



Megan J. Elias. *Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture*.
Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald. *United Tastes: The Making of
the First American Cookbook*.

Megan J. Elias. *Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 296p. ISBN 9780812249170. US\$ 34.95.

Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald. *United Tastes: The Making of the First American Cookbook*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017. 351p., ill. ISBN 9781625343222. US\$ 32.95.

Cookbooks have always been vital sources for food studies scholars, because they presumably document what foods people have eaten and how they have prepared them. In these two engrossing studies, researchers move beyond recipes to investigate how cookbooks function as crucial national texts in the United States and as fruitful topics of print culture research.

As Elias contends in her introduction, cookbooks are texts that are both “reflective and formative of their own culture” (3). Thus, if we are what we eat, cookbooks make us American. However, *Food on the Page* is not a simple analysis of ingredients and instructions: Elias states that she is not interested in what Americans ate but rather how cookbooks have shaped readers’ understandings of what American food is from the eighteenth century to the present. Her ambitious goal, however, means that she has bitten off more than she can chew.

Elias structures her study around ideas, not dishes or decades, and since she does not



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provide a bibliographic essay or appendix of the titles she consulted in her research, it is difficult to accept this work as the comprehensive history of American cookbooks Elias intimates that it is (5). Furthermore, *Food on the Page* is akin to an overcrowded potluck table rather than a delectable meal of carefully planned courses, because Elias covers numerous not necessarily related topics in each chapter. For instance, in “The Best-Fed People in the World: American Cookbooks in the Nineteenth Century,” Elias discusses antebellum cookbooks, community cookbooks, regional cookbooks, and cookbooks composed by “writers in the progressive style” (35). The second chapter discusses cookbooks devoted to war rationing, corporate cookbooks (those written by refrigerator, stove, and appliance manufacturers), and weight-loss cookbooks. Elias’ extensive research is laudable, but in choosing to put so many topics on the table, the most tantalizing parts of her study – the rise in Southern cookbooks after the Civil War and the Frigidaire Company’s deft deployment of “coolness” (63) as both a human and sensory descriptor as a concept in its cookbook, for examples – lose their flavor. It is also curious that the bulk of the chapter that print culture scholars will find most useful – “Gourmet is a Boy” – focuses primarily on food magazines and not cookbooks, and that another section of the study treats food memoirs, a topic tangentially related to the book’s title and stated purpose. While print culture scholars interested in cookbooks will find much to chew on in *Food on the Page*, they should read the book with a grain of salt, knowing that Elias’ study is eclectic rather than authoritative.

Elias asserts that Amelia Simmons’ *American Cookery* is considered the first American cookbook, because it includes “recipes for originally American foodstuffs such as corn and turkey” (9). Other food studies scholars have concurred, noting that the 1796 edition of the cookbook includes recipes for several pumpkin dishes, including pie, and also features pearl ash rather than yeast as a leavener. In their meticulously researched study of *American Cookery*, Keith Stavelly and Kathleen Fitzgerald maintain that such patriotic celebrations of the cookbook dismiss its historical importance as a published text. Their research contextualizes the cookbook in ways readers will find exemplary: investigating the printers who first brought out the book; comparing the 1796 Hartford edition to the 1808 Albany edition; mapping the dates of the book’s advertisements; exploring the origins of the plagiarized recipes; examining the significance of the author’s professed identity as an orphan; and situating it in the literary, social, ecological, political, and environments of early



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Connecticut. For the authors of *United Tastes*, the recipes in *American Cookery* are perhaps the least interesting aspect of it, though they propose a convincing answer to a question that has perturbed many food studies scholars: why the arrangement of the recipes in the book is so haphazard. The authors explain that this organization distinguishes *American Cookery* from its English predecessors: it was a work that “was part of an endeavor to integrate all grades of life, from plebeian to patrician, in middling well-being and harmony” in a nation where “fancy food was being simplified and plain food enhanced” (200).

Subsequently, the authors incorporate genealogies of printers’ families, peddlers’ inventories, colonial portraiture conventions, poetry by the Connecticut Wits, agricultural reports, literacy statistics, and Federalist political philosophies into an argument about *American Cookery* that is not about food at all. Rather, they claim that the book was “part of an effort by the prominent citizens of Connecticut to win cultural leadership of the new nation known as the United States” (263). Such a conclusion seems anticlimactic after digesting the monumental research the authors have invested in the book; to be sure, Stavely’s and Fitzgerald’s conclusion may seem reductively regional, as may the many contextual tangents upon which the authors embark. Despite its appetizing title (“tastes” is a deliberate anagram of “states”), the book will not satisfy the appetites of all readers. Those not interested in arcane details about Connecticut’s early state history or its famous personages (aside from Noah Webster and Timothy Dwight) may find the many contextual tangents on which the authors embark quite tedious to read. As well, when Stavely and Fitzgerald synthesize their archival discoveries to surmise who Amelia Simmons actually was and how *American Cookery* came to be written, they admit that readers may find their hypothesis “conjectural” (243). But there can be no doubt that this book will inspire more print culture projects on *American Cookery*, as the content in the chapters, the expertly composed notes, and the thorough appendices on “The Sources of *American Cookery*,” “Recipes from Plain to Fancy,” and “Editions, Printings, and Major Plagiarisms” will inspire its audiences to read – or re-read – the first American cookbook, “the story of a cook’s determination to buck the odds and become an author” (268) as well as a repository for pumpkin, corn, and turkey recipes. As in Elias’ *Food on the Page*, the overall efficacy of *United Tastes* is compromised by the surfeit of ingredients in each chapter, but each book advances the fields of both food and print culture studies.



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