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From “training in citizenship and home-making” to “plating up”: Writing Australian cookbooks for younger readers

Abstract:

In term of popular literature about young people, cookbooks purporting to address children's obesity and other diet related issues currently take a prominent place. Beside these, there is a growing related sub-genre of cookbooks for young people that are intended as guides use in practical food preparation. These include television tie-ins such as the globalised *Junior MasterChef* series as well as books by chefs, nutritionalists, activists, celebrities and parents, most of which have an almost rigidly proscriptive take on what, how and why children eat, and what and how they should eat. Working from Australian cookery instruction books for girls such as those by Flora Pell (1916 and later), through Margaret Gossett's landmark *Children's Picture Cookbook* (1947), to today's plethora of children-targeted volumes, this paper addresses this Australian publishing phenomenon. It examines these books from the point of view of writers-as-producers as well as the intended consumers for these volumes, the various messages they convey, and what they reflect about food, society and writing for children in Australian popular culture.

Biographical Note

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Girl's Guide to Work and Life: How to Create the Life you Want, 2004 (both Allen & Unwin, Sydney). Founding Editor of *dotlit: Online Journal of Creative Writing* (2000-2004), Donna is currently Special Issues Editor of *TEXT: Journal of Writers and Writing Programs*, a Founding Editorial Board member of *LOCALE: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies* and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Donna has been writing about food writers and their influence in scholarly and popular publications since 2006.

Keywords:

Food writing – Australian cookbooks – Food history – Flora Pell – Margaret Gossett – *Junior MasterChef*

Introduction: beyond cooking

Today, cookery writers not only provide practical information regarding the purchase, preparation and service of food; they provide information of personal interest (such as on diet, health and beauty), with social ramifications (having input into debates on what and how we eat), and of global significance (addressing issues including environmental sustainability and food security). As scholarship on cookbooks continues to grow, cookbooks written for children are beginning to attract academic interest (see, for instance, Black 2006; Hersh 1997; Hertzler 2005; Longone 2003). Dividing these volumes into two types—cooking *for* and *by* children—we focus on the second, examining the various messages they convey and what they reflect about food, society and writing for children. This approach uses, and contributes to, a growing literature of using cookbooks as cultural resources. In culinary bibliographer Elizabeth Driver's words: "Cookbooks ... illuminate many aspects of the past; however, to interpret accurately what they tell us about their time ... it is important to keep the books themselves at the centre of the story" (2009: 258).

School textbooks: writing as life skills provision

School cookbooks attest to both the power of food and the morality with which it is infused. While the moral imperatives around what is 'right' for children (to do as well as to eat) have changed over time, the utility of foodmaking for social and moral purpose has an uninterrupted history since the foundation of domestic science classes. Internationally, the domestic science/home economics movement has received attention from researchers (Weigley 1974), while the integration of food into educational settings has also recently stimulated considerable interest and public attention. However, the use of food to engage school students in active, productive learning also has a long history, with John Dewey founding the University of Chicago Laboratory School on the principle that engaging students in growing, preparing and eating food would provide learning opportunities in a range of subjects as well as after school.

The international arena provided both a context and inspiration for the development of cooking literature for children in Australia. While the distinctive features of Australian food production and its historical circumstances produce particularities in published works, the historical impetus for the production of cookbooks has been shared across different locales. Although, for instance, the historical and cultural contexts within which the domestic science movement developed varied considerably, the movement was a transnational one. The beginnings in the United States are traced to 1841 when Catharine Beecher published *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and At School*, considered by some to be the first home economics cookbook (see Weigley 1974). Beecher agitated for instruction in domestic economy to be part of the education of all women, for the household to be recognised for its importance as a social institution, and for improving women's status by reorienting their gender roles from the private to the public sphere:

Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of the whole family are secured. (1842: 37)

This approach required a shift in the perception of domestic work from that of manual labour that was perfected through practice, to a profession that could be studied and learned. Critics of home economics often argued that cooking was something girls could, and should, learn at home and was a waste of time and money in schools (Kingston 1996: 99); nevertheless, in Australia, domestic economy was integrated into the Victorian and New South Wales curricula by the end of the nineteenth century. Colin Bannerman (1998: 19) explains the Australian rise of domestic science as a product of growing interest in cultural development and the curse of bad cookery, which encouraged support for teaching cookery. Placed in a broader framework, however, it is possible to see the support for a modern, scientific approach to food preparation as part of both the elevation of science and systematic knowledge in society more generally and a transnational movement to raise women's status. School textbooks from this period can also be read in terms of anxieties over gender roles and the contradictions inherent in domestic science itself. It was, for example, stated that a knowledge of cooking would reinforce and ensure a woman's place in the home, however, it was also assumed that training in cooking and household skills would provide opportunities for outside employment.

One of the stark differences between the books written for children—more specifically at this time, for girls—and general cooking literature was the amount of foundational detail provided, suggesting that girls were not learning such skills at home. The books made no assumptions about the skill level of the reader or the equipment they would be expected to have access to. Flora Pell's *Our Cookery Book* (1916) included such simple information that one of its readers joked that the instructions were so clear they should have included: 1) walk into the kitchen, 2) approach stove (Stevens 2011). The inclusion of recipes for boiling eggs or rice and making cups of tea enabled beginners to start with the basics, but the motivation for this was more than knowledge of how to cook.¹ According to Pell, then Supervisor of the Domestic Arts in Victoria, public opinion had begun to demand that:

schools shall provide for children such training in citizenship and home-making as shall raise up a strong race of well-nurtured people, skills not alone in the right conduct of their own lives, but impatient of the existence of any conditions unfavourable to the health of the community. (Pell 1913-14: 80-1)

Schools should, Pell asserted, supply the training for home life that was being eroded by a tendency for girls to become 'clerks, typists, shop-assistants, or the like, rather than housekeepers, home-makers, or helps' (Pell 1913-14: 80).

Pell and her contemporary, Lucy Drake, were authors of popular textbooks on cookery produced both for students and popular consumption. Their books ran into many editions, and were in publication from 1912 to the 1950s, at a time when cookbook publication was a small fraction of the considerable creative industry it is today. These cookbooks can be read not only as meal blueprints, but also as

interventions in the diet of the nation and as part of the ongoing debates around both food and home. As Inspectress of Domestic Arts Colleges from 1924, Pell was ultimately responsible for these colleges' operation, and she was passionate about her work. She firmly believed that a girl's education was incomplete if she was not trained in the principles of "True Household Economy", cookery and nutrition ('Vesta' 1924: 6). These three elements are covered in detail in *Our Cookery Book*, *Miss Flora Pell's Tested Cookery Dishes and Valuable Home Hints* (1925) and *A Sunshine Cookery Book with 50 Dried Fruit Recipes for the Modern Table* (c. 1926). For Pell, girls were "guardians of the future" (cited in 'Vesta' 1924: 6). She believed that there was a link between training wise mothers who ran efficient and effective households and cared for the physical, mental and moral health of their children and the prevention of juvenile crime (cited in 'Vesta' 1924: 6). At this time, Pell, although not a wife or mother herself, upheld socially conservative gender roles and advocated what was known as 'domestic feminism'.

The dominance of women as cookbook writers throughout the period in Australia, the UK and the USA attests to the strength of this concept of separate spheres, although the consequences of this are ambiguous. While the growth in publications dealing with 'women's topics' provided opportunities for women writers, and can be linked to changes in domestic life and women's roles, at the same time these books were providing series of well used recipes that were, thus, equally important in producing culinary tradition.

A new age: Margaret Gossett's *Children's Picture Cookbook*

Pell's and other instructional cookbooks were reprinted in Australia in new editions, and were popular with readers until the post-war period when developments in publishing and growing domestic affluence led to a change in the way publications were produced, marketed and consumed. Although there is evidence that Pell's cookbooks continued to be used and promoted to new generations after the second world war, the late 1940s saw the development of a new Australian market for food-related publications that is more in line with current consumer behaviour and concerns. Most post-war publications were, however, (except for textbooks) firmly targeted at adult cooks.

Margaret Gossett's *Children's Picture Cookbook*, published in Brisbane by the Strand Press in 1947, is unusual in this context. There are, indeed, only two other volumes in this category of 'Cooking—Juvenile Literature' catalogued in the National Library of Australia during the 1940s: the Boy Scout Association's *The Cook's Badge* (1948), one of the very rare publications for boys about cooking at this time, and Angela Carter's *Every Child's Cookery Book*, published in London in 1949. There are no books at all catalogued in the subject area for the 1950s and only four in the later 1960s. The limited number of children's cookbooks published before the 1970s internationally has, indeed, been noted (see, for instance, Hertzler 2005: 347) and certainly seems the case in Australia. With the exception of cookery books published by newspapers and women's magazines, and community cookbooks, many post-war

cookery books—until Margaret Fulton’s groundbreaking *The Margaret Fulton Cookbook* (1968)—were, moreover, either fully imported into Australia, or were texts by British or American authors republished or reprinted in Australia.

Gossett was an American, and the *Children’s Picture Cookbook* was first published in New York in 1944. It was lauded in Columbia University’s *Teachers College Record* as one of 1944’s “books of the year for children” (Gilbert 1945: 320-8) and described in another review in this influential serial as “delightful and practical” (Earl 1945: 326). Although the book clearly has been edited for Australian readers—with Australian flags in one picture—Americanisms have slipped through. A recipe for Taffy (24-5) is, for instance, included, which would have been ‘toffee’ locally. Some ingredients are also used that were not available in Australia—such as corn syrup which has never been easily obtained—while some suggestions were certainly not to Australian tastes, like serving dill pickles with sandwiches (32). There are also some American expressions, such as the use of “hard cooked eggs” (32) instead of the Australian ‘hard boiled’.

Despite these oversights, with its use of bright colours, bold illustrations and design by Elizabeth Dauber and lively address, Gossett’s 47-page volume was a landmark publication in children’s cookery literature in post-war Australia. The innovative use of child-friendly illustration as instructional text was noted by US reviewers (Earl 1945: 326), while *Harper’s Magazine* described how the “simple but fun recipes [were illustrated] with a picture for each step” (1944: 190). Another found the book’s “ingenious, clear arrangement” sure to “turn the most un-domestic child into a zestful and successful cook” (Paulist Fathers 1944: 280).

Gossett’s recipes are in keeping with 1940s and earlier mainstream Western thinking regarding children’s (sometimes called ‘nursery’) food—usually nourishing but bland, featuring what were thought to be easy to digest meals (Black 2003: 349). Today we would describe these foods as stodgy and uninspiring, with starchy and sweet foods predominating. Heavily sweetened dishes also catered to children’s supposed preferences (Longone 2003; Black 2003: 349). Ann Hertzler notes that American children’s cookbooks from 1850 to 2000 “have a preponderance of high-calorie dessert and party/fun recipes and limited vegetable recipes” (2005: 347). Gossett certainly follows this trend, with only a handful of savoury dishes among a range of sweet drinks, cakes, slices, icings, cookies, muffins, desserts, pies and candies. There are, for example, a date cake slice that includes one cup of sugar and a pound of pitted dates for each cup of flour, and which is rolled in more icing sugar before serving; and popcorn balls that need two cups of sugar and a half cup of molasses or corn syrup to make the toffee to hold them together.

Each recipe includes an illustrated list of cooking equipment and methodologies are not only clearly described, but developed and shared across recipes. The Date Sticks mentioned above, for example, utilises the following instructions: “You make this cake by the same rules as muffins. See page 34. You mix all the drys, then the wets. Then you add the wets slowly into the drys” (22). There are also tips on time management, how to successfully prepare for each cooking session, as well as sound advice on cleaning up and first aid (46). The page on cooking “tricks” (47) is

illustrated with performing circus animals and a magician, underlining the fun and even magical nature of cooking. All recipes are described and illustrated as fun to make and eat, as if every meal is a party or other celebration. There are pictures of children playing, and eating at picnics and tea parties, and around campfires and barbecues. While both boys and girls are featured cooking, eating and playing throughout the book, no adults are pictured consuming foods made by the children, firmly placing the children's cooking and eating as an amusement rather than a core part of everyday life.

Contemporary trends

Charlene Elliot (2010) describes 'eatertainment' as part of a shift in children's roles from producers to consumers, suggesting that playing with food (toys in packaged meals as well as breakfast candy characterised as 'fun', for instance) is a way of compensating for children's dull and lonely lives in dual-career families, where they have lost any domestic role and do not contribute to household production (Elliot 2010: 544-45). In the context of the popularity of culinary culture, it is not surprising that there is a proliferation of specialised cookbooks for children, but the growth in eatertainment may be more ambiguous than Elliot suggests. Contemporary children's cookbooks are also written in the shadow of increasing anxiety about children's health and lack of culinary knowledge. In her *Kitchen Garden Cooking with Kids*, Stephanie Alexander laments the availability of packaged/pre-prepared foods and increasing hours parents spend at work, and is concerned for "the fate of the children" (Alexander and Dollard 2006: 5), explaining:

Statistics show that more than one-quarter of our children are overweight. Few children eat the number of serves of fruit and vegetables recommended for optimum health. Many children are leading more and more sedentary lives ... Education about food choices has almost entirely disappeared from school curricula and in too many homes nobody is offering positive examples of healthy eating (5-6).

For Alexander, a lack of enjoyment in preparing food at home is leading to poor food habits. Hence, the Kitchen Garden at Collingwood College (on the same site as Flora Pell's Domestic Arts School), and the book and DVD of recipes to be read, watched and cooked by children. Alexander's recipes are built on fundamental principles that are quite unlike the concern for frugality and utility that underpinned Pell's *Cookery Book*, or the ides of sweet, fun nursery food in Gossett's *Children's Picture Cookbook*. Although the principles, such as variety and freshness, have more to do with food itself than culinary skills-based education, like Pell, Alexander aims to have an impact on life outside, as well as inside, the school.

Alexander participated in Australia's *Junior MasterChef* in 2010, a competitive cooking program built on the popularity of the adult version. *Junior MasterChef* is pitched to its audience as a transformative pedagogical moment—proving that when it comes to quality cooking, neither age nor a long apprenticeship matters. Over 5,000 children from around Australia applied to be part of the series, with eventually fifty 8 to 12 years-olds chosen to compete for twelve places in the program. "What they plate

up”, the promotion declared, “will blow you away” and, in many cases, it did astonish many competent adult cooks. The program fell between the two conventions in culinary publication that Pell and Gossett denote. It was didactic like Pell, offering the promise of improvement, but it also demonstrated the enjoyment of cooking that Gossett suggests. It took this idea of pleasure much further, however, employing the rhetoric of artistic integrity and autonomy that elevated the children to the level of the (adult) celebrity chefs they learned from, cooked with and competed against.

The show’s pedagogic nature was clearly revealed in how the series promoted itself as a learning opportunity. This neatly aligns with the generic conventions of Australian cookery television, which since Graham Kerr and other early exponents have tended towards a didactic approach to culinary skills. In this way, *Junior MasterChef* did include a number of segments that provided information that could teach viewers (of whatever age) how to cook. In the cook-a-long, for instance, viewers could download the recipe ahead of time and cook while viewing. The master classes were also paced to allow techniques and food knowledge to be learnt. The program was, moreover, also a site for the transmission of cultural knowledge, culinary knowledge most obviously, but also other encoded forms of knowledge about age, class, gender, ethnicity and national identity. Alongside this, and underpinning the competition at the heart of the program, was the celebration of individual creativity that transcended all these elements. At times, for instance, the child contestants transcended the abilities of the celebrated adult chefs who were supposedly teaching them.

Although *Junior MasterChef* was pitched as a transformational pedagogical moment for all viewers, these junior chefs were, at the same time, widely acknowledged as unique. In the cookbook from the program, for example, the editor explains:

There’s no doubt that the standard of cooking on *Junior MasterChef* surprised everyone who watched, which is why putting together this recipe collection was something of a challenge. Of course we wanted to feature the best recipes from the show, but we also wanted to create a guide for the vast majority of kids who aren’t quite up to recreating George and Gary’s prawn tortellini with marron and pumpkin puree just yet! (Jenkins 2010: 3).

Recipes thus include Isabella’s handmade gnocchi and Stephanie Alexander’s leg of lamb, plus “easy dishes such as vanilla biscuits and mango ice blocks” (3). Both the children on the show and the guest chefs joining them—a who’s who of Australian celebrity chefdom including Margaret Fulton, Kylie Kwong and Matt Moran—were thus distinguished from home cooks of any age as autonomous artists. The young television chefs were, for instance, featured in magazine articles with their own recipes. Each of the cookbook’s brief biographies of the children in the finals reinforced their exceptional talents, transforming the idea of the television chef from a skilled artisan to an artist with entrepreneurial flair. One of the judges told twelve-year-old Isabella, for instance, “You need to open a restaurant” (quoted in Jenkins 2010: 17). The show, therefore, acted as a vehicle for consolidating the brand of the ‘chef’, marking a break with both the conventional didactic and ‘cooking is fun’ approach to culinary skills of previous decades.

Conclusion

In many ways, the instruction manuals for the home cook from the early twentieth century were uncomfortable with the idea of the pleasures of eating, focusing instead on professionalising home cookery. By mid-century, young people were targeted as a market for both cookery books and food products via an approach which imagined cooking and eating as play. For Stephanie Alexander, in this century, rousing a fulsome pleasure around food (not only in its preparation and consumption, but also in its growing) is a valuable pedagogic tool in discourse generated around obesity that may indicate that the two threads in culinary narratives for young people have been developed and usefully merged.

However, these changes in cooking literature for children have not been so clearly defined across all publication platforms. Although the *Junior MasterChef Collection*, for instance, contained health advice and nutritional information, there were far less vegetables featured than either Alexander or Pell would have found acceptable. It, indeed, has more in common with children's cookbooks from mid-century, which include a preponderance of high-calorie desserts and a focus on fun. Cooking, to many (for generations), a chore without glamour or choice, is thus presented to readers as sweet, optional and a form of play. As time has passed, cooking for children has become even more recreational, and continuous throughout the history of children's cooking literature has been the need to occupy children—whether usefully, healthily or by entertaining them.

As the examples discussed here show, when cookbooks for children first appeared at the end of the 19th century the moral imperative was preparation for the future—as both mothers and citizens. By the middle of the 20th century, cooking had changed from a necessity to a pastime for children and children's roles had shifted from production to consumption. As cookbooks have diversified in number and form in the contemporary period, children's nutrition has received special attention in the context of health concerns. The recreational and creative cooking promoted in *Junior MasterChef* also certainly reflects a wealthier and prominently urban audience where cooking is an entertainment option for children. In this context, the cooking games available for portable game consoles mean that children can even transcend actual foodstuffs and operate in a purely imagined world. As these trends develop, children's cooking manuals might well change the relationship we all have to food in the future.

Endnote

1. These girl readers were understood as 'little women' and there was little difference, except for the basic level of information included, from cookery books written for an adult audience.

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