IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINS OF AN AMERICAN CUISINE

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Reviewing
JANE TENNANT, OUR FOUNDING FOODS: CLASSICS FROM THE FIRST CENTURY OF AMERICAN CELEBRITY COOKBOOKS
(Willow Creek Press 2008)

THE ENGLISH SETTLERS who arrived on the shores of Massachusetts in 1615 soon confronted a dilemma. Strapped for food, they found a grain that grew easily in the New England soil, required little labor, and produced a yield several times greater than the wheat with which they were familiar. But one of their old world culinary customs was never to eat "heathan graine," and this new grain was served to pigs back home. To the colonists it was the equivalent of dog food.[1]

Caught between tradition and opportunity, the settlers' abandoned custom, and corn soon became a staple of their diet. The United States was still 174 years from its birth, but the colonists had just stumbled upon the defining characteristic of American cuisine: adaptation.

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[1] James E. McWilliams, "A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America," at 8-9 (Columbia University Press 2005).

Much has been written about the recent culinary revolution, but we know far less about the tastes and dining habits of those early Americans. It therefore is refreshing to read Jane Tennant's *Our Founding Foods: Classics From the First Century of American Celebrity Cookbooks*, an interesting, though ultimately unsatisfying book that collects recipes from cookbook writers beginning in 1615.

Tennant's first chapter suggests that the colonists had not yet defined an American cuisine by the end of that first century. Five of the seven cookbooks in that chapter were written in Great Britain. The sixth, which was not published until the 1980s (that is not a typo), was more a keepsake than a cookbook. Martha Washington's, "The Booke of Cookery," was a collection of recipes she gathered and handed down to her family.

The first truly American cookbook – Amelia Simmons' "American Cookery" – was not published until 1796. Tennant does not address why it took almost 200 years for the Colonists to produce an indigenous cookbook, but James McWilliams notes in his masterly "A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America," that the economic and cultural conditions necessary to create an indigenous cuisine were absent until the middle of the 18th century. Most 17th century families lacked even the most basic culinary items. There were no dining table and chairs, forks, spoons, or individual cups. There were no shops at which to buy ingredients, and the available herbs and spices for even the wealthiest colonists were extraordinarily limited.[2]

An audience for cookbooks did not emerge until the mid-18th century, when rising incomes and growing inter-colony and international trade spawned a new uniformity in colonial kitchens. By 1750, the typical colonial kitchen was stocked with the day's common kitchen gadgets and foods from other regions. A colonist in Delaware, for example, could buy "bread and beer from Philadelphia, beef from New England, okra and rice from Carolina, and ham from Virginia."[3] For the first time a cookbook writer could be con-

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[2] Id. at 3, 6.

[3] Id. at 14-15.

fident that consumers across the colonies had the materials to make the same recipe.

Amelia Simmons had the good fortune to put pen to paper amidst this new uniformity. We have no sales figures, but Tennant characterizes the appeal of "American Cookery" as "huge."[4] Its popularity forced publishers to "rush[] to press with American appendix attached to cookbooks."[5] Cookbooks remained a niche market, however, and it was not until 1824 that Mary Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's cousin, wrote the second American cookbook, "The Virginia Housewife."

The definitive break from European cookbooks occurred, appropriately, in the Jacksonian era. Tennant quotes Eliza Leslie, who published cookbooks in 1828 and 1837, declaring European cookbooks impractical for Americans:

> There is frequently much difficulty in following directions in English and French cookery books, not only from utter want of explicitness, but from the difference in the fuel, fire-places, and cooking utensils . . . . [M]any of the European recipes are so complicated and laborious, that our female cooks are afraid to undertake the arduous task of making anything from them.[6]

"Arduous" does not begin to describe the drudgery that was common in the American kitchen:

> The American housewife risked singed eyebrows, burned fingers, and a permanent backache as she hung a heavy pot on a crane suspended over the flames, or turned a roast on a spit, or emptied coals into a brazier so that she could simmer a sauce. The wonder was not that she turned out an edible meal, but the variety and elegance of many dishes prepared under such circumstances.[7]

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[4] Our Founding Foods at 28.

[5] Id.

[6] Id. at 57.

[7] Id. at 28.

If you have ever had the "pleasure" of cooking a meal in an 18th century kitchen, you know that the roaring fire was oppressively hot, dangerously so in the stifling summer heat.[8] The pots were cast iron, and when filled with liquid could easily weigh ten to fifteen pounds. Without any of the conveniences we take for granted, the women – free and slave – who labored to put meals on the table were subjected to physical demands that few of us ever experience.

Despite many interesting insights, "Our Founding Foods" is a flawed book. The first problem arises from the title itself. The book is subtitled "Classics From the First Century of American Celebrity Cookbooks," but it contains recipes from cookbooks published over three centuries – from 1615 to 1914.

Tennant also substitutes bygone ingredients for modern alternatives, as she must, but fails to flag the substitutions or identify the original ingredients. The reader thus comes upon the occasional recipe entry that seems downright odd, such as the chipotle peppers in adobo sauce in a recipe for Old Dominion Glazed Ham.[9]

This suggests a larger issue in "Our Founding Foods": the lack of context. The book presents a series of recipes spanning 300 years from different colonies, states, and cultures without telling the stories behind those recipes. The result is a lost opportunity to engage readers who came to the book presumably not to get a dinner recipe, but to learn more about our culinary history.

"Our Founding Foods" lacks much of the drama and intrigue that make that history so compelling. Take Amelia Simmons. She did not merely write a popular cookbook, she was the first person in the history of the country to identify an indigenous American cuisine. And, as far as we know, she came out of nowhere to do it and fell back into obscurity just as quickly. Who was this extraordinary woman and what drove her to take on such an ambitious task?

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[8] On a bitterly cold January day long ago, my classmates and I cooked a meal in a Colonial Williamsburg kitchen that once was manned by slaves. The heat source was a roaring fire in an oversized fireplace. By mid-morning the temperature in the room was so high that we could not stand to be in the kitchen for more than ten minutes.

[9] Our Founding Foods at 59.

Tennant notes that Amelia Simmons identified herself as "An American Orphan," but does not probe the biographical fragments that suggest Simmons may have been uniquely suited to ignite a culinary revolution. As an orphan she was probably untethered to the English tradition that stunted the growth of an indigenous cuisine. A "domestic" who, she said, was "reduced to the necessity" of working in others' homes, she probably spent years working in the kitchens of wealthy colonists and was exposed to recipes and ingredients unavailable and unknown to most Americans. She may also have seen a variety of cooking styles and techniques if, as seems possible, she traveled through some of the northern colonies. Historians long surmised that Simmons was a New Englander because her book was published in Hartford, Connecticut, but she may have started in New York. Culinary historian Karen Hess recently posited that Simmons hailed from the Hudson River Valley. Many of the book's later editions were published in the Valley, and her use of a number of Dutch words suggests familiarity with the settlements there.

With this uncommon experience, all Simmons needed was a bit of education and the ambition to do something new. Speculating on the source of that ambition raises a remarkably tantalizing possibility. Why would a "domestic" claim to be an orphan and move from New York to New England? It was common for colonists and early Americans hiding their family history to claim to be orphans, particularly those who wanted to appear to be something they were not. Perhaps Simmons was one of those Americans. Perhaps she was a light-skinned former slave passing as white or an indentured servant who left New York, where slavery was not abolished until 1799, for the sanctuary of the New England states, all of which abolished or prescribed the gradual abolition of slavery by 1784.[10]

Tennant also does not explore the fascinating stories behind the recipes in "Our Founding Foods." One such recipe is "Carolina Loaf Rice Bread," which Tennant takes from a cookbook published in

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[10] The information on the slavery laws comes from Michael E. Groth, "The African American Struggle Against Slavery in the Mid-Hudson Valley 1785-1827," The Hudson River Valley Institute, www.hudsonrivervalley.org/library/struggle.html (accessed on Aug. 30, 2011).

1845.[11] Rice was not the preferred crop of the planters who arrived from Barbados in the late 17th century seeking land for their expanding sugar plantations. When sugar proved difficult to grow in the lowland swamps, the planters' slaves suggested a crop that flourished in the swamps of their West African homeland – rice. The slaves taught their owners how to plant, grow, and harvest the rice that soon became a staple crop in South Carolina.[12] And what did the slaves get for their innovation? Another sixty years of slavery.

Tennant's book is a useful step forward in our search for the origins of American cuisine, but we need a more robust telling of the early years in our culinary history. McWilliams' book is remarkably interesting, but it is a scholarly effort that is unlikely ever to reach the millions of Americans who love to prepare and eat good food.

We need a popular telling of this history. We need an account of this compelling story of experiment, innovation, and adaptation that is both more robust *and* accessible. Historical ignorance is too prevalent among the millions of Americans who have come to obsess about food and wine. It is time to remedy that problem, to prove to those who regard the farm-to-table movement as a recent phenomenon that farm-to-table dining was never more immediate than in 1615, when everything on the table came from the family farm.

[11] Our Founding Foods at 191.

[12] McWilliams at 51-52.