

ABSTRACT

Feeding the American Narrative

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This thesis looks at the social, cultural, economic, and political factors in 1950s America that made women embrace the home and the kitchen with arms wide open. Aside from only examining the historical landscape of this particular decade, this paper also analyzes the ways in which 1950s domestic literature shaped female identity. I argue that the strategy of 1950s domestic literature was to wield the power of the American narrative—weaving its various elements into cookbook introductions, cake mix boxes, canned food labels, televised commercials—in order to subordinate women to the home. Through domestic literature, the kitchen was re-envisioned as not a place of confinement where cooking was mandatory, but rather as a place of freedom where cooking was both a privilege and an opportunity. The kitchen became, in the woman's psyche, a place where the American narrative was realized, and as long as she stayed within the domestic sphere, she was able to experience such things as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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FEEDING THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

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Waco, Texas

May 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Walden—Thank you for being a wonderful mentor and friend. You believed in me and my project when I was ready to give up on both. I'm also grateful that you encouraged me to change my major to Professional Writing. Where would I be without you? Wasting away in the business building, probably.

Dr. Shaver and Dr. Wright—Thank you for showing interest in my research and for asking such insightful and thought-provoking questions.

Mariah Franklin—Thank you for helping me with this thesis formatting mess. Struggling together has been such fun.

DEDICATION

“If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien

For mom and dad, who have made sure from day one that my stomach—much like my life—was happy and full.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Before Second-Wave Feminism

Betty Friedan was the first to publicly expose the happy housewife myth in her famous work, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. In her book, many women confessed to feeling either unfulfilled or just plain bored in the home, harboring a secret but deep longing to do something other than prepare food and change bed sheets. The second-wave feminist movement that followed forced the nation to confront the issue of gender inequality by recognizing that the suburban housewife lifestyle “kept women dependent, undereducated, underemployed, and largely underfulfilled” (Gilbert, Kuznick 9). The kitchen today is no longer as gendered as it was in the fifties, but it is still worth asking how it got that way in the first place. And if so many women admitted to abhorring the kitchen, then what made them stay there for almost an entire decade?

This thesis examines the social, cultural, economic, and political factors in 1950s America that made women embrace the home and the kitchen with arms wide open. (I use the term “1950s” loosely to reference the years between the end of World War II and the early sixties, right before the second-wave feminist movement began.) In this thesis, I argue that the strategy of 1950s domestic literature was to wield the power of the American narrative—weaving its various elements into cookbooks, cake mix boxes, canned food advertisements—to bring productivity, modernity, and exceptionalism into the domestic sphere. This section will provide a literature review that will show how the

multidisciplinary facets of my research work together cohesively. I will first start by addressing what scholars have said regarding the roles of women and perceptions of femininity in 1950s America. Then, I will discuss what scholars have said about food culture in America within this same time period.

Between Two Wars: Women in the 1950s

Scholars agree that the fifties was characterized by great ambivalence—and at the center of all this confusion was the home. Stuck between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War—feeling both the pride of victory and the fear of potential downfall—the nation scrambled to find a cohesive American identity. Jennifer L. Barker and Kirstin Ellsworth characterize the fifties as being defined by “disillusionment and idealism, constraint and expansion, and simultaneous postwar rebuilding and reassessment of traditional values and roles” (970). Following the disruption of World War II, the American people longed for a return to normalcy, for some sort of common footing that would allow the nation to reset and rebalance. Elaine Tyler May writes that “postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men” (9). Laura Shapiro discusses the origins of these traditional gender roles, explaining that the iconography of wife in the home and husband at work “had hovered over the nation since the industrial revolution, invariably starring a father who worked hard to support the family and a mother who lovingly tended her brood” (138). Part of the woman’s traditional role, Mary P. Ryan argues, was to be the more expressive gender, the one inherently apt in “divining personal needs, supplying emotional support, and monitoring interpersonal relationships” (337). Plagued by a nostalgia for the past that was rooted in the desire for a brighter future, the

nation reverted to traditional notions of gender because it was a cut-and-dry standard that would allow family life to resume. Women left whichever jobs they had had during the war to reassume their “proper” place in the home. This emphasis on the family triggered a demographic revolution. From 1950 to 1960, the total population increased by almost 30 million, the largest spike in population growth ever recorded in history. In 1953, a third of American women were married by age 19, and in 1960, 75 percent of women ages 20 to 24 were married. From 1940 to 1957 the fertility rate rose by 50 percent, and there was an average of 3.2 children per family.

During the Cold War, women staying in the home was held to an even higher standard as marriage and children became more than mere nostalgic longings—they became part of a national agenda. Jane Sherron De Hart writes that Cold War policy-makers believed the promotion of family values “would assure the stable family life necessary for personal and national security as well as supremacy over the Soviets” (125). But, as Oakley points out, the home also served as proof of a healthy economy: “Americans filled the insides of their homes with all the labor-saving appliances and gadgets they could afford to buy with cash or credit” (236). The home—in addition to being a symbol of moral virtue—had also become a symbol of abundance and leisure, the mark of a thriving capitalist society. Lastly, Americans retreated to the home because they were afraid of communism and of nuclear annihilation. Oakley calls the fifties “the age of fear and suspicion,” a time of McCarthyism and terrible anxiety. Americans were, as May puts it, “well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age” (23). During the Cold War, the American home became an ideological force-field.

Food scholars and historians alike have commented on the cultural implications of the 1950s kitchen. The Kitchen Debate, which took place in a model kitchen in Moscow, is a topic that frequently arises in Cold War scholarship. Vice President Richard Nixon said to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the beginning of the debate, “In America, we like to make life easier for women.” Nixon was trying to show his adversary “that the ‘model home,’ with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom” (May 16). In *Cold War Kitchen*, Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann illuminate how the modern kitchen—with its various cultural implications—was used as a diplomatic weapon (1). Sherry Inness adds to this, arguing that the “well-stocked kitchen became a signifier of the American dream” (*Dinner Roles*, 144). The modern kitchen represented technological advancement, high productivity within a free-market system, and a family-oriented culture.

With the home at the center of the cultural war, and women at the center of the home, it comes as no surprise that the American narrative was able to penetrate the domestic sphere and change perceptions of femininity. As domesticity became a pillar of American morality, it became the woman’s responsibility to uphold this pillar, making sure her country would not fall. During the fifties, the happy housewife was pictured in advertisements, magazines, cookbooks, and other forms of domestic literature, the purpose of which was to remind women of where they belonged.

I should note before moving on that Joanne Meyerwitz, editor of *Not June Cleaver*, is skeptical of the research that has been done on women during the fifties because most of it has been centered on white, middle-class women. She makes a salient

point that while scholars are not at all agreeing with the myth of the happy housewife, studying women through such a narrow scope oftentimes does nothing but perpetuate the stereotype (4). While I share in Meyerwitz's concern, and while I acknowledge that employed women, women of color, and lesbian women among others existed during the fifties, my paper is mainly focused on white middle-class women. I focus on this demographic specifically because white, middle-class women were the ones directly targeted by advertisements and cookbooks, the two mediums that my research focuses on. Advertisers and cookbook authors targeted this demographic because—among other ideological barriers—immigrant and lower-class women could not afford the American narrative. The young, affluent America depicted in domestic literature did not include everyone—only the ones who could afford the products being marketed. I will go into more detail about this demographic in a later section.

1950s Food Culture

A lot can be said about how food culture changed during the 1950s, but for the purposes of my paper, I will explore how food was depicted through domestic literature—specifically, through cookbooks and advertisements. At the beginning of my research, I wondered how 1950s domestic literature was able to inform women of their traditional roles within the context of a changing world. Rather quickly, I discovered that it was all a matter of re-envisioning the ideas associated with the home and with motherhood. 1950s domestic literature was able to re-envision the age-old concept of women belonging in the kitchen, and out of this came the myth of the happy housewife.

In the introduction of *Kitchen Culture in America*, Inness argues that in order to “understand women's gender roles in the United States, we need to study food” (4).

Katherine Parkin expounds upon this, noting how “cooking has historically been the focus of cultural analysts who seek to define women’s role in the home and in society” (53). There is an obvious and integral connection between women and food that dates all the way back to the industrial revolution, when men and women first splintered off into their respective spheres—the domestic and the professional.

The woman’s traditional role as cook partially explains the food-centered culture of the 1950s. In the fifties, domestic literature tried to foster women’s interest in cooking by presenting it as a distinctly feminine activity through which women could express love toward her husband and children. Domestic literature had to reconcile this, however, with the fact that methods of food preparation were evolving. In *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, Laura Shapiro discusses the role of the food industry in changing American diets and perceptions of food preparation; “as World War II was ending, the food industry found itself confronted with the most daunting challenge in its history: to create a peacetime market for wartime foods” (8). In the post-war years, new technology allowed for developments in convenience foods that made frozen, dehydrated, and canned foods more appealing (and more edible) to the civilian market. Jessamyn Neuhaus, in *The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s*, qualifies the burgeoning of convenience foods as the most significant aspect of 1950s cooking (532).

Food scholars attribute the success of convenience foods to advertising, which perpetuated traditional gender roles in the face of modernity. Advertisements emphasized speed and efficiency, a new and easier way to put dinner on the table. At the same time, domestic literature also told women to stay true to their traditional feminine roles. Many

scholars' research has focused specifically on this paradox. In "Campbell's Soup and Traditional Gender Roles," Parkin shows how Campbell's advertisements preyed on the woman's desires to please her family, the messages never centered on the dietary interests of the cook herself but rather on the interests of her family members (54). Campbell's used the traditional idea of the woman as obsequious to the needs of her family in order to sell a modern product. In *Finding Betty Crocker*, Susan Marks shows how a similar phenomenon occurred with cake mixes. She explains the egg theory; by letting the woman add her own eggs, the housewife could use a cake mix without feeling guilty for "cheating" (168). This shows how once again, an old concept—one that demands the woman's involvement in cooking as act of femininity—was used to market a modern product.

Furthermore, scholars have recognized creativity to be a recurring theme in domestic literature. They argue that women were receptive to modern appliances and convenience foods in part because of the rhetoric that made them feel that convenience cooking was acceptable so long as it was creative. Inness writes, "The creative cook was supposed to think of all ingredients in the cupboard—no matter how ordinary or incompatible they might seem—as fodder for her imagination" (*Dinner Roles* 149). Shapiro adds onto this, arguing that "creativity was the fairy dust that would transform opening boxes into real cooking" (64). Creativity allowed women to use convenience foods without feeling guilty and turned cooking into art. I delve deeper into the marketing of convenience foods and the rhetoric of creativity in subsequent chapters.

Scope of Project: Marketing the Middle-Class White Woman

Kitchen culture is always influenced by factors such as race and socioeconomic class, which means that “not all women are affected by American food culture in identical ways” (Inness 4). In the fifties, middle-class women could not afford to hire their own help to prepare food, but, as previously mentioned, they were well off enough in the economic boom following World War II to afford convenience food items and the latest kitchen technology, staples in a modern kitchen. But class was not this community's only distinguishing feature; as is so often the case when talking about class, race is part of the discussion too. The abounding majority of middle-class women in the fifties were non-European white.

The Americanization of the dinner table began almost as soon as foreign foods became popular in cookbooks, between World War I and World War II. When it came to food, middle-class white women often defined themselves by what they were *not*—and this affected how they perceived foreignness in relation to food. First off, middle-class white women were not poor. Until the Depression, saving money was an aspect of food preparation that middle-class women did not have to think about. Immigrant women, who were part of the working class, were forced to prepare food economically. The cheaper, lower-quality food that immigrant women cooked with had less nutritional value, which meant working-class families were not receiving the same health benefits as middle-class families. When times got hard due to frequent unemployment or sudden illness, working class families had to do without milk, fruit, and vegetables, foods that we now consider some of the most important (Levenstein 103). But instead of attributing the health disparity between the working class and middle class to a disparity in wealth, health

experts and dietary reformers ignored economic factors and began attacking the ways in which immigrants customarily prepared food. Health experts “studied assiduously the food habits of the immigrants they confronted” (Levenstein 103). Spices and seasonings were denounced for disturbing the digestive process. Foods that were “overspiced, 'garlicky,' and indelicate-looking” were also written off as unhealthy. To Americanize, immigrants were told to separate one dish into three because, because according to health experts, dishes made up of many foods mixed together (i.e. bortschts) did not retain valuable nutrients.

This disparity of wealth and health between the middle and lower class continued in the 1950s. Whereas the middle class got richer after the war, the lower class remained poor. This meant that even if immigrants were willing to assimilate to the American way of cooking, they would have been barred from the community still by the simple fact that being a middle-class housewife was unaffordable. It was again an economical issue. Immigrants did not have the money to purchase the items—the pots and pans and blenders and convenience foods—that characterized a modern kitchen.

Secondly, middle-class white women were not mysterious or strange. In *Dinner Roles*, Inness argues that between World War I and World War II, immigrants were “often perceived by Americans who had lived in the United States for a longer period as threatening to change the country” (94). I argue that Americans held a similar regard for immigrants between World War I and the Cold War, a time when a fear of communism made the nation suspicious of the unknown and mysterious. In the fifties, many assumed that foreign foods “endangered American values and tradition” (94). Americans therefore had a strong aversion to all things foreign—including foreign foods. Strange foods were

associated with even stranger people, so while domestic literature told women to experiment with unique flavors, women were also admonished not to be *too* bold in their experimentation.

In a time when soy sauce and noodles in a casserole were enough to call it a “Shanghai Casserole” (*Southern Living* 124), cookbooks perpetuated a distaste for foreign foods that were too flavorful, too pungent, and most of the time, too spicy. Foreign dishes were included in cookbooks “with the clear understanding, whether implicit or explicit, that they were inferior to American foods with a northern European background” (Inness 89). Though many recipes’ titles included the names of foreign places (i.e. the Mexican Casserole in *Southern Living*), the dishes—requiring such ingredients as cream of mushroom soup and butter—were clearly not authentic, but were exoticized merely to sound exciting and creative.

In 1950s food advertisements, icons like Betty Crocker for General Mills, Martha Mead for Sperry Flour, and Mary Alden for Quaker Enriched Flour were all depicted as white, middle-class women. No one seemed to take issue with advertising the homogenous middle-class white woman until the Minneapolis—St. Paul chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) filed a class action complaint against General Mills in 1972, asserting that Betty Crocker's Caucasian representation was “discriminatory toward minority women” (Marks 233). Later, when we look at how Betty Crocker was “empowering and genuinely helpful” to middle-class white women (233), we must keep in mind that Betty Crocker was also very exclusive in the help that she offered. Not until the late nineties did Betty Crocker begin looking ethnically ambiguous (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Betty Crocker throughout the ages

From now on when I refer to women in my paper, it is safe to assume that I am referring only to middle-class non-European white women.

My Contribution

Women fell for the happy housewife myth, yes—but *how*? What was it about 1950s domestic literature that made women seek fulfillment in the kitchen? Scholars have

proven that women in the fifties responded effectively to messages about cooking creatively and conveniently, but what about these messages was so intoxicating?

My research has led me to conclude that 1950s domestic literature re-envisioned the kitchen as not a place of confinement where cooking was mandatory, but rather as a place of freedom where cooking was both a privilege and an opportunity. Cooking in the fifties was not only the woman's way of feeling feminine; it was her way of feeling American as well. The kitchen became, in the woman's psyche, a place where the American narrative was realized, and as long as she stayed within the domestic sphere, she could experience such things as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Methodology

In the next three chapters, I will present productivity, modernity, and exceptionalism as separate parts of the American narrative. In each section, I will start by defining the term. Then, I will provide the historical context in which the narrative was operating and show how the narrative was relevant in the 1950s. Finally, I will delve into an in-depth discussion on how 1950s domestic literature brought the American narrative into the domestic sphere, and how women were supposed to experience said narrative through food preparation. During this analysis, I will draw from primary sources—advertisements and cookbooks from the 1950s—to illustrate my argument. Briefly, in the conclusion, I will discuss the limitations of experiencing the American narrative within domesticity.

CHAPTER TWO

Productivity: The Economization of Kitchen Labor

Defining the Term

Productivity has been a crucial element in the American narrative since the 1800s, when the United States emerged as an industrialized country. As we strive to maintain our position as an economic world leader, productivity is useful in measuring the health of our economy, serving as a “gauge of [our] country’s potential output levels and living standards” (Frankel 9). American productivity is a defining feature of our identity as a capitalist nation. In March of 2000, *The Economist* ran an article titled “Highly Productive: American Productivity,” which compared our productivity levels with that of other leading nations such as Germany and Japan, showing that productivity is one of the merits upon which we contemplate our international standing. Productivity is often discussed in terms of leadership, to determine whether or not the United States can sustain growth and continue reigning as the world’s largest economic player.

In plain terms, productivity can be defined as the economization of labor, and in the American free market mentality, people generally accept the idea that a society able to economize its labor in production “is better off than one unable to do so” (Frankel 9). We view productivity as an American virtue because it facilitates the flow of consumer culture that promotes a capitalistic society. But we see productivity as a virtue not merely because it brings economic wealth to the nation. One of the major spoils of productivity is leisure; “To the extent that labor as a means can be economized, its rewards as an end, in the form either of output or of leisure, will be greater” (9). This means that while

increasing output is certainly viewed as positive in a free market economy, the amount of free time that people had as a result of productivity was also an attractive part of the narrative.

Productivity thus functions primarily as part of the professional sphere, in an industrial setting wherein the presence of machinery has greatly reduced the amount of human labor involved in the production process. Since men were the ones occupying the professional sphere, it was mostly men who experienced productivity. Women were excluded from this part of the American narrative until World War II, an event that spurred a dramatic shift in the way American's perceived femininity.

Historical Context: Rosie Wins the War

In *American Productivity: Key to Economic Strength and National Survival*, William Proxmire discusses “the failure to fully utilize our available manpower” as a misuse of national resources that could lead to economic instability (1). This was an issue that the United States dealt with during World War II, when most of the nation's manpower was fighting overseas. The number of available men and single women in the labor force during the war proved to be inadequate by 4 million workers in just the munitions and armed forces industries (Ryan 316). The lack of available manpower put the nation in danger of economic decline, so in an effort to sustain productivity, women were called to join the labor force. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the war industry impelled a new field of job opportunities for women, the necessity for war impedimenta generating a “clear and unambiguous invitation to women to come to work” (Ryan 316). In their desperation for workers, the government and manufacturing companies dispersed propaganda and advertisements encouraging women to contribute to the war economy.

The numbers show that women responded effectively to this invitation. During the war, the overall participation of women in the labor force went from 25 to 36 percent of the adult female population (Ryan 317). Six months after Pearl Harbor, over two million women were employed, and over three million more joined in the next few years. Women were “taking over jobs as welders, riveters, security guards, cab drives, and in a variety of other hitherto male occupations” (Anderson 32). As the war continued and the war industry expanded, the need for labor grew. War Manpower Commission chairman Paul McNitt announced, “Now that the war has really entered the active offensive...we need more and more munitions. That is why we need more and more workers.” Between 1940 and 1945, the percentage of female employment in the workforce rose from 27 percent to almost 37 percent. When the war ended, approximately one in every four married women was employed outside the home.

The call for women to work was successful due to the rhetoric in wartime propaganda, arguments constructed to convince women that they were capable of doing “men's work.” This rhetoric drew parallels between the domestic sphere and the professional sphere, inviting women to partake in the productivity narrative by depicting the workplace as being not so different from the home. “What job is mind on the Victory Line?” was a popular leaflet written and distributed by the Women’s Bureau in 1943:

“If you’ve sewed on buttons or made buttonholes on a machine, you can learn to do spot welding on airplane parts. If you’ve used an electric mixer in your kitchen, you can learn to run a drill press. If you’ve followed recipes exactly in making cakes, you can learn to load shell” (United States Women’s Bureau, 1943).

This leaflet—and others like it—made domestic concepts fit within the productivity narrative, the purpose of which was to dispel the idea that working was unfeminine, and to give the challenging environment of the workplace an exciting appeal.

Visual rhetoric sought this same end. The most iconic image from wartime propaganda is Rosie the Riveter. While she is used today as a symbol of female empowerment, during World War II Rosie was a call for women to join the munitions. Through a myriad of media outlets—movies, newspapers, photographs, articles, posters—Rosie made it clear that joining the work force meant joining the war effort.

In a cover done by artist Norman Rockwell for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, Rosie sits with her ankles crossed, a copy of Hitler's “Mein Kampf” under her feet. As if this were not American enough, behind Rosie are stars and stripes, a large American flag waving in the background (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: A painting of Rosie the Riveter by Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post*

Rosie holds a rivet gun in her lap and a ham sandwich in her right hand, looking somewhat aloof, easy-going. She is wearing blue overalls with a blue collared shirt underneath. Her cheeks and arms are covered in what appears to be dirt or grease marks. The face covered up, one might easily mistake Rosie for a man, with her muscular build and the baggy clothes concealing her figure.

The major parts of this image combined—a buff working woman front and center, with the American flag in the background, and the enemy at her feet—showed women how they were expected to fit into the American narrative during wartime. A woman could show her dedication to her country as well as her support of the troops in Europe

by joining the workforce. Rosie spread the word that “women had to work if they wished to be considered loyal Americans” (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 127). She also engendered a “sense of purpose accompanying productive work” (Anderson 28). The 1942 version of Rosie is still popular today; it shows a close-up of Rosie’s bicep, the words, “We Can Do It!” in a speech bubble at the top. This poster was originally made for the purpose of boosting morale among female workers, but it be used later during the feminist movement of the eighties, and it endures still today.

The modern-day usage of Rosie the Riveter as a champion of women’s rights is completely different from how she was used during the war. The messages may appear similar, but there is a distinction in the motivations for such messages. During World War II, it was not society’s understanding of gender equality that allowed women to diverge from their traditional roles as housewives, but rather the exigency to restore the labor force previously dominated by men. During the war, most Americans viewed “women’s jobs as temporary extensions of patriotism and domestic responsibilities that resulted from the emergency situation” (May 71). This distinction is key to understanding why women were ushered back into the home after the war was over.

When World War II ended and men reoccupied their roles as breadwinners, women were expected to resume their domestic lives. When asked, three out of four working wives said they wished to keep their jobs after the war (May 76), but institutional barriers made it difficult for women to keep working. Companies that employed women during the war either fired most of their female employees or revived old policies that banned the employment of married women: “By November, 1946, more than 2 million women had been summarily dismissed from their jobs” (Ryan 319). The

dismissal of women from the workplace after the war proves that Rosie the Riveter was only ever meant to be a “temporary phenomenon (May 68). Still, the lines separating the domestic sphere and the professional sphere were thenceforth permanently blurred. As Laura Shapiro states in *Something From the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, female wartime employment changed everything; after the war, “whether or not [women] chose to earn money, they were living for the first time in a world where seemingly immutable sex roles were subject to challenge” (xxiii). It became the nation’s objective, then, to figure out how to persuade a bunch of Rosies that they belonged in the home.

In the 1950s, women were able to continue experiencing the productivity narrative in the home through domestic advertisements. The industrialization of food put the home—and subsequently, women—at the center of production efforts. Furthermore, advertisements for convenience foods urged women to economize kitchen labor, reinforcing productivity as an American virtue that could be realized within the home.

Productivity in 1950s Domestic Advertisements

Whereas during the war women were encouraged to join the production effort, after the war women were encouraged to enjoy the spoils of production. Productivity during the war helped to pull the nation's economy out of the Depression, and a large sector of post-war production was aimed at female consumers.

As family sizes expanded in the baby boom era, the home became an important part of the nation’s economy. The indulgent consumer behavior of middle-class America in the fifties allowed for the rise of household purchases. In the first five years after the war was over, the amount of spending on household items rose by 240 percent. The fifties was a time of not only a “reinvigorated consumer culture and a child-centered

culture but also a food-centered culture” (Endrijonas 157). The rise of the food industry would eventually peak in 1960, resulting in what Elaine N. McIntosh refers to in *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* as “the Second Agricultural Revolution” (123). After World War II, food was no longer locally sourced or seasonally bought; fruits and vegetables could be purchased at the grocery store year-round. The rise in Americans' incomes during the post-war years also meant that consumers were willing to pay more for processing (Endrijonas 158). Affordability thus aided the proliferation of convenience foods during this time.

In a flourishing capitalist society, women had all the attention. Their roles as consumers became even more pronounced during the Cold War, when the home became a symbol for democratic values. During the Kitchen Debate, Nixon pointed to the dishwasher and declared to Khrushchev, “In America, we like to make life easier for women.” In 1950s America, women experienced productivity peripherally as its main beneficiaries; the more money a woman’s husband made, “the more conveniences and luxuries she would have” (Oakley 117). Whereas women had labored during the war to sustain productivity, they could now sit back, relax, and enjoy the spoils of a prosperous economy.

The woman’s experience of productivity, however, was far more intimate than her mere passive engagement in consumer culture. In the fifties, convenience food advertisements brought the productivity narrative into the realm of domesticity. In the same way that machinery had helped Rosie be productive at work, convenience foods would help the housewife be productive at home.

How Convenience Foods Economized Kitchen Labor

In “Why Have Americans Become More Obese?” an article in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, David M. Cutler, Edward L. Glaeser, and Jesse M. Shapiro use the French fry to humorously illustrate the post-war economization of kitchen labor in a poignant way. Before World War II, Americans did not regularly consumer French fries because it required “significant peeling, cutting, and cooking” (94). Thanks to post-war innovations, however, the production of French fries was sped up drastically, which is why today, “the French fry is the dominant form of potato and America’s favorite vegetable.” This example proves that there was some truth in convenience food advertisements; post-war advancements in science and technology did reduce the amount of time and energy involved in food preparation just like advertisements promised.

In the 1950s, ads for convenience foods filled the pages of every women's magazine. The advertisements all promised the same thing: to “save women tremendous amounts of time in the kitchen” (Endrijonas 157). A Minute Rice ad in the October 1955 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* says “No boiling! No draining! No sticky pans! And no *watching*—you always have *easy days* with Minute Rice” (89). In the June 1956 *McCall's* magazine, an advertisement for Nescafé Instant Coffee claims that there is “no easier way to make delicious iced coffee than with Nescafé!”

Productivity might seem like an idea that sells itself, but women in the fifties were not yet accustomed to viewing the kitchen as an industrial place. This was a rather radical idea, because while productivity was a virtue that women accepted without question in the workplace, women were unsure of whether or not it remained virtuous in a domestic setting. Taking this into consideration, 1950s domestic advertisements were effective

because they portrayed convenience foods as a way for the housewife to prolong her membership in the productivity narrative.

This is why “marketing for some of the new foods skipped the ‘excellence of product’ and went straight to ‘ease of preparation’” (Shapiro 10). Quality in the kitchen was expected, but productivity in the kitchen was a new concept that took some getting used to. This is why the economization of kitchen labor took rhetorical precedence in most convenience foods advertisements while quality tagged on as an afterthought to reassure women that convenient cooking would still bring excellence to the dinner table. A Campbell’s soup ad in the November 1995 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* pictures Anne Marshall, the Betty Crocker of Campbell’s Soup, saying “Campbell’s Onion Soup will save you work and add new flavor!” (87). Notice that “new flavor” is placed after “save you work.” In the next paragraph, the advertisement continues to emphasize productivity by comparing canned soup with soup from scratch; “Why bother peeling onions and blending a sauce—when Campbell’s Onion Soup is such a nice thing to add to your favorite recipe?” The rest of the ad does not mention taste, nutrition, or any of the soup’s other qualitative attributes.

Conflicting Messages

Implicit in 1950s domestic advertisements was this idea that cooking ought to leave room for leisure, and yet, women were only able to experience this leisure in limited ways; “Time saved on household tasks through technology meant more opportunities for women’s personal development. Such development was tempered however, by powerful messages that women should not neglect their domestic obligations

to the family” (Endrijonas 157). While 1950s advertisements certainly promoted convenience foods as offering leisure—women were told they “could perform their cooking tasks and still have time for a trip to the movies with their friends or some other leisure-time activity”—other genres of domestic literature frequently suggested that a woman’s free time was best spent aspiring to greater cooking finesse (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 163). Grocery shopping was another domestic obligation women could not neglect. Many 1950s cookbooks articulated that knowing family members’ food preferences was the woman’s responsibility, something she should keep in mind when making food purchases (Endrijonas 167). This subservience to others’ tastes made grocery shopping a laborious task for women, one that became even more time-consuming after convenience foods appeared on store shelves, thus increasing the number of options available for family members to pick from.

Conclusion

Through convenience foods, the housewife was able to experience the productivity narrative—but only in a limited sense in that she was unable to enjoy the spoils of her productivity in any meaningful way. In the fifties, it remained that an efficiently prepared meal—the output of a woman’s economized labor—should still please other members of the family first before pleasing the cook. Meanwhile, it remained that leisure was time a woman ought to spend improving herself in other areas of domesticity.

CHAPTER THREE

Modernity: Novelty in the Kitchen

Defining the Term

When we hear the word “modernism,” we might recall a specific genre of art and literature; paintings and books are, however, mere manifestations of modernist ideals or critiques of the modern world. Modernism is after all not just an artistic genre; modernism was also a cultural movement that affected everyone in the twentieth century, artists and non-artists alike. Part of the difficulty with defining modernism has to do with proximity, for “until the present, modernism has been allowed to write its own history” (Surette 1). Modernist sentiments of being up-to-date and advanced are clearly present in American culture today, but only until very recently have scholars been able to extrapolate the beliefs and paradigms of modernism that brought on the cultural movement. Modernism is also difficult to define because it seems uncontainable; the marks of modernism are traceable “back to the furthest temporal horizon” (Levenson 1). For these reasons—and because the term is, as I have mentioned, often studied as an artistic genre separate from the cultural movement—the exact definition and origin of modernism remains ambiguous.

For the purposes of this paper, I present modernism as a discourse on novelty. In his book titled *Modernism*, Michael Levenson recognizes the duality of modernism, how it is “haunted both by a search for novelty and by the recollection of precursors” (2). Modernism is simultaneously a longing for the future and a nostalgia for the past. In *The Birth of Modernism*, Leon Surette writes that in the modernist sense, to be modern is “to

have transcended history, to have climbed out of history into an unmediated , incorrigible realm of knowledge, and in that sense, to have fulfilled history” (4). During the twentieth century, this optimism was accompanied by an even stronger lenience on tradition. We are to understand modernism, then, as “not a collision between novelty and tradition but a *contest of novelties*” (Levenson 5). What we ought to do in the face of change—the trajectory of newness—is the dilemma upon which modernism revolves.

Though the term modernity did not come about until much later, I argue that it has always been a part of the American narrative. We have always been a nation bent on proving our uniqueness and superiority (Restad 4), which has greatly influenced our progressive mindset and pushed us to become leaders in science and technology. As Dan Rather writes in *The American Dream*, “a new continent demanded innovation from the start” (202). Modernity has evidently been a pervasive force in the American collective consciousness even when there was not yet a name for it. This is where we see the exceptionalism narrative and the modernity narrative overlapping. The American idea of exceptionalism (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter) opened the door for modernity, and in doing so, admitted modernity into the cultural narrative. Seeking what is new and unknown has always been part of the American quest for greatness, springing forth “from the unique circumstances of our nation’s birth” (202). The modernity narrative in all of its complexity is what makes America a dynamic nation, one undergoing constant change.

Historical Context: A Decade of Drastic Change

Modernity has a lot to do with change—how it is perceived, and how it is subsequently dealt with. It is therefore no wonder that modernity was an immediate

concern for Americans during the 1950s, a decade of disorientation after World War II had ended, and of rapid advancement in the wake of the Cold War.

In the fifties, the nation was undergoing rapid transition. The economy was booming, television sales were rising, Americans married younger and in larger numbers—these changes made the fifties “an age of great optimism” (Oakley x). America was no longer the defeated nation that struggled during the thirties; “even with the Soviet attainment of the bomb in 1949, America remained confident of its technological, and moral, superiority and had built its Cold War foreign policy on the notion of containing the communist menace—in essence, a policy reliant on perpetual technological superiority” (Douglass 1). The Cold War ideology was all about embracing change, because change was good; change brought about prosperity; and enough change would restore America’s claim to supremacy and defeat the Soviet Union once and for all.

Yet, in spite the social and economic changes transforming America during the post-war period, the nation still “seemed to belong to an earlier, more placid age” (Oakley 20). The longing for consistency in an ever-changing world created a family-oriented society where men and women submitted to traditional gender roles. Elaine Tyler May describes the paradox perfectly in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*; she calls the Cold War ideology and the domestic revival “two sides of the same coin: postwar Americans’ intense need to feel liberated from the past and secure in the future” (10). This shows how in 1950s America, a fascination for the future came with a nostalgia for the past. On one hand, novelty was perceived as the cure for the

trauma caused by war; on the other hand, Americans feared what they did not know and relied on the past for a sense of security.

This paradox had enormous effects on perceptions of female identity. 1950s domestic literature reinforced the idea that caregiving and nurturing—a woman’s “natural” talents—were most useful in the home; and yet, the literature could not hide from women that the world was changing. By depicting food preparation as both modern and traditional, 1950s domestic literature invited women to engage in a discourse on novelty—which made women feel like they had a place in the modern world.

Novelty in Domestic Literature

1950s domestic literature shows a keen understanding that times were “new, different, modern,” because times were indeed changing—and many of these changes radically transformed the home and the woman’s role in it (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 147). Convenience foods were on the rise; blenders, ovens, and dish washers transformed the kitchen into a radically different place. To include women in modernity, domestic literature completely re-imagined food preparation—starting with the kitchen.

A major goal of 1950s domestic literature was to make women recognize that “the kitchen was no longer the stodgy, old-fashioned place it had been in their mothers’ time but was instead up-to-date and technologically sophisticated” (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 142). During the first part of the twentieth century, the kitchen was considered a wondrous technological achievement: “The radical innovation of the twentieth-century urban, modernist kitchen was the creation of a separate space with modular square appliances, a unified look, an unbroken flow of countertops and counter fronts over appliances, and standard measurements” (Oldenziel, Zachmann 1). It became a symbol of technological

achievement and economic affluence that these kitchens became mainstream in middle-class America. During the Cold War, politicians strategically used the kitchen to “constitute, embody, and enact their political goals” (3). The modern kitchen was depicted in domestic literature as every woman’s pleasure palace—an industrial, productive place filled with gadgets that would make the woman’s job streamlined and efficient (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Advertisement for modern kitchen

Pertaining to convenience foods, certain messages were conveyed more explicitly than others. The Nescafé advertisement below, for instance, relies on the word “modern” to bait women into buying instant coffee (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Advertisement for Nescafé instant coffee using the word “modern”

Some 1950s cookbooks even made a direct connection between the nation’s forward movement and food culture. The foreword in *McCall’s Book of Wonderful One-Dish Meals*, for example, shows how women and food factor into the dialogue of a nation undergoing rapid change. It starts by calling the early sixties “exceptional times,” and draws a sweeping parallel between great American achievements and the transformation

of food culture. It talks about the space age, how men have traveled to the moon, “gaining strength and energy to do so from a remarkable supply of condensed and fortified foods.” The Forward also touches on globalization, how international travel is becoming popular and people are bringing back to the U.S. exotic foods that their grandparents have never tried. The Foreword even acknowledges that women are mobilizing, that the conversation regarding female employment has begun: “Thus, our cookbook has a double value because it covers both bases. Easy one-dish meals for the liberated lady to prepare so that she does not have to spend all day in the kitchen. And even easier one-dish meals to aid novice George as he encounters soup bones, roux, and shallots for the first time.” (Not only does this passage actually reinforce traditional gender roles by assuming that men will be inept and awkward in the kitchen, it is also inconsistent with the rest of the cookbook, where women, specifically, are addressed.) These great American accomplishments—space exploration, international travel, and women’s mobilization from the kitchen—were meant to give women the feeling that their cooking endeavors were somehow tied to this progressive time in American history.

Advertisements for TV dinners used a similar though slightly more subtle tactic. The Swanson division of the Campbell Soup Company came up with term “TV dinner” to stir up “modern notions of sophistication and prosperity,” associations that Americans had regarding television (Smith 175, *Kitchen Culture*). During the fifties, sales of television sets averaged 5 million per year, and by the early sixties, 90 percent of American homes owned at least one TV set. Americans thought of the TV as a magic box that “could bring the world into the living room” (Oakley 95). TV dinners were not meant

to be consumed in front of the television so much as they were meant to recall technological advancement, middle-class status, and the future.

TV dinner advertisements promoted productivity and modernity simultaneously. Women “prepared” TV dinners not only because it saved them time, but also because it was a way for them to partake in a modern lifestyle. In a 1948 editorial in *Quick Frozen Foods*, the editors tell frozen food advertisers to sell the futuristic “idea of suspended animation,” because selling modernity is the “great, exciting and dynamic theme upon which the [frozen food] industry rests” (Smith 194). This strategy certainly worked for Swanson; Americans ate an estimated 13 million TV dinners in the first year they were on the market. Other frozen food companies tried to copy Swanson’s aesthetic appeal—a metallic tray with food separated into three compartments, but none posed a serious threat to Swanson, for “it was the phrase *TV dinner* that found a permanent place in the culture and made the product an icon” (Shapiro 19). Women in the fifties were cultural gatekeepers, letting modernity into the domestic sphere and thereby transforming eating into a modern experience.

Cake Mixes: Sending a Mixed Message

While domestic literature encouraged women in the fifties to embrace modernity, advertisements and cookbooks still spread messages about the woman’s traditional role as the cook in the house. These messages were addressed to women only, because “one way to keep traditional values alive was through cooking, emphasizing its age-old connection with mom and the American way” (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 146). The emphasis on tradition and novelty sent rather confusing messages to women as they were told to buy convenience foods but cook from scratch, to “accommodate all family members’

preferences but streamline the food purchase and preparation process” (Endrijonas 157). Advertisements for convenience foods mostly told women to save time while some cookbooks stuck to the idea that “home-baked goods were the key to emotional stability and a show of love within the family” (158). In many cases, this contradiction could be found in one text. For example, *Betty Crocker's Good and Easy Cookbook* praised convenience foods but called for a moderate use of them.

In the fifties, women were trying to be traditional in a modern context, and we can see this discourse on novelty clearly when we look at cake mixes, which permitted “the most sentiment-laden dessert in America” to arrive at the dinner table with almost no human contribution (Shapiro 195). In the American culinary tradition, cakes are of “particular importance in the construction of ideas of home and motherhood” (Humble 64). Cakes have a long history of celebration and are indicative of special occasions; traditionally prepared on birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, and other moments of significant meaning, for the woman, baking a cake meant creating an atmosphere of joy. Made to be cut into pieces and shared, the communal aspect of cakes contributed to how they became such dominating symbols of life's commemorative moments. Made the traditional way from scratch, cakes were a difficult feat to triumph; baking a great cake was a “prodigious undertaking” (Humble 57). This too contributed to how cakes became an emblem of celebratory moments—they required more time, energy, and ingredients to make. Baking a cake was not only a show of culinary mastery, but also a show of feminine mastery.

Cake mixes were not successful when first introduced during the Depression by a Pittsburg company called P. Duff and Sons; “problems of spoilage and packaging” kept

mixes from widespread consumption (Marks 166). After the World War II—and after four years of cake mix research—cake mixes were re-debuted by General Mills. From 1945 to 1951, the use of cake mixes increased by 343 percent. Advertisements spread the word that women no longer had to go through the hassle of baking a cake from scratch, praying it would come out of the oven moist and delicious and not a total disaster—cake mixes were there to save women from such a tiresome endeavor. At the bottom of General Mills cake mix boxes, Betty Crocker promised, “...I guarantee a perfect cake every time you bake, cake... after cake... after cake!”

Using the *Just Add Water!* campaign, Betty Crocker and Pillsbury took the lead in sales with more than 200 cake mix companies behind them (Figure 5). Flour mills were not in the business to sell flour anymore—they were selling modernity. But in spite of their success, General Mills executives still felt that the sales figures did not meet industry standards (Marks 168). To diagnose the problem, General Mills turned to business psychologists Dr. Burleigh Gardner and Dr. Ernest Dichter. The breakthrough came with the discovery of the egg theory. Dichter reasoned that baking a cake was the woman's way of showing love, and therefore, the *Just Add Water!* method of baking did nothing but cheapen that love; “in order to enjoy the emotional rewards of presenting a homemade cake, [women] had to be persuaded that they had really baked it, and such an illusion was impossible to maintain if they did virtually nothing” (Shapiro 75). By leaving powdered eggs out of the mix, women could add their own eggs and as a result, regain agency in the baking process. After adopting the *Add Your Own Eggs!* campaign, General Mills and other companies that followed suit saw an increase in sales, and before long, cake mixes became staples in every American household (Figure 6).

No Cake Disappears like **Duff's**



Devil's Food

... so irresistible it never sees a second day!

DEVIL'S FOOD with the rich, chocolaty perfection of Duff's puts any appetite in a "second helping" mood.

IT'S JUST NATURALLY FINER because Duff's has a double advantage—specially

selected quality ingredients, and the skill gained in nearly 20 years' experience.

NO OTHER MIX makes Devil's Food like Duff's. Buy a box today and see why, "It's just *naturally* better."

QUICK—Only 5½ minutes from box to oven
ECONOMICAL—Costs ¼ less than home recipes



SPICE CAKE that's in a class by itself! Pure, imported spices—plus plenty of eggs and milk are already in Duff's fine Spice Cake Mix. All you do is add water and bake.



WHITE CAKE that wins praises every time! Duff's White Cake Mix does all the work—blending milk, eggs, creamy shortening—you just add water and bake two high, fluffy layers!



No "hidden" extra costs
Eggs and milk—everything's in!

Fine custom-milled cake flour, creamy shortening, rich, chocolaty cocoa...
Duff's is the complete mix.

JUST ADD WATER
—that's all!

**This Beautiful Silver
CAKE SERVER**

Yours for only 50¢

and one box top from any of the Duff's cake mixes—Devil's Food, White or Spice.

Heavy silver plate in the stunning "Waverly" pattern, 9½" long. Made and guaranteed by The American Silver Co.

DUFF'S MIXES, Wallingford, Conn.

Please send me _____ of the lovely "Waverly" design cake servers. I enclose 50¢ (in coin) and one box top from a Duff's Cake Mix for each server.

NAME _____

STREET _____

CITY _____

ZONE _____ STATE _____

Offer expires Dec. 31, 1948. Good in U.S.A. only.



MORE WOMEN BAKE WITH DUFF'S THAN WITH ANY OTHER BRAND OF MIXES

HOT ROLL MIX - DEVIL'S FOOD MIX - SPICE CAKE MIX - WHITE CAKE MIX - GINGERBREAD MIX - HOT RUFFIN MIX - MAPLE MIX PRODUCTS BY AMERICAN HOME FOODS



WORTH \$2.25

© 1948

Figure 5: *Just Add Water!* cake mix campaign

Betty Crocker developed the recipe...
Softasilk made it possible!

**NEW! A CHIFFON LAYER CAKE
WITH ONLY 2 EGGS!**

"So large, so light,
so luscious...
IT'S CALLED
Love Light
2-EGG CHIFFON"
says Betty Crocker
of General Mills

"YOU HAVE TO BAKE IT TO BELIEVE IT!" says Betty Crocker. "The silk-spun fineness of SOFTASILK Cake Flour is the key to this exciting, new way to make luxury Chiffon layer cakes with only 2 eggs! SOFTASILK is specially made to carry the extra sugar and shortening needed for this airy, delicate glamour cake... So be sure to use SOFTASILK!"

Betty Crocker's "LoveLight" 2-Egg Chiffon Cake

2 eggs, separated	3 tsp. double-action baking powder
1½ cups sugar	1 tsp. salt
2¼ cups sifted SOFTASILK Cake Flour	½ cup Wesson Oil
1½ tsp. flavoring	1 cup milk

Heat oven to 350° (moderate). Grease generously and dust with flour 2 round layer pans, 8 or 9 x 1½", or one oblong pan, 13 x 9½ x 2".

Now, just 3 easy steps!

- 1. Meringue is the key to this cake**
Beat egg whites until frothy. Gradually beat in ½ cup of the sugar. Continue beating until stiff and glossy enough to stand in peaks.
- 2. Only 2 minutes batter beating**
Sift remaining sugar, SOFTASILK Cake Flour, baking powder, salt into another bowl. Pour in Wesson Oil, half of milk. Beat 1 minute, medium speed on mixer or 150 vigorous strokes by hand. Scrape sides and bottom of bowl constantly. Add remaining milk, egg yolks, flavoring. Beat 1 minute more.
- 3. Simple folding of meringue assures fluffy texture**
Just fold meringue into batter by cutting down gently through batter, across the bottom — up and over — turning bowl often. Pour into prepared pans. Bake layers 25 to 30 minutes; oblong, 35 to 40 minutes.

For high-altitude adjustment over 3000 feet write Betty Crocker, Box 100, Minneapolis, Minn.

SOFTASILK CAKE FLOUR
The world's most modern cake flour
Each package of Softasilk makes up to 6 big cakes!

Figure 6: *Just Add Eggs!* cake mix campaign

The *Add Your Own Eggs!* advertising campaign was effective in the fifties because while it made the woman feel modern, it did not jeopardize her fulfilment of femininity. Adding her own eggs enabled the cook to accept a new method of baking that would still allow her to show motherly love and feminine mastery.

Conclusion

The discourse on new cooking methodology in domestic literature is how women experienced modernity during the 1950s. This brilliant synthesis of the old with the new told women they could have it all. In the modern kitchen, women could participate in food preparation as a traditionally feminine activity and be modern gals at the same time. As progressive as some of the messages were, however, men were rarely shown heating up a can of soup (Parkin 53). In line with the idea that cooking was a gender-specific activity, domestic literature told women that only they possessed the talents to cook the modern way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Exceptionalism: Food Preparation as the Means for Success

Defining the Term

Exceptionalism is an element of the American narrative that has in many ways shaped our foreign policy and influenced our hand in worldly affairs. Despite the fact that it has informed and continues to inform our national identity, the term itself is rather elusive.

Scholars have defined American exceptionalism differently depending on the context; in *American Exceptionalism: An Idea that Made a Nation and Remade the World*, Hilde Eliassen Restad says that definitions of American exceptionalism abound because “authors confuse the objective and subjective definitions of it” (3). Restad argues that in order to define American exceptionalism as a category of American identity, we must treat it as “not as objective truth, but as subjective self-understanding” (3). It is only with this in mind that we can begin understanding Exceptionalism as an element of the American narrative.

American exceptionalism has been a part of our national narrative from the very beginning. It formed initially from idea that the New World was qualitatively different from the Old World, that the colonies were vastly different from Great Britain. Qualitative differentiation is, however, an incomplete definition, for exceptionalism is not only the idea that America is qualitatively *different* from other nations, but also that the United States is *better*; that in a normative hierarchy of nations, the United States rests at the very top (Restad 4). These two ideas are folded into each other and become

indistinguishable: being the best is precisely that which makes America qualitatively different. We see just how powerful the exceptionalism narrative was in the nineteenth century, when manifest destiny, the idea that constituted the seventeenth and eighteenth century American exceptionalism, served as the ideological catalyst for the expansion of the American empire that occurred between 1787 and 1867.

With this idea that the United States sits atop the hierarchy of nations comes a strong sense of mission. American exceptionalism is subsequently also the idea that “the United States has a unique role to play in world history” (Restad 5). This too has to do with the distancing of the New World from the Old. Aboard the *Arabella* in 1630, en route to the New World, John Winthrop preached the same idea using different terms; he called American exceptionalism “a city upon a hill.” He said, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” Believing in American exceptionalism thus entails adopting a leadership mentality that requires first and foremost an awareness of where the United States stands within the context of worldly affairs.

But what exactly is different about America that makes it superior to other nations? *The National Review Online* writes that America is exceptional partly because it is “freer... than any other nation on earth” (Restad 4). In the eighteenth century, colonists sought detachment from Great Britain because they wanted freedom, and after the Revolution was won, the Founding Fathers put in place a democratic government system that was wholly unlike the monarchic government system in Great Britain. Individual freedom began therefore a distinctly American idea. Dan Rather, in *The American Dream*, refers to freedom as “America’s bedrock” and “America’s greatest promise” (1,

2). The virtue of a free and democratic nation was reinforced over the years as the United States continued to dominate as a world power, breaking the cyclical rise-and-fall pattern of great empires in the past.

Historical Context: Washing Machines versus Rockets

It was not until the Cold War that the American empire fell in danger of crumbling. The Soviet Union—with its weapons of mass destruction—threatened to take America’s spot as the dominant world power. The United States was vulnerable; the Soviet Union could defeat us in nuclear warfare, and in doing so, prove to the world once and for all that democracy is a flawed governing system.

This is why American exceptionalism was able to take full effect in the fifties. The mission this time was to prove the superiority of democracy over communism. In the Kitchen Debate, Nixon focused on household appliances as a tactful way to avoid discussing rocket science, a topic that would altogether expose America’s inferiority. Nixon said to Khrushchev “To us, diversity, the right to choose... is the most important thing... We have different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice... would it be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?” In showing how freedom aligns with capitalism, “Nixon insisted that American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of suburban homes” (May 18). The nuclear family—with a stay-at-home mother, a breadwinning father, and the latest household appliances—had become the very essence of American exceptionalism.

This definition of superiority made it so that American exceptionalism during the Cold War was contingent upon the subordination of women to the home. And yet,

women did not feel subordinated; they felt free. Unlike Soviet women—who were commonly depicted as unfeminine—American women did not have to be hard-working, thanks to the modern gadgets that would help them cook and clean and allow them more leisure time (May 19). This became the differentiating factor between Soviet and American women: Soviet women had to work—American women did not.

Anticommunist crusaders were suspicious of women who did not embrace domesticity, the implication being that “self-supporting women were in some way un-American” (19). Staying in the home became a way for women to show how they were qualitatively different and, in compliance with the definition of superiority during the Cold War, better than Soviet women.

This was, however, a rather broad notion of superiority and one that women could only experience tangentially since American women were never able to actually interact with Soviet women. The fear of communism sent women scurrying back to the realm of domesticity, but it was what each woman did in the kitchen that made her feel exceptional in a deeply personal way. By depicting food preparation as creative work, 1950s cookbooks provided ways for women to become exceptional. Creativity offered women a way to qualitatively differentiate themselves from other women, and as a result, food preparation became a way for women to compete with one another for superiority and find freedom in their daily lives.

Exceptionalism in 1950s Cookbooks

The rhetoric of creativity that depicted cooking as an enjoyable activity began in the thirties, when the modern cookbook emerged. Before this, cookbooks had a more authoritative, dry tone (Neuhaus 532). Like instructional manuals, they provided precise

details about how to cook under the assumption that cooking was mandatory for the woman who wished to fulfill her feminine role. Modern cookbooks changed the way women perceived cooking by constructing “culinary household tasks as an enjoyable and creative outlet for middle-class housewives” (Neuhaus 531). Though first conceived in the thirties, I argue that this rhetoric did not take full effect until the fifties, when creativity became first and foremost a way to justify the reliance on convenience foods. To encourage creativity, 1950s cookbooks emphasized “the way in which food could be viewed as a work of art” (Endrijonas 160). Women did not have to feel ashamed for using convenience foods as long as they were doing so creatively.

In the fifties, creative cooking was a way for the housewife to show off her kitchen savvy and differentiate herself from other women; therefore, what a woman served to her family and friends had to be unique. In *Dinner Roles*, Inness argues, “Creativity in cooking represented a way for a woman in the 1950s to set herself apart from other women... Creative cooking was not only an act of enjoyment for the cook; it was also a highly competitive way to demonstrate her domestic talents” (148). According to 1950s cookbook author Ruth Brent in her party-planning cookbook *Time for a Party*, food was a way for women to build reputation (5). This is why she advises the hostess to “serve food [she] can prepare without effort” if it is her first party (13). Brent notes that the food can be simple—but it must be displayed attractively: “When you decide on your menu, picture the way the food will look on your table, on your platters and vegetable dishes, and on your china” (14). Like Brent, many 1950s cookbook authors placed emphasis on food presentation, suggesting that the appearance of the woman’s dinner table was a reflection of her personality (Endrijonas 164). The introduction to *Salads*:

Favorite Recipes from Southern Kitchens has a section on the aesthetic of a proper salad: “Dash your salads generously with color, being sure the color combinations are pleasing” (5). The cook is told later that this is especially important if she is preparing food for a special occasion. Since she will be judged more harshly during these times, she must use her “most elegant silver, china or crystal trays” and “garnish the salad neatly and attractively” (6). Shapiro calls this technique “glamorizing,” an easy way to turn ordinary into gourmet (66). This salad cookbook goes as far as to claim that it is the garnish that makes “one salad a masterpiece and another just a bowl of greens” (12).

Not only did this rhetoric of creativity give women a means of becoming unique and possibly superior, it also turned the kitchen into a wildly liberating place. Women no longer had to follow the recipe step by step; they could use their imagination to completely transform a dish. The preface of the *Ladies Home Journal Cookbook*, published in the sixties, says, “The love of a wife and mother tangibly expresses itself in the care, variety, and *imagination* which she brings to cooking her family’s meals.” (Italics added.) Cookbook authors often encouraged the cook to come up with her own ideas and add her own touch to the recipes, for “even if recipes did not demand decorative ingredients like maraschino cherries and flaked coconut, a cook could always add garnishes of her own” (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 150). The creative cook was exceptional because she was free to make her own decisions.

The rhetoric of creativity in 1950s cookbooks opened the door for exceptionalism to enter the home, but not without some contradiction. Although cookbooks encouraged women to be creative and expand their culinary horizons, implicit in the detailed instructions was this idea that women needed proper guidance and should still follow the

rules. 1950s cookbooks “presented women with a paradox: cooking was viewed as an outlet for creativity; however, this creativity was encouraged in very structured controlled ways” (Endrijonas 159). *Recipes on Parade: Desserts*, for example, tells women to “use [their] imagination when garnishing a dessert,” but then is quick to add: “—but never over garnish. Too much of a good thing is too much. Stick to simple garnishes and not too much of them” (10). Such details as these show that while cookbooks seemed to grant women a lot of freedom in the kitchen, this freedom was still to be controlled and tempered. Furthermore, this freedom was always subordinate to the needs of others. 1950s cookbooks rarely mentioned the woman eating the food she cooked, because it was always implied that the woman cooked not for herself but to please others.

The Casserole Decade

Because of its flexibility, the casserole was easily the most popular dish of the 1950s. For this reason, I will be using the casserole as a case study. The casserole’s popularity in the 1950s can be partially attributed to its being viewed as the most modern dish. Making a casserole involved—and often required—processed and canned foods, glassware that had not existed in previous decades, and of course, an oven. The casserole was a dish that made the housewife feel up-to-date (Inness, *Dinner Roles* 151). It was also touted as being a highly productive dish, reinforcing again this idea that the kitchen had become industrialized and efficient. Dump some canned foods into a pan, stick it in the oven, and voila! Dinner is ready in no time. Inherently large and therefore meant to be shared, one casserole could feed the entire family. Not to mention, the casserole was also an all-in-one package; no need to make a meat dish and then a separate vegetable dish

when the casserole contained both (some even contained fruit). The mother could also easily throw yesterday's leftovers into a casserole to save time *and* avoid being wasteful.

But aside from being characterized as both productive and modern, the casserole was known and praised primarily for its elasticity. When it came to preparing a casserole, the possibilities for creativity were endless. Staples in a casserole usually included some sort of creamy soup, mushrooms, beef and chicken stock, and pastas; but beyond these basic items, pretty much any ingredients were acceptable. *Southern Living* claimed that the casserole “may as well be the most fun” dish to make due to the infinite amount of options (7). We see again how creativity fostered a sense of freedom in the kitchen. Casseroles ranged from “Beef with Peppers and Eggplant,” which sounds somewhat normal, to “Fruited Beef Casserole,” a casserole that combines apricots, raisins, almonds, and ground beef (*McCall's* 14, 15). No combination of ingredients was too odd. Casseroles featured in *Southern Living* include “Tuna-cashew” (67), “Rice and Oyster” (80), “Macaroni and Corned Beef” (99). A few casserole recipes even had an ethnic twist, like the “Mexican Spaghetti” and “Curried Rice” casserole (152, 188). The variety shows how the casserole could be exotic or mild; it could call for all fresh ingredients or all canned ones; it could include expensive foods like oysters or cheap foods like macaroni. It was up to the cook to choose.

Creativity made up for the fact that casseroles were not terribly complicated dishes to prepare. Cookbook authors made it clear that in this modern age, the satisfaction of cooking no longer had much to do with the amount of time and energy the woman put in, but rather the amount of creativity she put in, which would make her really stand out. *McCall's Book of Wonderful One-Dish Meals*, a cookbook with an entire section on

casseroles, encourages the cook to “let [her] imagination run rampant” (7). *McCall’s* promises that by optimizing her creative capabilities, the woman would enable herself to make “casserole masterpieces.” In a later passage, *McCall’s* presents a hypothetical scenario: “The uncertain newlywed, about to entertain her in-laws for the first time, could do no better than to choose a Beef Ragout or a Chicken Potpie. Served in the elegant ambiance of wedding-gift crystal, silver candelabra, and Madeira linen, the savory masterpiece is bound to convince any mother that her son is indeed a lucky man” (3). The casserole was a simple dish, but prepared well—prepared *creatively*—it could impress the right people and elevate the cook’s sense of achieved status.

Community Cookbooks

This “sense of achieved status” is a term I borrow from Anne Bower. She uses this in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* to describe how the recipes in community cookbooks are autobiographical, authors of autobiographies and authors of recipes similarly elevated by the sharing of personal stories. Community cookbooks are necessary for us to look at because they were widely read in the fifties. Like any other cookbook, community cookbooks offered a range of recipes and advice for achieving success in the kitchen, but community cookbooks were unique in that the recipes were submitted by women across the United States and chosen for publication by the cookbook editors.

Community cookbooks publicly recognized women as being unique and superior individuals. *The Southern Living Cookbook*, a community cookbook from the fifties that I will be using as an example, published recipes submitted by women from various cities in Southern United States. This particular community cookbook is comprehensive in nature,

including recipes for appetizers, desserts, hot dishes, cold dishes, small dishes, large dishes, and of course, a surplus of recipes for casseroles. Every entry is from a woman (none from men), most of whom are married. Printed at the bottom of each recipe is the woman's marital status (Mrs./ Ms.) followed by her full name and the city she is from. This emphasis on the details of the woman as an individual is evidence of how 1950s cookbooks used exceptionalism to depict cooking as an activity worthy of public praise and recognition. Everyone would know that the recipe for “Macaroni with Tuna and Corn” was created by Ms. Mary Lou Campbell from Honea Path, South Carolina (*Southern Living* 64). Everyone would learn how to make a Jalapeno-Hamburger Pie from Mrs. Robin Ann Lester from Lewisville, Texas (65). Bower noted that work outside the home was rarely found in the pages of community cookbooks, the emphasis remaining focused on personal matters. Women told their stories through recipes, and suddenly their lives seemed to bear more significance and meaning—it was, after all, *their* names printed in ink, *their* personal histories written on the page for all to read (32). The introduction of *Southern Living* states, “She has tried and tested the recipe in her own kitchen. Now she shares it with you” (3).

In praising a few noteworthy cooks, community cookbooks were also affirming the work of women as a whole. In a time when women did not have much of a public voice, one woman’s name in print was a victory for all women. In this way, community cookbooks did not foster a competitive spirit so much as it fostered a spirit of camaraderie. Each entry in a community cookbook was more than a mere recipe—it was a glimpse into another woman's life, a window into her experiences. Referring to her grandmother, who enjoys community cookbooks, Bower says, “She could ‘read’ her

cookbooks because they carried elements that fired her imagination, drew her in, that caused her to reflect on her behavior (as a cook), and to construct her identity (as a housewife and mother, which indeed was her occupation) in terms that were readily accessible to her and in relation to her peers” (53). The fact that women’s recipes were being printed and bound into books reinforced the idea that women’s domestic lives were important and therefore worthy of documentation.

Conclusion

The rhetoric of creativity in the 1950s transformed cooking into a competitive activity that gave women autonomy in the kitchen, which in turn permitted women to rely on convenience foods without feeling guilty. Community cookbooks recognized women for their hard work in the kitchen by publishing their recipes. This creativity was tempered, however, by the expectation that the housewife put her family members’ dietary preferences above her own. The rhetoric of creativity was further convoluted by the fact that instructions on how to be creative were exact and precise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Betty Crocker: The Ideal American Woman

In the end—and perhaps not surprisingly—Betty Crocker was the only woman in the fifties to fully embody the American narrative, and ironically, she was created by a marketing team comprised of men. While Betty Crocker hit the peak of her fame during the fifties, she was invented in the twenties. During that time, the Washburn Crosby Company that purveyed Gold Medal Flour began receiving letters from women who were desperate for kitchen advice. Samuel Gale, manager of the advertising department, felt uncomfortable signing his name at the bottom of corresponding letters, afraid women wouldn't take the advice seriously because it came from a man. (The letters were not written by Gale at all, but rather by members of the all-female Gold Medal Home Service Staff. Gale just felt bad for signing them.) Gale's dilemma resulted in one of the most persuasive advertising campaigns of all time: the creation of the fictitious Betty Crocker.

In the fifties, Betty Crocker was a role model. Women adored her because she was the perfect American housewife. Betty Crocker spread the message that a woman was happiest when she was at home. Women considered Betty Crocker a friend, mentor, and trustworthy expertise. They listened to the “Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air” to hear Betty’s coaxing voice (played by various women who auditioned for the part) and receive helpful tips for becoming a better cook. By the end of the Second World War, *Fortune* magazine had deemed Betty Crocker the second best-known woman in

America, right behind Eleanor Roosevelt, and to date, *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook*, released in 1950, is one of the best-selling books of all time.

Betty Crocker the person does not exist, but her influence had a real and remarkable effect on how women perceived themselves. Women latched onto Betty Crocker because she empowered them; “she helped women believe that their presence in the kitchen made a difference” (Shapiro 196). Betty Crocker reinforced traditional notions of femininity, depicting cooking as a means of showing affection, but Betty Crocker was also a huge proponent of creativity as a way for women to excel and have fun in the kitchen. In a personal letter from *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook*, commonly known as *Big Red*, Betty Crocker writes, “We hope this book will bring you more fun in cooking and deeper joy in your homemaking” (5). *Big Red* includes “pictorial, step-by-step instructions,” but the recipes still leave room for variance so that women could add their own touch (Marks 136). In the “Useful Kitchen Utensils” section, Betty Crocker quips, “Just as every carpenter must have certain tools for building a house, every woman should have the right tools for the fine art of cooking” (16). The message here is that the professional sphere and the domestic sphere are essentially the same, for both allow the individual to pursue creative opportunities.

Betty Crocker guided women to culinary success by showing them how cooking was exciting, dynamic, and relevant in changing times. She was a champion of modernity, a leader in innovation. Her products gave women an up-to-date, advanced way to prepare food that economized kitchen labor. In *Big Red*, Betty Crocker notes how modern the recipes are, claiming that *Big Red* is “a new and different cook book for a new age!” Her Chiffon cake was named “the 1st really new cake in 100 years!” when it

first arrived on shelves in 1948. Inspired by the popularity of color television, Betty Crocker created the Colorvision Cake, which was advertised as “new kind of cake!” because it had new flavor, new color, new glamour, and it was the new easy way (Marks 172). Productivity and novelty were recurring themes in Betty Crocker’s messages, but of course, novelty was in discourse with traditional notions of femininity. At the bottom of each cake mix box, Betty Crocker reminds the homemaker: “You add the eggs yourself.”

Although Betty Crocker’s goal was to empower women in the kitchen, women often responded to her messages with feelings of inadequacy. Many women wanted to be Betty Crocker, but most fell short. Some women wrote to Betty Crocker confessing their agonies in the kitchen. One particularly distressed woman wrote in a state of despair; “...I get so darn tired of hearing women who have 4 or 5 children, say they still have time to do this and bake that besides getting through with most of their work every day without help... I like to cook and bake but I can't seem to get things done—or get in the mood to bake... I feel in a rut—it's horrible” (Marks 122). This woman finds it difficult to enjoy preparing food, but she is not giving up on finding happiness in the kitchen. She goes on asking Betty Crocker, “If you or someone could please tell me just how these other women do it—what's their routine?” and then frantically adds, “I've got to get through or I'll go crazy, I know” (122). This woman, who signed the letter, *Young Mother*, feels inadequate because while she believes that she ought to enjoy cooking, the reality is that she does not. What many women did not know was that their feelings of inadequacy were all part of the marketing plan; advertisements purposely used scare tactics to sell culinary products (Parkin 56), and these tactics worked because women were afraid of humiliating themselves or letting their families down.

In the fifties, women saw Betty Crocker as the perfect wife and perfect mother, the ideal American woman. Women tried to construct their identities around Betty Crocker's image, but many—like the young mother I quoted above—felt that they had fallen short of expectations and suffered feelings of inferiority as a result. Under the assumption that baking was a display of femininity that came naturally to women, we can see how a young mother might have sound reason to panic when she cannot get in the mood to bake. Dissatisfaction in the kitchen compromises her identity, obfuscating her sense of who she is as both a woman and as an American.

Betty Friedan and the Problem with No Name

If the kitchen is a liberating, productive, and modern place—then what is there to complain about? The woman gets to choose her own ingredients; she is surrounded by modern gadgets that help her get the job done quicker; or, if she would rather do no work at all, she can just pop some TV dinners into the oven. Is she not living the American dream?

The American narrative in 1950s domestic literature contributed to “the problem with no name” that Friedan talks about in *The Feminine Mystique*. If 1950s domestic literature perpetuated the idea that cooking was how women participated in the American narrative, then within this mindset, to feel unsatisfied in the kitchen would be to doubt the validity of the American narrative. But who could do that? Who could question the fibers of our great nation? How could anyone say that productivity, modernity, and exceptionalism were flawed?

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. revealed to the nation how the American narrative remained largely unfulfilled; he argued that the

“magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence... was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Using this as an example, we can see that though the American narrative may not be inherently flawed, there is a pattern with regard to the way in which Americans experience this narrative—or do not experience it, or only experience it marginally. It appears that throughout American history, disenfranchised groups were forced to experience the American narrative within a contained space. Unlike African Americans who were subject to segregation by law, however, women in the fifties were not legally bound to the home. Hence why women had trouble confronting or even recognizing their subjugated status; they saw no tangible barriers holding them back. Women in the fifties became convinced that they were not inferior or superior to men; they were simply different (Friedan 28). They experienced the American narrative at home while men experienced it elsewhere.

This separate but equal set-up is problematic because the American narrative cannot function properly if it is confined to certain parameters. While domestic literature used the American narrative to re-imagine food preparation, at the end of the day, preparing food was still clearly the woman’s job. Since there is no such thing as freedom within confinement, women in the fifties were unable to experience the American narrative truly or fully because it was constricted to the domestic sphere. As Friedan exposed through personal interviews, many women did not enjoy cooking among other domestic duties, but they could not see a way out. In fact, they did not look for a way out; they looked for a way in, for they had been told that domesticity was the only realm within which they could experience what it was to be American.

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