

# Food for Thought: New Respect for Old Cookbooks - -- Scholars Discover Meaty Historical Fare At Radcliffe Library

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The Schlesinger Library, on the grounds of Radcliffe, the former women's college now incorporated into Harvard as a center for advanced studies, has become a beacon for culinary historians. For some time, historians of women resented the gathering of cookbooks at the library as too symbolic of the values that kept women in the kitchen. But increasingly academics are taking food seriously.

Now a multitude of scholars are looking at food in a whole new way. The Washington, D.C.-based Chronicle of Higher Education recently highlighted the emergence of food studies at U.S. colleges, where previously anything to do with food had been dismissed as lightweight and irrelevant. (Mr. [Sidney] Mintz's explanation is that people don't think much about eating because food just appears three times a day.) The very ordinariness and ubiquity of food that once kept academics uninterested is now drawing them to the subject. "The quickest way to understand a culture is through its food," says Ms. Haber.

## FULL TEXT

Colonel Halstead C. Fowler left the United States in 1941 with a mound of luggage and a case of champagne to ease the seasickness he expected to suffer on the voyage to the Philippines. Forty months later he returned to the United States with three bullets lodged in his malnourished body and a case of beri-beri that had permanently damaged his eyesight.

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Roland Barthes, the pioneer of semiotics, wrote essays on the recipes that appeared in Elle Magazine after World War II. Sidney Mintz, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, wrote about sugar and slavery in his book

"Sweetness and Power," putting the sweet tooth of the emerging middle class in England at the heart of the story of capitalism.

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The oldest cookbooks in the library are tablets found in Mesopotamia with recipes for making beer. Recipes appear on Egyptian walls and in Roman writings. But they really came into their own in the last century and have been growing in popularity ever since. Now huge numbers are published each year ranging from encyclopedic, expensively produced books by famous chefs to pamphlets put out by community groups and churches to raise money.

While historians tend to read cookbooks to extract broad patterns in society, for most people they're a form of vicarious gastronomic indulgence, a zero-calorie way to eat one's heart out. "People love to read cookery books, they read them like novels," says Ms. Haber. "In the past 15 years, cookery books have become artifacts to read and collect even if they are not actually used for cooking."

For the Schlesinger, gathering these books has been an enormous task, as nobody knows what has been published when; there are few bibliographies of cookbooks because they have been outside the conventional interests of libraries. The Schlesinger library has grown on the back of donations from collectors, principally food writer Julia Child, who turned over her books and papers. It also houses the papers of writer MFK Fisher and Grace Chu, who wrote one of the first Chinese cookbooks in the U.S.

In its collection, you can see the changing status of women, the shifting rhythms of domestic life and the massive diversification in tastes that have occurred in recent decades. There is nary a whiff of garlic or a hint of spice in the recipes from 1950s France or America -- everything seems to be a fleshy pink and glazed with a thick layer of mayonnaise. But the contemporary collection is heavy with Asian and Latin American food, reflecting the huge shifts in the U.S. diet.

Books in the 1950s assumed women had all day to cook; the recipes are laborious. They were replaced by books with titles like "Meals in Minutes." There are also heavily politicized feminist cookbooks from the 1970s with vegan recipes for communes celebrating the solstices and other nonpatriarchal festivals. By the 1990s, the books had come full circle to the hyperdomesticity of Martha Stewart, the first cookbook billionaire following her recent IPO.

Although all the books reveal something of their time, there are some, like "Recipes Out of Bilibid," that capture a specific moment in history in an extraordinarily revealing manner. In this grim camp, conversation repeatedly turned to food as prisoners tried to cope with the constant grinding hunger. They talked not just of food but of the comforts of domesticity that it represented, reminding themselves that there were prospects for the future.

Col. Fowler took it upon himself to collect the recipes, which span geography, class and time, and reflect the strange demographic of prison camps into which people from around the world were thrown together. Much of the food has a basic, masculine tinge to it -- outdoor cooking or recipes for making 11 kilograms of corned beef. Others speak of men left alone for the first time to fend for themselves in the kitchen; the book opens with a recipe for "Midwestern

Baked Beans" that consists of mixing cans of baked beans and kidney beans with a jar of pickled onions. Another consists of dill pickles filled with Kraft cheese.

There are more elaborate recipes: a Creole bouillabaisse recalled by a soldier whose father was a chef, and a long description of a lavish Indonesian rijstafel with 27 different sambals, curries and meat dishes. A Frenchman who had been a chef on a British freighter captured in Singapore contributed a recipe for baba au rhum and there is a whole section of Scandinavian food contributed by sailors from those countries.

Collecting recipes is not how one would expect fighting men to cope with the rigors of prison camp, but "Recipes from Bilibid" actually fits into a long history of prison writings about food. Zhang Xianliang's "Grass Soup" is a reconstruction of his diary of 22 years in a Chinese prison camp that records his recipes for survival. Out of the Vietnamese re-education camps of the 1970s came many stories and essays on food and imprisonment. Best known in the genre is the book "In Memory's Kitchen," a collection of recipes from woman at the Terezin camp, a Czech waystation to the Auschwitz concentration camp.

These women jotted down recipes for strudels and roast goose as they struggled to survive on the most meager of diets. In assembling these recipes, they kept part of the Czech Jewish tradition alive even as they themselves perished.

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