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January 2005

Book Review - "(En)Gendering Cooking"

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(En)Gendering Cooking

by Amanda J. Swygart-Hobaugh

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 & Co., 2003 (cloth). 412 p. bibl. index. ISBN 0-393-01671-4.

Jessamyn Neuhaus, ***MANLY MEALS AND MOM'S HOME COOKING: COOKBOOKS AND GENDER IN MODERN AMERICA.*** Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003 (cloth). 336 p. notes. bibl. index. ISBN 0-8018-7125-5.

Schenone muses in her preface, "I have days in my very own kitchen when I am a high priestess of life" (p. xv). She then confesses,

> …On some days I detest cooking, for it makes me a wretched woman…. How I curse that Susie Homemaker plastic oven I loved as a child and the cooking badge I labored for as a Girl Scout—raised to be a kitchen slave by my culture, my mother—tricked into this bondage. (p. xv-xvi)

I believe this passage encapsulates the conflicted relationship many self-proclaimed feminists have with the cultural practices that are oft-deemed "feminine," e.g., sewing, crafts, and, of course, cooking. In my opinion, while offering differing approaches and perspectives, a core objective of both Schenone and Neuhaus's works is to explore the historical, social, and cultural context from which this discord arises, and if not to reconcile then to more fully understand this struggle. As such, both works offer meaningful insights sensitized by feminist/gender perspectives and would thus be valuable additions to women's/feminist studies collections.

Schenone presents a sweeping narrative of the social history of food and women's seemingly inexorable tie with cooking in America, from pre-colonization to present day. A journalist/freelance writer by trade, Schenone relates this captivating history via a narrative style versus a traditional academic treatment; however, she draws on various

scholarly sources to buttress her arguments, thus adding credence to her account.[1] Also, the various recipes—including Native American "Moose Butter" (p. 28), of African-origin but oft-anglicized "Hoppin' John" (p. 79), the Women's Christian Temperance Union's "Temperance Punch" (p. 127), Italian-immigrant "Italian Easter Cake" (p. 221), and Depression-Era "Poor Man's Cake" (p. 293)—and illustrations interspersed throughout this history lend an artistic flair as well as fuller body to the narrative.

At my initial reading of the introductory material, I was somewhat leery of Schenone's overarching purpose, fearing that her celebratory approach to women's link with food/cooking would fail to also critique this relationship from a feminist perspective. However, my mind was set at ease upon reading the following: "Throughout history, cooking reveals itself as a source of power and magic, and, at the same time, a source of oppression in women's lives" (p. xv).

Schenone adroitly balances this "consistent paradox" (p. xv), at once celebrating the "power and magic" that cooking has brought to American women's lives as well as highlighting how women's relationship with cooking has throughout history been a "source of oppression." For example, while Schenone details the grueling household responsibilities of the colonial housewife and her concomitant social/legal inferiority under English law, she then segues into a discussion of her necessity to the colonial family's survival. Similarly, she illustrates throughout her narrative how racial/ethnic groups when faced with various social inequalities—colonization and indigenous persons being forced from their lands, enslavement, the relegation of domestic labor to African-American and immigrant women—and/or targeted for "Americanization" to serve white, middle-class values/interests attempted to preserve their cultural identities and resist these

social inequalities via their foodways. Likewise, Schenone notes the nineteenth-century separation of the public/economic and the private/home spheres and the concomitant "middle-class 'cult of domesticity'" (p. 125) ideology wherein a woman's true worth was illustrated through her ability to conform to the ideals of perfection in housekeeping, motherhood, and, of course, cooking—a ideological rationale for the domestic science/home economics movement that created a professional and educational niche for women.

While Schenone extols the creativity, sacredness, and power source of food in American women's lives throughout history, Neuhaus turns a chiefly critical/analytical eye towards this subject matter. Via an analysis of cookbooks published from the 1920s to the mid-1960s in the United States, Neuhaus explores this medium's role in prescribing traditional gender norms and roles for men and women in relation to cooking as a household responsibility.[2] Neuhaus's opening chapter on cookbooks from 1796-1920 echoes much of Schenone's discussion of separate spheres, the cult of domesticity and "Republican Motherhood," (p. 12), and the domestic science movement during the nineteenth century. Moreover, and again similar to Schenone, Neuhaus notes the growing middle-class interest to "Americanize" immigrants in the early twentieth century to "groom students for future employment as maids and cooks" (p. 19) in middle-class homes. Also in tandem with Schenone's work, Neuhaus discusses the impact of the processed/pre-packaged foods boom, the food industry's targeting of women as consumers, and the dwindling domestic labor market on (middle-class) women's expected cooking role in the home during the early to mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, both Schenone and Neuhaus note how rhetoric of patriotism permeated

cookbooks during the World Wars, manifesting in the call for rationing foods, backlash against canned/processed foods, and the campaign for "victory gardens."

Where Neuhaus departs from Schenone is in her nuanced analysis of the gendered rhetoric pervading the cookery instruction between the 1920s and mid-1960s. For example, in response to women's increased social, economic, and educational freedoms during the 1920s and 1930s as well as the shrinking domestic labor market, Neuhaus reveals that cookbooks dispensed a domestic ideology that promoted (middle-class, white) women's proper place as in the kitchen cooking.[3] Furthermore, Neuhaus observes that the cookbooks of these decades encouraged women to approach cooking as a creative and/or artistic outlet—admonishing that their husband's happiness, which was to be their utmost concern, depended upon their ability to be creative in the kitchen, day after day, week after week. Similarly, Neuhaus discerns that cookbooks—constructing inherent differences between men's needs/desires for "manly" foods such as steak and potatoes and women's propensity for "dainty" foods such as salads and finger sandwiches—advised that women must sacrifice their tastes to please their potential or current husbands, as the following excerpt from a cookbook illustrates: "[L]earn how to cook a steak properly as 'He' likes it. The girl who can broil a steak well, make good coffee and light fluffy biscuits, will be forgiven many sins and omissions" (p. 78). Concurrently, Neuhaus finds that many cookbooks (particularly those targeting male audiences) attested to men's superiority in the kitchen due to their adventurousness and daringness (to which women were to aspire)—quickly banishing any question of male cooks' masculinity by constructing cooking as a masculine hobby akin to sports and the prepared meals as the acceptable manly fare.

Subsequently, Neuhaus examines cookbooks published during the WWII years. She notes that while the domestic ideology of the kitchen as women's proper place persisted, patriotism, duty to country, and national security became the rallying cry. With women's traditional gender roles being challenged by "Rosie the Riveter," cookbooks responded accordingly; as Neuhaus reflects,

> What accounts for this outpouring on the centrality of a woman's home cooking to the safety of the nation? …[A]nxiety about gender norms at a time when "traditional" gender roles seemed threatened created the need for such messages, though now that threat came from wartime upheavals and uncertainties rather than "the new woman" and processed foods…. [L]oaded with rhetoric about domesticity, cookbooks demanded far more of their readers than simple patriotism…. [T]hey also insisted that a woman's wartime duties included creating a relaxing atmosphere at the dinner table, where war-weary families could rest and enjoy delicious, satisfying meals. They insisted, in short, that women belonged in the kitchen. (p. 137)

Moreover, while some pre-WWII cookbooks questioned women's cooking abilities, Neuhaus observes that WWII-era cookbook authors were reluctant to criticize: "In a time when soldiers really and truly went into battle 'for Mom and apple pie,' cookery authorities could hardly criticize mom's piecrust" (p. 153).

Lastly, Neuhaus turns to the post-WWII years through 1963, the year Betty Friedan exposed the "feminine mystique" to the nation.[4] Accordingly, Neuhaus proclaims that a comparably intense and vehement domestic ideology—dubbed the "cooking mystique" (p. 161)—saturated cookbooks of this era. Men once again were deemed superior to women in cooking ability, and cooking remained masculine as long as it was relegated to a hobby and conformed to prescribed notions of masculine tastes and practices. Reminiscent of the WWII-era, Cold War anxieties were intertwined with the domestic ideology permeating cookbooks, as the following cookbook excerpt illustrates:

> The world today needs people with stamina and courage. Good meals can help to supply them. Each homemaker has a part to play through seeing that her individual family is provided with the essentials for giving it health and vigor. *Family security, as well as national security, results from good management of meals.* (p. 224, emphasis in original)

Moreover, Neuhaus argues many cookbooks asserted that a woman's primary fulfillment in life should come from providing her family three square meals a day—eerily reminiscent of Mrs. Brown's thoughts from Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours:*[5]

> She is going to produce a birthday cake…. The cake will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety…. At this moment, holding a bowl full of sifted flour in an orderly house under the California sky, she hopes to be as satisfied and as filled with anticipation as a writer putting down the first sentence, a builder beginning to draw the plans.
>
> The cake is less than she'd hoped it would be. She tries not to mind. It is only a cake, she tells herself. It is only a cake…. She'd imagined it larger, more remarkable. She'd hoped (she admits to herself) it would look more lush and beautiful, more wonderful. This cake she's produced feels small…. (pp. 77, 99)

Furthermore, Neuhaus observes, "Cookery experts usually did not attempt to validate women's feelings of lethargy or weariness—rather, they exhorted women to overcome dullness and boredom and to 'be pretty, be bright, and be a good cook'" (p. 232). However, Neuhaus acknowledges that while a "cooking mystique" permeated many of the examined cookbooks, some—notably, Peg Bracken's *The I Hate to Cook Book*—reflected a "discontent" with this domestic ideology by not wholeheartedly embracing the tenets but recognizing cooking as a "necessary bore" (p. 239) fated as a woman's lot in life—perhaps foreshadowing the second-wave feminist movement soon to erupt.

Both Schenone and Neuhaus's works offer nuanced insights into the gendered aspects of cooking and would thus be welcome additions to feminist/women's studies collections. While Schenone's writing style lends itself more readily to a general versus an academic audience, I would not necessarily exclude her book from college/university collections; in fact, I believe the accessibility of her writing would readily encourage readers to broaden to more academic treatments of the subject matter, such as Neuhaus's

book. As such, I highly recommend Neuhaus's work for a college/university wishing to develop their collection of gender and social history.

In closing, I believe the following excerpts from the authors' concluding remarks bring us full circle:

> Cookery clearly offers innumerable Americans the opportunity for creative expression, for demonstrating care and affection, and for sensual, satisfying pleasures. But we should be aware that the cookbook we casually consult for a favorite recipe has a history. We should remember that…food manufacturers, cookbook authors, editors, and publishers used this medium to sell their products and their magazines. In the process, they helped establish links between gender and food preparation that remain strong to this day. (Neuhaus, p. 267)

> We can be ashamed of our wars and flaws, our capacity for evil as human beings. But cooking and caring for one another—this is our bright side. In cooking, we find our creativity, ingenuity. And I believe women want to embrace this connection because of our special history with food. If men want to join us in the kitchen, I think that's great. We need all the hospitality and caring we can get. (Schenone, p. 349)

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[1] The academic in me was somewhat put off by Schenone's lack of precise source citation; however, her chapter-by-chapter "select bibliography" (pp. 355-78) lists several useful sources, geared towards both general and academic audiences and some accompanied by brief annotations.
[2] See Neuhaus's "Essay on Sources," pp. 320-323, for a detailed discussion of her sampling procedures.
[3] Neuhaus acknowledges that as the assumed primary audience by most cookbook authors/publishers excluded racial/ethnic minorities, the domestic ideology conveyed was thus decidedly white, middle-class women.
[4] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974).
[5] Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Picador, 1998).