

Introduction

My mother was a terrible cook, and my earliest memories of food center around her indescribable home-cooked meals during the 1950s and early 1960s. She was a popular public school music teacher and a talented pianist, but she could not cook. She baked roasts in a hot oven until they resembled shoe leather; she boiled broccoli for nearly an hour.

Both my parents worked, which did not conform to the idealized nuclear family of the 1950s; however, my mother was part of the middle-class audience targeted by the expanding advertising industry. She embraced processed foods with a vengeance: birthday cakes originated with a Betty Crocker or Duncan Hines box mix and Cheez Whiz on Ritz Crackers snacks. She served SPAM® in every conceivable manner. Tuna noodle casserole, based on a foundation of a can of tuna and a can of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup, was on the family menu at least once a week. When she arrived home later than expected, we chose Swanson frozen dinners from the freezer. My mother's Jell-O creations were not the colorfully illustrated towering results found in cookbooks and magazines. Her designs utilized an excess of shredded carrot, miniature marshmallows, and canned pineapple, all crammed within the confines of bilious green lime gelatin. Of course, as was the practice, my mother topped this with a dollop of mayonnaise and a maraschino cherry.

Beliefs and notions about food are tangled into a perplexing web of social issues and politics, both domestic and global. During the 1950s, the increasing sophistication of the advertising industry through print, radio, and television played a fundamental role in exploiting food to reaffirm social and political ideologies and promote traditional, prewar gender roles. Food also is profoundly political, often found at the center of government policies. Supplying it can be a supportive reward for allies

and withholding it can be a crippling hindrance to enemies. This volume touches on examples of the United States using food in its domestic and foreign policy. As we look back at government-sponsored international programs through the lens of more than seventy years, one can use these initiatives to demonstrate that the US was a noble, caring nation. However, these programs also represented pragmatic, political decisions to assure the US that hungry nations would not look to the Soviet Union for assistance. Industry wanted new markets. US domestic policy made it clear that postwar rationing and agricultural programs also would support struggling European countries and prevent them from falling into the sphere of communism.

Following the years of austerity during World War II, most Americans were once again enjoying an abundance of food by the beginning of the Cold War. The nation recovered its economic health and began to prosper with new growth in agriculture and industry. Food in the 1950s was part of a growing commercial, industrial complex, which in turn heavily influenced what we ate, dictated a delivery system, and ultimately determined how food tasted, looked, and smelled.

The transference of industrial manufacturing from war materials to the creation of commodities for the domestic sphere, aided by improved technologies in food production and processing (freezing, canning, dehydrating), placed a renewed emphasis on women and the kitchen. As the economy expanded, many Americans moved to newly built suburbs, spiking the development of fast-food chains, such as McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts.

Most women's lives changed drastically during World War II when high-paying jobs attracted women of all races and classes to work as part of the US war effort. While it was considered a woman's patriotic duty to work for the war effort, government publications reminded women that their husbands and sons were fighting for an elusive idea: the "American way of life," sometimes defined as the "American dream." Although most women admitted that their wartime jobs had been rewarding, both monetarily and emotionally, returning soldiers needed these jobs to support their families in the new economy. The early Cold War years forced different gender issues on men and women. Thus began the gender split that advertisers and industries pushed throughout the 1950s. Men worked to provide food and material goods for their families, and women were responsible for the requirements of running a household, including cooking all the family meals. Many new transplants to the suburbs were men and

women, separated from close family members and friends, uprooted to a truly isolating landscape.

Television was the most important consumer innovation of the 1950s. With a captive audience focused on a flickering black and white image, food and appliance advertisers reinforced the importance of a new consumer world. Alongside family-friendly programs, such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, advertisers were able to encourage the purchase of products while supporting the ideals of the 1950s family unit.

Madison Avenue advertising agencies pushed processed foods in cans and boxes and electric kitchen appliances—skillets, mixers, coffee makers, and can openers—all intended to make cooking fun and entertaining, fast, and easy. Advertising directors assumed that women would leave their wartime work and return to their roles as contented, productive housewives. As the 1950s progressed, more women entered (or reentered) the workforce—despite persistent campaigns that encouraged them to remain exclusively in the domestic sphere. Without missing a beat, advertisers turned their attention to this demographic, including my mother, by promoting time-saving gadgets and foods to liberate the modern working woman. But while the advertising industry was courting the white middle class, others mostly remained invisible: African Americans, immigrants, rural people, and Native Americans.¹

A primary focus of the Cold War centered around a perceived and looming threat of communism. International programs, such as the Marshall Plan, were designed to support democracy by discouraging countries from favoring the USSR. Domestic anxieties over communism culminated in Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee. Civil rights organizations, always under suspicion of subversion, had to clarify "that their reform efforts were meant to fill out the contours of American democracy, and not to challenge or undermine it."² A politically charged racial climate in the US damaged the image of a freedom-respecting American democracy as the world consumed newspaper articles and watched newsreels that covered the struggles of America's people of color.

African Americans held the most prominent presence of any other minority group of Americans in advertising. Still, the images were patronizing and reinforced stereotypes—stereotypes either expected or not recognized by the white audience. The illustrations of Uncle Ben (rice products), Rastus (Cream of Wheat and Cream of Rice), and an

“apron-clad plantation mammy named Aunt Jemima”³ all harkened to the days of slavery.

Publisher’s Weekly announced a “cook book boom” in 1947 when *The Good Housekeeping Cook Book*, first published in 1944, sold over a million copies. During the 1950s, publishers, as well as food product manufacturers, released a cascade of cookbooks. Some assisted the housewife in her quest to be a modern woman. Still, perhaps more importantly, they acted as a support for the many new suburban women who no longer had easy access to their mothers’ or grandmothers’ culinary advice. Cookbooks came forth from commercial publishers and manufacturers, and others were issued informally by church groups and charitable organizations. Throughout the 1950s, readers purchased cookbooks that brimmed with color photographs bound between visually unique covers. Recipe books became splashier, more extensive, and elaborately illustrated.⁴ Recipes for fruity Jell-O molds, casseroles galore, sandwich loaves, sauces, creams, and frostings proliferated throughout the cookbook world. Simultaneously, many of the recipes in these books became simpler, assuring the reader that she could save time by using more processed foods to create culinary masterpieces.

Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book is, without doubt, the most famous cookbook of the era. Published in 1950 and known as Big Red because of its vivid red and white cover, it quickly became a bestseller. In 1945 *Fortune* magazine recognized Betty Crocker as “America’s First Lady of Food” and declared her to be the second most popular woman in America (former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt placed first). Three years later, President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) acknowledged Betty Crocker as Women’s National Press Club Woman of the Year, and in 1949, the Advertising Federation of America named Betty Crocker Advertising Woman of the Year. But Betty Crocker was an illusion; she was not a real woman but an entity created in 1921 within the walls of the Washburn-Crosby Company (later to become General Mills).

The 1950s produced a plethora of cookbooks that provided recipes and helpful hints for the use of canned and frozen foods and advice on how to make quick, one-dish casseroles. Poppy Cannon (1905–1975), the author of *The Can-Opener Cook Book*, exclaimed with pride: “At one time a badge of shame, hallmark of the lazy lady and the careless wife, today the can opener is fast becoming a magic wand.”⁵ Cannon’s book presents can-opener-friendly recipes ranging from Five Minute Louisiana Gumbo to California Chili (requiring only cans of chili con carne and red kidney beans).

I have no recollection that my mother owned any cookbooks, and I only remember watching as she read the directions given on the back of a package. When I married in the late 1960s, I received a copy of *Betty Crocker's New Picture Cookbook*, published in 1961—ironically, a gift from my mother. One can only imagine my pride after producing a picture-perfect pineapple upside-down cake. Eventually, I conquered many more uncomplicated recipes, utilizing all the canned and frozen items I could find. I suddenly felt like a grown-up woman (an illusion shattered a few years later when I realized that all my friends had exchanged their sad Betty Crocker cookbooks for Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*).

During the 1950s, cooking outdoors on the barbecue proved to be men's territory: "Husbands become the experts and do the barbecuing."⁶ Women were not welcome in the barbecue world. With the production of George Stephen's kettle-shaped covered grill, later sold under the name Weber kettle, charcoal briquettes and manly barbecue accessories soon became the rage. The backyard barbecue became an influential family and community event with cooking reserved for men. During the 1950s, men were encouraged by social scientists and psychologists to establish a masculine authority to counter a perceived notion that their sons spent too much time under the feminine influence of their mothers. The popular opinion was that these young boys might grow up to become homosexuals, juvenile delinquents, or even communists without a father's input. Illustrated print advertisements from this era reinforced this male gender role. For example, popular illustrations represent the suburban family and community spirit by depicting groups of men and boys busy at work grilling steaks and hot dogs. The women are in the background, presumably ready to present the side dishes.

The US has always been considered a melting pot of culinary experiences, encompassing many worldwide flavors. Or, as American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. astutely noted, "The melting pot was also a cooking pot."⁷ Latin Americans, particularly Mexicans, contributed foods to the American diet, as much of the Southwest was initially Mexican territory, creating dishes infused with the rich culinary heritage of Native Americans. During the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants arrived in the US to work in mines and on the western branch of the first trans-continental railroad. When not performing manual labor, many of these immigrants became known for their cooking skills. Thus, in addition to the English and Scots-Irish cuisines of early American settlers,⁸ French,

Chinese, and Mexican foods have also long been a part of US culinary traditions. Germans, Poles, Scandinavians, Italians, Greeks, and people from other European and Asian nations followed, bringing their recipes and cooking techniques. The 1936 edition of *The Joy of Cooking*, by Irma S. Rombauer (1877–1962), included Chinese, Mexican, and Italian dishes. However, while the recipes themselves may have had foreign-sounding names, following the examples of other contemporary cookbooks, most recipes were stripped of their foreignness by reinterpretation and utilization of already familiar ingredients, including the reduction or elimination of herbs and spices, a practice that continued into the 1950s.

The casserole was the favorite meal that often connected the American family to foreign, exotic locations. Never calling for fully authentic ingredients, foreign-inspired dinner casseroles from one 1958 cookbook included a Mexicali Spaghetti Bake, which contained spaghetti, ground meat, and cans of tomatoes, cream-style corn, and pitted olives. Likewise, a recipe for Ham Ling Lo had no ingredient associated with Asian cooking but consisted of some mashed potatoes, two cans of coarsely grated luncheon meat (most likely SPAM®), and a can of pineapple slices.⁹ If these recipes proved to be elusive, one could always use cookbook author Poppy Cannon’s “magic wand” and open a can of Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee Spaghetti, one of Van Camp’s Mexican-style foods, or a can of Chun King Chop Suey.

The newly processed foods of this era, and the rise of fast-food restaurants that encouraged consumption of fatty foods such as hamburgers and fried foods, led to obesity. Medical experts also agreed that American children were clearly overweight and physically unfit. In 1953, the *Journal of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* published a report outlining the physical deficiencies of American children compared with European children. Alerted to this report, and following the President’s Conference on Fitness of American Youth, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969) created the President’s Council on Youth Fitness (with cabinet-level status) in 1956, chaired by Vice President Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994). Eisenhower supported the idea that it was entirely appropriate for the federal government to be concerned about the health of its young people, especially young men. With the constant threat that the Cold War might turn hot, the nation needed strong and healthy soldiers.

An early pioneer in fitness and health, Jack LaLanne (1914–2011) also focused on the unhealthy effects of popular fatty, processed foods, including salt-laden canned fruits and vegetables, and the substantial

amounts of refined sugar and flour found in the cereals and celebrated desserts of the 1950s. In a first for television, and years before the world discovered Jane Fonda's televised exercise program, LaLanne created his fifteen-minute program, which targeted the housewife and encouraged her to exercise. He often utilized everyday household items, such as chairs or brooms, as makeshift gym equipment.

Industrial food producers and advertisers took note of the burgeoning health-concerned trends of the time. Kellogg's issued Special K, marketed as a low-fat cereal aimed at consumers desiring to lose weight. Not wishing their products to fall in popularity, food lobbies recruited advertising agencies to tout their foods as healthy and suitable for diets. One such lobby, Sugar Information Inc., asked consumers, "Are you getting enough sugar to keep your weight down?" Post Grape-Nuts cereal and even Pepsi-Cola joined the chorus by proclaiming their products to be the perfect foods for losing weight.

Better go easy on that Sugar! Thought you were counting calories?

You're wrong about sugar, Mother! Sugar in tea or coffee at every meal gives fewer calories than your reducing salad!

5 Pounds Net Wt.
Domino
 Pure Cane Sugar
 Extra Fine Granulated
 American Sugar Refining Company
 New York, N.Y.

It's smart to stay slim and trim and get *Domino's* "Energy Lift" too!

Figure I.1. "Stay slim and trim." Domino Sugar magazine advertisement, 1950s. Source: Retro AdArchives/Alamy Stock Photo.

The gastronomic 1950s dramatically ended on July 24, 1959, during the “Kitchen Debate” between the US vice president Nixon and the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971). The leaders of the two most powerful countries in the world stood in the kitchen of a model home, decorated in a lemon-yellow, and debated the merits of capitalism and communism. For Nixon, the American kitchen—the heart of a tranquil, middle-class home, with its time-saving gadgets and colorful, modern appliances—clearly demonstrated the superiority of the US and democracy. Historians have portrayed this as a decisive moment in the Cold War; the US had presented a modern, streamlined kitchen as the most persuasive weapon against the communist threat. Perhaps the most ironic part of this debate was that the kitchen itself was a model and not even real. It was part of an imaginary American model ranch house, sitting like a duck out of water in Moscow’s Sokolniki Park. Barricaded and cut in half, the kitchen was an illusion, a room designed only for spectators.

In the broader social spectrum of house and home and family life, the 1950s was a time of revolution in the American kitchen, with new technologies for refrigerators, stoves, and small electric appliances. The food industry introduced new products, and snack foods became popular. Although not to everybody’s tastes, the canned, frozen, and dehydrated foods of the 1950s, frequently jammed into Jell-O molds or one of the decade’s famous casseroles, are now often described as comfort food: a handful of chips or popcorn as we watch our favorite television shows (now more than likely downloaded or streamed); chips and dip, which entered our snack vocabulary in the 1950s; the ubiquitous little Vienna sausages in mystery sauce or pigs in a blanket that appear at birthday or anniversary parties; casseroles prepared by our mothers or grandmothers, perhaps one of President Truman’s favorite meals—the ultimate comfort food, Tuna Casserole. The following recipe was created by his wife, Bess Truman (1885–1982).

TUNA CASSEROLE

Harry S. Truman National Historic Site, U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service Museum Collection¹⁰

Directions

Cook elbo mac [elbow macaroni] for 20 min.

Drain good.

Stir in tuna packed in water (DRAIN), 1 c. [cream] of celery soup and less than ½ c. milk

Sprinkle with cheddar cheese & bread crumbs

Bake at 350° for about 20 min. or until bubbles.

Slice hard boiled egg on top.

In a 2012 *Time* magazine article, Jeffrey Kluger asked, “Is there anything sadder than the foods of the 1950s? Canned, frozen, packaged concoctions served up by the plateful, three meals per day. We knew far less of flavor or freshness or artisanal excellence than we do now. We were culinary rubes and too clueless even to know it. [The food] was easy to prepare and it was always there. You loved it as a kid, and, be honest, you still love it a lot now.”¹¹

Often, one views the 1950s as a time of petal pink or cadet blue refrigerators, SPAM® sandwiches, big-finned Buicks, poodle skirts, or the change in popular music due primarily to a singer named Elvis. Some think of the 1950s as an era of domestic bliss, represented in television sitcoms. Although it was a time of abundance in the US, it was also a time of societal transition. Now, after nearly seventy years, we look back at the 1950s as the golden era, a time when the American dream was within reach of the average American family. It was an illusion for many, particularly anybody who was not white or middle class. Today, many describe the 1950s as nostalgic—a time of conformity, consumerism, and a simpler life. It was a time to celebrate the nuclear family—husbands and wives defending their homes from real or illusive dangers within utopian suburban communities. Advertisements for food, refrigerators, coffee makers, and soda pop all hawked their goods in the context of this perfect nuclear family. This image was inescapable, “scattering its potent assumptions of family deep into our collective psyches.”¹²

In her foreword to *The Gastronomical Me*, food writer M. F. K. Fisher (1908–1992) noted, “People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don’t you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do?” I, too, am often asked why I am immersed in the food of my childhood after starting my adult

life as a professional musician and then becoming a dance historian. Fisher responds, “Like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others.”¹³ I echo Fisher’s response and have written this volume to address some of the issues I have been thinking about for a long time. For example, I am intrigued by my mother’s choices in meals and honor the many women who have shaped our likes (and dislikes) about food and the generations of women who have provided comfort and love through food, often while juggling full-time employment. I am interested in and often horrified by how government policies use food as a source of incredible power. Why have so many people been left out of food conversations: African Americans, immigrants, and Native Americans? Even in the 1950s and earlier, American food would not have been as vibrant and varied without these influences.

On the other hand, how do we reconcile food authenticity or appropriation today when examining the 1950 versions of the foods of different cultures? Today many consumers are knowledgeable about organic foods and often inquire about the source of food they eat, fueling the farm-to-table movement. However, most do not think about the origins of food—whether that is Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, North or South America—nor do they think much about appropriation, accepting Schlesinger’s “melting pot as cooking pot” explanation.

Finally, I am fascinated by the extraordinary power held by the advertising and manufactured food industries that shaped ideas about the taste, smell, texture, and appearance of the food we ate. Advertising created the packaging on cans, jars, and frozen food containers that cried out “Choose me” to our mothers in grocery stores across our country. Finally, and most importantly for me, I am interested in how food ties families and communities together, often uniting opposites in sharing precisely what Fisher sees: love.