

## Toward a Hestianeutic Look at Recipe Sharing

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### Introduction

Cookbooks and recipes have been around at least since the Middle Ages dispensing information on food and eating. However until most recently they been one of the most overlooked historical documents. Cookbooks, relegated to the “women’s sphere” and the realm of domestic economy have long been considered inconsequential to the historical narrative but cookbooks and recipes are finally getting noticed by social and cultural historians, archeologists (e.g. Leach & Inglis, 2003; Nussel, 2006), feminist scholars, culinary and food studies scholars (e.g., Albala, 2012)., social scientists (Leach & Inglis, 2003; Scott, 1997; Theophano, 2002) and the like. They have shown that there is much to be learned about everyday living in recipe collections and cookbooks. In recent years these researchers have discovered that cookbooks can be rich documents that offer clues not only about what people cooked but also about domestic responses to changes in socioeconomic conditions. They provide a lens to food production and acquisition, nutritional ideologies, class relations, material culture, regional and ethnic cultural differences, immigration, technological change, social movements, and the ecological, political, and social context of the times. Counihan and Van Esterik (1997/2008) claim that we need to view cookbooks as revealing artifacts of culture in the making.

Interest in the historical value of cookbooks and recipes has led to large scale projects documenting the extent of cookbook collections (e.g., *Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project; Elizabeth Drivers’ Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949*). Even conferences (e.g., Roger Smith Cookbook Conference held in New York every year) and summer institutes and seminars (e.g., Reading Historic Cookbooks: A Structured

Approach, A Seminar Taught by Barbara Ketcham Wheaton at Harvard) are now dedicated to exploring cookbooks. The rising interest in the possibilities for enriched historical consciousness through examining of food, recipes, and cookbooks has led many to explore their own cookbook collections. Albala (2012) states:

There are ways the historian can read between the lines of the recipes, so to speak to answer questions that are not directly related to cooking or material culture but may deal with gender roles, issues of class, ethnicity and race. Even topics such as politics, religion and world view are revealed in the commentary found in cookbooks and sometimes embedded in what appears to be a simple recipe.

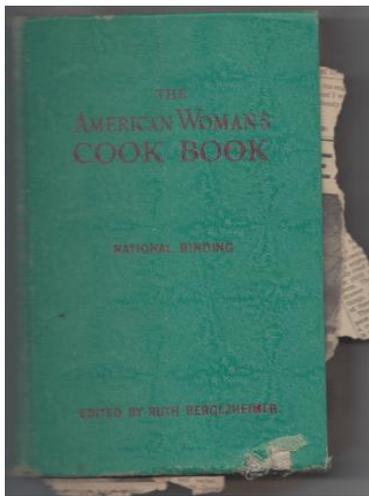
In this paper, I present one way to “read between the lines” - some initial hestianeutical theorizing (Thompson, 2002) – paying close attention to language and the social, cultural, epistemological significance of sharing recipes.

Patricia Thompson (e.g., 1988, 2002) a noted scholar of home economics proposed dual standpoints: one associated with Hestia and the private, domestic sphere or “homeplace” and the other associated with Hermes and the public, civic sphere or “marketplace”. Typically interpretive research draws on hermeneutics, the theory and practice of textual interpretation. According to Thompson (2002), it derives from Hermes, the protector of public spaces and communication and therefore “serves to reinforce hermean intentions rather than introduce alternative readings from...the hestian domain in it systems of action” (p. 183-4). Hermian intentions are dominance and control of public space. She argues for a hestianeutic interpretation of domestic life. Since most 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century recipes and cookbooks originated in the hestian domain it is appropriate to consider hestianeutic interpretation.

For this paper I intend to use the “reader’s choice” recipes published with the “women’s pages” of a particular newspaper, the Vancouver Sun from the 1930’s to the 1950’s. These recipes were compiled yearly in to cook books titled Reader Choice Prizing Winning Recipes. I suggest that they are a form of community

cookbook in the sense that they did serve a larger community, the women who lived in British Columbia at the time, and they are similar to community cookbooks in that they are a compilation of recipes submitted by members (generally women) of the community willingly shared for a specific purpose. I choose these because they slipped out of my grandmother's cookbook when I finally got around to looking at the book that had been in my possession for over fifty years.

My paternal grandmother died in 1964. Shortly after she died a crate of items from her home arrived at our home. When we opened it, the only item that I



claimed was a cookbook. It was the American Women's Cook Book published in 1946. I never really paid much attention to it but it stayed with me all the years through many moves. Recently I opened and examined it more closely. The cookbook itself showed little use. No pages with food splashes. No dog-eared pages. In fact the book seemed to have been used more as a filing cabinet for newspaper articles, old letters and

fact sheets on gardening. In looking more closely, I noticed that many of the newspaper clippings were from The Vancouver Sun's women's pages under the heading Readers' Prize Recipe. These recipes were sent in by readers and if selected for publication the reader received a prize of one dollar. I have selected four of the clipped recipes for closer examination.



My grandmother lived in the small community in northwestern British Columbia (over 800 miles as the crow flies from Vancouver). Of the four Reader's Prize Recipes selected, two were from the Lower Mainland, one from Campbell River, and one from Trail. The prize contest provided the opportunity for women to share their recipes and cooking ideas with a larger community of women. In this way the discourse of domesticity enhanced the key hestian concept of connecting.

Also for my grandmother and probably others it offered a chance to connect with her homeland, her roots, her heritage. She immigrated to the United States from above the Arctic Circle in Norway when she was sixteen travelling by herself from Ellis Island to Seattle. There she worked in restaurants and ended up in northwestern BC where she settled and became a successful business woman. She never returned to her home country so perhaps the Norwegian Frystekake provided a taste of home, a connection to her heritage.

The recipes follow a standard format indicating that they may have been modified slightly from the original but they all assume that women of time had hestian knowledge and were familiar with cooking and that baking equipment (e.g., mixing bowls, standard measures, mixing spoons, baking pans) were standard equipment in most home. For example, in the Macaroon Brownies the first direction is "cream butter, add sugar and cream until light and fluffy". In today's cookbooks where often authors assert their authority and where the hestian discourse of domesticity has been replaced somewhat by scientific efficiency, a more herman approach, they would more likely be written - "beat butter with an electric mixer in a large mixing bowl on medium speed for... minutes." The Irish Oatcakes recipe states "bake in a moderate oven" but does not give an exact temperature which may indicate that the submitter didn't have a stove with a calibrated oven which was common in many homes, especially those that still had wood or wood and coal stoves. It may also indicate that most women cooked

and their hestian knowledge would ensure that they knew what “moderate oven” meant.

Of the four submitters selected only one used her own name Mrs. Gladys Hawes, the rest used initials that were presumably their husbands, and indication of the patriarchal nature of marriage and hermean domination of society. It makes one wonder whether Gladys was widowed or just ahead of her time.

What is interesting in our time of concern about privacy, security, and identity theft where society is increasingly being subjected to various forms of surveillance and social control, is that the home addresses including street and house number was given were given for three of the pictured recipes. Mrs. W. H. Smith of Campbell River gave her postal box address. This speaks to a kinder, safer society where neighbours trusted and relied on one another and where connection and community were common values, hestian values.

To enhance the sense of connection each of the Reader’s Prize Recipes contained a comment from the submitter, “These cookies are liked by young and old” writes Mrs. W. H. Smith about her Choco-Oat Cookies. Mrs. Gladys Hawes, says “This is a rich confection” of her Norwegian Frystekake. “Don’t brown the cakes as this makes them taste bitter” warns Mrs. W. R. Patey of the Irish Oat Cakes, demonstrating that knowledge created in the hestian domain informs problems related to nurturing and sustenance. Mrs. G. M. Schmidt comments “If these should win me the prize, would you please send me the three Edith Adams’ cook books which are advertised at the special price of one dollar?” She was referring to the cookbooks of compiled Readers’ Prize Recipes (see below).

Although the recipes were submitted by the readers, somewhat challenging the traditional notion of cookbook authors and home economists as voices of authority on food preparation, there is evidence that the fictional Edith Adams (usually a home economist, which Thompson considers a hestian profession)

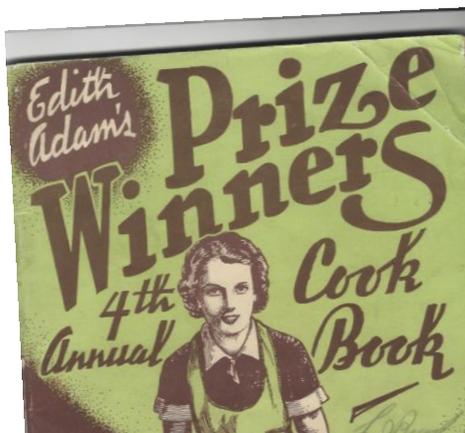
had tested the recipe and did assert *her* hestian authority in the way of helpful hints and encouraging comments. In the Choco-Oat Cookies recipe the directions state “Dissolve the soda in boiling water and add to creamed mixture” and in brackets is (We prefer to add soda to dry ingredients and add water ‘as is’ to the creamed mixture. – E.A.). At the end of the directions for Norwegian Frestekake is the comment in brackets “Very good. – E.A.”. The tone is could be described as authoritative as opposed to the herman authoritarian.

Advertisements for other publications prepared by the fictional Edith Adams were listed in italics at the end of each recipe:

*“Tough cuts of meat can be tenderized quickly in your pressure cooker. Send for Edith Adams’ Cooking Under Pressure (37 cents) and enjoy easily followed directions for the modern pressure utensil.”*

(This “modern pressure utensil” was the commercial saucepan-style pressure cooker designed for home use that debuted at the New York World's Fair in 1939. After the war the consumer pressure-cooker market took off and revolutionized how the average homemaker was able to cook. The benefit of using a pressure cooker for preparing meals-cooking in just one-third of the time was perhaps the beginning of the trend to greater convenience in food preparation and food products.)

Each year from the 1930’s to 1950’s Vancouver Sun recipes were compiled into Edith Adam’s Prize Winners Annual Cook Book and described as “readers’ tested recipes” and “basic cookery”.



Edith Adams was fictional food editor of the women’s pages of The Vancouver Sun from 1924 to 1999. There were many Edith Adams over the years, many of them with a background in home economics and a home economics degree.

In a way these books are akin to community

cookbooks, as they have the same purposes that Bower (1997) proposes for community cookbooks: presenting women as professionals of domestic work; food as an cultural artifact; and bringing to the public the voice of people typically denied a space.

Edith Adams recipe collections were reputed to be especially reliable (Driver, 2008) perhaps because they were practical recipes, connected to “real” people and made in “real” homes where preparing food for families was a “real” event. The cooking reflected in these books originates in the Hestian domain. The underlying values were sharing, cooperation, and nurturing home and family. Contrast this with the herman mediated view of “food as entertainment” as currently evidenced in Food Network television and the popularity of competitive cooking programs.

In 2005, Whitecap Books set out to publish a compilation of the annual Edith Adams prize cookbooks. Whitecap sent out a clarion call to anyone possessing old copies of the stapled cookbooks and the result was a compilation of 13 years of the prize cookbooks in a publication called *Edith Adams Omnibus* - testimony to the historical and social significance of Readers' Prize Recipes, as repositories of hestian knowledge and technology.

## **Discussion**

This cursory examination of four clippings from my Grandmother's cookbook and their source provides a glimpse into hestian life and the discourse of domesticity. In the early days, when "women's pages" were created they were the space available to women, the space for hestian knowledge to shared. They have been categorized as “gendered spaces” with differing opinions on their function. Did they marginalize women? Present stereotypical information? Or are those hermenutical interpretations? A hestianeutical interpretation would see them as empowering places where women could find their voices, seek relationships and

connections with others, share advice and experience, and preserve heritage for future generations.

According to most etymological sources (e.g., British Library) *recipere* originates from the Latin verb meaning to “receive” and its first use was by apothecaries before a listing of ingredients that a patients should “receive” for a medical remedy. The symbol “Rx” continues today as the symbol used at the beginning of a medical prescription. This would place it in the herman discourse of domination, prescriptive, controlling.

Before 1700’s the everyday word for a culinary recipe was *receipt*. However, Thompson (2002) suggests that when we use hestian and herman lenses, we can read words in two ways. In the book, *Eat My Words*, Theophano (2002) also explains that the etymological roots of the word “recipe,” can be traced to the Latin *recipere*, but she suggests that the meaning is “exchange”. Her case studies show that recipes have always been borrowed, exchanged, used, and modified and that they have come not only from friends and family but also from the popular print publications of the time. In the discourse of domesticity recipes are connected to sharing knowledge of sustenance and nurturance and rather than controlling ingredients and methods, modifications, substitutions, and “making do” is encouraged.

According to Theophano (2002), the availability of “print media such as newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets [in the mid-nineteenth century] gave women additional ways to augment their own culinary repertoires and compile their cookbooks” (p. 182). Women’s pages in newspapers provided an important forum for sharing recipes and learning about food and other aspects of daily life. The Vancouver Sun was read throughout the province (even though it was at least 2 days old by the time it reached my grandmother). Notice the underlying value of “exchange”, implying sharing and cooperating in the creating and accumulation of knowledge. This is a much more hestian approach than the

copyrighted cookbooks of today that are mass-produced by large publishing houses for profit.

According to Thompson (2002) a hestianeutic interpretation discloses a discourse of domesticity with the goal of sustenance and nurturance, with caring and connecting being the basic concepts. She contends that the political concepts of the hermean lens are not adequate for dealing with economic and social problems such as hunger, homelessness and family fragility because they are issues that arise in the hestian space of our common world and use of a hestian lens is of paramount importance. "It is not that hermean accounts are false, it is just that they are partial. They are not the whole story and should not be taken as such" (p. 33-34).

Frequently women's pages have been disparaged as "soft" "fluff" journalism as opposed to "hard news" but when you see these as "two different frames of intelligibility" (Thompson, 2002, p. 173) one based on a hestian lens and the discourse of domesticity and the other on the hermean lens and the discourse of domination it is possible to see that both are necessary.

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