

Liana Epstein
Prof. Stuart
ENGL 121 03

The Great American Writers' Cookbook

Nestled among leather-bound volumes, grayed and worn with age, undoubtedly touched by countless scholars within the mysterious interior of the Yale Beinecke rare book library, *The Great American Writers' Cookbook* sticks out like a sore thumb. Much younger than its worn, faded counterparts, this volume published in 1981 retains its bright blue cover. The illustration shows a small, colorful tomato, onion, green bell pepper, two lemons, salt and pepper shakers, and a bottle of Tabasco sauce flanked by a glaringly large, obtrusive typewriter. The cover reflects how writing is emphasized over cooking within the pages of this “cookbook.”

Edited by Dean Faulkner Wells, the niece of Nobel Prize author William Faulkner and introduced by famous New York Times food critic and journalist Craig Claiborne, this compilation of recipes has a strong literary background. Wells wrote to notable authors of the time – “Great American Writers” – requesting recipes and the resulting contributions are found in this book. Writers “responded with...grace and humor, talent and wit...and with a sense of fun and a light-hearted spirit,” (xiii). Both Wells and Claiborne are personally invested in this collection.

Raised in William Faulkner’s household, Wells gained early exposure to the glories and difficulties surrounding the life of a literary figure. Faulkner, whom Wells called “Pappy,” was a known alcoholic and members of the Faulkner family experienced almost every psychological and social disorder associated with fame.¹ Wells remained in Oxford, Mississippi and began a regional press company that primarily publishes works by southern writers similar to those she grew up with.² Confronted with a plethora of serious issues in her own life and seeing that many writers grappled with similar problems, Wells was likely eager to promote a lighthearted work that could allow these authors to escape the harsh realities they faced on a daily basis.

In his introduction, Claiborne communicates the realization that food can both divide and bring people together, and each recipe has a story. He shares a personal account of a heated fried chicken recipe battle. He finally says, “Some of the finest cooks I know happen to earn their living by sitting down at a typewriter...I think I know why that is. It takes as much sense and sensibility to poach an egg or make a quiche or omelet properly as it does to parse a sentence or alliterate without seeming

¹ Wells says her family experienced “nearly every psychological aberration, narcissism, nymphomania, alcoholism, anorexia, agoraphobia, manic depression, paranoid schizophrenia. There have been thieves, adulterers, sociopaths, killers, racists, liars and folks suffering from panic attacks, and real bad tempers.” (Rehm)

² Wells and her husband founded Yoknapatawpha Press in 1975 that is named for Faulkner’s fictional county from the Chickasaw word meaning “gentle water.” She has supported writers such as Willie Morris, Scott Ely, Barry Hannah, and Donna Tartt (“Yoknapatawpha...”)

sophomoric,” (xvi). This generalization notes the intelligence of these authors, but perhaps this strength is also the one that most prevents this work from being a serious cookbook. If truly devoted to researching and publishing a recipe, each author could undoubtedly do it with ease. However, participating in this cookbook provided an outlet for entertainment away from the usual professional sphere to which they were accustomed.

The fact that the writing implement in the background of the cover dwarfs the vegetables and tangible food ingredients indicates that this book is for entertainment and enjoyment of writing rather than an instruction manual on how to become the next Julia Child. As the title indicates, this is written by Great American *Writers*, not *chefs*, and is therefore intended for fans of literature and foodies alike. But it is no *Joy of Cooking*. Wells communicates in the foreword: “this book...is...a tribute to the men and women who have given me, in their distinguished work...hours of pleasure and edification. My hope is that this collection will not only provide some interesting and useful recipes but that it will be, as the British say, a ‘jolly good read.’” (xiv)

Though this cookbook is primarily a ‘jolly good read,’ it does contain *some* legitimate culinary material. The book is organized into nine sections: Appetizers and Beverages, Soups, Stews, Meats, Poultry and Game, Seafood, Eggs and Pasta (and one pimento cheese), Vegetables, Breads and Cereals, and Desserts. Each section contains an identical sketch of a large typewriter, an onion, tomato, and mushrooms. A typewriter-lettering heading hangs above a humorous or witty quote about food or cooking. For example, the vegetable title page is accompanied by a quote from English-American essayist Wilfrid Sheed: “I honestly can’t cook my hat. My favorite and only recipe is dining out.” (155) These quotations are rarely relevant to the particular category; perhaps further indication that food content is not the focus.

Most cookbooks of the time clearly targeted specific audiences – housewives, average Americans, aspiring gourmets – but this cookbook makes no attempt at political or social commentary by appealing to a particular demographic. As Theophano suggests in *Eat My Words*, it attempts instead to show the influence of cooking and food on the culture and hobbies of these writers’ individual lives – their “explorations of identity,” (228). Additionally, Inness states that “cookbooks are one of the most popular forms of literature in the United States,” and “reading about cooking and food fascinates our society...however...mainstream society disregards cookbooks as culturally unimportant, except for the messages they convey about cooking,” (2). This makes a cookbook an ideal forum for well-known writers to publish because they feel no pressure to convey deep messages and contributing to an

already popular genre will only bring them more fame and recognition. Sometimes others even contribute for them, as a few recipes are founded on pure speculation.

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway died decades before publication, yet Fitzgerald's gin cocktail and Hemingway's mojito recipes lie among the pages. Wells used historical documents, the writers' works, and their biographical information to create believable recipe submissions from famous authors who did not contribute themselves.³ These additions were likely designed to further increase the cookbook's desirability and popularity.

Even the structure of the recipes themselves suggests that the book contains a celebrity-focus. The author's name is the biggest, most prominent feature of each recipe. Underneath is a short text outlining the works and biography of the author, beneath this is the dish title, and finally comes the recipe itself. Each recipe concludes with the author's signature – some showy and some modest. It would seem that the well-known names are the draw to the book itself, and an effective marketing strategy to hook consumers. In this way, the cookbook appears to prioritize endorsing writers to enhance the status of the book. Wells even used her own name to add to the book's appeal. Though well known among southern writers, Wells highlights her status as a member of the Faulkner clan to utilize the name-recognition of a larger audience. Anticipating great popularity, the first pages contain a re-order form to ease the purchase of additional copies of the cookbook containing flashy celebrity signatures.

This book is intended for anyone who will pick it up – those familiar with writers of the time and eager to learn what they have to say about food, a topic rarely addressed by those novelists constantly preoccupied with social and political issues. The authors' intentions and tones vary just as much as the potential readers. Each recipe is written exactly as the author submitted it. It is clear that the intention is rarely to prepare the dish precisely, but rather to convey personality and writing style through the recipe. Most are hard to follow and omit key details until the end. Each author immediately concedes that he or she is no great chef. Norman Mailer's⁴ recipe for Stuffed Mushrooms begins, "since it's adapted almost directly from a recipe in Larousse, I can't lay claim to huge originality," (2) and novelist Shirley Ann Grau begins with, "I don't cook...so I've enclosed a recipe from an old friend." (4). The majority of the recipes are adaptations of already-established dishes. The spin is the

³ One example of the research Wells may have done to arrive at Hemingway's mojito recipe: Hemingway drank frequently at La Bodeguita del Medio in Havana Cuba, where the mojito was invented. Fitzgerald was known to suffer from alcoholism, so a recipe for a cocktail was logical. Making assumptions from his book *Tender is the Night* and the fact that "Rickey" drinks including gin were popular during the Jazz Age in New York, where Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda spent some of the 20's, Fitzgerald's recipe is for gin, though he was dead at the time of publication. (Sedaris)

⁴ Norman Mailer was an American novelist, journalist, essayist, playwright, filmmaker, actor, and political candidate; a Pulitzer-prize winner and contributed to the development of a literary genre called "New Journalism." (Wells 2)

way in which they describe the preparation or perceive the dish itself. As Mailer instructs: “chop the stems, squeeze as much water out of them as you can...” (2) and columnist Shana Alexander Harry instructs, “gather [mushrooms] in the woods (or if you daren’t buy),” (3). While these writers don’t claim to be chefs or foodies, they never hesitate to interject commentary: “...which is the trickiest part of the whole dish,” and crude estimations of ingredients, such as “a good amount of black pepper,” “a lavish use of quarter-pound sticks of sweet butter,” and “a bit of cinnamon,” (2). At the end of his recipe, Mailer states, “I’ve omitted one vital detail,” which is the key step of brushing the mushroom tops with butter before baking. He concludes with a simple, “That’s it.”

It is evident that some are eager to participate but admit that cooking is not their area of expertise. Others simply dismiss the whole concept of cooking, with recipes such as Larry King’s Party Boy’s Midnight Snack Puree, which instructs,

“Take anything capable of being ground up in a mixer and grind it up. Do not poke fingers into mixer. Stand at a respectable distance and chunk things in it. Eat hot or cold depending on how much you have drunk. Anything over two quarts, you should not mess with fire,” (34).

Another example of this is Michael J. Arlen’s⁵ “Salad Bar Solzhenitsyn” in which he literally describes how to make a *physical* salad bar out of pinewood and using a hammer (188). The most common approach to the recipe submission appears to be a combination of humor and a recipe. For example, Roy Blount, Jr.⁶ includes a recipe for Garlic Grits and a poem about grits and how everyone loves them (174-175).

However, there are a few exceptions. Anthony Lewis⁷ submitted a recipe for carrot bread that could be found in any cookbook. His recipe contains a clear list of ingredients with specific amounts and only relevant comments such as, “filling 2/3 full,” “the only hard part is grating the carrots, which is done by hand and just takes time,” (194). Some writers include historical background on recipes or draw attention to their elite backgrounds and exposure to fancy restaurants. William Humphrey’s⁸ recipe of “Fagioli All’Uccelletto” (163) is not a recipe at all, but instead a saga of his experience at the Florentine restaurant *Trattoria del Carmine*. His point is to emphasize his personal connection to the owner of such an establishment and thereby distinguish himself. The food is secondary.

⁵ Arlen is an Armenian-American writer and former New Yorker TV critic (Wells 188)

⁶ Blount is an American writer, best known as a humorist; he is also a reporter and speaker, raised in Indiana (Wells 174)

⁷ Lewis is a journalist, often writing NYT op-eds and the New York Review of Books; he also won the Pulitzer-prize winner for reporting on McCarthyism in 1955 (Wells 194)

⁸ Humphrey is a novelist who wrote most frequently about small-town life in rural Texas. He also taught at Bard College, his writings were often compared to those of Faulkner and Mark Twain (Wells 163).

Each section ends with a humorous, ridiculous recipe such as Ken Follett's⁹ "Caviar for Breakfast" that begins: "I'm not American and I don't cook, but here is my favorite meal," (130). Though silliness and satire pervade this cookbook, there are also gentle reminders that the authors *are* writers. Word choice is important; one sees the use of words that do not commonly frequent cookbooks. In Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's,¹⁰ "Modest late-night snack based loosely on English trifle," for example, he uses a soup bowl, pours sherry, "trowels" ice cream onto a cake, and then "impregnates" ice cream with meat of walnuts. (215)

Unlike most cookbooks, which have a consistent theme, intended message or audience, this compilation contains wide variation. Since there are multiple authors, it is at their individual discretion to decide what they wish to convey to the reader. The book most resembles a community cookbook since its recipes come from multiple sources of similar backgrounds. However, the only real commonality among the authors is their titles as "writers." But even this tie is a loose one, for Larry King is not known as a writer, and the occupations range from journalism to poetry to television comedy. Perhaps this provided a unique opportunity for these 175 "Great American Writers" such as John Aldridge, Maya Angelou, Ray Bradbury, Larry King, Willie Morris, and others, to step away from their customary professions and write about something fun.

This book was published in 1981. The late 70s were politically tumultuous as scientific experimentation increased and the American public became wary of new technology following disasters such as the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident. By 1981, the nuclear arms race had intensified to a peak tension where Mutually Assured Destruction by the US and Soviet Union was generally accepted. These years also witnessed John Lennon's assassination, the eruption of Mount St. Helens, and the tragedy of the space shuttle Columbia. The Great American Writers certainly had enough *serious* material to work with. This cookbook provided humor to diffuse some of the apprehension many Americans were likely feeling in response to these historical events.

As far as food was concerned, the transition to the 80s introduced the idea of cooking on television. Julia Child became a pioneer with the 1963 debut of *The French Chef*, but by the 1980s, her shows including *Julia Child & Company*, *Julia Child & More Company* and *Dinner at Julia's* had become commonplace (Green). The television provided a new conduit for many things, and communicating cooking was no different. By placing the emphasis on the content contributed by

⁹ Follett is a thriller author; many of his works reached number 1 ranking on the NYT best-seller list (Wells 130).

¹⁰ Lehmann-Haupt is an American journalist, critic, and novelist; former NYT Daily Book Reviewer; he was also politically active and joined Norman Mailer and other writers in signing the "Violence in Oakland" essay condemning police violence against Black Panther Party members in 1968 (Wells 215).

famous *writers*, this book could be viewed as a way to preserve the beauty of a written cookbook and the involvement of literary figures in a culture about to experience a media transition. The most popular edition of one of the most referenced American cookbooks, *The Joy of Cooking*, was published in 1975, and soon became a staple in many American homes. Along with the new technology, weapons, and war on the mind of many Americans, food was a frequent issue of contemplation for change. In 1981, Carol Krause did a series on “foods of the future” speculating what meals would be like in 2000. By the 1980s, the microwave became common in most households and the death of the traditional “housewife” role as women entered the workplace began the idea of America as a “fast-food nation.” (“Retro...Cooking...”) Food was being addressed in enough avenues to allow this book to fill a different role.

American publisher Katharine Graham concludes the book with the words, “Alas, I’m not a writer, not great, only an American, I guess – and most of all, not a cook,” (Wells). This quote is consistent with the theme of the compilation. In a time of political angst surrounding nuclear warfare, energy crises and gas shortages, and the “Reagan Revolution,” and in careers which focused on serious issues and commentary of a social nature, the chance to submit a recipe and treat it as seriously or humorously as one wished, was a temptation even few *Great American Writers* could resist.

Works Cited

Bruni, Frank. "Contentment's Elusive Recipe." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 10 Apr. 2012. Web. 23 Oct. 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/10/opinion/bruni-the-missing-ingredients-in-claibornes-life.html?_r=0>.

"The Food Timeline: Popular American Decade Foods, Menus, Products & Party Planning tips." *The Food Timeline: Popular American Decade Foods, Menus, Products & Party*

- Planning tips*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2012.
<<http://www.foodtimeline.org/fooddecades.html>>.
- Green, Rayna. "Julia Child's Kitchen: A History." *Julia Child's Kitchen*. Smithsonian, 2002. Web. 29 Oct. 2012. <<http://amhistory.si.edu/juliachild/default.asp>>.
- Inness, Sherrie A. *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Polis, Carey. "Craig Claiborne Biography, 'The Man Who Changed the Way We Eat,' Tells Story Of Legendary Restaurant Critic." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 07 May 2012. Web. 23 Oct. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/07/craig-claiborne_n_1496186.html>.
- Rehm, Diane. "Dean Faulkner Wells: 'Every Day by the Sun'" *The Diane Rehm Show*. 30 Mar. 2011. National Public Radio, 30 Mar. 2011. Web. 7 Nov. 2012.
<<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-03-30/dean-faulkner-wells-every-day-sun/transcript>>. Transcript.
- "Retro Housewife: Cooking and Recipes." *Retro Housewife 1980s Cooking and Recipes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.retro-housewife.com/1980-cooking-and-recipes.html>>.
- "Retro Housewife: Life in the 1980s." *Retrospective*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2012.
<<http://www.retro-housewife.com/life-in-the-1980s.html>>.
- Sedaris, Amy. "Great American Writers and Their Cocktails." *Morning Edition*. National Public Radio. 15 Dec. 2006. NPR Online, 16 Dec. 2006. Web. 7 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.npr.org/2006/12/15/6624971/great-american-writers-and-their-cocktails>>.
- Theophano, Janet. *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002. Print.
- Wells, Dean Faulkner., and Craig Claiborne, eds. *The Great American Writers' Cookbook*. Oxford, MS: Yoknapatawpha, 1981. Print.
- "Yoknapatawpha Press History." Yoknapatawpha Press, n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.yoknapatawphapress.com/>>.