



CULINARY TYPES

Stories about Food and Food Enthusiasts
by T.W. Barritt

American Children's Cookbooks of the 50s and 60s

Textbooks of Technique or Consumerism?

Ask the question, and you are likely to get a nostalgic smile and an immediate recollection of a favorite recipe. Most home cooks fondly recall, “*My first cookbook,*” and if they grew up in the 50s or 60s, it was probably a cookbook written especially for children.

Those early texts spawned a huge publishing segment with continued growth to this day. While few specific sales numbers exist from the period, the 1950s were the first time that children’s cookbooks were mass-marketed by large publishing organizations. The supermarket industry also experienced extraordinary growth and emerged as the primary source of food products for the American family, and convenience food products were beginning to dominate American tables. Pre-packaged breads, cereals and snack products were marketed specifically with children in mind. Television was emerging as a powerful tool to target children and influence buying patterns and marketers were just starting to recognize the potential opportunity.

Teaching a child to cook can result in valuable kitchen skills, increased family time and healthier eating habits. Professional culinary texts offer thousands of cooking techniques, but basic methods common to all include kitchen safety, knife skills, preparation of vegetables, eggs, stocks, sauces, doughs and batters, as well as methods for cooking meat, fish and poultry. Culinary educator Anne Willan says successful mastery of basic techniques is critical to proper execution of a recipe and the ability to create recipes of one's own.

Did children's texts of this era educate, or were they a product of the food industry marketing boom that was underway? Many children's texts are filled with convenience foods and short cuts of the period, often requiring no technique beyond stirring and heating of pre-packaged products. In 1953, the adult-oriented *Better Homes and Garden's New Cookbook* promised, "With this new Cook Book as your guide, you'll be a wonderful cook!" Two years later, *The Better Homes and Gardens Junior Cook Book* made no such promise, but unabashedly states that "Cooking is great fun." Did these mass-marketed children's cookbooks deliver on the perceived promise of teaching actual kitchen skills or did they instead teach consumerism?

By the time the *Junior Cook Book* arrived on shelves, the children's cookbook genre was hardly new. As early as 1870, cookbooks were written for children, often in storybook format with whimsical illustrations and plots centered on mealtime or party preparation. *Kitchen Fun: A Cook Book for Children* published in 1932 by Louisa Price Bell had the appearance of a storybook, but offered recipes with step-by-step directions and authentic culinary techniques that children could master. The 24 recipes easily group into technique categories of kitchen safety, doughs and batters, sauces, egg preparation, vegetable preparation and there is a recipe for Baked Salmon Loaf that resembles *fish mousseline*. In an accurate reflection of the grocery basket of the day, only two pre-package products – animal crackers and raspberry jello – are included in the entire collection of recipes.

As children's cookbooks found their niche, food manufacturers were extending the reach of traditional print advertising campaigns, offering advertising cookbooks to a growing national

audience. These mass-produced booklets were often available for free and contained kitchen advice and recipes using brand-named products, strengthening the relationship between manufacturers and consumers. Savvy marketers quickly targeted children as a way to reach parents through these types of booklets and leveraged three clear techniques to engage potential young cooks – an expert kitchen advisor, peer-group endorsements and appealing cartoon illustrations.

In 1950, the Westinghouse Electric Corporation published *Sugar An' Spice and All Things Nice* by Julia Kiene, director of the Westinghouse Home Economics Institute. The booklet resembled an elementary school reader with eye-catching black-and-red illustrations and featured kitchen safety tips and cooking techniques from Kiene along with detailed instructions for preheating a Westinghouse Range. Dedicated to “*all Little Ladies, and Young Gentlemen, who would like to learn more about the Art of Fine Cooking,*” it included solid recipes for muffins, breads, cookies, puddings and layer cakes all made from scratch. The introduction advised readers to assemble all ingredients and tools prior to cooking, similar to the French technique “*mis en place*” of organizing all ingredients before preparing a recipe. Most recipes called for fresh ingredients, but in a hint of trends to come, a bag of crushed potato chips garnished a tuna casserole and a pork chop casserole recipe required a can of mushroom soup.

The Carnation Company released *Fun to Cook Book* in 1955, written from the perspective of a young girl. “Margie Blake” was identified as the daughter of the company’s home economist Mary Blake who was the credited author of many Carnation recipe books. Nearly all the two-dozen recipes require Carnation Evaporated Milk. The storyline of Margie’s cooking adventures incorporated safety tips, advice for handling kitchen equipment and a primer on “Kitchen Manners.” Margie is the surrogate for her mother’s expert advice, but also provides a peer endorsement. The Carnation Company archive confirms that Mary Blake was actually a fictional character, as was Margie, which was a typical tactic for food marketers of that period. A young reader would certainly learn to prepare meatloaf, eggs, pie crust, and fancy cuts of vegetables in a

manner that actually resembles French carving techniques, but the majority of recipes required nothing more than rudimentary skills of measuring, stirring, heating, shaking and whipping.

In time, children's cookbooks show a convergence of the genres of advertising cookbooks and instructional texts. The *Better Homes and Gardens Junior Cookbook* and the *Betty Crocker Boys and Girls Cookbook* series are among the most comprehensive, widely-distributed and best known. Meredith Publishing's release of *Better Homes and Gardens Junior Cookbook* in 1955 shows a magazine publisher, or source of household advice, seeking to capture the hearts and minds of a young demographic that would grow up and purchase its monthly periodicals. The *Junior Cookbook* is indeed a starter version of the adult model with the same red gingham cover and three-ring binder format, and instruction on weights and measures, cooking terms and safety tips. Color food photography is prominent, but still mixed with child-friendly illustrations. Beyond that, the text is completely scaled for the skills of a young beginner. While not promoting specific products, there is a clear emphasis on convenience cooking. Nearly 50 percent of the recipes call for the combining, mixing or heating of canned goods or pre-packaged products. There are several recipes using legitimate technique, such as the directions for "Magic White Sauce Suppers" that closely resembles Bechamel Sauce, and directions for carving vegetables for a fancy relish tray. But, overall a young chef might get the impression that cooking is a heat-and-serve proposition. Meredith Publishing clearly knew which gender was likely to purchase household magazines. While the inclusive subtitle identifies the cookbook "*for the Hostess & Host of tomorrow*," the introduction asks the reader, "*Have on a pretty apron, and is your hair looking mighty smooth?*" The "host of tomorrow" is depicted in only one illustration actually engaged in the act of cooking.

General Mills 1957 *Betty Crocker Boys and Girls Cookbook* offered a hybrid format of instruction and advertising, also blending expert advice – albeit a fictional expert – and peer endorsement. A General Mills company publication said the cookbook was created in response to letters from mothers asking Betty Crocker for guidance on teaching children to cook.

Designed for 8-to-12 year olds, General Mills recruited eight girls and four boys to test the recipes for the book and select their favorites. Illustrator and mother-of-four Gloria Kamen provided charming sketches and detailed instructional diagrams. Portrait illustrations of the young home testers – with first names only – appeared in the introduction and brief testimonials were woven throughout. Among the 245 recipes and menu ideas are authentic techniques for baking, vegetable preparation and sautéing of meats. Readers could learn about handling a wide variety of fresh ingredients, as well as use of General Mills products like Bisquick and Gold Medal Flour, and creative food decoration and presentation techniques are explored. There is even a recipe for the classic dish *Potatoes Anna*. However – with a nod to convenience and potential sales – the editors also included a series of sidebar product promotions called “Whiz Recipes” which explained that the same from-scratch recipe could be made faster with a Betty Crocker mix. In the end, the text was the right mix of technique and marketing for the Betty Crocker brand. The cookbook sold over one million copies.

General Mills issued the *Betty Crocker New Boys and Girls Cookbook* in 1965. The updated version contained over 275 original and new recipes and the group of junior testers increased to 25 children, including the original team. This time, Whiz Recipes were eliminated and the presence of brand name products was minimized, to the point where recipes actually read, “*1 package of our yellow cake mix.*” Project recipes – particularly those in the cakes chapter – are far more elaborate, and there are detailed directions to stage a dinner for four. With a legion of young followers established, Betty Crocker transcended the promotional characteristics of advertising cookbooks and delivered a resource-filled and reliable instructional text.

Children’s cookbooks have shown consistent growth for the publishing industry since 2001 and current texts continue to leverage the characteristics of the genre and marketing techniques that emerged in the 1950s. Food Network personalities Rachael Ray and Sandra Lee offer cookbooks – with both women portrayed as cartoon characters – that attract a young audience to their celebrity brands and programming. Lee, who advocates “semi-homemade

cooking” and has served as a spokesperson for Campbell’s, promises “nothing made from scratch,” in her children’s edition. Other authors embrace proven culinary techniques and healthy-eating trends while building their brands. IACP Cookbook Award Winner and chef Rozanne Gold extended her popular *Recipes 1-2-3* franchise to children in 2006, recruiting a team of young sous-chefs to test and endorse a book of simple recipes that use creative imagery, appealing illustrations and fresh ingredients.

T.W. Barritt is a culinary enthusiast and writer who first developed a love of food when his parents presented him and his three brothers with a copy of *Betty Crocker's New Boys and Girls Cook Book* in the mid-1960s. Since then, Barritt has studied techniques of French cooking, pastry, classic European Breads and the craft of food writing at the French Culinary Institute in New York City and taken classes at Apicius, the Culinary Institute of Florence, and La Varenne at Chateau du Fey in Burgundy, France.

***Culinary Types: Stories about Food and Food Enthusiasts* is a personal writing project created and owned by T.W. Barritt. Its purpose is to explore and savor the many facets of food and the extraordinary people who grow, prepare, study, celebrate and eat food.**

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