed and preserved; local versus global; slow versus fast; artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial; healthful versus contaminated and fatty.”⁸⁵ Lauden insists that this false history has “things back to front.”⁸⁶

Lauden offers a different perspective by unpacking the hidden history behind the buzz words of today’s back-to-the-past food rhetoric, such as “natural” and “local.” Lauden notes that “natural” was not always a positive moniker for foodstuffs. Writes Lauden:

That food should be fresh and natural has become an article of faith. It comes as something of a shock to realize that this is a latter-day creed. For our ancestors, natural was something quite nasty. Natural often tasted bad. Fresh meat was rank and tough, fresh milk was warm and unmistakably a bodily excretion; fresh fruits (dates and grapes being rare exceptions outside the tropics) were incredibly sour, fresh vegetables bitter. Even today, natural can be a shock when we actually encounter it.⁸⁷

⁸³ Rachel Lauden, “A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food,” *Gastronomica*, 1, no.1 (February 2001): 36-44.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

Just as “natural” has not always been viewed as the ideal, “local” was once a feature to be avoided, not celebrated. Lauden notes that “Local food was greeted with about as much enthusiasm as fresh and natural. Local foods were the lot of the poor who could neither escape the tyranny of local climate and biology nor the monotonous, often precarious, diet it afforded. Meanwhile, the rich, in search of a more varied diet, bought, stole, wheedled, robbed, taxed, and ran off with appealing plants and animals, foodstuffs, and culinary techniques wherever they could find them.”⁸⁸ If “natural” and “local” supposedly improve the health of twenty-first century Americans, was the same true for people in the past? Lauden answers this question with a resounding no. Exclaims Lauden, “By the standard measures of health and nutrition—life expectancy and height—our ancestors were far worse off than we are. Much of the blame was due to diet, exacerbated by living conditions and infections which affect the body’s ability to use the food that is ingested...No amount of nostalgia for the pastoral foods of the distant past can wish away the fact that our ancestors lived mean, short lives, constantly afflicted with diseases, many of which can be directly attributed to what they did or did not eat.”⁸⁹ Lauden’s recounting of the history of food provides a much different glimpse of the lives and dining tables of the past and calls the benefits of a return to that earlier period into question.

As Lauden’s article demonstrates, promulgating an idealized, mythic past is not an innocent act—it is harmful, not only to the way that Americans remember and value the lives of the past, but to the way that they value cooking in the present. Idealized renderings of the history of home cooking obscure the fact that Americans cooked natural, local foods at home because they had no other choice. It is easy to wax lyrical over the benefits of freshly baked bread while opining the deleterious effects of over-processed Wonder Bread when there are more options for

⁸⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

feeding the family than grinding grain, kneading dough, and waiting hours in a sweltering kitchen for the oven to reach the right temperature for baking. As Lauden declares, “Churning butter and skinning and cleaning hares, without the option of picking up the phone for a pizza if something goes wrong, is unrelenting, unforgiving toil.”⁹⁰ Therefore, “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs can urge Americans to dabble in canning, pickling, and churning butter because they have recognize that there the safety net of the modern food system exists to fall back on. As Lauden’s article reminds us, there is an enormous difference in meaning between churning butter as a chore essential to life and churning butter as an individual choice.

If I Can Cook, So Can You

Jeremiahs proclaim that realigning the present with the ideal model located in the past golden age will assure a path forward into a brighter future. Professionally trained chef and author Kathleen Flinn offers just such a vision in her book *The Kitchen Counter Cooking School: How a Few Simple Lessons Transformed Nine Culinary Novices Into Fearless Home Cooks*.⁹¹ The recipient of the 2012 American Society of Journalists and Authors Award for Best Non-Fiction Book in the Memoir/Autobiography category, Flinn’s account of how she inspired nine timid non-cooks to become confident home cooks has found national recognition. This story also serves as an excellent example of the almost magical transformative powers that imbues the practice of making meals by hand from fresh ingredients within the death of home cooking narrative. Flinn recruits nine volunteers, visiting them at home, poking around in their refrigerators and cupboards, and interviewing them about their home cooking practices. What she finds are fearful, intimidated, and bored non-cooks who exhibit an over-reliance on convenience products, lack kitchen skills, and have little faith in their own abilities to make

⁹⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁹¹ Kathleen Flinn, *The Kitchen Counter Cooking School: How A Few Simple Lessons Transformed Nine Culinary Novices Into Fearless Home Cooks* (New York: Viking, A Member of the Penguin Group), 2011.

meals from fresh ingredients. The women then attend weekly cooking lessons in which they learn basic skills like proper knife techniques and food storage, taste a variety of ingredients, and practice making recipes. By the end of the book, most of the women have learned how to cook—and the realization that they can cook for themselves transforms their lives.

Flinn’s inspiration to begin her cooking classes came from observing a woman and her daughter as they shopped at the local grocery store. Flinn puzzled over the woman’s choice to fill her cart with boxed mixes, canned foods, and frozen dinners instead of the fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and cheeses that she could be found easily in the other aisles in the store. Flinn expresses her wonderment that “despite being half full, [the cart] contained no *real* food.”⁹² She proceeded to follow what she describes as a heavy set woman and her preteen daughter around the grocery store as the woman tossed more processed foods into her cart.⁹³ Finally, as the woman adds a package of chicken breasts to the pile, Flinn cannot resist interceding as she informs the woman that “whole chickens are on sale.”⁹⁴ Flinn is shocked to discover that the woman *does not know how* to cook a whole chicken. In fact, she does not know how to cook *at all*. Flinn notes, “she seemed like a smart woman and a good mom, but when we talked about cooking, she was discouraged, frustrated, and convinced that shortcuts remained the only path she had the time or skill to navigate.”⁹⁵ Flinn offers to use her expertise as a professional chef to help the woman navigate the store and make better choices. For an hour they “discussed why she bought so many boxes and cans” and Flinn managed to “convince her to clear out most of them with the real food that the boxed versions attempted to replicate”⁹⁶ Out went the boxed pot roast, in went the a three-pound beef roast and all the vegetables needed to make the dish from

⁹² Ibid., 1.

⁹³ Ibid., 1-2.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.

scratch. The encounter left Flinn shaken. She wondered what she could do to help other women who lacked the self-confidence and skill to cook for themselves. Then, she had an idea; she would offer cooking lessons.

Flinn drafted inexperienced and unsure non-cooks to participate in her experiment. The women shared certain characteristics: addicted to convenience products and stuck in old habits, overwhelmed by the size of the task or too busy to fit in daily meal preparation, lacking experience and skill. Universally, however, the inability to cook had wrought a wide array of negative consequences on the women's lives. As Flinn declares, "I could not have predicted the residue and damage that a lack of cooking skills had on people's daily lives. Among the boxes and cans, I found a larger story of perceived failure that left them struggling with guilt, frustration, and a stinging lack of confidence."⁹⁷ Flinn hoped that by sharing the confidence and skills that she acquired in culinary school with these cooking neophytes they would be able to overcome their trepidation and become confident, well-rounded home cooks.

The lessons started easily enough: learning how to properly use a knife, discerning the varying nuances of flavor between different varieties of salt, parting out a whole chicken. As the women experiment with the cooking techniques and begin to understand the tastes, smells, and properties of a variety of ingredients, they begin to gain confidence in the kitchen. This newly found self-assurance is readily apparent when the women begin to disassemble their own chickens. "Now it was their turn," writes Flinn, "Brow furrowed, knife in hand, each volunteer gamely attempted to cut up her chicken. Donna held the wings ever so daintily, trying to minimize her contact. To my left, Gen cut the leg right off, perfectly. 'I did it! Look!'"⁹⁸ Gen's

⁹⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 99.

excitement over her culinary achievement reveals that the cooking school experiment is working—she is learning to cook with confidence.

However, the cooking school has more of an impact on the women than just teaching them how to recognize the chemical afterburn of iodized salt or slice the wing off a raw chicken. The same women who, just a few weeks ago, were unable to imagine life without a weekly ration of Hamburger Helper and frozen pizza bites, begin to prefer the flavor of fresh ingredients to the boxed version. Flinn gives the women a taste test—offering them both the fresh and boxed versions of fettuccini Alfredo. Flinn recounts the women’s reactions as she brought the two plates to the counter:

The fresh Alfredo was white with a velvety texture and had a faint scent of garlic and warm cream. The boxed version had a thin sauce and an unnatural sheen; it smelled strongly of cheese.

‘Don’t make us eat that,’ Jodi said sternly, screwing up her face. I knew from the inventory that I had made of her overstuffed panty that she had at least half a dozen boxes of this same stuff.

‘Oh, come on,’ I said. ‘You need to taste the difference.’

She sniffed it. ‘I can actually smell the iodized salt in it.’ She took a bit and put it on her plate, then lifted it to choke down a bite.

The rest of the group tentatively picked a single ribbon of the boxed pasta. ‘This doesn’t taste anything like that,’ Donna said, motioning to the freshly made sauce. ‘It’s not terrible, but it’s not good, especially compared directly to the real version we just had. I never thought to do that.’⁹⁹

With this taste test, with the same women who would have wolfed down the boxed pasta not too long ago barely able to swallow a single bite, is an example of the “death of home cooking” Jeremiah’s tenets in action. They proclaim that if American would simply cook from scratch, the rewards would speak for themselves and the nation’s convenience food addiction would disappear.

The cooking school has deeper, more personal rewards as well. The task no longer seems so overwhelming and the stress of making meals from scratch simply melts away. One of the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 137.

students, Jodi, reveals that she no longer feels afraid of the kitchen as she exclaimed, “It just kind of hit me. I realized that cooking is not supposed to be stressful. Why do I put myself through all the anxiety?”¹⁰⁰ As the women completed their cooking lessons, they found that they were no longer the same—not only in the kitchen, but in the way that they viewed themselves. Trish, a sixty-one year old woman who had spent her whole life disappointed in the foods that she cooked despite a well-stocked pantry and books filled with recipes collected from magazines and newspapers.¹⁰¹ After the class, she found a sense of confidence about the foods that she cooked and discovered real pleasure in the kitchen. She tells the story of a stew that she makes on a regular basis:

“When I made it the last time, I took it to my friends’ house and she had a perfect silver oblong pan and it looked so pretty. Everyone said, ‘Wow, Trish, you’re so good in the kitchen.’

“And this may seem silly, but it was a big moment for me. I was proud of something that I cooked.” Her eyes got a little misty at the memory. “No one expected that from me. I didn’t expect it from myself. It is remarkable that at my age I can still change, and that I can still surprise myself.”¹⁰²

The same is true for most of the women. The lessons they learned stuck with them and they made changes to the way that they approached the kitchen and cooking. ““The class definitely changed some fundamental basics about how I cook,”” Cheryl reveals, ““I make more sauces, soups, and meals from scratch. I am more confident in the kitchen because I just have more faith in my skills. I think the class not only helped me learn things but also taught me not to be afraid of cooking and trying new things on my own.””¹⁰³ For Donna, the classes helped her to find peace in her marriage and lose weight. She had struggled with her husband over who would do the cooking, but declares, ““Now if we eat something homemade, I make it. The thing is that he

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰² Ibid., 244-245.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 255.

hasn't changed, I'm the one who has changed'"¹⁰⁴ The cooking lessons changed these women's lives: giving them confidence in their abilities, control over their food, and a new vision of themselves as home cooks.

Change is the central mantra of the "death of home cooking" jeremiad. By changing habits, attitudes, and practices in the kitchen, Jeremiahs argue that Americans will reap the benefits of better health, stronger relationships, and a more connected community. Flinn's book provides an illustration of the way that reclaiming home cooking is presented as path not only to better meals, but to personal fulfillment as well. However, just like the "death of home cooking" narrative's reliance on an idyllic past for inspiration, the picture that arises from the accounts of the benefits of home cooking are idealized. The problems created by not knowing how to cook are over-stated while making meals from scratch as a solution is overemphasized. These accounts ignore the fact that, even when meals are made from scratch, it does not lead directly to better health, better relationships, or even better food.

One of the most frequently cited benefits of home cooking is its mystical ability to bring the family closer together during shared meals. However, in his article "Power at the Table: Food Fights and Happy Meals," Richard Wilk argues that the propensity for academic and popular accounts to present family meals as universally positive obscures the reality that they are actually just as often times of tension, conflict, and division.¹⁰⁵ Drawing on interviews with parents of picky eaters, Wilk expresses the idea that he was surprised to find that they not only reported that the struggles with their children negatively impacted their dinnertime experience, but that many revealed similar painful memories from their own childhoods.¹⁰⁶ Wilk argues that,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Wilk, "Power at the Table: Food Fights and Happy Meals," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 10, no.6 (2010): 428-436.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 428.

in popular and academic discussions of the family meal, “the goodness of family meals is truly hegemonic, in the sense that alternatives are unthinkable. There is no oppositional position, no shading of opinion, and no praise of solitary eating.”¹⁰⁷ In literature related to the topic of family meals, Wilk discovered only positive terms like “intimacy, integration, interaction, sociability, connection, foundation of society, togetherness, harmony, loving, and nurturing.”¹⁰⁸ However, his interviews revealed that “there is strong evidence that the participants in family meals are quite aware that all is not peace and light.”¹⁰⁹ Wilk argues that “the yawning gap between stereotype and performance creates a zone of maximum dissonance.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the ideal family meal and the real family meal both influence the experience of American families—forcing them to contend both with the conflicts that arise at the table *and* with the fact that those struggles further separates their lived experience from the happy harmony that society seems to expect. Moreover, Wilk warns that there is an overwhelming tendency to treat family meals that do not conform to the norm as “deviant.”¹¹¹ In place of a discussion that places happy meals and unhappy meals as moral opposites, Wilk advocates for a more “nuanced” discussion. Wilk insists, “The positive and negative sides of family meals are not just moral opposites; they are part of the same phenomenon and should not be divided up. This stance is in itself a political one, in that it counters the use of a normative ‘happy family meal’ as a rhetorical tool for punishing those who lack the means or desire to conform to the cultural mores of a dominant class.”¹¹² This is the same type of analysis that swirls around home cooking. The way that critics consistently portray from scratch meal preparation as the fix for all of society’s ills and a source

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 429.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 429.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 430.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 434.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 434.

¹¹² Ibid., 434-435.

of personal fulfillment ignores the experiences of cooks and non-cooks who find the task boring, uninspiring, or too difficult. Even worse is when these assessments begin to cast home cooks a morally upright or morally corrupt based on their kitchen practices.

The Virtuous Versus the Villainous and the “Morality” of American Home Cooking

In May 2012, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed a city-wide ban on the sale of sugary drinks—like sodas—in sizes larger than 16 ounces.¹¹³ Public Health officials lauded the move as a step in the right direction toward stemming the obesity epidemic, particularly among young children. Libertarians, conservative talk show hosts and soda industry executives had the opposite reaction, depicting the mayor as “Nanny Bloomberg” and pointing to the proposal as an example of government interference run amuck.¹¹⁴ Whether you believe that banning the “Big Gulp” is an essential intervention or an unnecessary intrusion, the move represents an example of government policy grounded on our current understanding of the relationship between American citizens and the American food system which places the blame for oversized waistlines on oversized portions.

Television personality and professionally trained chef Anthony Bourdain proposes similar government intervention on behalf of home cooking. In so doing, Bourdain fulfills the final aspect of the jeremiad—the call to reform. Once the Jeremiah has identified the current state of decline, identified the solution from the idealized past, and offered it as a path to a better future, they then call for immediate action to follow their plan to solve society’s problem.¹¹⁵ In his book, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*,

¹¹³ Michael M Grynbaum, “New York Plans to Ban Sale of Big Sizes of Sugary Drinks,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2012: A1

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/31/nyregion/bloomberg-plans-a-ban-on-large-sugared-drinks.html?_r=1

¹¹⁴ Ben Forer and Olivia Katrandjian, “Soft Drink Industry Fights Back, Depicting Bloomberg as Nanny,” *ABC News*, June 2, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2012/06/02/soft-drink-industry-fights-back-depicting-bloomberg-as-nanny/>

¹¹⁵ David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 5.

professional chef, television personality, and travel writer, Anthony Bourdain calls for the reinstatement of Home-Economics curriculum in every American school to offer “compulsory cooking classes” for both girls and boys.¹¹⁶ Bourdain declares:

I’m talking about pounding home a new value, a national attitude, the way, during the JFK era, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness created the expectation that you *should* be healthy if you were a kid. That you *should*, no, you *must* be reasonably athletic. That at the very least you must aspire to those goals, try your best—that your teachers, your schoolmates, and society as a whole would help you and urge you on. There would be rigorous standards. Your progress would be monitored with the idea that you would, over time, improve—and become, somehow, better as a person.¹¹⁷

Bourdain’s insistence that government intercession on behalf of home cooking—combined with the resulting societal pressure—are necessary steps to urge Americans back into the kitchen grows out of the tenets of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. As Bourdain announces, “by the end of the ‘60s, *nobody* was cooking. And soon...no one even remembered *how*.”¹¹⁸ And, for Bourdain as for other mourners, the disappearance of at home meal preparation has detrimental effects for society and only by returning to the kitchen will Americans be able to reclaim better healthy, a stronger family, and a better society.¹¹⁹

This perspective, however, moves the “death of home cooking” jeremiad into the danger zone of making character assessments based on what, when, and where a person cooks (or does not cook). Like many other lamenters, Bourdain not only advocates for a resurgence in cooking at home, but insists that such a move is a “moral imperative.”¹²⁰ Cooking at home is no longer a choice but a “virtue” that should be instilled in every American.¹²¹ Bourdain goes even further insisting that “maybe, it is now time to make the idea of *not* cooking ‘un-cool’—and, in the

¹¹⁶ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 61.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

harshest possible ways short of physical brutality, drive that message home.”¹²² This moralizing—the creation of a setting where cooks are depicted as virtuous and non-cooks are denigrated as wicked—becomes the point where the “death of home cooking” jeremiad veers into hazardous territory for, as I have illustrated in this chapter, the “death of home cooking” jeremiad is built upon the imagery of an idealized, nostalgic past that never really existed and paints a picture of today’s kitchen landscape that obscures the true complexity of American cooking practices. The ultimate danger of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad is that the “virtuous” proponents of reclaiming the kitchen begin to set themselves up as the arbiters of “correct” behavior and “right” living without recognizing that their moral superiority is based on faulty evidence and oversimplified generalizations. Bourdain falls into this trap. First, he establishes the moral superiority of home cooking writing, “I do think the idea that basic cooking skills are a virtue, that the ability to feed yourself and a few others with proficiency should be taught to every young man and woman as a fundamental skill, should become as vital to growing up as learning to...cross the street by oneself, or be trusted with money.”¹²³ Bourdain then sets himself up to dictate the basics of this “virtue” exclaiming:

Let us then codify the essentials for this new virtue: What specific tasks should every young man and woman know how to perform in order to feel complete? What simple preparations, done well, should be particularly admired, skills seen as setting one apart as an unusually well-rounded, deceptively deep, and interesting individual? In a shiny, happy, perfect world of the future, what should *every* man, woman, and teenager know how to do? ¹²⁴

Bourdain proposes a set of criteria against which society could not only judge the individual’s cooking skills, but their characters as well. However, Bourdain’s list of key elements for the “virtue” of home cooking belies his own professional background as trained chef. For example,

¹²² Ibid., 61.

¹²³ Ibid., 60.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 61-62.

he begins his assessment asserting that “basic knife skills should be a must”—and “knife skills” are something that forms the basis of the education of a formally trained chef.¹²⁵ That Bourdain’s list is so obviously biased toward his own background and experiences in the kitchen reveals what is ultimately so troubling about the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. The constant repetition of the refrain that “no one cooks anymore” has the impact of silencing difference while offering a singular image of what “real” or “proper” home cooking should look like. While Bourdain purposefully overstates his case as part of his over-the-top writing style, his attempt to imbue home cooking with moral superiority points to a disturbing theme within the “death of home cooking” Jeremiah—the quest for authority over the form and content of home cooking that ignores diversity and remolds the American kitchen according to the Jeremiahs’ own narrow vision.

Do As I Say and Cook the Right Way

By asserting a static vision of “real” home cooking and “proper” family meals and then veering toward the troubling assertion that “good” people cook the “right” way and “bad” people eat the wrong kinds of foods, the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs claim the authority to shape American home cooking practices according to their own vision. This raises the question: what is their vision? The Jeremiahs’ nostalgic search for answers in an idealized, non-existent past relies on idyllic images of mothers and grandmothers happily making recipes from scratch culminating in a meal where every member of the family gathers around the table to share food, conversation, and reconnect as a family. This brings to mind the image of Norman Rockwell’s iconic 1943 cover for *The Saturday Evening Post* titled “Freedom From Want” in which a smiling family watches as a grandmotherly figure places a plump, golden-brown turkey at the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 62.

head of the table for her husband to carve.¹²⁶ This image is certainly appealing. However, this picture also points to the “death of home cooking” narrative’s bias toward the experience of white, middle-class, nuclear families while masking the diversity, discord, and dissension that remains just outside the frame of the picture. Food advocates have a long history of wielding “real” home cooking and “proper” meals as a weapon to bring others into line with their vision by labeling non-conformists as deviant and immoral—a precedent that the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs come close to emulating.

The tendency to use a single definition of “real” home cooking as a benchmark for moral character has been particularly strong when it comes to efforts to Americanize immigrants. Strange ingredients, strong odors, and unusual cooking practices have always been used as a marker of difference to designate outsiders in a community—often going as far as to associate odd foods and out-of-the ordinary cooking smells with immorality.¹²⁷ This pattern was particularly strong during nineteenth century when a flood of immigrants to the United States brought with them a tidal wave of new food preferences that did not fit within the traditional, white, New England-based recipe repertoire. Home economists made it their mission to teach newly arrived families the right way to prepare and eat meals—making home cooking a cornerstone of “Americanization.”¹²⁸ Home economists and other reformers viewed the immigrants’ traditional foods and cooking practices with suspicion—blaming incorrect food choices and improper cooking techniques for everything from drunkenness to poor health—and set out to strip immigrant diets of their traditional dishes by teaching them how to “eat like

¹²⁶ Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001).

¹²⁷ Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, “Incensed: Food Smells and Ethnic Tension,” *Gastronomica*, 6, no. 2 (2006): 57-60.

¹²⁸ Laura Schenone, *A Thousand Years Over A Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told Through Food, Recipes, and Remembrances* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 252-254.

Americans.”¹²⁹ Diets and cooking practices that did not align with this vision of “correct” cooking were not only portrayed as improper, but as immoral. “Bad” cooking led to “bad” people who were in danger of falling into drunkenness, “delinquency” and other crimes.¹³⁰ Only by fixing the cooking and eating habits of those outside the mainstream—immigrants, the poor, rural families—could the ills of society be remedied. Home economists’ efforts to homogenize American cooking, and society, according to a white, Anglo-Saxon, New England recipe was nicely symbolized in their reliance on a recipe for “white sauce” that was used to cover just about everything. As Laura Shapiro declares, just as home economists sought to cover over the differences in American society, “the important function of an American white sauce was not to enhance but to blanket.”¹³¹ In their attempts to overhaul immigrant cooking practices, home economists sought to eliminate what they saw as alarming practices tinged with an unpleasant aura of immorality without regard for the meanings of the traditions to the immigrants themselves.

Extending the goal of overwriting immigrant’s traditional food practices with correct American practices into the twentieth-century, Phyllis H. Williams’ 1938 book *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America: A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers and Physicians* provides a long description of the origin of Italian immigrant food preferences and the influence of those traditions on their cooking practices in the United States.¹³² However, the book’s main purpose is not to allow the readers to glean a better understanding of the immigrants that they may come into contact with so as to enhance

¹²⁹ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 124.

¹³⁰ Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99-100.

¹³¹ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 87.

¹³² Phyllis H. Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America: A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers, and Physicians*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938).

communication. Instead, Williams makes clear that her goal is to provide a background understanding of the persistence of Italian-American home cooking practices so that her readers can work more efficiently to change them in order to align more closely with proper, American patterns. Williams explains how an increased standard of living in America has allowed the Italian immigrants to indulge in luxuries like sugar and coffee with harmful effects on their health and the health of their children.¹³³ Moreover, she insists that the wealth found in America led the immigrants to model their foods on the diets of wealthy families in Italy instead of the proper diet of Americans.¹³⁴ According to Williams, their reluctance to give up traditional foods and cooking practices “further delays the dietary adjustments.”¹³⁵ Williams illustrates her point by explaining how Italian families discard unfamiliar items—like canned meats—that appear in relief basket either by trading them for more desirable items, selling them, or tossing them in the garbage.¹³⁶ Williams declares, “when they refuse a free American-style meal, it is habit and not need that dictates their decision.”¹³⁷ However, Williams simply expresses alarm over the practice. She does not suggest reformulating charity donations to better suit the immigrant’s tastes; it is the immigrants who should alter their food preferences, not the foods included in the baskets that needed to change. This view mirrors the way that food movements tend to march forward with their own vision, insisting on change, while obscuring and ignoring the preferences and traditions of others.¹³⁸ The reformers remain blind to the complexities of home cooking practices.

¹³³ Ibid., 61-63.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 65-66.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁸ Catherine Manton, *Fed Up: Women and Food in America* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 49.

With an emphasis on a single vision of “real” home cooking and “proper” family meals, the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs also exhibit similar blindness. They do not take into account the wide diversity of food preferences, cooking practices, and mealtime rituals that accompanies America’s multicultural society. For example, the overemphasis of a “proper” family dinner consisting of a nuclear family seated at a table partaking of a meat and potatoes meals ignores traditions where women serve the men first and then eat separately; where families sit on the floor; or that are shared from communal dishes and scooped with bits of bread by hand. The rising popularity of ethnic foods, particularly within the foodie movement, masks the fact that, in many ways, these foods still remain foreign. For example, Chinese food is so ubiquitous that restaurants are a common feature across the United States. However, the foods and cooking techniques, for the most part, have not been integrated into American daily cooking practices—they remain “take-out” foods. An expression of the continuing suspicion of ethnic food in general, and Chinese food in particular, can be found in the repetition of stories where unsuspecting diners ordered chicken and found that their Chinese take-out instead contained cat or dog meat.¹³⁹ Moreover, the dishes that Americans do recognize as Chinese food—from Chop Suey to General Tsao’s Chicken—did not actually originate in China but were instead developed by Chinese immigrants to suit American palates.¹⁴⁰ Relegated to restaurant kitchens serving Americanized fare, Chinese cooks have been allotted the status of “perpetual foreigners.”¹⁴¹ The “death of home cooking” narrative does not represent a welcoming invitation for Chinese and other ethnic cooks but instead continues the legacy of excluding their experiences from the

¹³⁹ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman: And Other Urban Legends*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984), 96.

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer 8 Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*, (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2008).

¹⁴¹ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “Cooking Up The Senses: A Critical Embodied Approach to the Study of Food and Asian American Television Audiences,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 180.

“American” kitchen. This becomes especially troubling when the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs include moral overtones in their message. By connecting their vision of “proper” home cooking to “virtuous” living, today’s “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs repeat the pattern set by previous food advocates. “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs advocate a single, static definition of “real” home cooking and argue that only by conforming to that vision can American families, communities, and society be saved from the ravages of ill-health and societal decline that comes from losing touch with kitchen traditions. Cooks whose traditions fall outside of this narrow definition risk being labeled as deviant and even immoral. Since diversity is the hallmark of the American kitchen—not uniformity—the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs jeopardize the success of their message by alienating the vast numbers of American home cooks who cannot adhere to the tenets of the limited vision of “real” home cooking.

Cooking at Home for a Better Future

Food and cooking have undergone massive changes over the past few generations. What previously seemed to be unchanging constants like food, cooking, and meals have undergone revolutionary redefinition. In the twenty-first century, these concepts are in the alarming gray area of transition as they are in the process of being modified to take into account the new reality of the industrialized food system. For example, “food” now includes Tang, Twinkies, and TV Dinners; “cooking” applies to small plastic packages placed in the microwave and heated for five minutes which, when opened, reveals perfectly steamed vegetables complete with butter sauce; and “meals” can be eaten on-the-go, in-the-car, at any time of the day or night. It is no wonder that many Americans are more than a little bit antsy due to the enormous transformations that took place in food and cooking over the past few decades. Drawing on the familiarity of the jeremiad, the mourners of American home cooking offer the reassurance of certainty: home

cooking *is* dying; the solution *is* found in the past; and reclaiming that past *can* save home cooking. However, this absolute certainty about the past, present, and future of home cooking in America masks the complexities, inconsistencies, and variabilities that mark the *reality* of home cooking practices and traditions.

This is not to say that similar critiques of the American food system are unfounded. In fact, individuals sounding the alarm bells about the modern-day food system *do* have cause for concern. The increased industrialization of agricultural and food production processes has led to the ubiquitous presence of a wide variety of cheap, highly-processed, ready-made foods that are now overflowing supermarket shelves and are always available on the go from fast food restaurants. Critics argue that this bounty has come at a high price to the environment in the form of pollution from chemical fertilizers and pesticides; to the individual with increased risks of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic, and even deadly, illnesses brought on by high-fat, high-calorie diets; and to society which now bears the brunt of healthcare costs associated with the growing obesity epidemic. These concerns are well-founded and deserve attention.

Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is not to silence these very serious, and necessary, critiques of today's food system. Interwoven so intimately with the daily lives of individuals, communities, and society as a whole, food and cooking function as symbolic, and practical, indices of identity. Concepts related to food and cooking such as sustainability, equity in production and distribution, equality in access, impact on the environment, implications for individual and public health, the relationship to establishing and replicating gender roles, should all come under close scrutiny. This is especially true as food and cooking have so often been ignored by scholars and policy-makers in the past as too inconsequential for notice.

However, I contend that the “death of home cooking” narrative deviates from the more substantial appraisals of the American food system in two significant ways. First, the critics ground their assessment of the current state of American cooking practices on a nostalgic view of an idealized past. The assumption that many of these critics hold is that, as Americans turn toward processed foods and away from cooking from scratch, the knowledge, skills, and traditions that have been passed on through generations of American families are being lost forever. Moreover, these doomsayers insist that the loss of this traditional cooking knowledge and skills increases the detrimental effects associated with the modern food system. Pointing to statistics indicating that the obesity rate in the United States is increasing at an astounding rate as proof of the harmful impact of processed foods on people’s health, opponents of the current food system warn that the problem will only get worse—more expensive and even more deadly. For these detractors, the only way to prevent even more severe consequences from over-reliance on fast and processed foods is to halt, or even turn back, the so-called “progress” made by food producers in the last half century. Proponents of a radical overhaul of the American food system point to diets high in fruits and vegetables, low in fatty foods like meats, and void of processed foods as the healthiest route to better eating, healthier lives, and a more just society. They do not need to look far to find what they see as the perfect example of healthy, sustainable, and even more delicious eating habits—they just look to the past. Turning back the clock to a time before food production became a highly industrialized, impersonal system to the period when individual families relied on home gardens and local farms for their food, opponents of the current system see a template for the future of food and cooking in America. For these critics—everything old is new again, but the trouble with their vision is that the past these challengers point to never really existed.

Moreover, while the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs advocate for a return to the cooking practices of the past, and promise a whole host of benefits when this goal is accomplished, no clear picture of what that old-but-new kitchen would look like. In calling for a reawakening of past cooking practices, “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs do a poor job of contending with important factors like race, gender, and class that have infused traditional home cooking practices with deep scars. For many, home cooking does not have a positive legacy, a fact that the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs gloss over in their rush to rescue home cooking. As a gendered chore, the work of the kitchen dominated the lives of generations of women. Returning to the stove holds little appeal for the feminists and women’s rights activists who have struggled for decades to attain the same respect and authority outside the home as their male counterparts. For African-American women, the kitchen is an even more contested site that is infused with the legacy of oppression as generations endured backbreaking toil as servants and slaves in the kitchen of white families. For many Americans, the choice between creating meals from scratch and making food from a box can only make sense when there is access to the necessary ingredients. For low-income families, lack of access to basic foods can arise for many reasons, but has very real impact on their food choices. Mourning home cooking, then, may be a luxury reserved for the rich.

The second weakness of declarations of the imminent demise of American home cooking is the way that the commentators oversimplify the actual situation in the kitchen by reducing the rich complexity of American cooking traditions to a binary opposition between traditional from scratch cooking and modern-day cooking from a box (or not at all). Critics make clear that from scratch cooking is the far superior option—in the source of ingredients, taste, healthfulness, and more—while convenience products and fast foods are demonized as the cause of America’s

problems: the disintegration of the family, the increase in obesity and chronic illnesses, the loss of small farms and growing influence of agribusiness which includes a long list of related maladies from a reduction of biodiversity to the threat of genetically modified foods. What the obituary of American home cooking ignores is the multifaceted practices of home cooks who approach the daily dinner ritual by drawing on a diverse skill set gleaned from a staggering array of sources. The ways in which home cooks approach the tasks of making dinner and sharing meals represents a complex convergence of the forces of tradition and modernity that they must negotiate each time they enter the kitchen suggesting that the realities of the kitchen inhabit a much more nuanced sphere that exists outside of the “death of home cooking” narrative. Far from being a constant clash between traditional from scratch cooking and modern (non) cooking from a box, meal preparation activities are more often a time when home cooks merge influences from both tradition and modernity—picking and choosing the techniques, ingredients, and products that best suit their tastes, time, and identities. Home cooking, then, resists simple categorization and pronouncements of its impending demise are overly simplistic and ripe for deeper analysis.

In the next chapter, I will flip through the pages of popular cookbooks to illustrate the ways in which cookbook authors leverage the tension between modernity and tradition that is harnessed and hyped by the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs into record-setting sales figures. For, over time, the phrase “quick and easy” has transformed from a time-saving guarantee to a promise of recapturing the fulfillment of cooking’s mythological Golden Age. In so doing, I demonstrate that cookbook rhetoric also serves to ramp up anxiety even as authors promise that their recipes and techniques offer a balm against the stresses of modern living.

CHAPTER 4

FROM GRANDMA'S RECIPE BOX: HOW COOKBOOKS SELL COMFORT AND HELP CREATE AMERICA'S CONSUMER COOKS

Cookbooks hit you where you live. You want comfort; you want security; you want food; you want not to be hungry; and not only do you want those things fixed, you want it done in a really nice, gentle way that makes you feel loved. That's a big desire, and cookbooks say to the person who's reading them, "If you will read me, you will be able to do this for yourself and others. You will make everybody feel better."

Laurie Colwin

*More Home Cooking: A Writer Returns to the Kitchen*¹

Even before its release on October 26, 2010, Ina Garten's *Barefoot Contessa How Easy Is That?: Fabulous Recipes & Easy Tips* topped the leading retailers' cookbook bestseller lists at Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble based on pre-orders alone. After its debut, the cookbook rocketed up their *overall* bestseller lists. With a smiling picture of celebrity chef Ina Garten, host of Food Network's program *Barefoot Contessa*, on the cover offering a delectable looking tray of desserts along with the promise of the "easy" recipes found within the book, the cookbook hit all the highlights that make contemporary cookbooks successful. The expertise of a celebrity chef mixed with the promise of easy recipes that allow cooks to produce healthy food for the whole family seems like the magic mixture that almost guarantees a cookbook's popularity.

The question is why this combination of factors—the guidance of an expert cook, easy to prepare recipes, and healthy, delicious foods—is so alluring to Americans that they offer up millions of dollars every year to take these cookbooks home. In fact, as other segments of the publishing industry floundered during weak economy of the "Great Recession," cookbook sales have flourished. "While the [publishing] industry saw a total drop of 4.5 percent in print book

¹ Laurie Colwin, *More Home Cooking: A Writer Returns to the Kitchen* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 10.

sales from 2009 to 2010,” reports Stacy Finz of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “the cookbook category grew by 4 percent.”² Part of this explosion in interest may be explained by the fact that Americans no longer have the money to spend on eating outside the home and are turning to cookbooks for the tips and tricks necessary to make cooking at home easier and more economical.³ However, the explanation that Americans have turned to home cooking due to the economic downturn does not fully explain the amazing popularity of cookery books. Instead, I argue that the allure of cookbooks rests in the idea that home cooks are buying—and publishers are selling—more than just recipes.

In this chapter, I connect the cookbook rhetoric to the “death of home cooking” jeremiad, by illustrating the ways in which cookbooks replicate the same pattern: claiming a that home cooking is in danger of disappearing in the present, seeking the solution in an idealized past, that is used as inspiration to offer an answer in the present—which just happens to be buying the cookbook, of course. For this chapter, I reviewed the contents of nearly one hundred cookbooks. I drew the bulk of my contemporary sources from the cookbook bestseller lists from Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble. To give my reading of cookbook rhetoric a historical context, I visited the Fales Library at New York University. After adding over 21,000 cookbooks to its already extensive collection in 2011, the Fales Library became one of the largest culinary archives in the United States and, in so doing, joined other established cookbook collections like those at Harvard’s Schlesinger Library and the Janice Bluestein Longone Culinary Archive at the University of Michigan as a valuable resource for food scholars.⁴ From

² Stacy Finz, “Cookbook Sales Flourish,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Cookbook-sales-flourish-2373044.php>

³ “Cooking Newbies Turn to Home Dining to Cut Costs,” *USA Today*, September 20, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2008-09-20-eating-in_n.htm

⁴ James Barron, “With Latest Donation, N.Y.U Food Library Joins Big Leagues,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2011, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/05/with-latest-donation-n-y-u-food-library-joins-big-leagues/>

the collection, I selected forty cookbooks spanning the decades between the 1950s through the 1990s.

Following the model of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad, these cookbooks insist that many of life’s pressures make it too difficult to cook and that families are missing out on the benefits of good, home-cooked meals like those enjoyed by American families for generations. The authors promise that, simply by purchasing their cookbooks and following the tips and recipes within the pages, home cooks can create a calmer, more fulfilling cooking experience and bring their families closer together. I argue that what contemporary cookbooks sell is a form of comfort through cooking—what I call “comfort cooking.” To give a sense of the tenor and pervasiveness of this narrative, I quote extensively from the cookbooks throughout this chapter as I demonstrate the way that these cookbook authors deploy the same types of rhetoric as the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. Ultimately, I argue that these cookbooks served to mediate the modern cooking experience, imbuing at home meal preparation with a sense of urgency that, instead of easing American fears, only serves to increase anxiety as home cooks evaluate the reality of their cooking practices against the ideal presented in the pages of these cookbooks and find themselves lacking.

Selling the “Comfort Cooking” Experience

While early cookbooks, such as Amelia Simmons’ *American Cookery* or Fannie Farmer’s *The Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, were no-nonsense cooking manuals aimed at women well-versed in kitchen practices, the language of cookbooks began to change as industrialization, urbanization, and technological advances encroached on the home. Instead of acting like a reference manual or handbook, later cookbooks offered reassurance to home cooks anxious about their skills in the kitchen. Increasingly, these popular cookbooks based their image of

cooks not in reality, but in an idealized fantasy world.⁵ More and more cookbook authors offered a fanciful image of the perfect American kitchen along with the promise that simply purchasing the cookbook would allow American home cooks to align their own cooking with that whimsical vision.

This shift can be seen in Irma Rombauer's wildly popular *The Joy of Cooking: A Compilation of Reliable Recipes with a Casual Culinary Chat* first published in 1931. Included on the New York Public Library's list of "Books of the Century" in 1995 due to Rombauer's particularly notable depth of information and friendly tone.⁶ As Susan Leonardi reveals in her careful reading of the 1951 edition of *The Joy of Cooking*, the "narrative elements" are what give "appeal and usability to the recipes in the book."⁷ Far from a harsh taskmaster or no-nonsense guide to the kitchen, according to Leonardi "the author herself takes on a palpable personality. She jokes, cajoles, condemns, informs, and reflects, and, in the process, creates a person who approaches the first-person narrator of fiction or autobiography, a narrator with faults and failures as well as charms."⁸ This dose of personality is what serves to "entice the reluctant reader" into picking up the cookbook and also sets the tone that transforms the act of making dinner into the "Joy of Cooking."⁹ The enduring popularity of the cookbook, with its many editions and iterations selling millions of copies and raking in millions of dollars, attests to the

⁵ Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 25.

⁶ Elizabeth Diefendorf, *New York Public Library's Books of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198.

⁷ Susan J Leonardi, "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie," *PMLA*, 104, no. 3 (May 1989): 341.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 341.

power of the positive image of cooking that Rombauer created within the pages of her cookbook.¹⁰

If anything, today's cookbook authors have become even more adept at selling a dream world where kitchens run smoothly, recipes turn out right every time and the family eats dinner together each night. Cookbooks sell fantasies—a picture of a calm cook, clean kitchen, and recipes that always turn out delicious.¹¹ What today's cookbooks sell is an experience—one I term “Comfort Cooking.” With “Comfort Cooking” meal preparation transforms into a cure for all of America's anxieties: a growing suspicion that Americans are losing touch not only with each other, but with their roots and traditions; an increasing sense of fear about the sources and safety of the foods available in the marketplace; and an ever more thunderous boom of voices sounding the alarm of the expanding obesity epidemic in the United States. The need for “Comfort Cooking” grew out of changes in food production and distribution and kitchen technologies since the eighteenth century that wrestled cooking expertise away from home cooks and placed it in factors outside their control. The result was the sense of the loss of connection between Americans and their food which also increased anxieties about what to eat and how to prepare it. Similar to comfort foods—dishes, like chicken soup, that not only provide physical nourishment, but also psychological and emotional sustenance as well—“Comfort Cooking” acts as a balm against Americans' deepest fears by promising Americans that they *can* in fact cook. By drawing on nostalgic images of kitchens of the past, these cookbooks create the image that the act of cooking will create a safety zone in the kitchen that will insulate Americans and their families from the dangers of the modern world. In so doing, cookbooks act as training ground

¹⁰ Anne Mendelson, *Stand Facing the Stove: The Story of the Women Who Gave America The Joy of Cooking: The Lives of Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 413.

¹¹ Jeremy MacClancy, “Food, Identity, Identification,” in *Researching Food Habits: Methods and Problems*, ed. Helen MacBeth and Jeremy MacClancy, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 65-66.

for America's consumer cooks—teaching them that if they only buy the proper ingredients, correct culinary implements, and the right cookbooks (theirs of course), Americans will transform into talented cooks whose worries will melt away while following the cookbook's recipes—they can comfort themselves by cooking.

“Quick and Easy” Recipes for “Busy” People

With such an overwhelming onslaught of cookbooks published every year, there should be no surprise that individual cookbook authors attempt to carve out a niche for themselves by appealing to potential readers with the promise that their cookbook offers *the* solution for all life's ills—in and out of the kitchen. The most prevalent promise that pervades cookbooks dealing with everything from appetizers to desserts and everything in between is the assurance that the recipes will be “quick and easy.” At first glance, this guarantee seems to be nothing but a direct rebuttal of cooking's history, and continued reputation, of long hours of horrific drudgery resulting in few rewards for the hapless cook. That the recipes contained within the cookbook are “quick” dispels the idea that cooking the recipes will result in hours upon hours of standing in front of a hot stove. Championing the idea that the recipes are “easy” dumps the perceived drudgery of cooking—chopping ingredients, watching and waiting for water to boil, and even washing dishes—and replaces it with the image of a simpler, and more rewarding, kitchen experience. Certainly, the lasting legacy of the long hours of hard work experienced by previous generations of home cooks is something that cookbooks need to overcome in order to lure what might otherwise be reluctant converts to the kitchen. Peeling back the layers of the “quick and easy” mantra of so many cookbooks reveals that this simple phrase hides complex and evolving meanings that have changed over time.

While the “quick and easy” designation was certainly not unheard of in the years leading

up to World War II, it was in the post-war period that “quick and easy” found particular traction, and a particularly unique meaning. As food producers flooded the market in the 1950s with a staggering array of new frozen, dehydrated, powdered, boxed, and canned foods, cookbooks rapidly tied “quick and easy” claims to the promotion, and use, of these “convenience” products. This was especially true of cookbooks published by food companies and appliance manufacturers that intended to pump up the positives of the new products while acclimatizing novice cooks to their attributes. According to the 1962 edition of *Betty Crocker's New and Easy Cookbook*, “Today's popular convenience foods make it so easy to serve 'almost immediate' dinners. When you use frozen, refrigerated, and canned foods, brown 'n serve rolls, and packaged mixes, you are taking advantage of the work of hundreds of 'silent servants' outside your home. Bring your personal touch to these convenience foods by adding special seasonings and arranging them attractively for serving.”¹² This description of the power of convenience foods in making “quick and easy” cooking possible, as well as its description of the role of the home cook as merely adding creative touches to the finished dish is right in line with Laura Shapiro’s exhaustive investigation of trends in Post-World War II food and cooking. Shapiro explains, that during the 1950s, “...the food industry was overhauling the very concept of ‘cooking.’ In ads and other promotional materials, such traditional cooking chores as cleaning vegetables, chopping ingredients, measuring, and mixing were dismissed as old-fashioned drudgery. The new ‘cooking’ meant opening boxes, defrosting foods, combining the contents of different packages, and decorating the results.”¹³ These foods emphasized progress and modernity. The 1966 cookbook issued by the Campbell’s soup company, *A Campbell's*

¹² Betty Crocker, *Betty Crocker's New Good and Easy Cookbook*, 1st Edition, Illustrated by Rudi Trautmann, (New York: Golden Press, 1962), 59.

¹³ Laura Shapiro, “‘I Guarantee’: Betty Crocker and the Woman in the Kitchen,” in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 30.

Cookbook: Easy Ways to Delicious Meals: 465 Quick-to-Fix Recipes Using Campbell's Convenience Foods, is dedicated to “all the modern, young-thinking cooks who enjoy using convenience foods in quick, easy recipes...to make family meals more tempting, party meals more exciting and their own lives more satisfying.”¹⁴ These cookbooks are forward-looking with an eye on the future.

As the 1960s rolled into the 1970s, convenience products no longer looked so promising after all and cookbook authors, along with American consumers, were no longer so enamored with “convenience” products. While some cookbooks still trumpeted the benefits of convenience-cooking with manufactured foods, a growing number of cookbooks eschewed boxed, canned, and frozen foods. As Jack Van Bibber shares his “prejudice against instant foods” in his 1969 cookbook *Fast Feasts: A Cookbook for Hurried Gourmets*, proclaiming that “It may be an impractical prejudice in our time of pressurized haste, of busily getting and spending, but I am immensely leery of frozen, pre-cooked, dehydrated, brown 'n serve, processed foods. More often than not, when one of these objects sits on my kitchen table, I circle around it, sniff at it suspiciously, cook it about half as long as the manufacturer suggests (by which time it's overdone), taste it, and then sigh for the bygone days of my mother's cooking when this particular temptation did not exist”¹⁵ In fact, many cookbooks authors expressed a deep suspicion of food manufacturers and their products. Cookbook author Marian Burros looked back at her own convenience cooking and cringed. In her 1978 cookbook *Pure & Simple: Recipes for Additive-Free Cooking*, Burros writes, “in the late Fifties and early Sixties...like the vast majority of other Americans I couldn't wait to try the newest convenience product.

Advertising had conned me into believing, just as it had almost everyone else, that what came

¹⁴ Carolyn Campbell, *A Campbell's Cookbook: Easy Ways to Delicious Meals: 465 Quick-to-Fix Recipes Using Campbell's Convenience Foods* (Camden, NJ: Campbell's Soup Company, 1966), 4.

¹⁵ Jack Van Bibber, *Fast Feasts: A Cookbook for Hurried Gourmets* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 4.

out of the laboratories of the big food companies tasted better, was cheaper than anything I could make at home and would save me hours of drudgery in the kitchen.”¹⁶ As Van Bibber and Burros make clear, the promise of “quick and easy” cooking through the use of convenience products began to lose its luster as Americans actually tasted the food and found that “convenience foods do not taste nearly as good as fresh foods.”¹⁷

As the allure of convenience products faded, cookbook authors massaged the definition of “quick and easy” so that it longer meant simply cooking with manufactured products. Instead, “quick and easy” could also mean cooking with ““real” food—fresh food, cooked simply and with care.”¹⁸ As Melvin declares, “The one thing quick and easy doesn't mean here is cooking from jars, cans, packages, and bottles. The recipes are based primarily on fresh meat, fish, and vegetables.”¹⁹ In this updated definition, speed and convenience were not the only values wrapped in the package of “quick and easy”—cookbooks came to include the promise of what David Sutton identifies as the “‘really real’ meal.”²⁰ Cookbooks started to repudiate the fakeness of mass-produced foods. Manners and Manners emphasize fresh ingredients in their vegetarian cookbook and declare that “by being quick and easy, this cuisine may also help do away with the desperate need felt by many people for package convenience foods, with their chemicals and high prices.”²¹ Whether stated outright or implied, these cookbooks represented a turning away from the rush of progress with a return to a happier time when “the world was simpler.”²²

¹⁶ Marian Burros, *Pure & Simple: Delicious Recipes for Additive-Free Cooking* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), 11.

¹⁷ Paula Dunaway Schwartz, *You Can Cook: How to Make Good Food for Your Family and Friends* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), v.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁹ Shelley Melvin, ed, *Quick & Easy*, (Gainesville, Florida: Triad Publishing Company, 1984), 5.

²⁰ David E Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 159.

²¹ Ruth Ann Manners and William Manners, *The Quick and Easy Vegetarian Cookbook* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1978), 11.

²² Maria Luisa Scott and Jack Denton Scott, *The Great American Family Cookbook: America's Favorite Recipes are Family Heirlooms* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), xii.

Cooking for Comfort

At the heart of all definitions of “quick and easy” is the promise of free time. However, the answer to the question “Free time to do what?” was never fully defined.²³ Hirschfeld notes that her 1969 cookbook was “designed for people involved in an enlarging circle of activities, the busy housewife engaged in community affairs, the career girl, the man who likes to cook—for all those who enjoy good food but for whom time is at a premium.”²⁴ However, the reader was left to speculate what exactly the “enlarging circle of activities” might include. Some cookbooks begrudgingly acknowledge that a woman who “runs a household” might have “a job in addition” and that this means that “often the time planned to prepare and serve a good meal disappears into thin air and good intentions.”²⁵ Others emphasize the possibility of leisure time. As the *Better Homes and Gardens After Work Cookbook* puts it simply, “make dinner easily and then relax.”²⁶

The cookbooks often connect “quick and easy” recipes with a single reward—slowing down the pace of life to spend more time with the family. As the editors of the *Eating Well Rush Hour Cookbook* note, “We are often exasperated by the thousand and one demands of modern life—usually just about the time we have to cook dinner. On weeknights, especially, spending less time in the kitchen becomes a clear necessity if we are spend more time at the table, enjoying foods and family. Too often, in the rush, something is compromised: taste, health or the whole joy of making and eating a home-cooked meal.”²⁷ This is the heart of “Comfort Cooking” where the act of cooking itself becomes the magical solution to life’s most pressing problems.

²³ Marian Burros and Lois Levine, *The New Elegant But Easy Cookbook* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 1.

²⁴ Florence Kerr Hirschfeld, *The Countdown Cookbook: An Array of Quick and Delicious Meals with Preparations Timed Minute by Minute* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), xi.

²⁵ *Busy Woman's Cookbook: Containing Short-Cut Cooking and Make-Ahead Cooking: A Completely Revised and Reorganized Edition of the Farm Journal's Timesaving Country Cookbook* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 157.

²⁶ *Better Homes and Gardens After Work Cook Book: 285 Quick and Delicious Dishes Created Specially for the Busy Chef* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 113.

²⁷ *Eating Well Rush Hour Cookbook: Sixty 60-Minute Healthy Meals*, (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1994), 8.

“Comfort Cooking” harkens back to the mythical days when families gathered around the table to eat good, healthy, home-cooked meals together, without returning to the necessity of standing over a hot stove all day stirring a pot.²⁸ “Comfort Cooking” provides the template for a “new life” where cooks “save time in the kitchen, so that you and your family can consistently enjoy together time over delicious, home-cooked meals, and perhaps share meals with others.”²⁹ By reconnecting Americans to the simple act of combining separate ingredients into a finished dish and then sharing the meal with the loved ones, “Comfort Cooking” combats the “...rootlessness, lack of community, and increasing isolation of modern life.”³⁰ There is nothing scary or intimidating about “Comfort Cooking.” As Jessica Seinfeld declares in her cookbook *Deceptively Delicious*, “...I realized that food can be fun and easy to prepare, delicious and satisfying to eat, and a rewarding source of fulfillment that comes from doing something great for the people you love the most.”³¹ The world that these cookbooks offer is one where the act of cooking at home and sharing the results with loved ones acts to cocoon the family from the influences of the big, scary world outside the front door—it is the traditions of the past remade to meet the needs of people living in the present.

According to these cookbooks, the outside world *is* a scary and confusing place that constantly threatens the stability and welfare of the entire family. Convenience foods are an ever present danger, as Fallon and Enig explain, “...we have been dazzled by...fast foods, fractionated foods, convenience foods, packaged foods, fake foods, embalmed foods, ersatz foods—all the bright baubles that fill up the grocery shelves at our grocery stores, convenience

²⁸ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 42.

²⁹ Mimi Wilson and Mary Beth Lagerborg, *Once-A-Month Cooking: Family Favorites* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009), 2

³⁰ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 30.

³¹ Jessica Seinfeld, *Double Delicious!: Good, Simple Food For Busy, Complicated Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 11.

markets, vending machines, and even health food stores.”³² Having succumbed to the allure of these products, Americans are reaping the rewards of a junk food addiction since “the consequence of this type of eating, however, is weight gain and oftentimes heart disease, diabetes, or other health problems, as well as a compromised quality of life, and even premature death.”³³ It is a full-time job to guard against these bad influences for around every corner a villain might lurk, just waiting to lure in unsuspecting shoppers with promises of tasty treats and good deals. As Bissex and Weis exclaim:

It’s a jungle out there. Supermarkets tempt us with buy-one-get-one-free promotions on sugary and salty junk foods but rarely on healthy stuff like broccoli and bananas. Fast food companies entice our children with free toys and special meals that, unbeknownst to many moms, can contain nearly 1,000 calories and over 40 grams of fat. And television ads target our children with offers of prizes, even cash, for buying sugary breakfast cereals and candy. It’s easy to see why lots of people get coaxed into eating too much and too many of the wrong kinds of foods. Indeed, it can be frustrating.³⁴

What is even more alarming is the idea that “food and ingredient decisions are more difficult than ever” not only because of the wide array of choices, but because “companies that make food...will sometimes try...to trick you.”³⁵ That is what makes the “Comfort Cooking” offered in these cookbooks so powerful. In this “aberrant culinary universe,” these cookbooks sell the skills necessary to put Americans back in touch with themselves as cooks, with the foods they eat, and with the families they love.³⁶

³² Sally Fallon with Mary G. Enig, *Nourishing Traditions: The Cookbook that Challenges Politically Correct Nutrition and the Diet Dictocrats*, Revised Second Edition, (Washington, D.C.: New Trends Publishing, Inc., 2001), xi.

³³ Rocco DiSpirito, *Now Eat This!: 150 of America’s Favorite Comfort Foods, All Under 350 Calories*, (New York: Ballantine Books, A Division of Random House, 2010), xiii.

³⁴ Janice Newell Bissex and Liz Weiss, *The Moms’ Guide to Meal Makeovers: Improving the Way Your Family Eats, One Meal at a Time!* (New York: Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 2004), 1.

³⁵ Seinfeld, *Double Delicious*, 9.

³⁶ Mark Sisson and Jennifer Meier, *The Primal Blueprint Cookbook: Primal, Low Carb, Paleo, Grain-Free, Dairy-Free, and Gluten-Free* (Malibu, CA: Primal Nutrition, Inc., 2010), 1.

The first step in comfort cooking is to trust the advice of the expert cook. The expert cooks who have assembled today's bestselling cookbooks promise to act as guides, not only in the kitchen while cooking but also out in the world while assembling the ingredients and equipment necessary to whip up healthy delicious foods. Since many of the cookbook authors are recognizable celebrity cooks with well-established television programs, especially on the Food Network, they have an easier time of attaining the trust of potential buyers. In *Barefoot Contessa How Easy Is That?: Fabulous Recipes and Easy Tips*, Ina Garten shares "tried-and-true Barefoot Contessa recipes that are easy enough to make, but still have all the deep delicious flavor that makes a meal so satisfying."³⁷ Chasing Garten's book up the bestseller list, Rachael Ray, the star of *Thirty Minute Meals*, offers *Rachael Ray's Look + Cook Book* which promises "100 Can't Miss Main Dishes." In *Good Eats: The Early Years* and *Good Eats 2: The Middle Years*, perennial favorite Alton Brown shares two cookbooks based on recipes appearing on his television show, promising that these will soon be followed by a third cookbook because it will be a "trilogy."³⁸ As celebrities, these cookbook authors have the advantage of recognizable names that potential buyers already trust on the basis of their television persona. These professional cooks offer Americans the comfort of inviting a well-known friend into the kitchen to cook with them.

Although many of the cookbooks are written by celebrity chefs, the top 100 bestseller lists on Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble are packed with a variety of cookbooks by unknown or little known cooks. Since these lesser known writers do not have the name recognition that goes along with fame, they must rely on the merits of their books alone to attract buyers. Instead of peddling their cookbooks based on the value of their names alone, these cooks declare that

³⁷ Ina Garten, *Barefoot Contessa How Easy Is That?: Fabulous Recipes and Easy Tips* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010), 11-12

³⁸ Alton Brown, *Good Eats: The Early Years* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 2009), 8.

their cookbook offers *the* plan, *the* recipes, *the* single cookbook that will change life for the better—permanently. Even more than the celebrity chefs, these cookbook authors offer *the* answer to life’s most enduring troubles.

No time to cook? Try *Perfect One-Dish Dinners*, this cookbook “offers a wonderfully filling alternative” because “a memorable dinner can be as simple as bringing one beautifully complete dish to the table.”³⁹ Or, if standing over the stove stirring even one pot takes too much time and causes too much trouble, a crock pot gives the cook the ability to put all the ingredients into a crock pot and simply walk away. As the authors of *Not Your Mother’s Slow Cooker Cookbook* Beth Hensperger and Julie Kaufmann declare, “We ended up appreciating our slow cooker meals and the appliance’s ability to enhance our daily lives. We found that wonderful food does not need to be complicated.”⁴⁰ Even something as complicated as baking a fresh, tasty loaf of bread becomes “easy” with *Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day* which presents Jeff Hertzberg and Zoe Francois unique process “to help people re-create the great ethnic breads of years past, in their own homes, *without investing serious time in the process*. Using our straightforward, fast, and easy recipes, anyone will be able to create artisan bread and pastry at home with minimal equipment.”⁴¹ While it might appear that the variety of plans offered by these cookbooks support the notion of America’s fractured food landscape, virtually all the cookbooks on the bestseller lists share one element in common—they sell comfort cooking. The claim of bestselling cookbooks is simple: buy the book, cook with it, and all your troubles will be over. Each of these cookbooks promises to provide “simple” recipes that help the cook navigate their “daily lives” while creating “memorable” dishes “in their own homes”

³⁹ Pam Anderson, *Perfect One Dish Dinners: All You Need for Easy Get-Togethers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), xiii, xi.

⁴⁰ Beth Hensperger and Julie Kaufmann, *Not Your Mother’s Slow Cooker Cookbook*, (Boston: The Harvard Common Press, 2005), viii

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

that will help them “re-create” the “home-cooked dishes” dishes of the past—all the hallmarks of “comfort cooking.”

As part of the process of gaining the readers’ trust, these cookbook authors portray themselves as equals with the home cook—appearing more as a friend than as a master chef. Even with their credentials firmly in place, neither the celebrity cooks nor the everyday experts use their experience, training, or finely honed skills as a badge of superiority to place themselves above the reader. Instead these experienced cooks offer up their expertise as a guide for the home cook to follow in order to gain familiarity with cooking and gain confidence in the kitchen. These expert guides are not harsh taskmasters; they are the home cook’s biggest fan. “We’re cheering for you!” exclaim Mimi Wilson and Mary Beth Lagerborg authors of *Once-A-Month Cooking: Family Favorites*, “and here’s our promise: we’ll do all we can to help you not only realize your goals, but have a positive experience in the process”⁴² In effect, there is no need to feel nervous about tackling even a tough project in the kitchen because there is a voice of reassurance just a page turn away. Moreover, these bestselling cookbook authors portray themselves as facing and overcoming the same kind of challenges that average Americans worry will prevent them from cooking. As Isa Chandra Moskowitz and Terry Hope Romero authors of *Veganomicon: The Ultimate Vegan Cookbook* declare:

These meals were not born in spotless, stainless-steel, made-for-TV kitchens. The recipes that await you in *Veganomicon* were created by two women who cook, live, and eat in real, urban kitchens. Since we’re both apartment dwellers, these are lessons learned from waging wars with temperamental gas burners, moody ovens, and tiny little cabinets bursting with pots, gadgets, and groceries. This is food made while chatting with significant others, gossiping with friends, and shooing nosy pets off the countertops. In other words, this is the kind of food you make and eat while life happens.⁴³

⁴² Wilson and Lagerborg, *Once-A-Month Cooking*, 2.

⁴³ Isa Chandra Moskowitz and Terry Hope Romero, *Veganomicon: The Ultimate Vegan Cookbook* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2007), xvi.

Overall, these cooks present the idea that they are just like the home cook and, in so doing, take the mystery and fear out of the kitchen. If they can create healthy, simple, delicious meals, so can the cook at home. As even celebrity chef Ina Garten pronounces, “when you get right down to it, I cook pretty much the same way you do; it’s just that after thirty years in the food business, I may have a little more experience.”⁴⁴ By portraying themselves as no different from the home cook, these experts level the playing field and make the home cook their equal. This acts as a form of encouragement to get home cooks into the kitchen to begin cooking (or at least to imagine themselves doing so to make the cookbook an attractive purchase).

The second step in “Comfort Cooking” is to get the home cook into the kitchen. Here is where the power of “quick and easy” comes into play since the promise that the experience will be “quick and easy” is how these cookbooks tackle the seemingly monumental task of luring the home cook into the kitchen. What is the secret to a “quick and easy” cooking experience? Almost universally, these bestselling cookbook authors declare the answer is to have the best ingredients and high quality kitchen equipment on hand and ready to use. As Ina Garten notes, “even with all the great recipes in the world, cooking will never be truly easy without a well-stocked pantry.”⁴⁵ And, it is not “long hours of preparation” that produce “simple, nutritious meals,” but setting “the groundwork ahead of time.”⁴⁶ This means *buying* the right ingredients and selecting the most efficient equipment because “it all starts with smart shopping.”⁴⁷ But, as the cookbooks have already made clear, the outside world is a scary, confusing place. In the marketplace there are conflicting claims about which foods are most nutritious and such a wide variety of kitchen equipment that it is difficult to determine what is good quality and what is

⁴⁴ Garten, *Barefoot Contessa How Easy Is That*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶ Fallon and Enig, *Nourishing Traditions*, 621.

⁴⁷ Seinfeld, *Double Delicious*, 15.

junk. Not to worry! These cookbooks provide the guidance necessary for home cooks to navigate the supermarket and home goods store. Not only do the majority of cookbooks provide long lists of necessary supplies to have on hand, but the reassuring voice of the narrator explains the skills needed for the less experienced home cook to find and purchase the ingredients and equipment that will establish “a well-stocked kitchen” which, in turn, “will transform your life.”⁴⁸ These cookbook authors are ready, and willing, to teach the aspiring home cook the necessary skills to become active, participatory, well-trained consumer cooks.

The entire cooking process begins with the ingredients. Any good cook, or aspiring cook that wants to produce good food, knows that “food that comes out of the pot can only be as good as the ingredients that go into it!”⁴⁹ Moreover, outbreaks of foodborne illnesses like salmonella taint even the freshest fruits and vegetables with the possibility of producing sickening results. This creates a lot of pressure to find and buy the freshest, highest quality ingredients. These cookbooks alleviate that stress by restoring the purchasing power to the home cook, instead of the marketplace by instilling the skills necessary to recognize high-quality ingredients. As Sisson and Meier acknowledge cooks should “use all your senses when you shop—touch and smell produce, let yourself be drawn towards bright, fresh colors and be curious. Read labels, ask questions, and try things you’ve never tried before. Begin establishing relationships with the people you buy food from—you’ll be surprised how much you’ll learn.”⁵⁰ Empowered with new-found knowledge a trip to the grocery store no longer needs to be a daunting excursion into an unknown landscape. With the assistance of these cookbook authors, home cooks can feel comfortable making the right choices when it comes to buying food for their families.

⁴⁸ Barbara Fairchild, *Bon Appetit Desserts: The Cookbook for All Things Sweet and Wonderful* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC., 2010), 19.

⁴⁹ Michele Scicolone, *The Italian Slow Cooker* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 2.

⁵⁰ Sisson and Meier, *The Primal Blueprint Cookbook*, 4.

The same is true for the equipment necessary to combine the ingredients into delicious dishes. Since “cooking is a craft, and a craft requires tools,” the more tools that a cook has, the easier, more efficient, and more enjoyable the cooking process becomes.⁵¹ While “all you really need to cook is a knife, a pot, and a big spoon,” the marketplace offers a plethora of “shiny new things” and strange “gadgets” that might be “great fun” or might just sit on a shelf where it does nothing but “collects dust.”⁵² Most of these cookbooks offer an equipment list to help the home cook choose between “the basics” like “sharp knives, cutting boards, spatulas, pots and pans, measuring cups and spoons” that are necessary for a “well-equipped workspace” and the fancier, more elaborate tools with “all the bells and whistles” that may not be “a necessity” but certainly can “take much of the drudgery out of meal preparation day after day, year after year.”⁵³ These cookbooks list specific recommendations, some complete with detailed pictures and descriptions, which help to take the mystery out of buying the right equipment for the kitchen. However, the authors go beyond merely pointing out what works best, they also offer helpful advice to steer inexperienced cooks away from potential mistakes or disasters. As Moskowitz and Romero share:

Here’s some consumer wisdom we’ve had drilled into our heads: if you can’t afford to buy a quality, well-made kitchen tool, you may be better off without it. Sure, you can buy a peeler for 99 cents at the everything-for-a-dollar store, but will it take the skin off a butternut squash? No. Better to save up the \$8.95 you’ll need for that sturdy all-purpose one the kitchen supply store sells. It’ll last forever. The same goes for pots and pans, and knives and mixers and whatever else. A caveat, though: more expensive does not necessarily mean better! Since this is the technological age, weed through consumer reviews on such shopping sites as Amazon.com to see which ones are best.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Thomas Keller, *Ad Hoc at Home* (New York: Artisan, 2009), 7.

⁵² Moskowitz and Romero, *Veganomicon*, 11.

⁵³ Sisson and Meier, *The Primal Blueprint Cookbook*, 8-9.

⁵⁴ Moskowitz and Romero, *Veganomicon*, 11.

The combination of detailed buyer's guides, complete with listings of the best stores to buy each type of equipment, with the friendly advice from the expert cooks helps to restore the home cook's confidence and alleviate any anxiety that might surround purchasing a particularly expensive kitchen machine. After all, buying the best kitchen equipment is not just an investment in a well-stocked kitchen, but it offers the additional pay out in the form of a happy, healthy home.

Under the tutelage of these cookbook authors, the home cook transforms into a confident consumer cook comfortable navigating the vast array of food and equipment choices available for sale. Now that the cabinets are fully stocked and the food processor is ready to run, it is time to start cooking! But wait—cooking is even more intimidating than buying ingredients and equipment. “Don’t worry,” these cookbooks almost universally declare, you do not need to be “genius” to cook.⁵⁵ The third step in comfort cooking is to give readers confidence in themselves as cooks. These cookbooks declare that with the right amount of practice, and the help of these cookbooks, anyone can create good, tasty food for the whole family. As Quinn declares “the secret rites of the kitchen need not be a mystery. Slowly build your specialized cooking knowledge, day after day, as you cook for the ones you love.”⁵⁶ This may seem like a complex commitment to an overly daunting task, especially when there are quicker more convenient options, but as Rocco DiSpirito reminds the timorous cook:

Before you throw up your hands and walk into a McDonalds and order another no-so Happy Meal, consider this: When you cook, you are in control of everything you put into your pan and thus into your body. You decide how many calories and how many fat grams you eat in a given day. You can still eat a version of your favorite foods. But you have to cook it. You have to make the

⁵⁵ Angie Dudley, *Cake Pops: Tips, Tricks, and Recipes for More Than 40 Irresistable Mini Treats* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 7.

⁵⁶ Lucinda Scala Quinn, *Mad Hungry: Feeding Men and Boys, Strategies & Survival Techniques, Bringing Back the Family Meal* (New York: Artisan, 2009), xi.

choice to step into the kitchen instead of pulling into the drive-through or turning to highly processed prepared foods because it seems more convenient.⁵⁷

These cookbooks offer the skills necessary to avoid the fast food trap by cooking healthy meals at home—skills the authors declare that anyone can master. With a friendly adviser, detailed recipes, and elaborate illustrations, these cookbooks demystify the kitchen and make it a welcoming place for anyone interested in cooking. Expert cooks, like Sisson and Meier, offer well-honed, common-sense advice with guidelines on even the most basic kitchen know-how:

If you are a beginner in the kitchen, start by reading all the way through a recipe before you begin. Don't be put off by long ingredient lists, as they don't necessarily mean a recipe is going to be more difficult. Give yourself enough time to cook without feeling rushed. As you gain confidence in the kitchen you'll be amazed by how quickly you can get a meal on the table. Be prepared for some things not to turn out as expected and for some recipes to not match your palate. The more you cook, the more comfortable you become with changing recipes to suit your personal tastes.⁵⁸

The goal is to help otherwise timid beginner cooks begin to gain confidence in their cooking and for these home cooks to engage in “comfort cooking.” These cookbooks demonstrate that not only does “home cooking feel good” but it will help alleviate the pressures and troubles that threaten American families; just “cook good, honest food and the rest will take care of itself.”⁵⁹ “Comfort Cooking” is cooking that not only produces delicious foods, but rewards the cook's efforts by drawing the family together for shared meals that ultimately lead to healthier, happier homes. Now that the readers have placed their trust in the cookbook authors, bought the books, and started cooking—it is time to reap the benefits of “comfort cooking.”

The first benefit of “Comfort Cooking” is that it allows the reader to gain an identity as a *cook*. The process of cooking itself acts to “calm the cook” as they shut out the stresses of everyday life and immerse themselves in the enjoyable task of providing healthy food for the

⁵⁷ DiSpirito, *Now Eat This!*, xiv.

⁵⁸ Sisson and Meier, *The Primal Blueprint Cookbook*, 8.

⁵⁹ Quinn, *Mad Hungry*, xi.

family.⁶⁰ With “Comfort Cooking” the kitchen becomes a source of pleasure instead of a source of stress. Cooking is an “ongoing process, one you should take pleasure in. The more pleasure you take from cooking, the more fun you have in the kitchen, the better your food will be!”⁶¹ Cooking can be a rewarding experience that provides fulfillment for the cook and the cook’s family. Even for those who still “don’t love to cook, you can at least take pleasure in the fact that you’re doing something good for the people you love”⁶² For, as Seinfeld declares, “when you feed your family good food, I assure you, you will feel like you are doing a good job”⁶³ This promise of fulfillment through “Comfort Cooking” appeals to busy Americans who feel as if their lives have spun out of control. “Comfort Cooking” restores the individual cook’s control of the foods that they cook and serve to their family.

The second benefit of “Comfort Cooking” promised in these cookbooks is that it allows the cook to reconnect with the raw ingredients of the foods they cook. Gone is the guilt associated with relying on unhealthy fast foods or questionable convenience foods, replaced with the satisfaction that the food you cook is healthy and delicious and shared with love. Just by following the recipes in these cookbooks, the home cook ushers in a “whole new eating experience” that is “all about fulfillment—and vitality—from here on out.”⁶⁴ “Comfort Cooking” means that the home cook no longer needs to worry about mystery meat or unidentifiable ingredients in the foods their family eats. As the water boils, the bacon sizzles, and the cake bakes, the home cook is secure in the knowledge that they have touched the food they eat and understand its components. As Quinn declares, “so no matter how busy you are, sauté that

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Perfect One Dish Dinners*, xi.

⁶¹ Keller, *Ad Hoc at Home*, 3.

⁶² Quinn, *Mad Hungry*, xvii.

⁶³ Seinfeld, *Double Delicious*, 10.

⁶⁴ Sisson and Meier, *The Primal Blueprint Cookbook*, 2.

onion, rip up fresh basil, or slow-roast a pork shoulder. That's all it takes to fill their sense memory and make your family feel good for a lifetime"⁶⁵

And that connection to family is the ultimate reward of "Comfort Cooking." As Seinfeld declares, "the benefits of good, healthy food go beyond the well-being of each individual. Good food makes us a happy, harmonious family."⁶⁶ Recipes in these cookbooks are "quick and easy" because that gives the home cook "ways to spend meaningful time around the family dinner table"⁶⁷ The time spent enjoying food with the family forges bonds that the busy, modern American life has otherwise severed. "Comfort Cooking" provides the opportunity to reconnect with loved ones without the hustle and bustle of daily life intruding for "to be able to sit around the table, passing food, sharing stories of the day, with the sense that for an hour or so, the outside world can be set aside, is a gift to embrace."⁶⁸ These cookbooks become the vehicle through which the gift of spending time with the family is created through the act of "comfort cooking." Wilson and Lagerborg sum up the essence of "Comfort Cooking" best:

After the shopping, after the cooking, the days roll along, may you discover that these dishes are an enticement to the table. The aroma of a home-cooked meal, and the sight of a set table, create the sense of anticipation that is the definition of welcome. Add conversation that goes wider and deeper than what happened at work today or who misbehaved, and you will nourish people, build your family, and create good memories for other days.⁶⁹

For in "Comfort Cooking" the food is the excuse for the meal and the cookbook is the excuse for the food, but what really matters are the connections and memories that bring the family together.

⁶⁵ Quinn, *Mad Hungry*, xi.

⁶⁶ Seinfeld, *Double Delicious*, 10.

⁶⁷ Wilson and Lagerborg, *Once-A-Month Cooking*, 2.

⁶⁸ Keller, *Ad Hoc At Home*, 1.

⁶⁹ Wilson and Lagerborg, *Once-A-Month Cooking*, 11.

The Ideal Versus The “Real”

This homey image of a happy family taking a break from the hectic goings on of the day to gather around the dinner table, lazily chatting about the day’s happenings while enjoying each other’s company is representative of the power of these nostalgic imaginings of American home cooking in the twenty-first century. Paul Hower and Douglas Brownlie, researchers whose expertise relates to the connection between consumers and culture, would recognize the allure of the rhetoric of “Comfort Cooking.” In their article, “Consumer Culture Matters: Insights from Contemporary Representations of Cooking,” Hower and Brownlie argue that contemporary cookbooks offer more than just recipes for tasty food, but give “*recipes for life* instructing [consumers] on the whys and wherefores of consuming, providing quick, easy and tailored solutions to time-strapped, harried consumers to resolve in an imaginary fashion the problems of contemporary life.”⁷⁰ This promise of quick and easy remedies to the stresses of modern life is at the heart of “Comfort Cooking.” But Hower and Brownlie go further in their analysis to suggest that within the pages of many cookbooks the kitchen undergoes a “magical transformation” in which it is “stripped of drudgery, toil and failure” and becomes “a space of magical self-realisation and imagined social affiliation”⁷¹ In other words, this cookbook rhetoric not only removes all of the barriers that typically prevent modern Americans from making dinner—lack of time, lack of skill, lack of motivation—but also imbues the kitchen with a sense of peace, well-being, and tranquility that seals it away from the hustle and bustle of modernity. For Hower and Brownlie, contemporary cookbooks represent “the emergence of...a mystification of the kitchen itself, as a pocket of resistance, a location of magical practices. The kitchen space is represented as a site where acts of apparent mundane consumption assume the form of

⁷⁰ Paul Hower and Douglas Brownlie, “Consumer Culture Matters: Insights from Contemporary Representations of Cooking,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, 34, (2007): 175.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

extraordinary consumption...wherein cooking....becomes a tactic to make the kitchen space habitable. A counter-discourse to all those notions of junk food and convenience, where the logic of *doing the right thing* is the order of the day.”⁷² Therefore, Hewer and Brownlie would agree with cookbook author Raymond Sokolov who, in *The New Cookbook: An Easy Imaginative Guide for Getting Started in the Kitchen*, declared that his work was “*subversive*” because it encouraged cooking from scratch as opposed to the “stultifying trend” of using “cake mixes, bottled dressings, frozen pizzas” and other convenience products.⁷³ For Sokolov, as for Hewer and Brownlie, cookbooks undermine the trend toward convenience cooking by offering an alternative vision of “real” home cooking.

I disagree. While I too identify the rhetoric of “Comfort Cooking” within contemporary cookbooks, I would argue that cookbooks do not simply create a counter-narrative to convenience. Instead, through their nostalgic imaginings of ideal home cooking, popular cookbooks play a significant role in sustaining and enhancing the “death of home cooking” jeremiad since within the pages of these cookbooks the ideal is pitted against the real and only home cooking can bridge the gap between the two. Typical of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad, cookbook rhetoric paints a picture of modern kitchens as lacking (good food, good cooks, good conversation) while drawing on an idealized, nostalgic image of the perfection of past cooking as they simultaneously offer their recipes and techniques as the ultimate solution that will align the real with the ideal. While not all cookbooks engage in this type of rhetoric, the formula is so pervasive—crossing genres, eras, and target audiences—that its presence speaks to the power of the sense of a deep chasm between chaos and calm—the lived and the imagined—that pervades the modern American home cooking. The tension between the perceived

⁷² Ibid., 178.

⁷³ Raymond Sokolov, *The New Cook Cookbook: An Easy Imaginative Guide for Getting Started in the Kitchen* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1986), 13.

perfection of the idealized kitchen and the ramped up unruliness of “real” life as depicted in these popular cookbooks serves to reinforce the sense of failure that many home cooks feel every time they open a can or pop a frozen dinner in the microwave instead of cooking from scratch (or at the very least preparing a recipe from one of these cookbooks).

The reality presented in these popular cookbooks is more real than real—it’s hyper-real; home cooks are more harried, dinner is more difficult, and family members are more finicky than in any actual scenario. In these cookbooks, the response to the question “What am I going to fix for dinner?” isn’t a plan, but “panic.”⁷⁴ Bissex and Weiss capture this sense of overwhelmed urgency writing that “you run in a million different directions all day—working, carpooling, volunteering, buying birthday presents, folding laundry, picking up toys, making beds, flushing toilets (let’s not get too graphic here), setting up play dates, and hopefully squeezing in a quick workout. But just when you want to sit down and catch your breath, IT’S DINNERTIME! You scramble to pull something, just anything, together because everyone is hungry and homework still needs to get done. Somehow you do it. You manage to feed your family.”⁷⁵ And if dinner isn’t “desperate” it’s a depressing drag.⁷⁶ As McMillen insists, “Unless you love to cook and look forward to time in the kitchen, it can be depressing to think of going home and facing yet another chore. Some days you may be so preoccupied that dinner doesn’t matter much. On other days you may not feel like cooking because you’re simply too tired. Worst of all, perhaps, are the days when you just run out of ideas, when you’re bored with every dish you can think of and life seems like eternal February.”⁷⁷ These passages highlight the way in which “real life” cooking

⁷⁴ Pat McMillen, *The Working Woman's Cookbook & Entertainment Guide* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1983), 1.

⁷⁵ Bissex Newell, and Weiss, *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers*, 3-4.

⁷⁶ Beverly Mills and Alicia Ross, *Desperation Dinners: Home-Cooked Meals for Frantic Families in 20 Minutes Flat*, (New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), ix.

⁷⁷ McMillen, *The Working Woman's Cookbook & Entertainment*, 2.

bounces between immediate, rushed emergencies and ceaseless, boring chores within the pages of popular cookbooks. Whether home cooking is presented as disorder or tedium, one thing is constant—dinner is disappointing. “*This* is dinner?” Fritschner asks incredulously as she evaluates another disappointing, in a rush, meal.⁷⁸ Not to fret! Lurking behind the scenes of these dinner disasters is “a different way, a better way” – the way to the home cooking ideal.⁷⁹

While the “reality” of today’s home cooking is presented in great detail, the home cooking ideal is more often explained in terms of what is missing or has been lost. Cookbook authors acknowledge that this ideal is often perceived as out-of-reach and unattainable; the ideal cook is someone else, the ideal kitchen is somewhere else, and the ideal meal happens only for other families. It is “an idyllic little picture of a foreign land you hope to visit someday...” but not an immediate reality.⁸⁰ As Irina Chalmers exclaims, “Every working parent knows that the period between leaving work and making dinner is not always the idyllic time some like to imagine. It must be only in other households that everyone arrives home at the same minute, full of smiles, brimming with happiness and offering to help”⁸¹ The image of the ideal points to “a friend’s ability to come home from work and seemingly without trouble prepare and serve a delicious meal” – something to be “envied” because it is so unreachable.⁸² These descriptions of the perfect, non-harried home cook are images of the home cooking ideal are situated in the past. This vision is steeped in nostalgia for “...a simpler time—a time when folks worked the land, when take-out food was the exception, not the rule, and when decency, kindness, and hard work

⁷⁸ Sarah Fritschner, *Express Lane Cookbook: Real Meals for Really Busy People* (Shelburne, Vermont: Chapters Publishing, LTD., 1995), 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁰ Jenny Rosenstrach, *Dinner, A Love Story: It All Begins at the Family Table* (New York: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), xx.

⁸¹ Irina Chalmers, *The Working Family's Cookbook* (New York: Barron's, 1990)

⁸² *Better Homes and Gardens After Work Cook Book*, 167.

were the measure of a person's success.”⁸³ As Nissenberg, Bogle and Wright articulate, “In times gone by, family meals used to be all-day affairs. The planning, shopping, cooking and table setting were all detailed, time-consuming events, culminating with the family gathered around the dinner table (all at the same time!) for a leisurely meal and conversation about the day's events and world affairs in general. Not anymore. Times have changed.”⁸⁴ That “times have changed” signals the broad gap between the “real” of modern life and the picture of the “ideal” of the perfect past.

This gap—between the real and the ideal—leads to one thing: guilt. This sense of guilt infuses the narrative of many of these popular commercial cookbooks. There is an underlying sense that the kitchen is “a place filled with guilt and the idea of what we ‘should’ be making.”⁸⁵ But even though “these cooks *want* family dinners” and “think they *ought* to prepare them,” the reality presented in these cookbooks is much different.⁸⁶ Instead of cooking meals, the harried cooks “just throw up our hands and say, ‘Let's order in,’ or ‘Let's eat out!’ Or else settle for that sad pre-fab dinner lurking in the back of the freezer.”⁸⁷ And, as Ely notes “the result” of “skipping the whole thing and driving through for fast food” is “guilt over the money spent and the nutrition lost, and a strong sense that somehow, because of all this, the family is suffering and missing out.”⁸⁸ This guilt is caused by the distance between the “reality” of rushing to make dinner each night and the fantasy of a world where the “job of providing nourishing meals” is

⁸³ Ree Drummond, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Recipes from an Accidental Country Girl* (New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2009)

⁸⁴ Sandra K., Nissenberg, Margaret L. Bogle, and Audrey C. Wright, *Quick Meals for Healthy Kids and Busy Parents: Wholesome Family Recipes in 30 Minutes or Less From Three Leading Child Nutrition Experts* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995), 1.

⁸⁵ Alana Chernila, *Homemade Pantry: 101 Foods You Can Stop Buying & Start Making* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2012), 9.

⁸⁶ Fritschner, *Express Lane Cookbook*, 11.

⁸⁷ Jeanne Besser and Susan Puckett, *The 5:30 Challenge: 5 Ingredients, 30 Minutes, Dinner on the Table* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 2.

⁸⁸ Leanne Ely, *Saving Dinner: The Menus, Recipes, and Shopping Lists to Bring Your Family Back to the Table* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), xi-xii.

“manageable, fun, and ultimately a simple way of life.”⁸⁹ The hope offered by these cookbooks is that the two—the real and the ideal—can become one. As one frantic mother exclaims, “I feel like if I could just get my act together to make dinner for my kids, then everything else would fall into place”⁹⁰

These authors offer their cookbooks as the bridge between the two extremes—the hectic, harried, frantic pace of modern society and the slower, relaxed, enjoyable experience of cooking and serving a delicious, healthy meal for the family. As the editors of the *Better Homes and Gardens After Work Cookbook* put it simply, “Remember, busy schedules and home-cooked meals can be coordinated. Just use the variety of recipes and helps in the *After Work Cook Book* and make the most of your limited time.”⁹¹ Aviva Goldfarb makes a similar promise in her cookbook *The Six O’clock Scramble* writing that, “These recipes—and the advice and hints sprinkled through the book—are tried and true with everyone’s families in mind...and the loving cooks who want to turn the Six O’Clock Scramble into a successful, even relaxing, time that can bring their family together or a wonderful dinner.”⁹² According to many of these authors, following the recipes, and advice, in their cookbooks means that “you can have a great meal—and time to enjoy it.”⁹³ These cookbooks sell a vision of a better life—one that remedies the problems of modern living by drawing real life closer to the ideal. Rosentrach sums up the transformation through her description of the results she hopes readers will reap from using her recipes:

My hope is that this collection of recipes and stories might offer a game plan, or at least a little inspiration, for any home cook at any level. It is as much for the

⁸⁹ Newell Bissex and Weiss, *The Moms’ Guide to Meal Makeovers*, xv.

⁹⁰ Rosenstrach, *Dinner, A Love Story*, xvii.

⁹¹ *Better Homes and Gardens After Work Cook Book*, viii.

⁹² Aviva Goldfarb, *The Six O’Clock Scramble: Quick, Healthy, and Delicious Dinner Recipes for Busy Families* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 2.

⁹³ Margaret Happel, *Quick Dinner Menus: Fast, Family-Pleasing Meals in Minutes* (New York: Butternick Publishing, 1979), 5

novice who doesn't know where to start as it is for the gourmand who doesn't know how to start *over* when she suddenly finds herself feeding an intractable toddler stuck in a whit-food-only phase. This book is for the person who never though too hard about home-cooked meals until the moment he or she became a parent. It's for mothers and fathers—working, staying home, single, divorced, any kind—who crave more quality time with their children and have a sneaking suspicion that the answer may lie in the ritual of family dinner, in the ritual of sitting down together at the end of the day to slow down and listen to each other. This book is, in fact, for *anyone* interested in learning how to execute a meal to be shared with someone they love and discovering how many good, happy things can trickle down from doing so. In other words, I'm thinking this book might just be for everyone.⁹⁴

These cookbooks promise that they are “one of the best investments you'll ever make” and not only because the recipes are “short and easy to follow” and “guaranteed to be delicious.”⁹⁵ These cookbooks promise that they “will help you and other lovers of good food to cook and enjoy delicious meals not matter how hectic your schedules” and that both cooks and eaters will “end every meal feeling relaxed, civilized and beautifully fed.”⁹⁶

However, by drawing on an idealized image of the perfect kitchen, cookbooks offer an unattainable promise. As such “a cookbook becomes in large part a fantasy item.”⁹⁷ Cookbooks offer readers a new identity—that of “a cook” who makes delicious meals while avoiding the tedium and drudgery of kitchen work and results in harmonious relationship-building within the family. However, this new identity is “rooted in nostalgia that attempts to recreate a home life reflecting the ideals of a nonexistent past.”⁹⁸ Cookbooks join with other culinary texts –food advertising, cooking television programs, government nutritional messaging, articles in newspapers and magazines—to permeate American society with this idealized, nostalgic image

⁹⁴ Rosenstrach, *Dinner, A Love Story*, xxii.

⁹⁵ Ruth H. Brent, *The Keep It Short & Simple Cookbook: No More than 4 Ingredients in Each Recipe* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), x.

⁹⁶ Ann Walsh, *Good Food Fast: Food Wine Magazine's Menu Cookbook* (New York: American Express Publishing Corporation, 1985), 7.

⁹⁷ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 170.

⁹⁸ Carlita Greene, “Shopping for What Never Was: The Rhetoric of Food, Social Style and Nostalgia,” in *Food for Thought: Essays on Eating and Culture*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 43.

of home cooking. As Greene argues, “whether we consciously consider it or not, nostalgia is being used within popular cultural texts...to call us forth by continually creating desires to imbue our daily lives with a sense of the past. Again, they seem to suggest that we too can capture this supposed quaint, warm, and loving time of domestic bliss if we only add a little pinch of this spice to our pot roasts, decorate our kitchen for the holidays by using a sprig of rosemary...”⁹⁹ A search for cookbooks containing the word “tradition” on Amazon.com returns over 1,500 options while more than triple that number of titles appear for the keywords “quick and easy,” indicating a tension between the desire to recapture the past, while living with the complexities of the twenty-first century. As a popular form of cooking-related discourse, cookbooks serve as mediators between the real life that home cooks experience in their own kitchens and the idealized picture found within the pages of the cookbooks. However, since this reality falls short of the ideal, the nostalgic imaginings of today’s popular cookbooks only serve to reinforce the sense of loss that provokes the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. Today’s cookbooks harken back to the days when home cooked meals created a sense of family and community (whether or not those days actually existed) and offer comfort in the promise that the act of cooking will restore Americans’ ability to enjoy the process of preparing healthy, delicious foods for the family to share together as a memorable meal. However, the recipe for happy, healthy homes prescribed by these cookbooks is ultimately untenable because its key ingredient is nothing but a fantasy that will always remain out of reach.

Haunted by Hate: The Legacy of Race in the Kitchen

The fantasy endorsed by bestselling cookbooks is predicated on the idea that home cooks will find comfort and pleasure in the kitchen. This imagining of the work of the cook ignores the fact that, for millions of Americans, home cooking may be infused with negative connotations

⁹⁹ Ibid., 43-44.

and memories. In choosing to identify themselves as cooks, African-American women in particular must first contend with a legacy of oppression and hatred that still infuses the kitchen with tension. For generations, white families exploited the labor of African-American women as slaves and servants—especially in the kitchen where they remained anonymous even as their recipes and cooking techniques helped to shape southern foodways.¹⁰⁰ This exploitation, and influence, of African-American cooks, can be seen in recipes—like the one for beaten biscuits which, like their name implies, required repetitive “beating” by hand to assure the correct texture—which remained popular in the south even though they were very labor intensive.¹⁰¹ In fact, a biscuit beating machine was invented only *after* the end of the Civil War when African-American women had the freedom to refuse to make the dish.¹⁰² Left with the choice to beat the biscuits themselves, either by hand or using the still-labor-intensive machine, or go without, white Southern women chose the latter. For African-American women whose forebears endured such hardships the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs’ invitation to return to the kitchen resonates not with pleasant images of comfort, but with the enduring essence of oppression.

The presence of African-American cooks in the American kitchen transformed into a powerful weapon of social inequality and racism when it was solidified into the image of the “mammy.”¹⁰³ In her book, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, historian Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, succinctly describes the legacy of this figure:

‘Mammy’ is part of the lexicon of antebellum mythology that continues to have a provocative and tenacious hold on the American psyche. Her large dark body and her round smiling face tower over our imaginations causing more accurate representations of African American women to wither in her shadow. The

¹⁰⁰ Rick McDaniel, *An Irresistible History of Southern Food: Four Centuries of Black-Eyed Peas, Collard Greens, Whole Hog Barbecue*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), 21-23.

¹⁰¹ Schenone, *Thousand Years Over a Hot Stove*, 83.

¹⁰² Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 41-42.

¹⁰³ M.M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 18-19.

mammy's stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to white—all point to a long lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia.¹⁰⁴

This image—of the fat, jolly, bandana wearing, motherly black woman—has been pervasive in everything from advertising to literature.¹⁰⁵ The image of the mammy persists, even in the twenty-first century, in the form of “the logo of Aunt Jemima and her lesser-known sister, Mrs. Butterworth” who “make the Mammy an image that was as common and comfortable as a warm breakfast of pancakes and syrup.”¹⁰⁶ The continuing presence of the mammy is what Rafia Zafar names “the reigning ghosts of American racism.”¹⁰⁷ That is why choosing to cook or choosing not to cook holds a different meaning for African-American women. For, as Zafar declares, “popularly held misconceptions about Black cooks haunt, consciously or not, the African American woman.”¹⁰⁸

The multiple levels of meaning associated with African-American food and cooking becomes apparent in discussions of “Soul Food.” On one hand, Soul Food represents an outgrowth of African-American pride in African origins, an embracing of the influence of their cuisine on popular American foods and culture, and the recognition of the vibrant nature of African-American traditions.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, many of the dishes designated as “Soul Food” come with a legacy of racism—watermelon, black eyed peas, collard greens. Fried

¹⁰⁴ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Williams Woys Weaver, “The Dark Side of Culinary Ephemeria: The Portrayal of African Americans,” *Gastronomica*, 6, no. 3 (Summer 2006) 76-81.

¹⁰⁶ Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 159.

¹⁰⁷ Rafia Zafar, “The Signifying Dish: Autobiography and History in Two Black Women's Cookbooks.” *Feminist Studies*, 25, no.2 (Summer 1999): 450.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Frederick Douglas Opie, *Hog & Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

chicken in particular is permeated with conflicting meanings. The link between African-Americans consuming fried chicken and racist stereotypes is still so strong that invoking the image can result in controversy—a lesson that African-American musician Mary J. Blige learned when she starred in an advertisement Burger King’s fried chicken wrap where she sang the praises of the meal.¹¹⁰ In April 2012, even before the television spot hit the airwaves, critics lambasted the fast food chain and the advertisement’s star for insensitivity to the fried chicken stereotypes associated with African-Americans. Stinging from the unexpected backlash, Blige apologized and admitted that the commercial had been “a mistake.”¹¹¹ Blige’s surprise at the public’s reaction to the commercial is understandable since fried chicken *is* an important food for many African-Americans. Despite the stereotypes, African-American families cook, eat, and enjoy fried chicken. Moreover, as food scholar Psyche Williams-Forsen reveals in her book *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, the choice to make fried chicken is not just about stereotypes, for the African-American women who cook this meal it is also about “self-definition, self-actualization, and self-discovery” as the women cook fried chicken in spite of negative stereotypes while formulating the meaning of the food for themselves and their families even as they negotiate their identity as an African-American cook.¹¹²

At the heart of the issue of portrayals of African-Americans consuming fried chicken is power—the power to define the African-American experience. This is the power that the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs appropriate for themselves with their declaration of a singular

¹¹⁰ “Mary J. Blige: Burger King Chicken Ad Fallout ‘Crushed Me,’ ‘My Heart Dropped Down to my Stomach,’ says Singer” *Rolling Stone*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/mary-j-blige-burger-king-chicken-ad-fallout-crushed-me-20120628>

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Psyche A. Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 220-221.

definition of “real” home cooking. A core aspect of this definition is the idea that making meals from scratch at home is a pleasurable and rewarding experience. The portrayal of the positive aspects of home cooking are distilled into the “Comfort Cooking” formula presented in twenty-first century bestselling cookbooks. The failure of the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs and the cookbook authors to grapple with the fact that cooking is not always a pleasurable experience and that the act of making meals, especially for African-American women, is a site of contention and constant negotiation, reveals an underlying weakness of the narrative’s structure. The “death of home cooking” jeremiad is unable to adapt to the complexities of the kitchen—including the lasting legacy of racism—and, as such, serves to create a vision of the American home cook that excludes the experiences of countless women.

However, the “death of home cooking” jeremiad—with its emphasis on comfort and nostalgia—remains alluring. The next chapter details how convenience products—the villains of the “death of home cooking” narrative—exploit the gap between the realities of daily meal preparation and “ideal” home cooking by imbuing their products with ideas like “homemade,” “comfort,” and the benefits of the family dinner. I identify three patterns in convenience food marketing—“homemade without being made at home,” “home cooking without cooking,” and “let us do the cooking for you”—that promise all the benefits of “real” home cooking, but without investing the time or effort necessary to cook from scratch. While “death of home cooking” Jeremiah’s place the blame for the deskilling of home cooks on these very same products, I argue that consumers use these products as solutions to daily problems in ways that run counter to the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. I contend that a dialogue that takes into account the complexities of the needs of home cooks in the twenty-first century is necessary to form a more nuanced understanding of home cooking in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 5

BRAND NAME “GRANDMA”: SELLING TRADITION TO AMERICAN HOME COOKS

I, too, keep Hamburger Helper in the house. I *like* Hamburger Helper. I also hate myself for liking it. It's the same with all the convenience foods I buy. Nothing is more embarrassing in the checkout line than a neon-red bag of Ore-Ida Tater Tots or a family-size box of Stouffer's lasagna. I tell myself I can hardly be the only person buying this stuff. Look at the Ore-Ida products alone—that freezer's as big as a barn! But deep down I know I'm the worst mom on earth. I'm lining the pockets of Industrial Food and poisoning my family—*all because I'm serving them something they like.*

Ann Hodgman
The Atlantic Magazine – June 2004¹

Nestled in a quiet corner of a not-so-busy strip mall, Dream Dinners in Lancaster, Pennsylvania can be easy to overlook. Not quite a restaurant and not quite a grocery store and with much of its make-and-take meal business based on appointment-only sessions, the nondescript storefront looked almost too deserted when I arrived. I knew I was in the right place, however, when I saw two women hop out of a dark blue mini-van, grab wheeled coolers out of the back, and roll confidently into the establishment. I trailed behind, holding the door as the pair proved further knowledgeable about the Dream Dinners experience, parking their coolers near the entrance, grabbing aprons off hooks on the wall, and lining up to wash their hands at a stainless steel sink glittering conspicuously in a back corner. I hesitated, taking stock of the layout of the room. With darkly hued harvest orange walls, wood accents, and a tall hutch, the

¹ Ann Hodgman, “What’s For Dinner?: Convenience Foods Have Been Doing Battle With Old-Fashioned Cooking for Half a Century. Which Side is Winning?” *The Atlantic Magazine*, June 2004, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/06/what-s-for-dinner/302963/>

décor exuded the quaint charm of a country kitchen while gleaming stainless steel hinted at a high-end, though not quite commercial, home kitchen. A large, glass-fronted refrigerator on my left provided space for customers to store their completed dishes and a matching freezer to my right displayed already packaged meals complete with heating directions and price tag. The primary work area was arrayed in front of me in a rough “U” shape made up of surfaces that looked more like the kind found in sandwich shops—a flat table top in front with a cooled cavity behind for storing perishable ingredients—than standard home kitchen counters. Noticeably, there were no stoves, ovens, or other appliances for heating food.

“May I help you?” a smiling employee asked as she approached from the back of the store.

“My name’s Jennifer and I placed an order online” I replied, not sure if I had given enough identifiable information.

“Ah yes” she said as she began rifling through a container filled with packets of paperwork, “Here you are!” she exclaimed, retrieving one of the bundles. As she handed me an apron and guided me to the sink to wash my hands, she explained that my information packet included a card for each of the dishes I had purchased from the Dream Dinners website when I made my appointment. All I needed to do was find the workstation for each dish and follow the “recipe” provided on a card at the station. “Make sure to wash your hands between each dish!” she declared before jaunting off to the front of the store to greet the next customer. “That seems easy enough,” I thought, as I donned the apron and vigorously scrubbed my hands with anti-bacterial soap.

Luckily, the workstation for the first meal I ordered, “Chicken Enchiladas,” was located near the sink so I did not need to search around very long before I found it. A laminated sheet

with the “recipe” rested on the counter—one side gave instructions for 3-servings and the other for 6-servings. I flipped to the recipe to match the amount of servings that I had ordered and began with step one—coating the aluminum pan with non-stick spray. The rest of the “recipe” was broken down into steps: mixing the filling for the enchiladas, filling the tortillas and placing them in the pan, and mixing a sauce to pour over the top. Each measure was described not only in terms of teaspoons, tablespoons, or cups, but also with color-coded square dots. For the filling, two orange dots (cups) of frozen, cut-up chicken breast, a blue dot (1/2 cup) of shredded cheese, an orange dot and blue dot (1 and 1/2 cup) of what looked like a mixture of salsa and sour cream, plus two green dots (2 tablespoons) worth of minced green onion were all loaded into a stainless steel mixing bowl and stirred with a large plastic spoon. I scooped a dollop of the filling into each of the six tortillas, rolled them closed, and placed them in the pan seam side down. I added a scoop of the salsa/sour cream mixture on top and finished off the dish with a sprinkle of shredded cheese. Per the instructions, I attached the lid firmly, retrieved the matching card which included the heating instructions from my packet and taped it to the top. I took the aluminum pan containing my creation and placed it in the refrigerated case at the front of the store where a helpful employee has taped a name tag for me on one of the shelves. Before moving on to the next station, I dutifully washed my hands.

The next card in my packet was for “Butternut Squash Ravioli” and as I made my way to that station, I noticed that the dishes I left behind after making “Chicken Enchiladas” had magically disappeared—whisked away by an unseen employee—and the station was already set up for the next “cook.” The “Butternut Squash” ravioli station was similarly spotless and it took me next to no time to plop two pats of butter, a scoop of already-prepared caramelized onions, and few tablespoons of various spices into a zip-lock baggie. After sealing the bag, I placed it a

larger zip-lock container with a bag of frozen ravioli, sealed the entire package shut and taped the heating instructions to the front. I repeated the same steps as before—placing the completed dish in the refrigerator, and washing my hands before taking my place at the “Pork Chop” station. This time, however, the process was not quite as smooth. As an early arrival, I had enjoyed the privilege of having the work stations all to myself. However, as the evening progressed, activity picked up and I found myself crunched for space as a small group of elderly women gathered around the “BBQ Chicken” work station next to where I was reading over the pork chop recipe. This was particularly poor timing because the pork chop recipe included *both* a rub *and* a sauce and I found myself jostled as I somewhat messily combined the dry ingredients for the rub. However, I was in a groove and compensated for the crowded conditions as I mixed BBQ sauce, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and honey for the sauce. As I sealed all the components for the meal into a larger Ziploc bag and deposited the entire package at my designated spot in the refrigerator, I marveled that in less than forty-five minutes, I had put together three meals with portions large enough to promise leftovers for lunches. The same smiling employee handed me a cardboard box to pack up my completed meals. As I lugged the somewhat heavy box to my car and then up the walkway to my apartment, I had a pang of jealousy for the two women with wheeled coolers—they really knew what they were doing!

A little less than a week later, my Dream Dinners experience came to fruition when I found myself running late after a meeting and with little desire to head to the grocery store (plus, there was the lure of Chicken Enchiladas in the freezer). I pulled the pan out of the freezer, popped it into the pre-heated oven, and waited. The apartment quickly filled with a deliciously tangy aroma and, when the timer beeped, I retrieved the piping hot meal from the oven. A whoosh of steam fogged my glasses as I lifted the cover off the container. The cheese had

melted into the sauce which still bubbled from the heat of the oven and the scent of salsa and jalapeno peppers permeated the kitchen. The enchiladas slid easily onto the plates and my husband and I each savored the first bite, last bite, and every bite in between. As we ate, we talked about the flavor of the dish. “A little salty, but not bad” my husband said. I thought the sauce had a nice flavor, but the filling had a few too many hot peppers for my taste. Next time, I would halve the suggested scoops of hot peppers and reduce the amount of salsa and sour cream sauce to try and reduce the salt content, though it would be much harder to adjust the recipe to suit our tastes when I had such little control over the component parts. After the meal, my husband brought the plates to the sink and I was grateful that there were no other messy dishes to wash. All in all, we had experienced a nice meal together and I still had time to read a chapter of my book before going to bed instead of doing dishes!

While the process went well and the food tasted pretty good, the Dream Dinners experience was—well—puzzling. What had I just done? According to the Dream Dinners website, I “put a feel-good, home cooked meal on the table.”² The chicken enchiladas that I prepared certainly did not *feel* like “home cooking.” So much of the creation of the dish had happened outside my own kitchen that I did not feel a connection between my home and the food. Moreover, combining frozen chicken with what seemed like store-bought salsa, sour cream, and a few other “fresh” ingredients to freeze and eat later did not seem like real “cooking” to me—partially because I did not have any control over the selection or combination of ingredients and partially because I did not learn how to make chicken enchiladas. Both of these factors—control over the ingredients and the ability to learn the recipe to recreate or adapt

² Dream Dinners, “Take Back Dinner,” *DreamDinners.com*, http://dreamdinners.com/main.php?static=take_back_dinner

it in the future—were a vital element in how I originally learned to cook and form the basis of my own understanding of the meaning of “cooking.”

In this chapter, I delve into the plethora of new products and services that industry insiders refer to as “meal replacements,” “meal solutions” and “cooking alternatives” that promise the same benefits of traditional home cooking, but without the need to invest a lot of time, effort, or skill in the process. I describe these phenomena as “home cooking without cooking” and “homemade not made at home” and “let us do the cooking for you.” I highlight the ways in which this growing industry engages in the same types of nostalgic rhetoric and utilizes similar idealized imagery as the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs in order to make their goods and services more appealing to American consumers. While critics charge that food companies, supermarket chains, and others have duped Americans into formulating a definition of “cooking” corrupted by convenience, I offer the counter-analysis that fast foods, convenience products, and supermarket “Meal Solutions” represent a strategy for working through the stresses of modern life and that they call into question the binary opposition between “from scratch” and “from a box” that the death of home cooking Jeremiahs rely upon as the key element of their argument that traditional American home cooking is in decline. I argue these products may be interpreted not as proof that home cooking is dying, but that home cooking traditions are vital, malleable, and constantly in the process of being reworked to meet the needs of American home cooks.

Home Cooking without Cooking

Dream Dinners began in 2002 as the creation of Stephanie Allen and Tina Kuna, two working mothers from Snohomish, Washington who parlayed their own “fix-and-freeze”

solution to the dinner problem into a successful business.³ Garnering die-hard adherents, Dream Dinners quickly expanded from one store to three stores to a national phenomenon with franchises across the country in just a few years.⁴ In fact, Dream Dinners sparked a multi-million dollar make-ahead meal preparation industry populated by individually owned look-alike shops and copy-cat services like Super Suppers.⁵ Although hard hit by the economic slowdown that began in 2008—at one time there were more locations closing than new franchises opening—Dream Dinners and its clones continue to attract customers looking for help in the kitchen.⁶ Dream Dinners lures in on-the-go Americans with the promise of “home-style meals” prepared from high-quality, healthy and fresh ingredients with all the “slicing, dicing, and chopping” done ahead of time and no messy clean up afterwards—all at a very affordable price.⁷ Customers spend a few hours assembling “ready-to-cook entrees” that they then take home, freeze, and heat only when the family is ready to sit down to dinner.⁸

Much like the rhetoric of contemporary cookbooks, in its advertising and on its website, Dream Dinners over-emphasizes the typical hardships associated with making meals while simultaneously painting an alluring picture of their own process as a pathway to a calm, relaxing dinner that allows the family to slow down and reconnect. The “dream” in Dream Dinners is the promise that by attending just one “meal assembly session” customers will be able to “provide their families with nutritious, wholesome, home-cooked dinners with less stress and more time to

³ Dream Dinners, “About Us – Our Story,” *DreamDinners.com*, http://dreamdinners.com/main.php?static=about_us

⁴ Joel Stein, “Outsourcing Home Cooking” *Time Magazine*, January 31, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708841,00.html>

⁵ Marcy Courier, “The Evolution of the Fast Food Prep Industry,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Entrepreneurship*, 15, no.1, (2009), 15.

⁶ Melanie Lindner, “Taking on Restaurants and Grocers,” *Forbes.com*, May 8, 2008. http://www.forbes.com/2008/05/08/franchise-meal-assembly-ent-manage-competition08-cx_ml_0508mealassembly.html

⁷ Jennifer Gill, “Can Cooking Dinner Really Make You This Happy?” *Working Mother*, February 2003, 36.

⁸ Ibid.

enjoy their families.”⁹ Video testimonials on the company’s website attest to the idea that Dream Dinners solves all of the problems that typically prevent meal preparation at home: lack of time, lack of experience, lack of interest, lack of ideas, and lack of money. As Dream Dinners customer Kasinda from Portland, Virginia succinctly explains: “I am going to give you five reasons why you should go to Dream Dinners today. The first is variety; the menu changes every month. The second reason is no prep work; Dream Dinners has all of the ingredients you need right at your station. The third reason is easy clean-up; most of the meals are one pot cooking. The fourth reason is healthy choices; Dream Dinners helps with portion control. And the fifth reason I think you should go to Dream Dinners is that it saves you time and money.”¹⁰ Kasinda hits all the high points of the Dream Dinners’ potential of quick and easy meal preparation. However, Dream Dinners dangles a deeper promise with the notion that its meals will create a more fulfilling meal time that will bring the family together—something Jamie S. makes clear declaring “In this day and age, family time is not only important, it’s essential. What Dream Dinners has done for me is given me the time to be able to come home and spend that time with my girls and my husband. Then, we can easily prepare a meal together ‘cause they’re that simple. And eating together as a family makes memories that last a lifetime. Thank you Dream Dinners, you’ve brought our family closer together.”¹¹ With these types of testimonials, Dream Dinners underscores the idea that freezers full of marinated chicken and pans of pasta lead not only to delicious and healthy meals, but to stronger, happier families. In effect, Dream Dinners pledges that its meals become the bridge between the hectic, stressful struggles of everyday life and the calm, peaceful enjoyment of a better future. According to

⁹ Dream Dinners, “Dream Dinners FAQs,” *DreamDinners.com*, <http://dreamdinners.com/main.php?static=faqs>

¹⁰ DreamDinnersVideo, “Kasinda on Dream Dinners,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuwrcdAiYH8>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Dream Dinners, by cooking dinner for the family their way Americans can have happier, healthier, more connected lives.

Can Dream Dinners even be classified as “cooking”? Joel Stein, a reporter for *Time Magazine*, was not sure. As he spent time “scooping cubes of frozen dry-looking chicken into a Ziploc bag, adding measuring cups full of chopped frozen vegetables, liquid smoke, minced garlic, and barbecue sauce” he declared “right now I have no idea if I’m cooking.”¹² Stein categorizes the experience as more akin to “applying Henry Ford assembly-line techniques to home cooking” than real home cooking.¹³ And, from my own experience, an assembly line is exactly what the Dream Dinners experience felt like. I could almost imagine myself working at a frozen TV dinner plant—putting meat and vegetables in metal trays ready for the oven.

Scratch DC, a home-delivery meal service that opened in Washington, DC in August 2012, does away with mechanical-like assembly line format by delivering all the fixings for a gourmet dinner—from marinated steaks and a pre-mixed salad to raw cookie dough for dessert—directly to the customer’s front door.¹⁴ All the customer needs to do is “follow the included recipe as it guides you to the best meal you’ve ever made”¹⁵ But, is heating up pre-marinated meat and drizzling pre-mixed dressing over pre-tossed salad really cooking? For die-hard defenders of traditional American home cooking the answer would be an emphatic “NO!” For them, Dream Dinners and Scratch DC offer only the semblance of cooking—not the real thing. For critics, by emphasizing convenience over the purity of the cooking process, these services are almost as fake as HouseBites, a United Kingdom based delivery service that, for a fee, will

¹² Joel Stein, “Outsourcing Home Cooking.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jessica Sidman, “Home Cooked Meals: Now With Less Cooking,” *Washington City Paper*, September 17, 2012. <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/youngandhungry/2012/09/17/home-cooked-meals-now-with-less-cooking/>

¹⁵ Scratch DC, “How it Works,” *ScratchDC.com*, <http://www.scratchdc.com/how-it-works/>

not only drop off dinner, but also dirty dishes that customers can leave piled in the sink in order to take all the credit for cooking the meal for themselves.¹⁶ HouseBites offers the image of homemade cooking, and, in much the same way, Dream Dinners, Scratch DC and other meal services provide the façade of home cooking without the preparation, hard work and messy cleanup of actually cooking at home.

Services like Dream Dinners, Scratch DC, and HouseBites deconstruct the idea of “home cooking,” distill the elements that seem to be the most meaningful to consumers, and repackage those components into smaller units which they offer for sale at a premium price. Mixing ingredients together seems to represent the essence of “home cooking” as part of the Dream Dinners experience. And this process does not need to take place at *home*—but can occur anywhere as long as the final result is transportable, freezable, and reheatable. For Scratch DC, the key is not the mixing of ingredients, but the assembling and heating of the final meal. Their model reasserts the primacy of the *home* in meal preparation, while diminishing the *cooking* portion of the experience by limiting the contact the cooks have with the ingredients. HouseBites forgoes the stove and shifts the significance to the mere suggestion that the meal was made from scratch. Dirty dishes transform into a symbol of the love and care that the homeowners were either not willing or not able to provide. What matters in this formulation is not the cooking experience, but the idea. What makes these services so alarming for proponents of from scratch cooking is the way in which these products disassemble meal preparation and reassemble the parts into something new that bears an uncanny resemblance to home cooking, but does not fit within their definition of “real” home cooking. The products destabilize authenticity by breaking down home cooking to its component parts and piecing them out while

¹⁶ Jess Zimmerman, “Takeout Restaurant Delivers Dirty Dishes So You Can Pretend You Cooked,” *Grist.com*, <http://grist.org/list/takeout-restaurant-delivers-dirty-dishes-so-you-can-pretend-you-cooked/>

maintaining the claim that their subunits still offer the same meaning as the complete home cooking process—consumers gain the personal and emotional rewards of a delicious dinner, a happy family, and high status merely by assembling ingredients, heating foods, or stacking dishes in the sink. The popularity of these products circumvents the Jeremiah’s self-proclaimed authority to define “real” home cooking by gaining adherents who accept the proposition that they can not only purchase a “home cooked meal” not cooked at home, but also the deep meanings of sustenance, comfort, and family represented by home cooking.

This is the phenomena that Robert Kastenbaum, a Professor of Communication at the University of Arizona, identified as “Old Food for Fast People” in a 1988 article of the same name. Kastenbaum argued that the increased pace of American society has led to a growing sense of “the accelerating fragmentation of contemporary life.”¹⁷ According to Kastenbaum, today’s “fast people” experience a “threatened sense of stability” and that “people organize themselves around the need to protect an imperiled sense of stability and continuity.”¹⁸ Food is one arena of everyday life that offers the potential of steadiness and permanence. In “old food,” Americans find a “symbolic construction” that “represents an imaginative retrospection of the total act of preparation and consumption that is thought to have taken place when human lives were more firmly rooted in nature and community.”¹⁹ In other words, modern Americans feel disconnected and anxious and look to the dinner table of the past for comfort. According to Kastenbaum, Americans do not actually *want* to return to the past—they are not actually yearning to spend hours slaving over a hot stove to produce a steaming stew or scrumptious cake. “What fast people want to consume,” Kastenbaum writes, “is the idea of old food.”²⁰

¹⁷ Robert Kastenbaum, “Old Food for Fast People,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 32, no.1 (1988): 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

Americans have imbued the “image and promise of old food” with the power of “continuity and identity” as part of the “striving for rootedness” in the modern era.²¹ Products like Dream Dinners, Scratch DC and others fit into Kastenbaum’s characterization of “old food” because of the way that they play off the imagery of today’s hectic lifestyle versus the slower, more relaxed experience of dining on one of their own meals. Take, for example, the description of the chicken enchiladas that I ordered as part of my session: “Straight from the freezer to the oven, this one-pan dinner turns your regular week night into a fiesta! Flour tortillas are stuffed with the irresistible combination of tender, white-meat chicken, fresh green onions and a sour cream salsa.”²² There is no hint of stress or difficulty in getting this meal on the table. Instead, the emphasis is on the enjoyment of the meal—crystallized in the idea that the meal will be a fiesta—a fun-filled family get together. In purchasing the Dream Dinners experience, customers are not only buying the chance to assemble and freeze tomorrow’s dinner, but the “dream” of an enjoyable family dinner.

Kastenbaum, and critics of the mass produced “homestyle” cooking, warn that, by embracing the *image* of home cooking in place of the *reality* of home cooking, Americans have left themselves vulnerable to “symbolic manipulation.”²³ Food companies fill their advertisements with iconic images and emotionally charged rhetoric in order to give their own products symbolic significance. For example, Marie Callender’s recently introduced a new line of frozen meals called “comfort bakes.”²⁴ On the package, the meal’s name appears as if hand written on an old-fashioned recipe card that even includes the word “recipe” in the upper left

²¹ Ibid., 55.

²² Dream Dinners, “January 2012 Menu,” *DreamDinners.com*, http://dreamdinners.com/main.php?page=session_menu

²³ Kastenbaum, “Old Food for Fast People,” 55.

²⁴ Marie Callender’s, “Comfort Bakes,” *MarieCallenders.com*, <http://www.mariecallendersmeals.com/comfort-bakes>

corner. In the bottom left corner of the box there appears to be a leaf of paper torn from a spiral note book with the words “oven baked taste from the microwave.” Above the name “Marie Callender’s” there is a small picture of a grandmotherly figure gazing down at a young girl who proudly holds a dish of homemade food. Finally, the slogan “from my kitchen to yours since 1948” is emblazoned above the enticing picture of the meal contained within the package. Marie Callender’s uses the images of a handwritten recipe card and the grandmother approving of the granddaughter’s cooking to evoke nostalgic feelings of home and family. The rhetoric of “comfort,” “oven baked” and “from my kitchen to yours” reaffirms the homey feel of the dish. Through words and pictures the company transforms a frozen dinner into a gateway to the coziness of home and the love of the family. Using these types of strategies to forge connections between the product and important concepts like nature, home, family and community through company slogans, packaging with powerful images, and advertising campaigns gives consumers the opportunity to seek emotional and personal fulfillment by purchasing the product.²⁵ The fear is that by seeking fulfillment through consumption Americans give power, not only to the images, but to food producers and advertisers who use those images as part of their marketing campaigns. Nostalgic images of home and family are particularly meaningful and lend themselves to appropriation in food advertising and more and more “food companies attempt to imbue processed foods with the character, traditions, and meanings of ‘homemade.’”²⁶ For critics, when food producers and advertisers invoke the symbols of the home—a mother lifting a steaming casserole out of the oven, ready to serve the smiling family waiting at the dinner table—they are “preying on desires for the old-fashioned values of home and hearth.”²⁷ In the end, however, according to the Jeremiahs, all consumers get is “an illusion of taste, an illusion of

²⁵ Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self*, (London: Sage Publications), 1996.

²⁶ Moisio, Arnould and Price, “Between Mothers and Markets,” 363.

²⁷ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 161.

satisfaction, an illusion of comfort, an illusion of nutrition and health” and must move on to purchase the next frozen dinner, fast food meal, or homestyle cooking “experience” in the hope of capturing something they can never really provide.²⁸

Homemade Not Made at Home

Much to the dismay of the death of home cooking Jeremiahs, the vocabulary of “homemade,” “homestyle,” “like grandma used to make,” and “from scratch,” have been taken up by a wide array of goods and services that promise to supply the same sense of fulfillment as home cooking—for a price. This is no more apparent than in advertising for convenience products and fast foods which are the very same types of products that the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs identify as the primary culprits in the impending demise of home cooking. For example, my husband’s favorite potato chips are “Grandma Utz’s Handcooked Potato Chips” made by Utz’s Quality Foods of Hanover, Pennsylvania. Packaged in what appears to be a brown paper bag with the image of a nineteenth-century grandmother complete with long dress, apron, and hair pulled back in a softly coiled bun who carries a plate of freshly made potato chips, the imagery and vocabulary of “handcooked” chips obscure the reality of a modern, sanitized factory where the chips were actually churned out in high volume.

A KFC (formerly Kentucky Fried Chicken) television commercial from the 2010 Christmas season serves as a particularly powerful example of an attempt to connect fast food with the rhetoric of home cooking. The commercial opens with the image of a snow-covered home gracing the front of a Christmas card with the words “Gift of Time” emblazoned in the starry sky above. The card opens to reveal a “pop-up” scene of a welcoming dining room complete with a fully decorated Christmas tree, a fireplace mantle with four stockings hanging in wait for Santa, and, in the center, a long dining room table is set with a bucket of KFC Chicken,

²⁸ Ibid.

cole slaw, mashed potatoes and gravy, and biscuits. Soft Christmas music plays as a cheerful feminine voice declares, “Give yourself the gift of time this holiday season with the KFC festive feast: twelve pieces of the Colonel’s original recipe chicken, hand breaded with eleven herbs and spices, plus three mouth-watering home style sides and six fluffy buttermilk biscuits. All for just \$19.99. Start a new holiday tradition and leave the cooking to us at KFC.” As the narrator speaks, the camera zooms in on the card’s image of the dining room table which slowly expands and transforms into a real-life table-scape with a delicious-looking bucket of chicken. The commercial ends with a flip of the card which reveals a KFC restaurant bedecked in multi-colored twinkling lights. By emphasizing the images of home—especially the fully laden dining room table—and by using phrases like “hand breaded,” “home style” and “tradition,” the commercial seeks to distance the bucket of KFC chicken from the idea of “fast food” and connect the meal to the values of home, family, and festivity.

Nostalgic images of home and family are just one of the ways that food companies attempt to lure buyers for their products. As historian Reay Tannahill notes, “right from the beginning, brand-name foods were marketed on the basis of purity, convenience, quality and reliability, and the consumer bought the promises as well as the product.”²⁹ Convenience products employ a wide variety of tactics in attempting to attract customers. Focusing on the health benefits of their product, emphasizing connections to nature, underscoring the high quality of ingredients and gourmet nature of the product are all ways that food producers attempt to make their items attractive. As consumer needs change, so do the methods food companies’ use to advertise their products. Much of the early advertising for convenience products like boxed cake mixes, frozen vegetables, and TV dinners emphasized “freedom from the kitchen.”³⁰ In the

²⁹ Tannahill, *Food In History*, 331.

³⁰ Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House*, 139.

twenty-first century, however, an increased number of food products “capitalize on the iconography of home.”³¹ Two commercials for Rice Krispies Treats illustrate the transition of advertisements from portraying convenience as freedom from the kitchen to showing convenience as a vehicle for spending quality time with the family. The first, aired in 1996, opens with a woman deeply engrossed in reading a romance novel titled *Tender Secrets*. From the other room, a child’s voice calls “Mom, are they ready yet?” to which she replies, “I’m still working on it!” Without looking up from the book, she reaches over to a plate of Rice Krispies treats and grabs one and yells “These things take time” as she munches on the corner of a gooey square. A male narrator declares “Rice Krispies treats are so easy to make, they take no time at all. But, they taste so good, your family will think you slaved over them all afternoon.” The woman closes her book with a flourish, a flash of emotion on her face as if to say she had just finished reading an exciting chapter. “And if that’s what they think,” adds the narrator, “well, what they don’t know won’t hurt them.” She removes her headband, messes up her hair and grabs the plate of Rice Krispies treats. Right before she walks through the kitchen door, she throws a handful of flour on her face, adds a splash of water, and puts on the demeanor of someone who had just worked hard at a difficult chore. Unseen beyond the door, the voices of her children and husband exclaim excitedly over the treats as the words “Rice Krispies Treats. So Good. So Easy” appear on the screen. The theme of the commercial is not that Rice Krispies treats bring the family together, but that the ease of preparation gives the woman plenty of time for her own hobbies *without* the interference of her family. Instead of actually spending hours in the kitchen, she is able to read a romance novel with the implication that she would not have otherwise been given time to herself.

³¹ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 158.

The imagery and narrative of a more recent advertisement for Rice Krispies Treats is much different, emphasizing the ability of the treat to slow the pace of life and provide a moment of togetherness for the family. Broadcast as part of the “Childhood is Calling” campaign that Kellogg’s launched in 2006, the commercial begins with a black and white shot of kitchen cabinets decorated with artwork obviously drawn by a young child. As the camera pans down to the only colored item in the commercial, a bright blue box of Rice Krispies cereal, soft music begins to play and a woman’s voice says “Go ahead, get the box and pour it in for me.” A small child picks up the box and tips it so that the contents pour out into a waiting bowl. The picture widens to reveal a woman and a second, older child stirring the contents of the bowl. The children smile and laugh and the mother leans over to kiss the smaller child on the cheek as they work together to make Rice Krispies treats. “The problem with making Rice Krispies treats with your kids,” a female narrator asserts as the family divides a gooey square to share, “is just that it doesn’t take long enough.” The camera pans backward revealing the family enjoying the Rice Krispies treats. “Rice Krispies. Childhood is calling,” concludes the narrator. Everything in this commercial—from the black and white film to the soft music to the narrator’s voiceover—oozes nostalgia and sentimentality. The emphasis is on the idea that Rice Krispies is a product that can help the family slow down and spend time together.

Although the two commercials both advertise the same product and process—using Kellogg’s Rice Krispies to whip up a batch of marshmallow treats—the contrast between the two messages is stark. The first video conceptualizes making Rice Krispies treats as a way to avoid the onerous chore of making food for the family. The emphasis is on providing leisure time that can be filled with pursuits other than cooking. The woman is not trapped in the kitchen—but instead wields power over her family by spending her time on her own interests while they are

beholden to her for the treat they wait for impatiently. When she finally does decide to deliver the treats, she is hailed with a hero's welcome—indicating that her “work” in the kitchen was very much appreciated by her family. This advertisement exudes all of the faults that death of home cooking Jeremiahs ascribe to convenience products: valuing convenience over real cooking; emphasizing “quick and easy” preparation and leisure time; underscoring separation and isolation instead of family togetherness; and even including a fake façade as the woman lies to her family about the length and difficulty of the work she did in the kitchen. The second advertisement, however, may be even more troubling for those who decry the decline of home cooking and its meaning for American families. By emphasizing nostalgia, sentimentality, and family togetherness, the “Childhood is Calling” commercial appropriates the rhetoric of the death of home cooking jeremiad and insists that all of the benefits of “real” home cooking can be found by making Rice Krispies treats as a family.

Death of home cooking Jeremiahs seek to save home cooking by returning Americans to the kitchen and reclaiming traditions on the brink of extinction. They would be dismayed to learn that Stouffer's—one of the most recognizable frozen dinner brand names in America—is also seeking to save dinner by reclaiming traditions on the brink of extinction with their “Let's Fix Dinner” campaign.³² Stouffer's, known for slogans like “No One Comes Closer to Home” and “See What's Cooking at Stouffer's” launched the “Let's Fix Dinner” campaign in 2009. The catchphrase “Let's Fix Dinner” has a double meaning, implying both the process of cooking the meal *and* the need to repair the dinner hour—to rescue it from disappearing by assuring that a quick, delicious entrée is available to facilitate a time not only for sustenance but for conversation and togetherness. The Stouffer's website calls attention to all the benefits of the

³² Effie Worldwide. “Rekindling Stouffer's Iconic Status.” *Effie.org*.
<http://www.effie.org/winners/showcase/2010/4032>

family meal noting “Chockfull of parental engagement, caring conversation, and a healthy dose of light-hearted banter, dinner brings family together without a whole lot of pressure or anxiety. The results are in, and it’s clear: Dinner makes a difference.”³³ Stouffer’s declares that the variety and ease of preparation of its entrées represents “Mom’s Ideal Dinner” for “come meal time, all mom has to do is place at STOUFFER’S entrée in the microwave oven, and dinner’s ready to go”³⁴ As a brand, Stouffer’s offers itself as a way to smooth the path between the stress of real life and the idealized family dinner.

The “Let’s Fix Dinner” campaign includes more than just a package redesign and television advertisement—there is also a social media component including roundtables with Mom bloggers and a series of YouTube videos depicting families that took the “Let’s Fix Dinner” challenge. The videos included five families—the McAlisters, the Joneses, the Beehners, the McCleary-Biyiks, and the Bensons—with four to five videos per family. Each video series followed a similar story arc. First, the family describes how difficult it is to eat a family meal together. “We’re very busy,” says the mother of the Jones family, “We’re very busy separately”³⁵ The imagery of the videos matches the “busy” lifestyle of the families as they are depicted rushing around to jobs, school, and other activities and struggling through hectic meals. Second, therapist Carleton Kendrick pays the family a visit and diagnoses what is going wrong with their dinnertime rituals and engages the entire family in identifying strategies to fix dinner. For example, when he visits the McAllister family, Kendrick points out that the nightly chaos that the family experiences when fixing dinner stems from the fact that Mom tries to do

³³ Stouffer’s, “For Family: What Dinner At Home Means For Your Family,” *Stouffers.com*, <http://www.stouffers.com/fix-dinner/for-family/what-dinner-at-home-means.aspx>

³⁴ Stouffer’s, “For Family: Mom’s Ideal Dinner,” *Stouffers.com*, <http://www.stouffers.com/fix-dinner/for-family/moms-ideal-dinner.aspx>

³⁵ letsfixdinner, “The Joneses Fix Dinner, Episode 1,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TccW3aD1IY0>

everything at once and he suggests that the other five members of the family take on some of the chores declaring that “*Everybody* in the McAllister family has to make this family dinner a reality.”³⁶ Third, the families put the solutions to their dinner problems into action—though not without difficulties in the adjustment as schedules continue to be hectic and tensions remain strong at the table. As the mother of the Benson family notes, “Every day is a little different. Not every day is great... There are times when I feel like giving up family dinners and just not participating.”³⁷ However, by the final video, each of the families reflects on how far they have come and how beneficial eating dinner together has been for the entire family—every family concludes that eating dinner together is worth it. “Dinner brings us together and that’s a start,” reflects the mom of the Beehner family.³⁸

While it would be easy to assume that these videos function as a long-format commercial for Stouffer’s products, surprisingly, the convenience meals are not made the central player in the nightly dinner ritual. Instead, a Stouffer’s frozen lasagna is inserted surreptitiously into the videos—usually in their happiest moments. Even though it is “not in the family’s budget” to go to a real restaurant, the Benson family enjoys an “Italian Restaurant Night” at home with Stouffer’s lasagna as the main dish which the father declares was actually “much better than going to a restaurant.”³⁹ The Joneses join hands around their brand new dinner table as they begin a prayer to God in thanks for the meal that includes salad, bread, and a Stouffer’s lasagna.⁴⁰ Only one video includes a shot of the frozen lasagna as it is removed the box—the

³⁶ letsfixdinner, “The McAllisters Fix Dinner, Episode 2,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwTWVRgdU6Y>

³⁷ letsfixdinner, “The Bensons Fix Dinner, Episode 4,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0jMFSPD4vc>

³⁸ letsfixdinner, “The Beehners Fix Dinner, Episode 5,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQNj7MQp9f0>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ letsfixdinner, “The Joneses Fix Dinner, Episode 5,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14Ge7ebaWh4>

third McCleary-Biyik installment where the family had experienced some difficulties enacting some of the creative dinner ideas suggested by the family therapist. On one night, the family attempts “Emma’s Restaurant” which did *not* include a Stouffer’s product. Mom exclaims that “the restaurant night is a little tougher than I thought...the girls had started eating while I was still cooking and by the time I sat down they were done eating.”⁴¹ Mom realizes that attempting “big activities” is “a little too much” and seeks out something that is “a little more simple” while still assuring that it “still makes dinner special.”⁴² A week later, the family attempts “Dress Up Night” which is a resounding success.⁴³ Central to the night is the image of Mom taking a frozen Stouffer’s lasagna out of its package then placing it in the microwave and finally bringing it out to the table with the concluding remark that “I think this dinner actually from all of them was the best.”⁴⁴ While the video does not give specific credit to the Stouffer’s lasagna for transforming the night into the “best” dinner that the family experienced, the image of the lasagna and the family’s enjoyment of the meal intertwine. The same is true for all the families, while Stouffer’s products are not trumpeted as a singular key to the success of their family meals, the videos hint at the crucial role that frozen lasagna and other convenience foods made by the company can play in transition from the busy activities of the day to the essential time for the family at dinner.

Convenience products—like Kentucky Fried Chicken and Stouffer’s frozen lasagna—are a favorite villain in the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. Since they take little skill to prepare, Jeremiahs accuse these mass-produced items of leeching traditional cooking skills out of the kitchen while providing Americans with easy-to-prepare foods that, if consumed in large quantities, lead to a wide array of health problems. However, this assessment of convenience

⁴¹letsfixdinner, “The McCleary-Biyiks Fix Dinner, Episode 3,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjrboWD6SZs>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

products rests on placing from scratch meal preparation in opposition to the use of convenience products—with from scratch considered “good” and convenience seen as “bad.” Such an assessment fails to take into consideration that, instead of merely being the pawns of food manufacturers, many consumers wield convenience products as a tool to manage the daily demands of feeding themselves and their families while juggling other demands.⁴⁵ Some consumers do rely exclusively on frozen foods, take out, and ready-made meals. However, for many families, these foods are one option among many and a wide range of factors, such as age, income level, work demands, and family dynamics, influence whether or not they roast a chicken or buy chicken McNuggets.⁴⁶ Moreover, “convenience” is not a static term when it comes to food preparation and is also influenced by lifestyle choices and individual needs.⁴⁷ Making a lasagna from scratch or picking up Stouffer’s frozen version looks very different depending on whether the home cook is a stay-at-home dad or a on-the-go career women—the meaning of time and effort changes depending on the context.⁴⁸ More importantly, constructing the choice between cooking from scratch and utilizing convenience products as a choice between “good” and “bad” can lead to a negative perception of people who choose convenience over fresh ingredients.⁴⁹ This, in turn can lead to a sense of anxiety and guilt over food choices.⁵⁰ Thus begins a vicious cycle where consumers desire to align their cooking and meal patterns with the ideal, but struggle with the demands of daily life and use convenience products as a coping mechanism which in turn increases anxiety that their meals do not match the ideal. This opens

⁴⁵ J. Michael Harris and Rimma Shiptsova, “Consumer Demand for Convenience Foods: Demographics and Expenditures,” *Journal of Food Distribution Research*, 38, no. 3(November 2007): 22-36.

⁴⁶ K. van der Horst, T.A. Brunner and M. Siegrist, “Fast Food and Take-Away Food Consumption are Associated with Different Lifestyle Characteristics,” *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, 24 (2011): 596-602.

⁴⁷ Les Gofton, “Convenience and the Moral Status of Consumer Practices.”

⁴⁸ Sara R. Jaeger and Herbert L. Meiselman, “Perceptions of Meal Convenience: The Case of At-Home Evening Meals,” *Appetite*, 42 (2004): 317-325.

⁴⁹ Ahlgren, Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall, “Attitudes and Beliefs Directed Toward Ready-Meal Consumption,”

⁵⁰ Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food, and Families*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 132-133.

the door for food manufacturers, supermarkets, and fast food restaurants to introduce new and different “homemade” or “homestyle” convenience products with the promise that *this* product will provide all of the benefits of “real” home cooking, but with less time and effort. Breaking this cycle requires a rethinking of the role of convenience in consumers’ lives as well as a more nuanced discussion that does not demonize the use of convenience products.

“Let Us Do The Cooking For You”

A stroll around the local Supermarket offers hints that home cooking is much more complex than what is represented in the binary opposition between cooking from scratch versus making meals from a box. Following the loop around the outer edges of the store reveals all manner of products designed to take the labor out of home cooking: pre-chopped carrots, celery, and onions in the vegetable aisle; a slew of hot options from rotisserie chickens to macaroni and cheese ready to take home and eat placed by the deli; a package containing raw strips of sliced beef and julienned vegetables to make stir-fry even easier displayed temptingly in the meat case. The middle aisles offer their own wonders. There are new Progresso “Recipe Starters” consisting of a can of “cooking sauce” with a picture of a wooden spoon on the front in varieties ranging from Creamy Parmesan Basil to Fire Roasted tomato which are intended to be added to a wide variety of ingredients from pasta to meats. There are “Recipe Inspiration” spice packs made by McCormick’s that come complete with pre-measured amounts of the spices needed to make dishes like Apple and Sage pork chops, Asian Sesame Salmon, or Chicken Marsala. There are Kraft “Fresh Take” combination packages that come with a mixture of breadcrumbs and cheese to coat chicken, steak, fish, or pork chops for dishes such as Smokey Mesquite pork chops or Italian Parmesan chicken. These products aim to attract customers by making home

cooking easier while invoking the imagery and rhetoric of food made by hand from traditional recipes.

As grocery stores have transformed into supermarkets and then super centers, the number of available items have skyrocketed. In fact, “the average number of products in grocery stores increased from 13,000 in 1980 to 40,000 in 1998.”⁵¹ With so many items competing for limited space, there is no room for unprofitable items on Supermarket shelves. This means that for Supermarket chains to go through the expense to set up displays, they must expect a payoff. Therefore, the wide variety of food options spread throughout grocery store aisles represents an effort to attract and maintain the business of a wide variety of customers. Moreover, the options are not separated into simple categories like “raw ingredient” and “convenience food.” Instead, the products for sale include both and everything in between. The staggering array of choices for one American staple, pizza, is staggering: there are hot pizza slices for sale at the deli counter right above cold pre-made pizzas ready to take and bake; complete pizza kits including a jar of sauce, a packet of dry dough mix, and a container of cheese line the shelves in the Italian food aisle; separately packaged dough, sauce, cheese and toppings appear in the refrigerated section; an entire section of the freezer aisle is filled with a plethora of frozen pizzas. These all represent the Supermarket’s effort to offer the consumer “Meal Solutions” to suit individual needs.

These “Meal Solutions” are nothing new, but represent a growing segment of the supermarket business. In 2000, the Food Marketing Institute, a leading market research firm focused on food trends in the grocery industry, published a report titled *Beyond Food Service...How Consumers View Meals*. Based on surveys, interviews and focus groups conducted across the United States in 1998, the study revealed that “consumers can be divided

⁵¹ Robert D Atkinson, *The Past and Future of America’s Economy*, (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2004), 124.

into six core groups: On the Go Jugglers, Healthy Family Cooks, Gut Stuffing Indulgers, Meat and Potato Cooks, Strict Food Monitors, and Thrifty Food Balancers.”⁵² Each of these groups “has a unique interpretation of the Meal Solution concept” and it is important for retailers to “develop specific Meal Solutions programs for them.”⁵³ According to the Food Marketing Institute, “the smart retailer must offer a range of Meal Solution concepts, each with carefully designed components and marketing programs”⁵⁴ Meal Solutions can be broken down into four categories including: “1. Ready to Eat, 2. Ready to Heat, 3. Ready to Prepare, and 4. Ready to Create.”⁵⁵ Examples would be a hot rotisserie chicken, a chicken pot pie from the refrigerated section, a stir-fry kit complete with marinated meat and chopped vegetables from the meat case, and a recipe card with a list of ingredients and directions for making clam chowder (all the ingredients available for purchase in the store, of course). The research implies that “to meet the needs of the greatest number of consumers, retailers should offer a range of options across all four concepts and not focus on one in particular.”⁵⁶ This study suggests that American home cooks cannot be separated into only two groups—one obsessed with cooking from scratch and one addicted to cooking from a box (or not at all). Instead, American home cooks fall into a broad range, each with its own interests and needs. Moreover, these categories include different approaches to making meals which span the spectrum from completely from scratch (following the recipe card) to relying on convenience (buying the steaming hot rotisserie chicken), but also includes hybrid options that include a little bit of convenience and a little bit of work in the kitchen. Most importantly, these options are driven by consumer demand—supermarkets will

⁵² Food Marketing Institute, *Beyond Food Service...How Consumers View Meals*, (Washington, DC: The Research Department, Food Marketing Institute, 2000), 3.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6.

not stock items that Americans will not buy. Scanning the Supermarket shelves—from the assortment of fresh vegetables to the ready-made macaroni and cheese—lends credence to the idea that the American cooking habits are complex and not easily categorized.

Fixing It or Faking It?

Critics of America's industrialized food system point to products like Stouffer's lasagna as the enemy of "real" home cooking because they emphasize convenience over process and speed over tradition. As prominent nutritionist Marion Nestle explains, "Nutritionists and traditionalists may lament such developments because convenience overrides not only considerations of health but also the social and cultural meanings of meals and mealtimes. Many food products relegate cooking to a low-priority chore and encourage trends toward one-dish meals, fewer side dishes, fewer ingredients, larger portions to create leftover, almost nothing cooked from scratch, and home-delivered meals ordered by phone, fax, or Internet."⁵⁷ This argument is predicated on the idea that convenience foods leech the important societal meanings out of cooking and eating—the more frozen, pre-cooked, fast, and on-the-go foods Americans consume, the less cultural value they place in important rituals like the nightly family meal. The notion that frozen lasagna can replace grandma's recipe for homemade lasagna leaves critics aghast. They accuse advertisers of insidiously adjusting what constitutes the definition of "cooking" and "homemade" while reaping the benefits in the form of increased sales.⁵⁸ The discourse surrounding the decline of home cooking leaves Americans feeling exhausted and guilty—something food corporations can take advantage of by increasing the attractiveness of their products through nostalgic imagery and rhetoric. This is a phenomenon that Martin Lindstrom, an expert on the advertising industry, points out in his book *Brandwashed: Tricks*

⁵⁷ Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 19-20.

⁵⁸ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, 151.

Companies Use to Manipulate Our Minds and Persuade us to Buy. Lindstrom declares, “In our time-starved society, how many mothers have time to drive to the supermarket, buy fresh ingredients, lug them home, then spend hours peeling, chopping, simmering, sautéing, baking, and broiling them to perfection? Yet most moms (and dads) feel incredibly guilty about bringing home a prepackaged meal—or worse yet, getting takeout. No matter how convenient that frozen lasagna looks, if it comes in a cardboard box, most mothers feel guilty about serving it, as if doing so would be saying she doesn’t really care.”⁵⁹ That is why Stouffer’s uses images of happy families gathered around a piping hot pan of their lasagna in order to make their product appealing—the “Let’s Fix Dinner” campaign insists that frozen lasagna is part of the solution to America’s mealtime dilemma, not part of the problem—and that is exactly what the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs find problematic.

What if there were a different way of viewing home cooking—a way that did not place “from scratch” and convenience foods in opposition, but instead includes both as part of a continuum of strategies that Americans access based on their own needs? What if “homemade” does *not* only refer to foods made by hand from raw ingredients, but also includes a much wider variety of foods? What if, instead of being a fixed construct “homemade is a malleable cultural construct” that consumers change based on their day-to-day situation?”⁶⁰ In this case, convenience does not indicate that home cooking has become *meaningless*, but that Americans are constantly reworking what makes cooking *full of meaning* in their lives.

⁵⁹ Martin Lindstrom, *Brainwashed: Tricks Companies Use to Manipulate our Minds and Persuade us to Buy*, (New York: Crown Business, 2011), 40-41.

⁶⁰ Moisio, Arnould and Price, “Between Mothers and Markets,” 379.

In her article, “Home to McDonald’s: Upholding the Family Dinner with Help from McDonald’s.” Helene Brembeck indicates that even a fast food meal be meaningful.⁶¹ A meal at McDonald’s breaks all the rules of “real” home cooking—it is not eaten at home, it is not made from scratch by a member of the family, and it is part of the industrialized food system. Therefore, the meal should be an empty shell—devoid of meaning and contributing to the “death of home cooking.” Through ethnographic field research at McDonald’s restaurants in Sweden, Brembeck reached the surprising conclusion that a meal at McDonald’s *can* be meaningful for families. Brembeck argues that, “the routines and the materiality of the restaurant offer ways of upholding family life but also of creating every day, family life, and home in new ways that are in accordance with the demands and rhythms of today’s world...McDonald’s restaurants can in fact be regarded as home and the meals eaten there as ‘proper’ meals.”⁶² A meal at McDonald’s holds value for the families who eat there because the restaurant meets specific needs, as Brembeck reveals:

...there is total agreement about the values the visit holds: it is easy, convenient, fast, and quite inexpensive for a large family. Moreover, you always know what to expect, the children know what to expect, no unpleasant surprises are waiting inside. And there is something for everybody. The parents know that the children like the food, eat it, and are satisfied. This is especially important for parents, where the evening meal at home often is turned into a daily fight. Besides, the food is considered tasty. The adults often go there for lunches or buy meals for themselves from the drive-in, because they think McDonald’s food tastes nice, not every day of the week, but now and then.⁶³

The very same factors that lead Jeremiahs to condemn fast food—speed in preparation and uniformity of flavor—are the elements of the fast food meal that help these occasions to fulfill the families’ needs. Moreover, the families reap the same rewards from the experience of

⁶¹ Helene Brembeck, “Home to McDonald’s: Upholding the Family Dinner with Help from McDonald’s,” *Food, Culture, and Society*, 8 no.2, (Fall 2005): 215-226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 215-216.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 221.

consuming fast food—a calm family dinner and a satisfying meal—as Jeremiahs insist that only a home cooked meal can provide. Brembeck’s findings indicate that, contrary to claims that fast food is meaningless, some families utilize this type of meal as a way to meet their own needs and construct family life according to their own definition.⁶⁴ While meaningful for the families Brembeck interviewed, this redefinition of “home” and “family” does not align with the “death of home cooking” Jeremiah’s vision for “real” cooking and “real” meals. Instead of dismissing these families’ feelings as outliers from the norm, perhaps it is time to broaden the scope of the discussion to include new possibilities. Perhaps what is needed is not a universal condemnation of fast food and convenience products, but a balanced discussion that takes into account the multi-faceted needs of consumers which might then result in equally balanced solutions that can help families attain the dual needs of good health and good food without guilt or shame.

Brembeck’s observations do not prove conclusively that fast food, and by extension convenience foods, hold meaning for all consumers. Certainly, many convenience products and fast foods are wolfed down on the run and do not contribute anything significant to consumers’ lives beyond excess calories.⁶⁵ The fact remains that over-consumption of fast foods and other highly processed foods is a contributing factor to many health problems like obesity, heart disease, and diabetes which have been increasing at an alarming rate, especially in children.⁶⁶ What the current discourse around home cooking ignores are the many ways in which Americans make use of convenience products and fast foods to create meaning in their lives. The underlying assumption is that a frozen lasagna or a meal at McDonald’s cannot provide the same cultural and societal significance as a home cooked meal made by hours of Mom’s hard work. Is that

⁶⁴ Ibid., 224-225.

⁶⁵ Jackson, “Grab and Go: A Restless Nation Tanks Up.”

⁶⁶ Cara B. Ebbeling, Dorota B. Pawlak, and David S. Ludwig, “Childhood Obesity: Public-Health Crisis, Common Sense Cure,” *Lancet*, 360 (2002): 473-482.

true? Home cooking has always meant taking raw ingredients and transforming them into a new form and, in the process, imbuing that food with meaning. Perhaps heating a frozen lasagna may not take as much time as making a lasagna from scratch, but the meal may still hold meaning. Dream Dinners, a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and a frozen Stouffer's lasagna take on new significance when they are allowed to function not as an escape from the kitchen, but as symbols of the continued significance of home, homemade, and home cooking—even when they are “home cooking without cooking” and “homemade not made at home.” Perhaps the meaning of home cooking is what Americans make of it—not what they make dinner out of.

In the next chapter, I take to cyberspace to discover the flexible nature of American home cooking traditions. Recipe-sharing websites and YouTube cooking videos provide excellent examples of the ways in which home cooks adapt traditional forms—recipes and cooking demonstrations—to new situations. Cooking online is, by its very nature, an act of hybridity that spans the divide between the traditional and the modern, real life and imagined life, the past, the present and the future. I contend that the complexity of online cooking content challenges the supremacy of the “death of home cooking” jeremiad by offering a counter-narrative based in the complexities of home cooking practice and the adaptability of tradition.

CHAPTER 6

GRANDMA'S GONE GLOBAL: HOME COOKING TRADITIONS MOVE FROM THE KITCHENETTE TO THE INTERNET

"I always think it is so kind of someone to share a family recipe with strangers, i (sic) think that it is the ultimate sacrifice for a cook, we appreciate your mom sharing with us..."

-YouTube comment by mystikspice posted on "Mary's Scottish Shortbread"¹

In February 2011, Google launched a new feature for its popular internet search engine called "Recipe View."² With millions of users seeking out dinner, dessert and other meal ideas every day, providing a recipe-only search function represented a practical move on Google's part as it allowed the company to attract users by addressing a specific need in a user-friendly, convenient manner.³ One common search is for "chocolate chip cookies." A Google web search brings up over 8 million results, including extraneous sites like Wikipedia's definition of "chocolate chip cookie" and the "history of chocolate chip cookies" from About.com. Using the "recipe view" filter narrows the outcome to just under 2 million hits and allows the user to sort the results by selecting desired cook time, choosing maximum calories allowed, and including or excluding specific ingredients. However, since Google simply pulls results from all over the web and orders them based on certain characteristics, the functionality of some of the search features can be hit or miss. For example, Google gives the option to narrow the search for chocolate chip cookies by *excluding* chocolate chips as an ingredient. Finding this an odd

¹ mystikspice, "Comment on Mary's Scottish Shortbread," *YouTube.com*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgB90MjtHqs>

² Ryan Singel, "Google Recipe Search Cooks Up Next Gen of Search," *Wired.com*, February 24, 2011,
<http://www.wired.com/business/2011/02/google-recipe-semantic/>

³ "Google with Recipe View Helps You Find Recipes From Across the Web," *Google.com*,
<http://www.google.com/landing/recipes/>

selection since I assumed anyone searching for chocolate chip cookies would want chocolate chips *included* in the recipe, I clicked the checkmark to limit the results to recipes without chocolate chips. I expected the trimmed down choices to include only faux chocolate chip cookies with substitutes like carob. Instead, the top results still included chocolate, just *not* listed specifically as “chips.” Chopped chocolate bars, chocolate chunks, chocolate bits, and M&M’s abounded, but, if I were looking for cookies with alternatives to chocolate, I would have been sorely disappointed. However, even with its quirks, Google’s “recipe view” hints at the significant role that the internet plays in twenty-first century home cooking practices.

Google is not alone in vying for the attention of recipe-hungry consumers: food blogs, cooking demonstration videos, recipe-sharing websites can all be mined for information related to food and cooking. Even Twitter’s 140 character limit is no barrier for creative home cooks seeking to share favorite dishes with followers as Maureen Evans of @cooking proved, publishing over 1,000 examples of her tweet-length recipes in *Eat Tweet: A Twitter Cookbook*.⁴ The NPD Group, a leading market research firm, reports that overall recipe usage in the United States has been on the rise—in 2005, only 37 percent of households indicated that they had used a recipe at least once a week but by 2011 the number had jumped to 42 percent.⁵ Tech-savvy Millennials have been driving the trend and, as such, internet recipe sites have gained influence alongside more traditional sources like print cookbooks, magazines, and television cooking programs.⁶ While much of the online content related to food and cooking originates from recognizable names like Betty Crocker, the Food Network, and Martha Stewart, the internet provides unparalleled opportunities for individual amateur home cooks to share recipes,

⁴ Maureen Evans, *Eat Tweet: A Twitter Cookbook*, (New York: Artisan, 2010).

⁵ NPD Group, “The NPD Group’s Recipes are Cooking Report: Report Excerpts,” *NPD.com*, https://www.npd.com/lps/pdf/recipes_are_cooking_report_excerpts.pdf

⁶ Karen Fernau, “Thrifty Millennials Feeding Recipe Culture,” *USAToday.com*, December 26, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/nation/2012/12/26/thrifty-millennials-feed-recipe-culture/1791471/>

demonstrate cooking skills, and connect with others across the globe who share similar interests in food and cooking. Now, a “top-secret family recipe” for “Grandma’s Best Zucchini Bread” can be posted on Allrecipes.com to be viewed, and made, by anyone in the world with internet access and a craving for zucchini bread.⁷

Home cooks have never before enjoyed such a diversity of presentation, variety of content, and immediacy of access to the information that they need to cook whatever they want, whenever they want, and however they want as they can find in mere moments through a quick internet search. With iPads doubling as cookbooks, millions of recipes available from countless websites, and experienced cooks available to demonstrate proper kitchen techniques any time of the day or night via YouTube videos, the internet can be a useful tool for finding new and interesting recipes and honing cooking skills. Moreover, the internet allows anyone with a computer to post family recipes, blog about favorite foods, and upload cooking demonstrations for a worldwide audience. Amateur cooks, inexperienced cooks, and even bad cooks now have an outlet for their experiences and can even find the same type of following formerly reserved only for professional cooks, expert cooks, and excellent cooks.⁸ As a source of innovation, cyberspace appears to be a whole new frontier ripe for exploration by eager, and not so eager, home cooks.

While it is easy to be swept up by the newness of what might seem to be the infinite possibilities of web-centered food and cooking content—the speed, the diversity, the connectivity and more—imparting cooking knowledge over the internet also represents the latest link in a long chain of knowledge transmission that stretches back for generations. Whether

⁷ Korrine, “Grandma’s Best Zucchini Bread,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/recipe/grandmas-best-zucchini-bread/detail.aspx>

⁸ For example, there is the “Bad Home Cooking” food blog by author Julie Tilsner where she chronicles her kitchen experiences “one botched meal at a time.” See: <http://www.badhomecooking.com/about>

standing in the kitchen sharing tips on the best way to whip butter into mashed potatoes or by slipping a note with Mom's recipe for no-bake cookies between the pages of a letter to a newlywed, home cooks have always shared cooking methods and favorite recipes. Therefore, online cooking content represents *both* tradition *and* innovation as internet sites mirror older oral and written information-sharing techniques while allowing home cooks to find creative ways to connect the intricacies of the World Wide Web to their own kitchen practices.

In this chapter, I analyze two popular forms of cooking-related online content: recipes posted on three recipe-sharing websites and user-created cooking demonstration videos uploaded to YouTube. While vast numbers of new recipes and videos appear online every day, these items do not represent sufficient evidence to refute the notion that home cooking is disappearing. Instead, I argue that these online "texts" offer a counter-narrative to the death of home cooking jeremiad. Death of home cooking Jeremiahs purport to champion the cause of "real" home cooking as they engage in hyperbolic rhetoric that over-simplifies the history of American home cooking, overemphasizes the significance of a narrow range of factors—such as convenience foods and labor-saving appliances—in contributing to the perceived decline of home cooking, and overstates the ability of certain changes—such as shopping at farmer's markets and making all meals from scratch—not only to rescue home cooking, but to solve the most pressing problems facing individuals, families, and society in general. I argue that these online recipes and cooking videos offer a prototype for a different type of home cooking rhetoric. In place of the disintegration of tradition so central to the idea that home cooking is dying, the form and function of internet cooking content replicates long-established patterns found in oral and written transmission of recipes and cooking knowledge. Instead of rigid adherence to a singular definition of "real" home cooking rooted in an idealized vision of the past, these texts illustrate

the flexibility, adaptability, and hybridity of cooking practices attuned to the needs of the present. These examples unsettle the binary that pits traditional from scratch cooking against so-called “convenience” cooking that includes boxed, canned, frozen and other mass-produced ingredients. Instead of framing these tactics as adversaries—with convenience killing tradition—the home cooks who share these online recipes and cooking videos present a spectrum of options in which convenience is just one choice among many that a home cook can select from at any time. For example, within the video “My Mom’s Peach Cobbler” posted by YouTube user Lownotes, the choice between fresh peaches and canned peaches for the cobbler is not presented as a life or death struggle for the fate of the kitchen. Instead, canned peaches are designated simply as an option which requires the cook to decide whether to use heavy or light syrup.⁹ As an example of blending tradition and innovation, these online cooking texts offer the possibility of a more balanced understanding of home cooking traditions in the twenty-first century—creating a dialogue that takes into account the wide variations in home cooking attitudes and practices, eliminates the guilt and anxiety fueled by a singular definition of “real” home cooking, and recognizes the vibrant and resilient nature of America’s home cooking traditions.

Sharing Cooking Knowledge from Word of Mouth to the World Wide Web

Home cooking knowledge begins—and ends—in the kitchen with the physical exertion required for making meals. Therefore, the most basic, and traditional, form of sharing recipes and cooking techniques is by word of mouth and through direct observation in the kitchen. In her book, *A Bite Off Mama’s Plate: Mothers’ and Daughters’ Connections Through Food*, Miriam Meyers provides a vivid description of the process of learning to make her mother’s

⁹ Lownotes, “My Mom’s Easy Peach Cobbler,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFZRnRzSbdc>

biscuits, not by reading a recipe, but by watching her mother bake biscuits:

My mother made beautiful Southern biscuits regularly. I sat in the kitchen talking with her as she spooned what seemed to be a random amount of self-rising flour into a special bowl, scooped a piece of fat from a can and placed it in the center of the flour, poured in buttermilk, and worked the mass with her fingers. When the dough was “right,” I watched her shape the biscuits, then place them on a greased baking sheet, blackened from many years’ use. I could make those biscuits today easily, though Mama never taught me formally. Being in the presence of my mother, talking with her as she made biscuits, ‘taught’ me... So this is the way many women learn—by being in the kitchen.¹⁰

Meyers’ learned her mother’s recipe by osmosis as she sat in the kitchen, chatting with her as she blended ingredients and formed perfect biscuits. For Meyers, these shared moments became both a cherished memory *and* a recipe that she could follow with ease even years later. Similarly, in the chapter “Doing Cooking” from the second volume of Michel de Certeau’s influential work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, famed French historian Luce Giard explains how, as a modern woman repulsed by the perceived limitations of housework, she initially resisted the kitchen. However, when Giard found that she was tasked with cooking for herself, she discovered that the kitchen was not wholly unfamiliar territory. Giard’s description of her realization that she had somehow absorbed the very lessons she had worked so hard to avoid beautifully illustrates the power and stubborn persistence of cooking knowledge:

From the groping experience of my initial gestures, my trials and errors, there remains one surprise: I thought that I had never learned or observed anything, having obstinately wanted to escape from the contagion of a young girl’s education and because I had always preferred my room, my books, and my silent games to the kitchen where my mother busied herself. Yet, my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells, and colors. I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings, and the dull thud of the kneading hand. A recipe or an inductive word sufficed to arouse a strange anamnesis whereby ancient knowledge and primitive experiences were reactivated in fragments of which I was heiress and guardian without wanting to be. I had to admit that I too had been provided with a woman’s knowledge and

¹⁰ Miriam Meyers, *A Bite Off Mama’s Plate: Mothers’ and Daughters’ Connections Through Food*, (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 56.

that it had crept into me, slipping past my mind's surveillance. It was something that came from my body and that integrated me into the great corps of women of my lineage, incorporating me into their anonymous ranks... Thus, surreptitiously and without suspecting it, I had been invested with the secret, tenacious pleasure of *doing-cooking*.¹¹

Both Meyers' and Giard's accounts of attaining cooking knowledge based solely on spending time in the kitchen reveal the power of learning cooking skills through observation. These are not formal lessons based on rote memorization of written recipes and repetitive practice of knife skills or cooking techniques like what might be found in the rigorous training of professional chefs or the curriculum of culinary schools. Instead, recipes and cooking skills pass naturally from one person to another through the simple act of sharing a space, telling a story, and creating a meal. These lessons draw intensity from the way that recipes and stories combine to communicate individual memory, family history, and community identity.¹² By telling stories while cooking, the processes of sharing recipes and creating narratives become intertwined.

Written recipes represent an attempt to transcribe the physical act of cooking into a printed format. The word on the page often "reflects orality" as if the writer were speaking to the cook through the recipe, sharing instructions in ways similar to the experienced cook directing a less experienced cook in the kitchen.¹³ In this way, writers often use recipes as a "canvas" on which to paint the stories of their lives.¹⁴ For centuries, women have told stories while cooking; it is only natural that these stories would accompany the written record of their

¹¹ Luce Giard, "Doing Cooking," in *The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, ed. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 152-153.

¹² Traci Marie Kelly, "If I Were a Voodoo Priestess: Women's Culinary Autobiographies," in *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 252.

¹³ Elizabeth J. McDougall in "Voices, Stories, and Recipes in Selected Canadian Community Cookbooks," in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. Anne L Bower, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 109.

¹⁴ Kelly, "If I Were a Voodoo Priestess," 252.

recipes as they are shared among friends, family, and wider audiences.¹⁵ In her article, “‘Family Liked-1956’: My Mother’s Recipes,” Sharon Jansen describes how her mother used recipes as a vehicle to tell stories. Writes Jansen, “usually my mother’s recipes come folded up inside her letters, which describe the dish, when she made it, who she made it for, how they liked it. And always what they said to one another, who is fighting with her husband over what, whose son or daughter is expecting a baby, who has the most annoying neighbors.”¹⁶ For Jansen, her mother’s recipes became embedded in her mother’s life story. By surrounding their recipes with personal anecdotes, funny stories, individual memories, and meaningful histories, recipe writers replicate the intimacy of the kitchen where food and family, recipes and stories, teaching and learning intermingle.

The important connection between story-telling and recipe writing—cooking and community—continues even when recipe transmission moves beyond the intimate relationships of friends and family to include a wider audience of community members and even strangers in the form of community cookbooks. Even years after publication, and potentially passing through dozens of hands and traveling hundreds of miles, a community cookbook can serve as a testament not only to the foods prepared, but to the lives and experiences of the home cooks that assembled the recipes and published the cookbook. Recipe names, descriptions of where the recipes originated, snippets of memories of the important occasions where the dishes were shared, accounts of the process of gathering the recipes and assembling the cookbook—all of these stories can help the home cook perusing the recipes or reading the cookbook gain a sense of the personality of the individuals who shared the recipes and the community that produced the

¹⁵ Colleen Cotter, “Claiming a Piece of the Pie: How the Language of Recipes Defines Communities,” in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. Anne L Bower, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 51.

¹⁶ Sharon L Jansen, “‘Family Liked-1956’: My Mother’s Recipes,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13 no.2 (1993): 67.

cookbook.¹⁷ This sense of underlying identity gleaned from the pages of community cookbooks may not have been intentional, since these cookbooks are often assembled with the goal of raising funds for a specific cause not telling the community's story, and the picture of the community may not be accurate as the cooks and the community as a whole may present an idealized portrait of themselves, but the ability of community cookbooks to convey meaning through recipes and stories is a powerful component of almost every collection.¹⁸

My own experience provides an example of the capacity of community cookbooks to communicate more than just recipes, but also to reflect the stories, memories and identity of the group that assembled the cookbook. In 2002, with the ink barely dry on my Master's degree and student loan payments just over the horizon, I accepted the first job that promised a steady paycheck—working as an order entry technician at YBP Library Services in Contoocook, New Hampshire. While the job could sometimes be tedious—keying in book orders for libraries to the company's computer system—I enjoyed going to work because my co-workers were almost universally friendly and enthusiastic about the work that they did on a daily basis. It was my first time working at a company where employees genuinely cared about each other and were friends both at work and after hours as well. From my first day, I felt welcomed: joining in on walks around the nearby neighborhood during breaks, chatting about the latest episodes of favorite television programs at lunch, and swapping interesting book titles that we discovered during the course of the day.

¹⁷ Marion Bishop, "Speaking Sisters: Relief Society Cookbooks and Mormon Culture," in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. Anne L Bower, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 98-99.

¹⁸ Anne L Bower, "Introduction: Bound Together: Recipes, Lives, Stories and Readings," in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. Anne L Bower, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 2

In a fitting tribute to a nationwide bookseller, the YBP Library Services Activities Committee solicited recipes from employees and published a spiral-bound cookbook titled *Flavors of New England: A Collection of Recipes by YBP Library Services*.¹⁹ Within the pages of this thin volume is evidence of the group's humor, dedication, and loyalty. The name of the contributor, his or her job title and the length of his or her service to the company appears beneath each recipe title. I found a familiar name, Lisa Nelson, the receptionist who helped me gain confidence when I was assigned to serve as one of her backups to cover her lunch and breaks. The blinking lights of the multi-line phone and the possibility of an important visitor strolling through the front door terrified me until she shared a funny story that helped me relax and ease into the receptionist duties. Her name appears on many of the recipes, and each one includes a "Recipe Note" where she shares an anecdote in the same chatty tone that I remember. For example, for the recipe "Ozark Pudding (Really a Cake)," she includes the brief line "one of my mother's quick desserts and it smells so good!"²⁰ This single sentence infuses the recipe with a layer of enthusiasm. Many of the other contributors also include recipe notes at the end of their submission or even scattered tidbits of stories throughout the recipes themselves. My favorite is a recipe titled "Turkey Jalfrezi" submitted by Rob Burberry. Starting with the declaration, "when I read this recipe it said Hot Turkey Jalfrezi, which sounded lethal-so I took the edge off it-now I just call it Turkey Jalfrezi," it is readily apparent that this is more than just a list of ingredients and cooking directions. The rest of the instructions spread over an entire page and continue with the same informal, collegial tone—full of asides and jokes—concluding with the tip that "if you cook this like I do, get a mop ready – I'm a mess in the kitchen!" What stands out, however, is that following this long narration there is a "Recipe Note" in which he shares the

¹⁹ YBP Library Services, *Flavors of New England: A Collection of Recipes by YBP Library Services*, (Kearney, NE: Morris Press Cookbooks, 2002).

²⁰ Ibid, 93.

following story: “When I moved out, my parents bought me a book ‘COOKING FOR BLOKES’ This book is very simple, perhaps insulting, it even had how to boil an egg. I got this recipe from that book and tailored it to my own tastes after much experimenting. This book encourages any guy to cook! ISBN#0751515639.”²¹ The fact that he ends the recipe by sharing the ISBN number needed to purchase the book is very fitting for an audience of book lovers! Within the pages of this cookbook, I recognize the personalities of the co-workers that made such an impression on me with their friendliness, professionalism, and humor—not merely from the recipes they shared, but also through the stories that were an integral part of the cookbook.

The vast anonymity of the internet may seem like the antithesis to the intimacy of previous sites for sharing cooking knowledge—the family kitchen, scraps of paper with instructions scribbled in barely legible handwriting, the pages of community cookbooks filled with inside jokes. However, with the proliferation of desktop computers, Smartphones, eReaders, tablets, and scores of other internet-enabled devices, cooking-related content thrives on the World Wide Web. Even in cyberspace, home cooks continue to share both recipes *and* stories. However, these recipes-as-stories are not merely a continuation of tradition, but also a form of innovation as home cooks adapt to a new medium. Even in the infancy of the internet, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, recognized the ability for cooking content shared on the internet to straddle the old and the new—tradition and innovation. In “The Electronic Vernacular,” published in 1996, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett investigated what was, at that time, a new phenomenon—online users sharing cooking knowledge and recipes via listservs and internet-based communities.²² For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett highlights a listserv, named SOURDOUGH, which allowed participants not only to share the recipe for sourdough, but to

²¹ Ibid, 59-60.

²² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Electronic Vernacular” in *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21-65.

exchange the “starter” that serves as a base for any sourdough recipe.²³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that this swap—not only of information, but of a physical component of the recipe—represents a new phenomenon in which the SOURDOUGH list “serves as a kind of switching station for the exchange of sourdough starter—bubbling yeast is, in a sense, routed along a mainframe network.”²⁴ In this way, technology meets reality in the form of a steamy loaf of bread made possible by a message originally transmitted electronically. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *The USENET Cookbook* represents an even more impressive example of technology replicating, and enhancing, an existing recipe-sharing tradition.²⁵ *The USENET Cookbook* was one of the first attempts to allow cooks from all over the world to share recipes in one searchable database. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this online site “extends and transforms” previous types of “recipe exchanges.”²⁶ The collection of recipes mimics favorite old cookbooks, but dwarfs them in sheer number of recipes and variety of content; instead of representing the work of a single author, the online site represents “the cumulative result of thousands of people who have posted recipes to one or another list or newsgroup” in an “ongoing accretion of deposits from disparate sources.”²⁷ These recipe-sharing databases also mimic the way that recipes are shared in “food columns and magazines” and community cookbooks where contributors also send in recipes that are assembled in the publication—with the difference that published collections are edited by professionals and the contents do not change while internet recipe databases “offer a fluid mass of possibility” over which users maintain control by choosing which recipes to save.²⁸ In this way, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, online recipe-sharing is “more like the expanding and

²³ Ibid, 30.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

contracting collective wisdom of an offline network of cooks and their individual repertoires”—in other words, internet databases come closer to replicating the fluidity and expansiveness of cooking knowledge within a community rather than the fixed content of a cookbook, though without the benefit of “face to face” interaction.²⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis of these early attempts at sharing cooking knowledge and recipes over the internet lays a foundation for examining the explosion of online content that has grown exponentially in the nearly two decades since this article was written. In my analysis of online recipes and cooking videos, I follow Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s example of emphasizing *both* the continuities and changes that take place when users share cooking knowledge online. In so doing, I highlight the ways in which these texts challenge the stagnation and intractability of the death of home cooking narrative by underscoring the resiliency and adaptability of home cooking traditions in the new and ever-evolving realm of cyberspace.

From Grandma to Me to You: Recipes, Stories, and Recipes-as-Stories in the Global Age

When Tiffany H. posted her grandmother’s recipe for donuts on the website Allrecipes.com with the notation “my grandmother passed this delicious recipe for making doughnuts [sic] along to me, and I thought I would share it,” she entered into a tradition of recipe sharing that has persisted for generations.³⁰ In this section, I delve into the internet recipe-sharing experience to reveal the ways in which online users continue the recipes-as-stories tradition by embedding recipes within stories even in the vastness of cyberspace. Within an environment that favors the quick retrieval of relevant information, surrounding recipes with personal histories, memories, reflections, and narratives might seem out of place, especially since these stories are not directly related to the list of ingredients and cooking directions that are the

²⁹ Ibid, 32.

³⁰ Tiffany H, “Grandma’s Doughnuts,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandmas-Doughnuts/Detail.aspx>

only elements required to complete the recipe. However, even a quick perusal of online recipes reveals that recipe transmission as a form of storytelling persists. On the internet, just as in the kitchen around a bubbling pot of stew or within the pages of a community cookbook, users surround their recipes with narratives. Some websites attempt to foster a sense of community by providing spaces where users can include descriptions of the recipes, but even on more basic sites that offer little opportunity to include narrative elements in the recipes, users find ways to include personal anecdotes, family stories, and narrative notations mixed into the recipes they share with a World Wide Web full of strangers.

The persistence of the practice of sharing recipes-as-stories from the intimacy of the kitchen to the virtual anonymity of the internet underscores the resiliency of tradition as users modify their recipes to fit within the limitations of specific website formats and adjust their stories to address an audience made up primarily of strangers. To demonstrate the ways in which recipe-sharing websites extend and support the recipe-as-story tradition, I plucked twenty-five recipes from three recipe-sharing websites for a total sample of seventy-five recipes. With a plethora of possible websites, I narrowed the field by eliminating sites that drew recipes mainly from magazines, commercially produced cookbooks, and television programs such as recipes.com, foodnetwork.com, and myrecipes.com. Instead, I concentrated on websites that encouraged users to post their own recipes, using their own language. With this focus, I selected Allrecipes.com, Recipezaar.com, and Cooks.com.³¹

Allrecipes.com and Recipezaar.com are both community-based websites meaning that they require users to register with a screen name and login in order to take advantage of most of the features of the site. Clicking on the “join for free” link on the Allrecipes.com homepage brings up a box that reveals if you join the community you will be able to “save recipes to your

³¹ Recipezaar.com has changed names to Food.com and now includes the tag line “Home of the Home Cook.”

recipe box; rate and review recipes; create a shopping list; submit your own recipes, and more...”³² The same is true for Recipezaar.com which declares “sign up for Recipezaar to share photos, show off your cooking chops, and connect to an enthusiastic and helpful community. It's free and easy.”³³ Once signed up and logged in, users are encouraged to participate actively in the process of sharing and commenting on recipes online. Recipes and comments posted to Allrecipes.com and Recipezaar.com are linked to the contributor's user name. Accompanying every recipe is a box where the recipe's originator can share commentaries about the recipes. There is also ample opportunity for others users to give their feedback in the “reviews” section of each recipe—a component that is well-utilized on both sites. These features combine to create a vibrant atmosphere and a sense of community reminiscent of face-to-face recipe-sharing.

Cooks.com offers a much different experience serving more as a database for storing and retrieving recipes than a recipe-sharing community. As the website notes it is “a convenient and reliable way to store all your recipes! Throw out those recipe boxes and clipping files where you can never find what you're looking for. Never lose your favorite recipes again! They'll all be searchable here at Cooks.com recipe database and search engine.”³⁴ In fact, users do not need to register or log in to post their recipes on the site. This means that the source of the recipes remain anonymous unless the contributor decides to take advantage of the “submitted by” feature to include his or her name. Acting more as a storage site and searchable database, Cooks.com is not concerned with fostering relationships or building communities. However, even in the more restrictive atmosphere and format of Cooks.com, users managed to sneak narrative elements and

³² Allrecipes.com, “Homepage,” *Allrecipes.com*, 2010, <http://www.allrecipes.com>.

³³ Recipezaar.com, “Member Sign-in and Registration,” *Recipezaar.com*, http://share.recipezaar.com/registration/login.esi?DEST_URL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.recipezaar.com%2Fmembers/myprivate.php

³⁴ Cooks.com, “Add Your Recipes,” *Cooks.com*, <http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/add>

stories into their recipes. For example, the anonymous contributor who posted the recipe for “Grandma’s Macaroni Dish,” declares “Grandma (to all us kids in the neighborhood) made this for Saturday lunch when we played with her grandchildren, the Ames’ kids.”³⁵ This short notation added to the body of the recipe in a space that is intended only for cooking instructions conveys this user’s childhood memory and sense of the “neighborhood” in which he or she grew up. Since each website includes thousands upon thousands of recipes that have been posted by users, I narrowed the field by using the search term “Grandma.” Since grandmothers have played such a critical role in the traditional processes of oral and written recipe transmission, it is fitting that “grandma’s” recipes would show up in large numbers online. A search for “grandma” resulted in 200 recipes on Allrecipes.com, 426 recipes on Recipezaar.com, and a well over a thousand recipes on Cooks.com.

The vast majority of recipes contain very little apparent “storytelling” beyond the recipe itself. In most cases, the user simply uploaded the recipe and did not comment on the contents. In other cases, the commentary was a brief explanation of the content of the recipe and possible variations and not a “story” in the technical sense of the word. However, it is important to remember that even these bare-bones recipes have stories to tell. As Colleen Cotter reveals in “Claiming a Piece of the Pie: How the Language of Recipes Defines Communities,” recipes that consist of just the list of ingredients and directions for combining them can provide “stories.” As Cotter argues, “by looking at the language and structure of a recipe, we begin to see how a recipe can be viewed as a story, a cultural narrative that can be shared and has been constructed by members of a community.”³⁶ Cotter herself conducted a linguistic analysis of pie crust recipes to demonstrate how the language contained solely within the recipe told stories. While the same

³⁵ Anonymous, “Grandma’s Macaroni Dish,” *Cooks.com*, <http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1735,156176-245196,00.html>

³⁶ Cotter, “Claiming a Piece of the Pie,” 52-53.

type of deep reading would be possible for the recipes posted on recipe-sharing websites, that undertaking falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I selected twenty-five recipes from each site, purposely choosing examples that contained narrative elements in order to demonstrate the continuities and changes that take place when the tradition of sharing recipes and stories moves from the family kitchen to the World Wide Web.

Despite the fact that the internet can often seem impersonal, sharing recipes online can be an intensely personal experience because the recipes serve as touchstones for significant memories that make up their own life stories. For example, as AngiC declares in her comments for “Grandma Solberg’s Summer Snack Squares” that “these are a chewy, no-bake bar that my grandma used to make me as a snack when I would play all day in the summer. It goes without saying that they bring me fond memories.”³⁷ AngiC shares her favorite recipe with the online community, but it is the memory of her grandmother making them that emerges as the important message. The same is true for Diane Martin. Her recipe for “Grandma’s Blackberry Cake” is both a connection to her grandmother and a memory of the time they spent together. Martin exclaims ““I REMEMBER going blackberry picking with Mom and Grandma. Even at 70 years old, Grandma could pick 3 gallons of berries before I had my pail half full. Grandma made up this recipe with her mom, and it's been passed down for five generations now.”³⁸ For Martin, posting the recipe becomes the occasion to share the story of picking blackberries with her grandmother. CookbookCarrie’s recipe for “Grandma Nancy’s Oatmeal Cake” also carries memories, not just of her grandmother baking the cake, but of her grandfather’s mischief enacted to ensure that he secured the majority of the cake for himself. CookbookCarrie relates that

³⁷ AngiC, “Grandma Solberg’s Summer Snack Cake,” *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Solbergs-Summer-Snack-Squares-278716>>

³⁸ Diane Martin, “Grandma’s Blackberry Pie,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandmas-Blackberry-Cake/Detail.aspx>

“Grandma used to bake this cake, only to have the whole thing disappear. She finally found out my Grandpa was taking it to his shop and hiding it in a drawer to snack on as he worked. It looks complicated, but it isn’t, and the flavor is worth it. Every time I eat it I think of my grandparents and smile!”³⁹ These online contributors not only post a recipe, they share significant memories that go along with the recipe. In this way the recipe becomes a link to the past and the person who once made it and also builds connections between the person sharing the recipe and the anonymous online community.

For members of online recipe-sharing communities, posting their family and personal recipes online falls directly in line with the tradition of sharing recipes orally and in writing. When Puppies777 posts “Grandma Lee’s Stuffing” on Recipezaar.com, she acknowledges the process of transforming the recipe from her mother’s practice of cooking it in her kitchen, to a written form for her own daughter: “this is the stuffing my mom, Lena always made for Thanksgiving. She never wrote it down but I helped her so many times I didn’t need to see it in writing. My daughter, Sam (17) is not into cooking. However I wrote it down and perfected it so she’ll be able to make it some day [sic].”⁴⁰ Puppies777 then draws in the online community by providing definite instructions to assure that the recipe will turn out the way it should by declaring “couldn’t be easier. Couldn’t be yummiier...BELL’s poultry seasoning is a must!”⁴¹ Chef53Kathy engages in the same process when she shares the recipe for “Grandma Helen’s Cinnamon Apples” on Recipezaar.com. She acknowledges the chain of transmission that brought the recipe into her hands and then incorporates the online community into that chain. Chef53Kathy declares “my grandmother made these for us every year during the holidays when

³⁹CookbookCarrie, “Grandma Nancy’s Oatmeal Cake,” *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Nancys-Oatmeal-Cake-57219>

⁴⁰Puppies777. “Grandma Lee’s Stuffing,” *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Lees-Stuffing-238367>

⁴¹Ibid

we would visit her in Illinois. All of the grandkids loved them. I'm happy to share the recipe with my Zaar [sic] cooking buddies.”⁴² By including her “Zaar [sic] cooking buddies” in the line of transmission for her grandmother’s recipe, Chef53Kathy assures that the recipe will never be lost while firming the ties with her internet community.⁴³

In fact, many users in the online recipe-sharing communities also acknowledge that they are participating in a long-standing culinary tradition of sharing recipes and stories. This is what Marion Bishop identifies as a “feminine culinary genealogy—a matrilineage based not just on a woman’s name but also on her kitchen, her act of cooking, and her body.”⁴⁴ That is why when SINGERSANDY posts “Grandma Cornish’s Whole Wheat Potato Bread,” she pays homage to the line of women from whom she inherited the recipe noting that “this is the recipe that my husband’s grandmother made for her family, my mother-in-law made for hers, and I have inherited the fun of making this bread for mine.”⁴⁵ Even though she is related to these women only by marriage, they are still part of her culinary genealogy through this recipe for bread. As Bishop argues, “not only are women creating and affirming identity through connection, they are fostering new kinds of connections that suggest altogether new ways to configure community and family: for me to remember a recipe is to remember the woman it came from, how it was passed on to her, and where I can situate myself within my culinary female family.”⁴⁶ Moreover, SINGERSANDY has now included a worldwide audience in her recipe’s lineage. On March 2, 2001, user Martha Blair added herself to this culinary heritage by declaring in her review of the recipe that “I’ve been attempting to bake bread for the past 25 years with varying success. I’ve

⁴² Chef53Kathy, “Grandma Helen’s Cinnamon Apples,” *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Helens-Cinnamon-Apples-323530>

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Bishop, “Speaking Sisters,” 102.

⁴⁵ SINGERSANDY, “Grandma Cornish’s Whole Wheat Potato Bread,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandma-Cornishs-Whole-Wheat-Potato-Bread/Detail.aspx>

⁴⁶ Bishop, “Speaking Sisters,” 103.

tried recipe after recipe and I believe I've finally found gold. No doubt this will be a main stay [sic] in our home. The result of my first batch was overwhelmingly successful. I can't even begin to explain how pleased I was. This recipe is definitely the BEST!"⁴⁷ A recipe found online is now integrated into another baker's culinary story.

Posting recipes online allows contributors to foster relationships and widen their community circles. In this way the "feminine culinary genealogy" stretches beyond familial ties to include a much broader, even worldwide, audience. When ClareVH posts the recipe for "Grandma Osborne's Applesauce Cake," she reveals that "my mom says that her mom got this recipe from Grandma Osborne, which means it is a very old recipe. Unfortunately, no one knows exactly who 'Grandma Osborne' was... Fortunately, she left us a moist old-fashioned applesauce cake."⁴⁸ Whoever she may have been, the mysterious "Grandma Osborne," left a culinary lineage that now includes not only ClareVH's mother and ClareVH herself, but a potentially global audience of online users of Recipezaar.com. Other times, users connect their own heritage with the recipes offered online. On January 1, 2008, Diane S. responded to Gwen Johnson's posting of her "Grandma's Lemon Pie" on Allrecipes.com, "I have been looking for a lemon pie recipe similar to the legendary one my husband's grandmother used to make; unfortunately, she had never written it down, and her secret is lost. This pie comes very close to hers."⁴⁹ Diane S's discovery of Gwen Johnson's grandmother's recipe for lemon pie allowed her to reconnect with her own recipe heritage that otherwise would have been lost. The internet facilitated this breakthrough in a way that mirrors previous recipe collecting, but adds a new

⁴⁷ SINGERSANDY, "Grandma Cornish's Whole Wheat Potato Bread," *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandma-Cornishs-Whole-Wheat-Potato-Bread/Detail.aspx>

⁴⁸ ClareVH, "Grandma Osborne's Applesauce Cake," *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Osbornes-Applesauce-Cake-91003>

⁴⁹ Gwen Johnson, "Grandma's Lemon Pie," *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandmas-Lemon-Pie/Detail.aspx>

layer. By declaring that the “secret is lost,” Diane S suggests that she may have attempted to track down the recipe by quizzing friends and family and perhaps even searching through the pages of recipe books. In the past, that would have been where her quest ended, in defeat. However, the vast collection represented by online recipe storehouses allowed Diane S to unearth a recipe that at least came close to replicating the desired dessert. At the same time, Diane S indicates that she will not be held captive either by the recipe or by her newfound heritage by making it clear that *she* is the master of the moment and the recipe. She does this by describing the changes she made to the recipe writing “I used fresh lemon juice and added the zest as well (as Grandma had). I used 1/4 C. cornstarch, since many other recipes with equal liquid measurements called for it (I didn't want it to turn out rubbery). I decided to try another meringue recipe, since I already had a sore arm from the CONSTANT stirring involved in making the filling. This is very labor-intensive; I can see why making lemon pies has fallen out of vogue. The results are worth it, however; I made it for company, and they raved about how good it was.”⁵⁰ This is the part of the cooking process that is often lost when recipes are exchanged verbally and in writing—the fact that once a cook makes the recipe his or her own changes naturally follow.

While posting recipes online may give users the sense that their recipes will never disappear, as templates for the creative performance of cooking, recipes are always in the process of being changed, altered, and adapted. As Marie Drews points out, “...recipes call to be interpreted and reinterpreted, set and reset. Like drama, they need to be *performed* if they are to enable remembrance, resistance, and persistence in the present.”⁵¹ Even the act of transmission

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Marie I Drews, “Cooking in *Memory's Kitchen*: Re-Presenting Recipes, Remembering the Holocaust,” in *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning*, ed. Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 69.

results in changes to recipes. Transforming oral or written recipes to online versions is not necessarily an easy process. Sometimes key information is missing or difficult to convey. User ksduffster points out both the positive and negative impact translating recipes to an online form in her posting of “Grandma Star’s Pot Pie (Chicken & Dumplings) recipe on Recipezaar.com. She writes, “this is my Polish grandma's recipe, taught to her by her mother. She never wrote down recipes, which forced us to spend even more time with her, learning her recipes (no one ever complained about that though), but also had the unfortunate (for you) effect of none of us writing down the recipes either, so most measurements below are estimates.”⁵² While the fact that her grandmother never wrote her recipes down had the positive impact of encouraging her grandchildren to spend time with her, it also had the negative effect of making the recipes difficult to duplicate for an online audience. Joan Kasura got around this handicap by translating the recipe “Grandma’s Apples and Rice” into a workable version. Kasura declares “LIKE MOST women of her generation, my husband's grandmother was a 'no-measure cook'. This recipe of hers suffered as it was handed down, so I made an effort to work out the kinks. Finally, my husband pronounced the results as good as he remembered, and we declared it the 'official' recipe.”⁵³ In these cases, the very act of documenting, and thus recreating, recipes also alters them.

Online recipe-sharing communities reveal the truly dynamic nature of recipe transmission. In the reviews and responses to posted recipes, community-members describe their own experiences of making the recipes and reveal the ways in which they adapt and alter them to suit their own needs and tastes. This underscores the true nature of recipes—they are not a

⁵² ksduffster, “Grandma Star’s Pot Pie (Chicken & Dumplings),” *Recipezaar.com*, <http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Stars-Pot-Pie-Chicken-Dumplings-209326>

⁵³ Joan Kasura, “Grandma’s Apples and Rice,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Grandmas-Apples-and-Rice/Detail.aspx>

stagnant document and are instead a representation of an action—cooking. Moreover, since cooking is a dynamic process, recipients transform the recipe to meet their own tastes and needs. That is why when PDGRANT posts her response to the recipe “Apple Pie by Grandma Ople” on February 1, 2009 she not only describes how much she liked the recipe, but also includes the ways in which she altered it to fit her own tastes. She writes:

I'm a novice cook to be sure. I am a Junior at the University of Alabama and just discovered that I can cook just as easily as my mother does by following some key recipes from this website. This recipe in particular has changed my life. This is the most amazing pie I've ever tasted in my life, and it isn't that particularly hard to make. I took several people's advice by adding 1 tablespoon of vanilla, a dash of nutmeg, and a dash of cinnamon. Additionally, I put the apples in the bottom of the pie crust and poured the hot syrup on them, then put the lattice on top. After that, I made a separate glaze that consisted of brown sugar and cinnamon. I poured it on hot, perhaps too hot and It [sic] seeped right through the lattice. Note that it should be hot though, otherwise it will clump on you. I cooked it at 350 for an hour and a half. The crust was more crisp, and the apples were softer as a result. I definitely suggest the Granny Smith apples over other types of apples.⁵⁴

Even though she is a self-described “novice,” PDGRANT feels that she has the right to alter the recipe for her own needs because she has now appropriated the recipe and made it a part of her own life story. This same type of scenario is repeated again and again in comments to recipes posted online. Users change, alter, and adapt recipes according to their own tastes and needs and then share their opinions with the rest of the online community. The process of constantly changing recipes is integral the tradition. As Janet Theophano recounts, “change is constant. The accidental or deliberate modification of centuries-old recipes takes place with the passing of each generation, with the movement of people from one locale or continent to another, with periods of crisis or scarcity such as war or natural disaster...Human ingenuity will create

⁵⁴ MOSHASHMAMA, “Apple Pie by Grandma Ople,” *Allrecipes.com*, <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Apple-Pie-by-Grandma-Ople/Detail.aspx>

facsimiles of those old favorites and experiment with new recipes.”⁵⁵ In cyberspace, just like in the kitchen, the give and take, and the ever-changing nature of recipe-transmission, is what gives the process its dynamic nature and helps the tradition of sharing recipes-as-stories remain vibrant and important even in the twenty-first century.

Extending Kitchen Space into Cyberspace with Online Cooking Videos

Each day, millions of people from around the world take up YouTube’s offer to “Broadcast Yourself.” Among the millions, Clara Cannucciari seems like an unlikely YouTube sensation. A great-grandmother over 90-years-old, Clara shares her memories and recipes from the Great Depression through videos posted to her channel “Great Depression Cooking.”⁵⁶ With the assistance of her grandson, Christopher, Clara has posted over a dozen videos in which she prepares the recipes that helped her family survive economic hardship in the 1930s. The “Great Depression Cooking with Clara” channel is a hit with over 37,000 subscribers and garnering over 4.5 million views. Clara’s YouTube success translated into a book deal with St. Martin’s press and the publication of *Clara’s Kitchen: Wisdom, Memories, and Recipes from the Great Depression*.⁵⁷ At age ninety-six, Clara chose to post her final video, in which she made a basic tomato sauce, on December 24, 2011.⁵⁸ Even without new content, the channel continues to gain new followers and remains a popular cooking-related channel on YouTube.

Clara is not alone. Since its 2005 launch, YouTube has become phenomenon, rapidly cementing its place as the largest video-sharing website on the Internet with millions of users and

⁵⁵ Theophano, *Eat My Words*, 50.

⁵⁶ DepressionCooking, “Great Depression Cooking with Clara,” *YouTube.com*
<http://www.youtube.com/user/DepressionCooking>

⁵⁷ Clara Cannucciari with Christopher Cannucciari, *Clara’s Kitchen: Wisdom, Memories, and Recipes from the Great Depression*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ DepressionCooking, “Great Depression Cooking – Tomato Sauce,” *YouTube.com*,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFvs0hUNue0>

billions of video views.⁵⁹ Many amateur filmmakers have found YouTube's format particularly easy to use since by following only a few simple steps just about anyone with a video recorder and internet access can upload content to the site.⁶⁰ Alongside the viral videos of adorable kittens, giggling babies, and angry honey badgers, scores of professional and amateur cooks have uploaded videos to YouTube. The sheer number, and diversity, of cooking-related videos appearing on the site every day is overwhelming. Moreover, YouTube's influence over home cooking practices has been rising as cooking videos have been increasing in popularity. In fact, from 2008 through 2010, the number of searches for recipes on YouTube quadrupled.⁶¹ The content and style of amateur videos posted on the site range from those uploaded by nervous newbies with shaky video and poor sound quality to others displaying almost professional characteristics including glitzy introductory sequences, theme music, high quality video, and near-perfect scene cuts. While some cooking channels have found fame—*Feed Me Bubbe* is another example of a cooking channel that gained a massive following that led to the publication of a mainstream cookbook—most languish in obscurity.⁶²

Part of the reason that YouTube cooking videos are so popular is that they give both individuals new to cooking and experienced cooks looking to expand their repertoire the ability to view real cooks in action as they maneuver in their kitchens. Cookbooks and recipes represent an attempt to transfigure an active process—cooking—into the passive medium of the written word. Much of this conversion is imprecise—words simply cannot capture the nuances that cooks put into their efforts of blending ingredients to produce the same delicious dish every time.

⁵⁹ Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*, (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2007).

⁶⁰ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 1.

⁶¹ Scarlett Lindeman, "YouTube: Better Than Cookbooks," *The Atlantic.com*, December 8, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2010/12/youtube-better-than-cookbooks/67658/>

⁶² ChalutzProductions, "Feed Me Bubbe Episode #1 Jelly Jammies Closed Captioned by Project ReadOn," *YouTube.com*, June 15, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-s1bkr8iPM>

As Scarlett Lindeman notes, “you can’t see or hear a recipe.”⁶³ Cooking videos circumvent this problem by capturing real cooks as they prepare recipes. You *can* see *and* hear YouTube cooking videos and that provides a much better chance to reproduce the specific movements, techniques, and the other cooking skills that disappear in translation from the physical act to the written word.⁶⁴ For generations, the best way to learn to cook was to spend time in the kitchens of experienced cooks—listening to them tell stories; watching them demonstrate cooking techniques; taking on new tasks and slowly developing kitchen skills and confidence under the watchful eye of the expert. This is what Susan Marks calls the “apprenticeship of the stove.”⁶⁵ In the twenty-first century, YouTube moves the “apprenticeship of the stove” from the kitchen to the computer.

While YouTube cooking videos represent a modern day manifestation of the age-old tradition of sharing recipes and cooking knowledge through observation and story-telling, they also offer key insights into the ways in which today’s cooks navigate between tradition and innovation in their kitchens. The death of home cooking narrative takes an all or nothing approach when it comes to depicting the twenty-first century culinary landscape in which they declare that America is in the aftermath of a food apocalypse where convenience products and fast foods have obliterated home cooking and is in need of a culinary reawakening in which enlightened home cooks must abandon the blasphemy of processed foods by returning to the kitchen practices of the past with an emphasis on locally sourced ingredients, from-scratch preparation, and slower, more family-centered meals. In this picture, modernity—and its so-called processed-food “progress”—is cast as the villain that has advanced ruthlessly at the cost of treasured kitchen traditions that can only be sent into retreat by a renewal of interest in “real”

⁶³ Scarlett Lindeman, “YouTube: Better Than Cookbooks.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 27-28.

food and cooking. Cooking activists wholeheartedly believe what Food Studies experts and cookbook authors Ken Albala and Rosanna Nafziger eloquently declare in their book *The Lost Art of Real Cooking*, that “It’s time to take back the kitchen. It’s time to unlock the pantry, to venture once again into our cellars and storehouses, and break free from the golden shackles of convenient, ready-made, industrial food. It’s time to cook supper.”⁶⁶

What is missing from the death of home cooking rhetoric is a middle ground—a space where modernity and tradition both thrive, where innovative and inherited kitchen skills combine, and where cooking for convenience and cooking from scratch are not mutually exclusive. While food writers often point to the extremes—the harried parents who pick up dinner from McDonald’s every night or the foodies who grow their own ingredients in backyard gardens and make everything from scratch—most Americans inhabit a hybrid zone where home cooks intermingle convenience and complexity in their kitchens. For many Americans, cooking is not a matter of choosing *between* innovation and tradition, but a practice of integrating both together. That is where YouTube cooking videos come in. As YouTube cooks put their kitchen space in cyberspace, they mix old and new—demonstrating the many ways in which they seamlessly integrate tradition and innovation in their cooking practices.

For this section, I reviewed the content of seventy-five YouTube cooking videos, focusing on amateur home cooks in the process of demonstrating recipe preparation. Since a search for the term “cooking” lands more than 1,140,000 results while “recipe” yields about 740,000 videos, I narrowed my results by mirroring the same term that I chose for the recipe-sharing websites—“Grandma.” I expanded my search by using variations of “Grandma Cooking” including “Grandmother Cooking,” “Granny Cooking,” “Nana Cooking,” “Grandma Recipe,” “Grandmother Recipe,” and more. I then allowed the YouTube format to guide my

⁶⁶ Albala and Nafziger, *The Lost Art of Real Cooking*, ix.

experience: choosing videos, adding them to a playlist, and then following intriguing links to suggested videos that appeared on the sidebar. I did not preview videos before I added them to my research collection and I repeated the search on a variety of dates to include newer content.

Once I had amassed approximately 150 videos that seemed to match my criteria of videos containing footage of amateur home cooks, I viewed each video. As it turned out, the 150 videos I had initially chosen did not all fit within the scope of my project. I excluded videos that actually originated from the television cooking programs or professional chefs and I avoided mock videos in which actors dressed up in wigs and dresses and playacted “Grandma” in the kitchen. I also deleted items from my playlist that seemed to be more of a private family moment than a public cooking demonstration. Some of the titles were deceptive and I did not keep selections that turned out to be about something other than cooking. For example, one result titled “Grandma’s Recipe” started out as if it were a cooking demonstration—with a young man grabbing ingredients out of a fridge, turning up the heat on a bubbling pot of water, and chopping vegetables. However, as the cook dumped bottle after bottle of ketchup into a giant stew pot it became apparent that this video was not about making food and was instead intended as a joke. Since the video’s description noted that it was “an entry for Second City’s 7 Day Shorts, word of the week being, you guessed it, ‘ketchup’” and the category confirmed that it was a “comedy,” I realized that this video did not match the selection criteria for my project and I removed the video from my playlist.⁶⁷ However, I did not rule out videos that were made by professional filmmakers when they focused on the kitchen work of an amateur home cook. By the time I had culled my collection, seventy-five videos remained in my sample. This represented over seven and a half hours of viewing time with videos ranging in length from just under two minutes to nearly twenty-five minutes.

⁶⁷ van46, “Grandma’s Recipe,” *YouTube.com*, December 8, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c6DOvftlnw>

As I viewed and transcribed videos, I found an amazing diversity even within my not-so-random sample. There were many examples of cooking shows that modeled themselves on television cooking programs where the home cooks identified themselves as the “host” and introduced what they would be making on that “episode.” There were videos where mischievous family members caught the home cook by surprise while he or she was in the midst of making breakfast, lunch, or dinner. There were cooking demonstration videos aimed directly at the camera and cooking instruction videos where the home cook taught family members how to make a specific recipe and the camera seemed virtually unnoticed. Home cooks ranged from exuberantly confident as they addressed the audience to obviously uncomfortable and unsettled by the presence of the camera. Some videos began with a fancy title sequence and music while others began abruptly as the home cook was in the middle of the recipe as if the cameraperson just suddenly had the idea to begin filming and the video had not been planned. Most allowed the cook to have the starring role as he or she explained every step of the preparation process. In some, the cooks were virtually silent, only responding as the person behind the camera peppered them with questions. A small number focused solely on the motions of the cook’s hands, played a song, and provided ingredients and directions in writing that appeared at the bottom of the screen. There also appeared to be a wide variety of motivations behind the creation of the videos: the desire for internet stardom; recording the preparation method for a specific recipe so that it would not be lost; celebrating the talents of the cook; documenting cooking lessons as knowledge is transferred from one generation to the next, and much more.

Similar to online recipe-sharing, YouTube cooking videos both continue *and* remake the traditional methods of sharing recipes and learning cooking methods through observation. YouTube cooks actively “translate” recipes from writing into action and back again, adapting the

content to meet the specific needs of the online environment. These cooks reveal a wide variety of sources for the recipes that they demonstrate: directly from mothers and grandmothers, through community cookbooks, and even directly from the internet.

In “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” the cook proudly declares that “This is Scottish Shortbread and it’s been our family for three generations.”⁶⁸ It is clear that this is a recipe that she prepares from memory—not a recipe card—especially when she gives conflicting measurements for flour. This mistake is later cleared up in the comments section in a reply to an inquiry from a viewer. With the combination of the cooking demonstration in the video, and the written clarification in the comments, “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread” transforms from one family’s secret into a reproducible recipe that gains rave reviews like the one from TheSugarpie15 who exclaims “I just made this! Wowzie!...this is without a doubt THE ULTIMATE!”⁶⁹

While “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread” shows how YouTube enables cooks to transform recipes from mere memories into written form, the video “Jen’s Cook Nook: Spinach Squares,” provides an excellent example of how online recipe sharing can incorporate many forms of recipe-sharing and expands the possible audience. Jen declares that “first of all you need your recipe” and the recipe she starts with is a printed recipe card which she says “this is my grandmother’s recipe; it is in her handwriting. I’m not exactly sure where she got it from.”⁷⁰ Although Jen is not sure where the recipe originates, she promises to “print out a nice copy for you guys below and I’ll pin it and link the pin in the more info bar.”⁷¹ By “pin it,” she is

⁶⁸ Krajczar, Karoly, “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgB90MjtHqs>

⁶⁹ TheSugarpie15, “Comment on Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgB90MjtHqs>

⁷⁰ Myhousewifelife, “Jen’s Cook Nook: Spinach Squares,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pT87l2g97-Y>

⁷¹ Ibid.

referring to the online site “Pinterest” which allows users to share images. By “pinning” her recipe, Jen expands the chain of transmission even further demonstrating the ability of online recipe sharing to cross boundaries between the visual content of the video and the written word of the pinned recipe.⁷² In this case, the audience has multiple resources to draw from—both a written recipe *and* a demonstration video—that can be used as a reference when creating the recipe in their own homes.

The host of NanasCookery, sings the praises of the recipe for “Golden Baked Vidalia” that she is about to demonstrate declaring “when I first saw this in a cookbook and made it, I wrote down ‘fabulous’ with a star because my husband and I love it.”⁷³ She lifts the “North Carolina Fundraiser” cookbook from the counter and holds it up so that the viewers can see the well-worn, light blue cover of the community cookbook where she found the recipe. However, it is also clear that she has taken ownership of the recipe since she declares that the name of the recipe within the cookbook is “Golden Baked Vidalias” while the title of the video is “Nana’s Golden Baked Vidalias.” However, Nana also recognizes that, by sharing the recipe with the YouTube audience, she cedes authority to the recipient. She acknowledges the fact that other cooks might make changes to the recipe when she explains that she uses gruyere cheese that she shredded in her food processor and that other cooks who do not have a food processor or cheese grater might substitute pre-grated Swiss cheese instead if they are “willing.” The emphasis she places on the word “willing” indicates that she is *not* willing to substitute Swiss for the gruyere in her own dish. Nana identifies that some cooks might have no other choice but to change the recipe since her video will have a worldwide audience. As she adds the cream of chicken soup

⁷² Jennifer Ross, “Spinach Squares,” *Pinterest.com*, <http://pinterest.com/pin/11822017743463462/>

⁷³ NanasCookery, “Nana’s Golden Baked Vidalia,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tB8IR7OqZFg>

mixture to the onions, she says that “if you are living somewhere else in the world you don’t have that, but I’m sure that you have some sort of condensed soup...I’m sure you can get something similar to it somewhere.” Nana’s instinct proves correct as commentators note that they are from many different countries including Ireland and Germany. By uploading her video, Nana has become a conduit for this recipe from the written page of the community cookbook to a worldwide audience of home cooks eager to try the recipe for themselves.

Moreover, recipe preparation on the internet is not a static experience like cookbooks and television cooking programs, but becomes a collaboration between the video creator and viewers as they interact through comments. The video “Grandma’s Grits Tips & Words of Wisdom!” shows a grandmother cooking grits for her granddaughter.⁷⁴ Much of the video consists of close-up shots of the grandmother’s hands as she stirs the grits while the only sound is a song. Sometimes however, the song ends and the grandmother makes a remark. For example, she explains that it is important to stir the grits frequently in the beginning or else they will “lock up.” The content of the video shows a grandmother sharing her kitchen knowledge with her granddaughter. However, in the written comments that appear on the website, the granddaughter interacts with viewers by responding when they make comments, ask questions, and compliment the cook. One comment, however, stands out—*orlendatube* asks, “what do you think of adding a little garlic to them?” The channel owner responds, “Ooh, I think a little bit of garlic would be a great addition. I’m actually going to try that next time!”⁷⁵ As she incorporates the suggested ingredient into her recipe, it has now become a collaboration between the three cooks—the grandma who made the grits, the granddaughter who posted the video on YouTube, and the

⁷⁴ *simplifiedishes*, “Grandma’s Grits Tips & Words of Wisdom!” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W9WHw7nkY>

⁷⁵ *orelendatube*, “Comment on Grandma’s Grits Tips & Words of Wisdom!” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W9WHw7nkY>

viewer who saw the video and took the time to add a comment. This is much different than cookbooks and television cooking programs where the recipient may make changes to the dish, but typically has very little to no opportunity to share feedback with the original cook.

Perhaps the most important innovation to the recipe-sharing tradition that arises from YouTube is the fact that home cooks can share recipes in a way that allows viewers from all over the world to learn the dish through observing the YouTube cook in action. In “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” Granny attempts to transform the biscuits she makes from memory into a recipe that viewers can follow. At first, she sets out to convert the proportions of flour, Crisco, and buttermilk that she typically knows by feel into standard measurements emphatically exclaiming, “since I never measure anything I don’t know how much of anything I use so I will try to help you know what to use when you make biscuits at home.”⁷⁶ She fills a one cup measure with Crisco and adds it to two and half cups of flour that was already in her mixing bowl. However, once she sees the glistening blob of Crisco on top of the flour something does not look quite right and she grabs a dollop as she quietly murmurs “put a little back.” Satisfied, she realizes that she needs to explain what she did for the audience and stammers “that’s how my uh, smidgen of this and a dab of that.” When she moves on to the buttermilk, her exasperation at the attempt to measure the ingredients is clear in her frustrated almost-wail, “I don’t have any idea. I will pour one cup and see what happens and start mixing with my hands.” With her hands in the flour, Crisco, and buttermilk mixture, Granny seems much more comfortable. She recognizes the feel of the dough as it forms and notes that “the texture and consistency of this is something you just have to learn what’s best.” She adds a little more buttermilk directly to the bowl without an attempt to measure it saying, “this would end up being about a cup and a half of

⁷⁶ Kaysummerville, “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqhGvQV8GxM>

buttermilk probably.” However, for Granny, it does not matter what the exact measurement would be, it is the *feel* of the dough that matters and you just “need to pour more buttermilk until all the flour gets wet.” She then massages the dough until she says that it is a “good consistency.” This is when the significance of the YouTube experience becomes clear as Granny lifts up a handful of the dough and says “this is what you need here.” Attempting to translate the visual image the dough slipping through Granny’s fingers would be nearly impossible to capture in a written recipe. Through YouTube, the kitchen’s four walls have expanded to global dimensions.

One of the key tactics of proponents of home cooking is to make meal preparation appealing by presenting an idealized image of what it means to make food “from scratch.” The death of home cooking narrative evinces an idealized past where home cooking is stripped of the heat, dirt, and labor while offering the possibility that engaging in home meal preparation today can be an enjoyable and rewarding while leaving out the part about cleaning up the mess afterward. The visual nature of YouTube cooking videos reaffirm the fact that cooking is messy and can be physically demanding. In “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” the male cameraman notices the cook having difficulty incorporating the butter and sugar together with a potato masher. “Do you want me to take a stab at that?” he asks and she hands over the masher. It takes all of his strength to get the butter, still somewhat chilled from the fridge, to mix with the sugar.⁷⁷ YouTube videos also reveal just how deceiving “quick and easy” can be. Despite including “easy” in the title the video “How to Make Flakey Pie Crust from Scratch The Easy Way’-2Crust Recipe” seems far from “easy.”⁷⁸ The video lasts twelve minutes and the cook spends more than

⁷⁷ Karoly Krajczar, “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” *YouTube.com*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgB90MjtHqs>

⁷⁸ videohomeandgarden, “How to Make Flakey Pie Crust from Scratch ‘The Easy Way’-2Crust Recipe,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnr3gAcY3ys>

five minutes of that time incorporating the butter into the flour by “squeezing” the two together by hand. As she repeats the motion over and over, it becomes apparent that the movements require real physical effort—the cook even starts to sound out of breath as she speaks. Even the “easy” version of the recipe takes hard, physical labor.

YouTube videos also reveal the dirty, messy, and difficult side of making meals that is often missing from the beautiful pictures of finished dishes gracing the pages of commercial cookbooks and remains hidden behind-the-scenes of television cooking shows. YouTube videos posted by amateur cooks leave no doubt that cooking creates messy kitchens and leaves piles of dirty dishes needing to be washed. In “How to Cook Fried Fish – Grandma Rosa’s Italian Kitchen Ep 7,” Grandma Rosa dips slimy fish filets and peeled shrimp into an egg mixture that oozes all over her hands.⁷⁹ The breading sticks to her fingers as she coats the fish and shrimp and the hot oil bubbles and pops as she drops each piece into the frying pan. The final presentation of the fried fish—arrayed on a decorative platter and garnished with lemon—masks the disaster that remains in kitchen where leftover egg congeals in a bowl, fishy-smelling oil cools in a pan waiting to be discarded, and bread crumbs undoubtedly litter the floor waiting to be swept up. Elsa Stosser-Duquette, featured in “Mom’s Apple Pie” by filmmaker Tim Duquette, is much more forthcoming about the end result of her cooking.⁸⁰ Although, she is overjoyed by the actual apple pie, declaring happily “Isn’t that beautiful!” as she removes it from the oven, she is not so enthusiastic about cleaning up the aftermath of her baking. “That’s the worst part in cookin’ and makin’ pies,” she exclaims as she surveys the dirty dishes, flour strewn table, and empty ingredient containers, “the cleanin’ up it takes me the longest...look at this

⁷⁹ royalodoye, “How to Cook Fried Fish – Grandma Rosa’s Italian Kitchen Ep 7,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9O6zw4hqpY>

⁸⁰ Tim Duquette, “Mom’s Apple Pie,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IO2-rceqfaM>

mess, look at over there all my mess!” For Elsa, and for the viewers, there is no escaping the final steps in making any meal—cleaning up the counters and washing the dishes.

One way that the cooks in these YouTube videos deal with time constraints and other factors that make cooking difficult is by incorporating convenience products into their repertoire. Death of home cooking Jeremiahs might point to the prevalence of convenience products in YouTube cooking videos as further evidence that home cooking has been compromised by big corporations and that Americans have been “duped” into warping the definition of cooking. However, these amateur cooks do not view convenience products and fresh ingredients as opposites and, instead, refer to both from scratch cooking and convenience cooking as legitimate choices along a spectrum of options that home cooks can choose from depending on time constraints, skill level, and personal preference. In “Grandma’s Collard Greens and Cornbread,” YouTube cook Sonya Beonit prepares not one, but two versions of the dish—one using frozen collard greens and one using fresh.⁸¹ She introduces the video saying:

Hello YouTube and Welcome to Sonya Beonit’s channel and today we’re cookin’ collard greens and cornbread. For those of you who think you don’t have time to cook, well guess what, we’re gonna do it two different ways. The first way we’re gonna do it the modern way. Here’s a pre-cut bag of chopped greens so it takes all the leg work of actually chopping the greens up. And for those of you who like it the old traditional way, the way my grandmother used to cook it when I was growin’ up, I’m gonna do it that way. I actually gone to the Farmer’s market, my local farmer’s market and I bought some greens I’m gonna actually clean these, chop them and we’re gonna cook them together.⁸²

For Beonit, cooking collard greens from a frozen package and cutting up fresh ones herself “the way my grandmother used to” are both options for a delicious meal—modernity and tradition are not at odds, but offer a range of legitimate choices. In fact, as she unveils two plates of collard greens—one from frozen and one from fresh—at the end of the video, she declares that the “only

⁸¹ sonyabeonit, “Grandma’s Collard Greens and Cornbread,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtNz1bdfArc>

⁸² Ibid.

thing” different between the two is that “when you buy in the bag it’s gonna have more stems inside the collard greens.”⁸³ For Beonit, both versions are equally delicious—the frozen simply representing “an easier way rather than chopping them up yourself.”⁸⁴

The same is true for the cook in the video “Grandma Kitchen’s Pumpkin Bread Recipe.”⁸⁵ As she is listing the ingredients, she indicates that the recipe calls for a 15 ounce can of “pure pumpkin, not pumpkin pie.” She also offers another option for the viewer if they “really want to get homemade with it” she says that they can “get a pumpkin and cook it down.” However, she confirms that “for me, I really like to just open a can.” However, the choice to include canned pumpkin rather than taking the time to make it from scratch does not ultimately change her opinion that her pumpkin bread is “homemade.” She notes that this “homemade” pumpkin bread not only makes “a nice quick treat to give your family,” but can also be given as a gift since “people will appreciate that you took the time to make something homemade for them.” Despite the use of a canned ingredient instead of fresh, she obviously considers the finished product “homemade” and insists that the finished dish is imbued with a sense of love that makes it an excellent gift to show family and friends how much she cares about them. This runs counter to the death of home cooking Jeremiahs who would argue that the canned pumpkin has a negative impact on the overall significance of the dish.

The majority of cooks in the YouTube videos that I viewed did not express angst or guilt over using convenience foods. Some expressed die-hard adherence to a specific brand name. In the video “Hot Wings,” the cook declares that the “best sauce to use for hot wings, buffalo hot wings, is gonna be Frank’s Red Hot, the original hot sauce” as she holds a bottle up in front of

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ ReginasTeaTime, “Grandma Kitchen’s Pumpkin Bread Recipe,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6m0x6tTKoFg>

the camera finishing with the declaration “so we’re gonna use Frank’s today.”⁸⁶ For “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” Granny is even more emphatic declaring “I only use White Lily [flour] to make biscuits.”⁸⁷ She explains that her loyalty comes from bad experiences using different types of flour in the past. “On occasion,” she admits, “when the other flour goes on sale, years ago, I’ve been known to buy it and it does not work at all. White Lily is the only flour that I’ll make biscuits with.” Similar to Sonya Bionit’s collard greens, some YouTube cooks offer various options and leave it up to the viewer which type of ingredient to choose—fresh or frozen. This is true for the cook in “Grandma’s Jalapeno Cornbread” who comments that “fresh jalapenos are better,” though not because they are healthier or more “authentic” as a death of home cooking Jeremiah might suggest, but because using them “makes it look pretty because it’s pretty and green and colorful.” She warns that, when not using fresh jalapenos, the recipe needs to be adjusted because “these kind are hotter than fresh, so if you use these don’t use as much as you would if you used fresh.” She does not indicate why she chose not to use fresh jalapenos, but certainly does not seem to feel guilty over the choice.

Bound by Tradition?

An analysis of the extension and adaptation of cooking traditions must contend with the fact that, for countless generations, cooking has been a gendered task assigned to women—so much so that cooking and femininity have been intertwined so deeply that they are difficult to untangle.⁸⁸ For generations, “proper” family meals could only be considered “real” when cooked by Mom, not Dad.⁸⁹ Women who embrace their role as home cooks must contend with the

⁸⁶ chriscook4u2, “Hot Wings,” *YouTube.com*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9x_UEUoj_k

⁸⁷ Kaysummerville, “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqhGvQV8GxM>

⁸⁸ Marjorie DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁸⁹ Anne Murcott, “Cooking and the Cooked: A Note on the Domestic Preparation of Meals,” in *The Sociology of Food and Eating*, ed. Anne Murcott, (Hants, England: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1983) 178-185.

stereotypical presentations of homemakers—evidenced in cookbooks, advertisements, television programs like *The Donna Reed Show*, and even children’s readers like the *Dick and Jane* books—as a smiling woman impeccably attired in a dress, frilly apron, pearls, and perfect coiffure even as she puts a roast in the oven or sweeps the floor. Feminists have spent decades attempting to undo the image of the happy housewife and break the bonds that kept women in the kitchen and away from public life. In her groundbreaking 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan identified “the problem that has no name” which she revealed was a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the daily repetition of domestic duties—cooking, cleaning, taking care of the family—which she declared had millions of educated, middle-class, suburban women thinking “is this all?”⁹⁰ While later critics pointed out that Friedan’s work “made sweeping generalizations when in fact Friedan’s data dealt exclusively with married, college-educated, middle-class women,” the fact remains that her book inspired a generation of women to reassess the connections between women, femininity, domesticity, and cooking.⁹¹ Inspired by writers like Friedan, the goal for these later-day feminists was not to remove the kitchen from the home, but to get women out of the kitchen. As Johnson and Lloyd note, “feminists during the first few decades of second wave feminism constituted ‘the housewife’ as ‘Other’ to themselves.”⁹² As such, cooking became “a key practice” that feminists sought “to disidentify with and distance themselves from” in their quest to free women from the singular destiny of becoming wives and mothers.⁹³ For feminists, the home in general and the kitchen in particular, were seen as “patriarchal, socially constructed, restricted, and oppressive places assigned to women due to

⁹⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 57.

⁹¹ Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking*, 219.

⁹² Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 2.

⁹³ Joanne Hollows, “The Feminist and the Cook: Julia Child, Betty Friedan and Domestic Femininity.” In *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, ed. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens, (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 37.

gender, class, and ethnicity.”⁹⁴ Performance artist Martha Rosler drove this point home in 1975 in her black and white short film titled *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Rosler filmed herself in her kitchen as she identified cooking implements by name in alphabetical order. Charlotte Brundson offers an excellent description of the short film in her article “The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha, and Nigella.” Brundson notes:

The Semiotics of the Kitchen uses the format of a child’s alphabet primer to explore the kitchen. Rosler, in medium shot, stands behind a table in front of her cooker and refrigerator: the classic television cookery set-up. ‘A is for apron’ she announces, as she struggles into one of those aprons that need to be buttoned up behind your head. B is bowl, which she slams down on the table, blender and broiler. C is for cup (fairly innocuous), can-opener (still functional), cleaver (a little more threatening) and finally, chopper, which she wields with fury. As she proceeds through the alphabet, rendering egg-beaters, forks, hamburger presses and rolling pins as offensive weapons, it becomes clear, as she finishes on a Zorro gesture with raised knives, that the semiotics of the kitchen signify containment, fury, aggression, resentment and potential revenge.⁹⁵ (Brundson 2006 42)

Through black and white imagery, simple words, and violent motions, Rosler reinforces the notion that there was nothing feminine, pretty, or natural about a woman’s place in the kitchen.

Feminists’ visceral reaction against the traditional gender roles that place women in the kitchen raises the questions: can a woman cook and still be a feminist? Jean Zimmerman struggles with this question in her book *Made From Scratch: Reclaiming the Pleasures of the American Hearth*. Having come of age surrounded by rhetoric that proclaimed that women were oppressed as homemakers Zimmerman admits that she saw the home as a place that represented a “dead end” for women where they became “trapped.”⁹⁶ After she got married and began raising her own family, however, she became interested in “the benefits of domesticity.”⁹⁷ While

⁹⁴ Meredith E. Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 3-4.

⁹⁵ Charlotte Brundson, “The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha, and Nigella,” In *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 42.

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, *Made From Scratch*, ix.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xvi.

Zimmerman does not advocate for a return to the strict gender roles of the past, she does call for a reassessment of the work of the home. Instead of viewing domesticity as inherently inferior to public life, Zimmerman declares that “revaluing ‘women’s work’ is a feminist act” as a celebration of the achievements and work of past generations of women. Recognizing that the work of the home is not merely women’s work—but is and always has been important work that should be valued, cherished, and shared—opens the door for a space where women can identify themselves as home cooks *and* feminists.

Advocating the benefits of traditional home cooking, however, is a very risky tactic. By advocating for a return to the kitchen, commentators, including the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs, risk also endorsing the “subordination of women” that went hand in hand with a “gendered division of labor.”⁹⁸ For millions of women, cooking for the family has not been a choice—it remains a chore. Men’s cooking makes headlines: “More Men Manning the Family Meal Making?” and “Home Kitchens Heat Up As More Men Start Cooking,”—but the popularity of the idea that men are cooking might arise from the fact that a man in the kitchen is still unusual.⁹⁹ An analysis of the American Time Use Survey conducted by researchers at the United States Department of Agriculture found that a significantly higher proportion of women reported that they were the primary grocery shopper and meal preparer for their families.¹⁰⁰ According to the researchers, “Over 2006-08, 73 percent of women and 32 percent of men age 18 or over reported that they were the usual person to do the grocery shopping for their

⁹⁸ Sherrie A Inness, *Cooking Lessons*, 1

⁹⁹ Sara Leeder, “More Men Manning the Family Meal Making?” *Eatocracy on CNN.com*, September 30, 2010 <http://eatocracy.cnn.com/2010/09/30/more-men-manning-the-family-meal-making/>
Vidya Rao, “Home Kitchens Heat Up As More Men Start Cooking: Websites and Cookbooks Are Catering to a Growing Number of Men Who Cook,” *Today.com*, April 11, 2011. <http://www.today.com/id/42482506/site/todayshow/ns/today-food/t/home-kitchens-heat-more-men-start-cooking/#.URqgzB1i7oI>

¹⁰⁰ Karen S. Hamrick, Margaret Andrews, Joanne Guthrie, David Hopkins and Ket McClelland. “How Much Time Do Americans Spend on Food,” *USDA Economic Information Bulletin*, 86 (November 2011), 29.

household” and “73 percent of women and 30 percent of men reported that they were the usual meal preparer in the household.”¹⁰¹ Despite calls for change from feminists, it appears that home cooking is still very much women’s work.

Men’s reluctance to take over the cooking is not surprising as they also face a long-standing bias that called their masculinity into question if they cooked regular meals. There were very few instances in which men could cook and remain “manly.” Situations deemed appropriate for men to cook included: in restaurants as professional chefs; at home on holidays, weekends and for special occasions; and outdoors, in the backyard, at the campfire or barbecue. As executive chefs in restaurants and celebrity chefs on television, men exhibiting control in the kitchen seems natural.¹⁰² Move the man into the home kitchen, however, and he is suddenly out of place unless it is a special occasion. In his 1983 article, “Making Pancakes on Sunday,” Thomas Adler proclaims that the idea of men cooking special food at special times is acceptable because it does not overturn proper gender alignments. Adler argues that “Dad’s cooking exists in evident contradistinction to Mom’s on every level: his is festal, hers ferial; his is socially and gastronomically experimental; hers mundane; his is dish-specific and temporally-marked, hers diversified and quotidian; his is play, hers is work.”¹⁰³ Adler’s analysis establishes a distinctive line between men’s cooking and women’s cooking—a line difficult for men to cross in order to become the family’s cook. Barbecuing is another form of cooking that is presented as appropriately masculine because it adheres to certain traits associated with masculinity.¹⁰⁴

According to Tim Miller, barbecuing represented “a topsy-turvy world where dad cooked with

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Vicki A. Swinback, “Sexual Politics: A Feminist Analysis of Culinary Hierarchy in Western Culture,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 15 no. 4 (December 2002): 464-494.

¹⁰³ Thomas Adler, “Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition,” *Western Folklore*, 40 no.1 (January 1981): 51.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Miller, “The Birth of the Patio Daddy-O: Outdoor Grilling in Postwar America,” *The Journal of American Culture*, 33 no.1 (2010): 7.

enormous utensils and everyone ate outside with their hands.”¹⁰⁵ Once again, these traits stood in opposition to women’s cooking: outdoors over an open flame versus indoors at the stove, enormous tools versus dainty utensils, hand-held foods versus foods requiring knives, forks and table manners.¹⁰⁶ Overturning these stereotypes and taking the “woman’s” place at the stove may still constitute a threat to manliness. However, viewing home cooking in terms of such strict gender divisions is also problematic. As food scholars Alice Julier and Laura Lindenfeld argue in their article “Mapping Men Onto the Menu: Masculinities and Food,” researchers need to approach the connections between food, cooking and gender in a way that recognizes that they are “deeply complex, highly nuanced, and ever-changing.”¹⁰⁷ The YouTube videos that I viewed both upheld, and challenged, the gender role stereotypes that encode home cooking as a purely feminine act. While limited in number, these videos suggest the need to review the underlying biases that inform gender analysis of cooking related materials in favor of a more complex reading of men and women’s relationship to cooking. Simply repeating the mantra that cooking is women’s work and that men do not cook erases the complexities and prevents real discussions of interconnections between gender and cooking.

Within my sample, men and boys made an appearance in the majority of videos: as consumers, cameramen, and cooks. In some, the interaction mirrored traditional patterns in which the female cook made the meal that was eaten by the man. For example, in “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” right after she pulls the biscuits from the oven she calls out “Granddaddy, come in here and get you something to eat!”¹⁰⁸ Granny, however, seems to take pride in her

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁷ Alice Julier and Laura Lindenfeld, “Mapping Men Onto the Menu: Masculinities and Food,” *Food and Foodways*, 13, no. 1-2 (2005): 8.

¹⁰⁸ Kaysummerville, “Granny’s Homemade Biscuits,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqhGvQV8GxM>

cooking and seems to enjoy making sure that her husband gets plenty of biscuits, gravy, and fried chicken to enjoy. She proudly exclaims, “Granddaddy’s been eatin’ my biscuits for 54 years!” The same is true for the end of “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread” as her husband appears after the finished shortbread comes piping hot out of the oven.¹⁰⁹ “Have one!” she insists with a beaming smile. “Delicious and hot!” he declares after taking a bite. “You’re not supposed to eat them while they’re hot,” she notes, “but he’s hungry!” After putting in the time and effort to make the shortbread, she seems happy to know that the result of her labor will satisfy her husband’s hunger.

There are also many videos where the men or boys do not actually appear onscreen, but are behind-the-scenes serving as cameramen. As Nana finishes up her “Golden Baked Vidalias,” she calls her grandsons out from behind the camera (her granddaughter continues to run the camera) and tearfully says “I enjoyed the last few days of filming because it was done by my grandchildren!”¹¹⁰ In other videos, the male cameraman takes an active role even while remaining off screen by prodding the cook with questions about ingredients and cooking process. In “Grandma’s Famous Homemade Dressing,” the cook mixes bread crumbs, chicken broth and seasonings as the cameraman and a female observer grill her on the specifics.¹¹¹ While most of the women tolerate the questions, some look uncomfortable in front of the camera. “Hey Mom! Getting’ you in action,” the cameraman for the video “Grandma Makes Cinnamon Rolls,” declares as he catches her in the midst of rolling up the cinnamon rolls.¹¹² The video does not appear to be pre-planned, especially since it began mid-recipe and did not show the dough and

¹⁰⁹ Karoly Krajczar, “Mary’s Scottish Shortbread,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgB90MjtHqs>

¹¹⁰ NanasCookery, “Nana’s Golden Baked Vidalia,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tB8IR7OqZFg>

¹¹¹ Shannon Campos, “Grandma’s Famous Homemade Dressing,” *YouTube.com*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQEY2zAgm_0

¹¹² Skyward123, “Grandma Makes Cinnamon Rolls,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdw5XYR9yAM>

filling being prepared. Moreover, while the cook accepts the camera's presence, she seems reluctant to interact with the man behind the camera. The cameraman follows her through the process of rolling, cutting and baking the cinnamon rolls while adding a running commentary. For example, as she creates an icing for the cinnamon rolls, the cameraman asks "What do we have here?" "Powdered sugar," replies the cook, hesitantly. "Oh, powdered sugar," he says, adding, "nice!" to show his enthusiasm. In this video, while the cook does not reject the camera, it appears as if she was reluctant to participate in the filming. The prevalence of home cooking videos starring women, but filmed by men, might be a result of the "gender divide on YouTube" in which "significant gender differences appear when we consider viewer rates, interactivity, and subject matter."¹¹³ In some venues, such as video blogging, men seem to participate more often than women (at least in the early days of YouTube).¹¹⁴ Videos starring women, but filmed by men, may indicate a disturbing continuation of this pattern as the women in the videos may not have taken the initiative to share their cooking skills on YouTube without the prompting of the male cameraman.

However, since women's work, especially cooking, has been undervalued as "insignificant," the fact that male family members were interested enough in their mothers and grandmothers cooking to pick up a camera and film them might indicate a shift toward recognizing the significance of tasks traditionally seen as feminine. Moreover, male amateur home cooks do have a presence on YouTube. One popular YouTube Channel is "Cooking For Dads" where amateur cook Rob Barrett has posted over 150 videos, with over 7,000 subscribers and nearly 2.5 million video views.¹¹⁵ On his accompanying personal website,

¹¹³ Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 85.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Cookingfordads, "Cooking for Dads Channel," *YouTube.com*,

cookingfordads.net, Barrett announces, “I am not a professional chef, just a dad who has learned to cook fun meals for the whole family.”¹¹⁶ I also encountered amateur male cooks in my sample. These videos had a distinctly different feel to the videos starring women. For example, “Grandma’s Homemade Vegetable Soup,” starring Anthony Rebello, is shot through a lens that distorts the picture, much like a funhouse mirror.¹¹⁷ He does not speak, but instead uses written instructions to guide the viewer through each step of the recipe. Eerie music plays as the soundtrack, but does not cover the sounds of chopping vegetables, stirring the soup, and covering the pot. As he places the finished dish on the table, the music changes to a lighter tone. He then serves himself a bowl of soup, eats, and displays the empty bowl to the camera as the words “Eat Your Vegetables” scroll across the screen. Overall, the look of the videos and the music that he chose infuses the cooking video with a very masculine aura that is complemented by the cook’s serious expression.

The amateur male cook in the video, “Beginning Cooks Grandma Johnson’s Scones,” also takes a different approach to his task.¹¹⁸ The format is very much like many of the cooking videos hosted by female cooks as he addresses the camera, describes each ingredient, and takes the viewer through each step of the recipe in what would otherwise seem like a very standard cooking instruction video. However, the cook is much more aggressive in the authority that he asserts over the recipe. While many of the female cooks expressed a high level of comfort in making changes and adaptations to the recipes they cooked, this amateur male home cook claimed the same level of expertise over a recipe that he had never cooked before. At the start of

<http://www.youtube.com/user/cookingfordads>

¹¹⁶ Rob Barrett, “Cooking for Dads,” *Cookingfordads.net*, <http://www.cookingfordads.net/>

¹¹⁷ Anthony Rebello, “Grandma’s Homemade Vegetable Soup,” *YouTube.com*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zuVZWyoOp8>

¹¹⁸ Albino7122, “Beginning Cooks Grandma Johnson’s Scones,” *YouTube.com*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hYSNd4bigk

the video, the cook reveals, “It’s my first time I’ve ever made this recipe so if I can make it and it turns out good than you can too.” However, in the first step of the recipe he makes a mistake—instead of mixing *baking soda* with sour cream the way that he is supposed to, he stirs in *baking powder*. He quickly realizes his mistake, and admits to the viewers “I just wanted to let you know that earlier I did already make a mistake.” He then attempts to fix the error noting, “But luckily this recipe calls for baking powder and baking soda so I’m just gonna switch them and see if it works.” While this fix seems reasonable, later in the process he decides to stop cutting the butter into the flour before it reaches the “pea size” indicated by the recipe saying, “you’re gonna want to stop once your sticks of butter are pretty tiny, pea size, a little bigger, honestly, they don’t have to be super tiny.” But, how does he know? He has never made this recipe before, but is making a major change by altering the consistency of the flour and butter mixture. When the scones emerge from the oven, they do not appear picture-perfect. He explains their appearance noting, “My only problem is that these might be a little too thick and of course I switched the baking soda and baking powder.” When they are cooled, a girl joins him and they both taste the scones. His assessment: “Well, even with my baking powder, baking soda switch up they still turned out pretty good, huh?” The girl responds, “yeah, they’re really good.” Throughout the video, the cook’s tone of voice, body language, and authority over the recipe exudes a high level of confidence even after making a serious mistake. He is not intimidated by the recipe and claims authority over the process despite being a “Beginner Cook.” Is this a masculine characteristic or the result of inexperience in the kitchen? Either way, this video provides an interesting glimpse of a young man’s cooking experience.

From the small number of male-centered cooking videos within my sample, I am not able to make broad-based evaluations of the identity of the “male cook.” In “Foodwork or

Foodplay?: Men's Domestic Cooking, Privilege and Leisure,” Michelle Szabo suggests that men's home cooking experiences not only differ from the experiences of women, but also deviate from previous assumptions about what it meant to be a male home cook.¹¹⁹ Szabo notes that previous studies related to men's home cooking focused on the idea that while cooking for women represented work, for men the same task was considered leisure.¹²⁰ By conducting ethnographic research in the form of in-depth interviews and observations with 30 male home cooks in Canada, Szabo discovered that their experiences could not easily be classified as leisure, but it was not work either.¹²¹ Instead, she proposed a new framework for understanding men's cooking practice—*work-leisure*—in which cooking was “neither clearly and always work nor clearly and always leisure.”¹²² The feature that may have differentiated this from women's cooking experiences is that Szabo found that her interviewees “each, consciously or not, *created* leisurely cooking. Differently put, these men manipulated their cooking environments and situations to make them more leisurely.”¹²³ That male home cooks experience daily cooking differently than their female counter-parts indicates that male cooks on YouTube may indeed construct the cooking process presented in their videos in a uniquely masculine tone. While a comparison between the styles of male and female cooks on YouTube is outside the scope of this dissertation, such a review may be a fruitful course for future research.

Ultimately, YouTube cooking videos underscore the complexity of home cooking as a practice that resists simple definitions based solely on ties to tradition or influences of innovation. YouTube cooking videos hint at the idea that cooking is a vital and variable practice

¹¹⁹ Michelle Szabo, “Foodwork or Foodplay?: Men's Domestic Cooking, Privilege, and Leisure,” *Sociology*, 0, no. 0 (2012): 1-16.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

molded by each cook—whether they are in their home kitchen cooking from memory or on YouTube cooking from a recipe downloaded from Allrecipes.com.¹²⁴ YouTube cooks engage in recipe transmission that not only follows traditional channels, but incorporates new forms of communication in the form of blogs, pinterest postings, and more. Moreover, these videos illustrate the fact that recipes and cooking practices are malleable as the cooks use fresh and frozen ingredients, incorporate viewer feedback into their own cooking practices, and contest the idealized image of home cooking while still approaching the task with enthusiasm and enjoyment. Moreover, the presence of men—at the table, behind the camera, and at the stove—indicates that the previous gender divide that relegated feminine tasks to a lesser sphere may be crumbling. The internet offers home cooks a new frontier that offers the possibility of both reaffirming kitchen traditions and revolutionizing cooking practices.

Keepin’ Tradition Alive and Cookin’

As home cooks merge their kitchen space with cyberspace, a different narrative for evaluating the meaning of home cooking in the twenty-first century emerges. While the death of home cooking Jeremiahs insist that home cooking is dying and that the only hope for a better future rests in reclaiming the past, online cooking content reveals that American kitchens have been both a location of massive change *and* ongoing continuities in the twenty-first century and that home cooks are comfortable with merging the influences of modernity and tradition in their cooking practices.

Online cooking content challenges the tenets of the “death of home cooking” narrative by providing examples of the complexities of home cooking practices and the resiliency of kitchen traditions. Where “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs long for a static, stable kitchen, these

¹²⁴ Albino7122, “Beginning Cooks Grandma Johnson’s Scones,” *YouTube.com*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hYSNd4bigk

internet cooks vary their techniques, include a mixture of convenience and fresh ingredients, and share their stories in a way that builds communities that in turn influences the internet cook's practices. These online cooking sources reveal that home cooking is a dynamic process that resists categorization.

In the next chapter, I share the story of my father's transformation from uninterested non-cook into an enthusiastic home cook as he began preparing meals after he retired. This enabled my mom, a reluctant cook, to enjoy freedom from the kitchen while giving my dad a sense of purpose and fulfillment. I contend that this story supports the idea that home cooking practices are multifaceted, variable, and flexible and that a wide variety of factors influence the attitudes and practices that home cooks bring to the kitchen every time they cook. I maintain that this complexity destabilizes the "death of home cooking" jeremiad and returns authority over meal preparation practices to home cooks.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: IN THE KITCHEN WITH...DAD?: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HOME COOKING



Figure 2: Dad Serving Dinner. December 2011.

A Bowl of Fish Chowder

After a nine hour drive from central Pennsylvania to my parent's home in New Hampshire, my husband and I were tired, sore, and hungry. As I kicked off my shoes in the entryway, a wonderful scent wafted toward me from the kitchen. I sniffed, enjoying the rich scent, and my stomach growled. As I maneuvered my bulky suitcase toward the living room with my husband following behind, my mom popped her head around the corner. "Hey guys! You made it!" she exclaimed with a beaming smile. "We already ate, but Dad's keeping dinner warm for you," she continued as she led the way down the hall to the bedroom where we could stow away our suitcases.

I made my way to the kitchen where the delicious smell intensified. "Hi sweetheart." My dad said as he opened the cupboard and pulled out a large soup bowl. "Your mom says you're hungry."

"Absolutely! But what is that smell?" I inquired.

"It's fish chowder." He replied, lifting the lid off a pot on the stove.

“Fish chowder!” I marveled as he set a brimming bowlful on the table in front of me. A thin white broth swam with potatoes and large chunks of fish. A gleam of butter created a ring around the edge and tiny green flecks floated on the liquid’s surface. As I savored my first spoonful, I was amazed. The flavors melded into a rich and creamy liquid with just the right fishy undertones complimented by the softness of a potato that had absorbed the mixture of flavors from the broth. Before I knew it, I had emptied the bowl. In my enthusiasm, I had not even noticed that my husband had joined me at the table and was busy polishing off his own serving. We both went back for seconds.

Lounging at the table, I felt refreshed. “That was really good!” I said. “Have you made it before?”

“Yeah, your mom and sister really like it so I make it when the fish is on sale.” My dad replied. “I can give you the recipe if you want.” I nodded enthusiastically.

I glanced around the kitchen. In the months since my last visit, the room had been transformed by the addition of long shelf between the lower and upper cabinets. I was shocked by the number of spice bottles that littered the shelf. Growing up, our spice rack had contained nothing but salt, pepper, garlic salt and a tired looking container of cinnamon. Other spices were a mystery. I clearly remember the first time my mother and I decided to try a recipe that included a bay leaf. I was astonished by the perfectly formed leaf that I pulled from the spice bottle to drop into the soup. That new shelf held dozens of containers of various sizes and shapes. “Where did that come from?” I asked my mom who had joined us at the table.

“Oh, that,” she replied, “your dad built it to hold his spices.”

His spices! I had heard rumors that my dad had started cooking dinner, and my mom may have even mentioned once or twice that my dad was trying out a new recipe—but a whole shelf of spices! I almost could not believe my eyes.

When I was growing up my mom cooked for the family. I enjoyed the foods she made—marinated steak, roast chickens, breaded pork chops. The foods were not fancy, but they tasted good. Every once in awhile she tried out a new recipe, to mixed results. I did not realize that she did not enjoy cooking until I was a teenager. Until I was fourteen, she was a stay-at-home mom. When she returned to work, I often started supper so that it would be ready by the time my mom got home. Over time, I pretty much took over most of the cooking—at least on weeknights. My mom seemed more than willing to have someone else do the cooking and I enjoyed it. When I left home, she took over the task again and finally shared the fact that she didn't really like cooking after all. She admitted that she found the task stressful because she never really knew if the dish would turn out right and worried that the family would not like what she cooked.

When I was a child, my dad never cooked. In fact, we often teased him because the few times he did make himself something to eat it would usually consist of tuna. That's it. Just tuna, swirled with a spoonful of mayo in a bowl—no bread. I do remember a few times when he cooked the family one of his own childhood favorites—a slice of bread with a hole in the middle which he placed in a frying pan, added an egg and fried so that the bread turned nicely brown while the egg yolk remained runny. Much of his disinterest in the kitchen stemmed from the fact that he worked hard all day installing flooring. He was typically up before the sun so that he could make it to the job site before any of the other tradesmen arrived and interfered with his concentration. My dad took pride in the quality of his work and loathed when electricians or

plumbers messed up his preparation, especially when it came to laying tile or vinyl since that type of material needed specific attention to make sure that the lines turned out straight.

A rack full of spices—that was a change!

Later that weekend, as my dad handed over the copy of the fish chowder recipe that he had promised, I asked him why he started cooking. “Well, I’m retired, but your mother isn’t. It was just something I could do” he said.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah. But it gets kind of tough to cook the same thing all the time so I like to try new recipes.”

“That’s true.” I agreed.

After the trip was over, when I spoke to my dad on the phone, I often asked him what he was cooking for dinner. He proudly mentioned some recipes he cooked a lot because he felt he had mastered them such as a dish made from chicken, sausages, and red potatoes. There were other times he was testing a new recipe. “We’ll see how it’ll turn out,” he’d say. When asked what he would like for his birthday, his usual reply of “I don’t know” was replaced with specific requests like “a 2-quart casserole dish with a lid.”

In the course of a year, my dad had transformed from an inexperienced non-cook into a confident home cook. The same kitchen that had been a site of stress and worry for my mom was a source of inspiration and enjoyment for my dad. As I listened to my dad talk about his cooking, I realized that he approached the task with the same dedication that he had brought to his work. He had been proud of the job that he did. Now that he was retired, he had found the same type of fulfillment in his cooking.

The same was true for my mom. As my father gained confidence and took over the kitchen, she transformed from a harried cook into a relaxed non-cook, sharing glowing reviews of my dad's latest culinary success. She admitted that it was a relief to come home from work and find the table brimming with delicious foods to eat. When she finally retired, however, she claimed that she would try cooking now and again. "Just so I don't forget how to cook," she said.

Good Cooks, Bad Cooks, Non-Cooks, Too

My father's cooking does not refute the "death of home cooking" jeremiad. One man learning to cook does not prove that cooking is alive and well in America in the twenty-first century. Nor is that the purpose of this dissertation.

Instead, his story supports the broader theme that I have brought to light through this dissertation: the idea that home cooking is complex, that experiences of home cooks are multifaceted, and that attempting to limit them to a singular definition of what is "real" is impossible. "Real" home cooking is not determined by experts but is created and recreated each time a home cook enters the kitchen. By declaring that "nobody cooks anymore" and insisting that the only way to rescue home cooking is to follow their template based on an idealized, nostalgic past where all meals were cooked from scratch, using fresh ingredients, by a highly skilled home cook, the "death of home cooking" Jeremiahs erase the dynamic nature of twenty-first century home cooking.

The "death of home cooking" narrative grew out of the rapid transformation of the American kitchen in from the Industrial Revolution through the post-World War II period, particularly in the rapid expansion of convenience products and the migration of women out of the home into paid work, and is bolstered by current anxieties related to the mystifying food system that obscures the origin of the foods we eat while offering up hazards such as foodborne

illness and obesity. Massive changes in food production and distribution, kitchen technologies, and the shifting demographics of the home left many Americans feeling cast adrift from the traditions that once anchored them to their families, communities and to each other. This sense of a lack of cohesion has been exacerbated by the “fractured food landscape” where a variety of conflicting messages vie for attention. The certainty of the “death of home cooking” narrative offers the reassurance that if Americans simply return to the kitchen and begin cooking from scratch, they can end obesity, regain family cohesion, and heal the ills of society.

Americans have been particularly receptive to the “death of home cooking” narrative because it conforms to a long-standing rhetorical tradition: the jeremiad. With scores of preachers, politicians, pundits, and policy makers adhering to the same rhetorical pattern, Americans are almost pre-programmed to recognize and respond to the message. Just like other jeremiads, the “death of home cooking” narrative underscores the idea that cooking is in a state of decline and that the way to remedy the situation is to return to the kitchen practices that existed before the decline began in the golden age of home cooking. In so doing, the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs promise, Americans can reap the benefits by easing the anxieties associated with modern living. By conforming to the pattern of the jeremiad, the “death of home cooking” narrative actually serves to *increase* anxiety as Americans measure the distance between their “real” life and the “ideal” life proposed by home cooking advocates. The “death of home cooking” jeremiad pays no heed to the complexities of the twenty-first century home cooking landscape, idealizes the past by ignoring the fact that for generation cooking was a hot, dirty, dangerous chore, and offers reassurances that its vision of “real” home cooking will solve society’s problems—an impossible task. What is even more disturbing is when “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs begin to claim moral authority by identifying “real” cooking as “good” and

convenience cooking as “bad” thereby demonizing anyone who does not fit within the narrow definition of “real” home cooking.

Despite its flaws, the “death of home cooking” jeremiad has widespread influence within the discourse surrounding home cooking. Cookbooks are one of the most prevalent sources of this type of rhetoric. Just like the “death of home cooking” jeremiad, cookbooks point to the decline of home cooking due to the pressures of modern life; identify past cooking practices as a source of inspiration for a solution to the problem; and insist that, by buying and using the cookbook, the home cook can put that solution into action. In so doing, cookbooks sell what I call “Comfort Cooking.” Through “Comfort Cooking,” American home cooks can slow down daily life, find self-fulfillment, reconnect with the family and live overall happier, healthier, more connected lives. Cookbook authors construct “Comfort Cooking” by establishing a hyper-real present that is more than just busy, it is out of control; creating an idealized past that is too perfect; and promising that purchasing the cookbook will lead to a future that is more tranquil, safe, and rewarding than is really possible. In contrasting the too-hectic present with the amazingly peaceful future, the cookbooks actually serve to increase anxiety by reaffirming that the gap between the “real” and the “ideal” is too far to be crossed.

By imbuing home cooking with a significant role in creating a happy healthy family, but offering the untenable solution of adhering to a singular definition of “real,” the “death of home cooking” narrative opens the possibility for other texts to appropriate the terms and images of home cooking to their own ends. Convenience products and services—like Dream Dinners and Stouffer’s frozen meals—have grabbed hold of the term “homemade” as a selling point. These products offer reassurance by pledging that they will help consumers to align their “real” lives with the “ideal.” While “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs would be alarmed at the idea that

convenience products are invoking “homemade,” I argue that the situation is much more complex as consumers use these products to meet their own needs in their own ways.

The fact that home cooks approach the kitchen on their own terms is apparent on the World Wide Web where users post a wide variety of cooking-related content. I maintain that online cooking content—in particular recipes posted to recipe-sharing websites and online cooking videos—represent a counter-narrative to the “death of home cooking” jeremiad. By counter-narrative, I do not mean that these recipes and videos prove that Americans are cooking. Instead, online cooking content underscores both the continuity *and* complexities of cooking practice that is ignored by the “death of home cooking” Jeremiahs. Internet cooks continue to share recipes as stories, extending a lineage of recipe-sharing tradition from the kitchen to the internet. At the same time, online cooking videos demonstrate the ways in which home cooks draw upon multiple influences and ingredients in their cooking practices. Moreover, by placing real cooks on display, the videos reveal the falsity of the ideal by showing the labor and mess associated with meal preparation. These examples serve to undermine the “death of home cooking” narrative by offering a different perspective of the definition of “real” home cooking.

The complexity of home cooking is reflected, once again, in my grandmother’s recipe box. Nestled in near the front of the box, between a recipe for “apple dumplings” clipped long ago from a newspaper and a recipe for “Tropical Bread Pudding” written out in my grandmother’s handwriting on the back of an old supermarket receipt, is a folded up piece of white paper. Unfolding the paper reveals a recipe for “New England Fish Chowder”¹ printed from the website “SimplyRecipes.com.” At the top, in blue ink, I have written “From Dad-Christmas 2011.” With the addition of this recipe, my grandmother’s recipe box begins to tell, not only her story, but mine as well.

¹ Elise, “Fish Chowder,” *SimplyRecipes.com*, October 2, 2009, http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/fish_chowder/

APPENDIX A: LIST OF ONLINE RECIPES

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Anonymous. "Grandma Anna's Old Fashioned Sugar Cookies." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1632,157178-242195,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma Ben's Green Grape Pie." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1637,159179-242195,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma Guerina Berra's Macedonia Di Frutta." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1613,156178-247193,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma Tall's Meatballs." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1626,157183-247192,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Apple Butter." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1730,152179-240198,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Boardinghouse Meatloaf." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1727,152177-244198,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Chocolate Cookies." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1710,152181-243197,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Chocolate Gravy." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1726,152181-242196,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Christmas Fudge." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1722,152182-240196,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Ginger Cookies." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,173,157176-240197,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Ginger Snap Cookies." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1710,157177-241197,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Gum Drop Cookies." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1710,158177-243196,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Homemade Noodles." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1726,159178-241196,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Macaroni Dish." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1735,156176-245196,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Oven Pancakes, German Style." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1718,156183-241197,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma Mae's Prize Egg Cake." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1616,156180-242192,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Peppernuts." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1710,157180-247199,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Scalloped Corn." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1650,155177-241198,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Schnitz Brot." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,164,155179-243199,00.html>

Anonymous. "Grandma's Sour Cream Cake." *Cooks.com*.
<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,166,153176-240197,00.html>

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Anonymous. "Grandma's Tootalings." *Cooks.com*.
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<http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1624,156178-240192,00.html>

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<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/grandma-cauffiels-bread-366483>

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<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Helens-Cinnamon-Apples-323530>

CHRISTINE70. "Grandma's Stuffing." *Allrecipes.com*. 2005.
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<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Osbornes-Applesauce-Cake-91003>

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<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Nancys-Oatmeal-Cake-57219>

Diana #2. "Grandma Ackroyd's Rice Pudding." *Recipezaar.com*. September 3, 2008.
<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Ackroyds-Rice-Pudding-322601>

Dienia B. "Grandma Anne's Codfish Sauce." *Recipezaar.com*. December 8, 2004.
<http://www.recipezaar.com/recipe/Grandma-Annes-Codfish-Sauce-105628>

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MissKittyLaine. "Grandma's Pizza ala Da Boys." *Allrecipes.com*. 2010.
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“Reach for the Stars: Imagining the American Dream for Teens in Science Fiction Film” *Blue-Collar Pop
Culture, Volume 1*. M. Keith Booker, ed. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Books, 2012: 150-166.

OTHER ACTIVITIES & SERVICE

Student Representative, Executive Board, Eastern American Studies Association, 2010-2013

Graduate Student Representative, Student Activities Fee Fund Committee, Pennsylvania State University,
Harrisburg, 2010-2012

Career Peer, Career Services, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, 2010-2012

Graduate Student Representative, Academic Integrity Committee, Pennsylvania State University,
Harrisburg, 2010-2011

American Studies and Humanities Student Association, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg,
President, 2009-2011