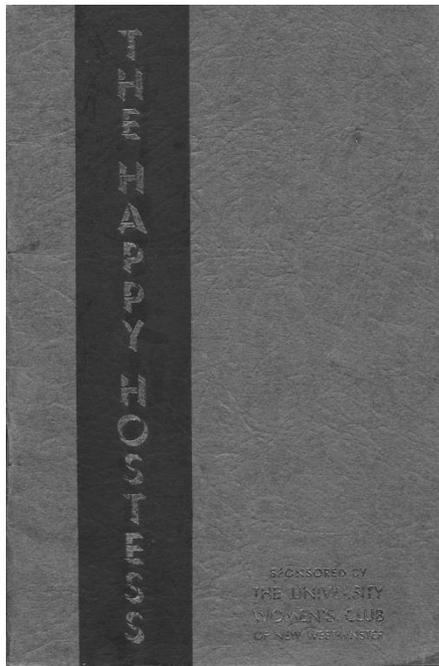


Community Cookbooks: The Stories They Tell

Contributed by Linda Peterat

Marlene Epp (2013) claims that community cookbooks can provide “glimpses” into four themes of social and domestic life: the role of women in fundraising and service, the connections between foodways and ethno-religious identity, the evolution of identity in relation to modernization and acculturation, and food practices as a political statement (p. 174). I used these four themes to analyze two British Columbia cookbooks: *The Happy Hostess* produced by the University Women’s Club of New Westminster in 1938 and *Cook Book* compiled by the Ladies of the Royal Purple in Oliver BC in 1946.



The *Happy Hostess* tells several stories about the role of women in 1938. They entertained or were expected to entertain. This was a probable role for the university-educated women who authored the book and their peers and friends for whom the book was likely written. The book contains three pages of menus for luncheons, suppers, buffet suppers, a menu for a progressive dinner (six homes), and bridge refreshments. There is one menu for a buffet supper for men that indicates the expectation that at times the women may be entertaining husbands and associates, or work colleagues. The “bridge refreshments” suggest that these women enjoyed activities beyond cooking

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and likely entertained their friends during games of bridge. The cookbook includes recipes for cocktails, luncheon and supper dishes, salads and salad dressings, desserts, cookies and pastries, cakes, sandwiches, and relishes.

The Happy Hostess also suggests the women were very entrepreneurial. The cookbook may have served as a fundraiser for their Club because they were very successful in securing advertising from 60 different companies that placed advertisements on 12 pages in the book. The way the women signed their names to the recipes and menus they contributed indicates how they identified themselves. Most used both names such as: Ann Archibald or Yvonne Love. A few identified themselves through their husband such as: Mrs. Bruce McCurrach, Mrs. Christie, or Mrs. R.C. Menten.

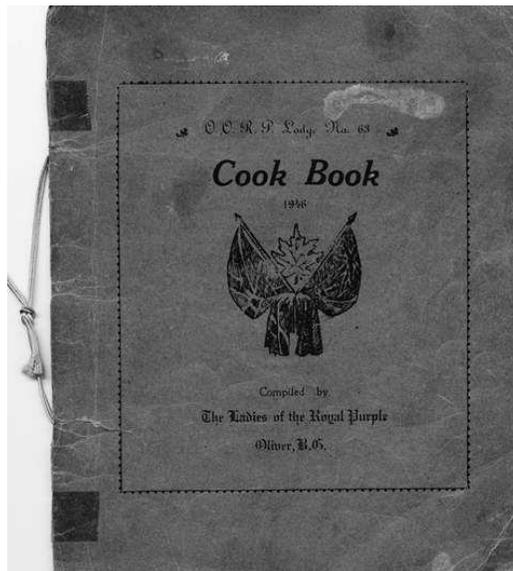
The recipes included in *The Happy Hostess* tell of the ethnic and cultural connections of the women and the foodways of their lives. There are indicators of diversity and fusion or mash-ups. Some recipes indicate early cultural food-fusion (Tuna Fish Chow Mein); some indicate a lure of the exotic (Creole Casserole, New York Drumsticks, California Salad, Sweets Tropica); some a connection and possible longing for the past (Angus Fruit Salad with a note that it is “an original recipe from Blairgowrie, Scotland); and ethnic origins (Sharlotka, Russian Honey Biscuits, and Hovorost [Russian] contributed by Mrs. B. Mironoff; Swedish Pastries, Chinese Tea Cakes).

Community cookbooks like *The Happy Hostess* reveal evolutionary stages of identities in face of modernization and acculturation. Community cookbooks are ways that women claimed respect for their domestic work and these University Women’s Club members showed their professionalization by a smart, clean, impeccably edited and professionally printed cookbook. The first page in the book provides basic information on oven temperatures, abbreviations used in recipes, substitutions that can be used, and a “table of measurements.” The book indicates some innovativeness and creativity. The “Menu for a progressive dinner (6 homes)” was suggested in 1938. Perhaps progressive dinners were popular back then but many had probably never experienced them until 1970s or 1980s.

The fourth theme found in this cookbook is about food practice as a political statement. It’s common that cookbooks try to include small sidebars of humour or “home wisdom”.

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This one devotes the final page to “How to Cook a Husband”, intended to add humour but also speaks of family politics of the time. It suggests that not everything is rosy in family relationships and in fact there may be considerable difference and tension. “How to Cook a Husband” begins with “A good many husbands are utterly spoiled by mismanagement. Some women keep them constantly in hot water; others let them freeze by their carelessness and indifference. Some keep them in a stew by irritating ways and words” (p. 51). The metaphorical word play continues suggesting that women’s duty is to add considerable gentleness and sweetness to the mix. And, “If thus treated, you will find him very digestible, agreeing nicely with you, and he will keep as long as you want, unless you become careless and set him in too cool a place” (p. 51).



Cook Book, written eight years after *The Happy Hostess* and compiled by the Ladies of the Royal Purple of Oliver offers an alternate story of women’s lives in British Columbia in 1946. A comparison of the two cookbooks reveals both similarities and differences in individual and community lives. [Read more on the Canadian Symposium proceedings site http://www.canadiansymposium.ca/proceedings_all_final.pdf pp. 55-65]

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The four themes proposed by Epp (2013) are useful in analyzing community cookbooks. When compared, the two books reveal two different lives for women of the time and the influences of the location from which they were writing. The University Women's Club cookbook provides a glimpse into the lives of university educated women, entrepreneurial, professional, and urban. The *Royal Purple Cook Book* reveals the lives of rural, agrarian linked, less affluent, possibly homemakers, but certainly small city residents of interior British Columbia. Epp (2013) states that compiled cookbooks like these community cookbooks are "texts that present what is commonly eaten within the households and collective gatherings of a community and reflect food preferences, food aspirations, and what might be considered culinary trademarks of the group that compiles the cookbook" (p.176).

Many more stories are yet to be told; voices yet to be heard as we value and carefully read and analyze community cookbooks from the past.

References

Epp, Marlene (2013). More than 'just' recipes: Mennonite cookbooks in mid-twentieth-century North America. In Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek & Marlene Epp (Eds.) *Edible histories cultural politics, towards a Canadian food history* (pp. 173-188). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.