Something from the oven: reinventing dinner in 1950s America

Cara De Silva
Witt asserts, “When alone and in the throes of same-sex desire, Klump binges in shame on commodified (and therefore, I would argue, presumptively ‘white’) foods such as ice cream and M&Ms” (147). Even if the argument were plausible, it would still indicate one of the book’s flaws because it fails to take into account audience reception of such narratives. Most of Witt’s textual explorations take into account only the producer’s assumed intentions. Because she uses a small scope of public sources to construct these cases, many of her interpretations of these motives are underdeveloped. As a result, Black Hunger is a book of potentially interesting ideas that rarely realizes any meaningful analysis of the relationships between food and American popular culture.

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Journalist Laura Shapiro picks up where her highly regarded Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century (1986) left off with this study of food and gender between 1945 and 1965. In Perfection Salad, Shapiro tracked how science, with its new awareness of nutrients and calories, precise measurements, and sanitation, invaded middle-class kitchens in late nineteenth-century America and altered the ways that housewives thought about and handled food. In Something from the Oven, Shapiro’s always lucid and engaging prose uncovers how the burgeoning commercial food industry furthered this “scientific cookery.” It effected a sensory distance between the home cook and the foods that she prepared, in the mid-twentieth century, by inventing an array of dehydrated, canned, and frozen foods and, in order to market the new products, creating a now-familiar image of the ideal 1950s white middle-class American housewife.

Shapiro digs beneath that stereotypical image to explore the complex relations among larger post-WWII cultural developments, the food industry, and real women. Popular magazine ads and articles painted a picture of the frazzled housewife with no time to cook. Instant potatoes, canned spaghetti, and frozen TV dinners, these ads and articles promised, transformed the drudgery of kitchen work into a
simple, efficient task and the housewife herself into a serene, modern homemaker who cheerfully nurtured her family with convenience foods. However, in newspaper chat columns and field research by university home economics departments, Shapiro discovers that women generally enjoyed cooking and did not immediately rush to purchase processed foods despite industry claims—supported by “live trademarks” like General Mills’s Betty Crocker—otherwise. Industry executives employed the nascent science of consumer psychology to learn why. Even if they held outside jobs, most women saw themselves as housewives first, whose cooking, more than other household duties, confirmed their homemaking skills. Avoiding the labor of creating meals for their families undermined the “moral obligation to cook” and conjured “a slew of anxieties that many women simply felt as guilt—a vast and murky guilt that seeped across issues of work, love, identity, and responsibility” (52).

Industry test kitchens responded by developing cooking competitions, like the immensely popular Pillsbury Bake-Off, and “packaged-food cuisine,” which brought together bland, overly salted or sweetened processed foods in often weird combinations (e.g., shrimp bisque made from frozen shrimp, canned tomato and cream of mushroom soups, Cheez Whiz, and cooking sherry) and eventually altered Americans’ palates. Homemakers experimented with this new cuisine as a way to inject personal creativity and “glamour” into their cooking, part of the larger midcentury cultural project of “gracious living” promoted in women’s magazines to middle-class families with their growing disposable incomes. Likewise, cookbook publishing flourished. Shapiro offers detailed studies of such popular authors as Poppy Cannon, whose Can-Opener Cookbook (1952) taught packaged-food cuisine, and Peg Bracken, whose I Hate to Cook Book (1960) contributed to the humorous “literature of domestic chaos.”

Other authors quietly sparked future cultural shifts in taste, like M. F. K. Fisher, who invoked her experiences in France to reintroduce Americans to the pleasures of fresh, regional foods and traditional foodways. Julia Child brought French cuisine into the mainstream with her now-classic cookbook, Mastering the Art of French Cooking (1961), and her PBS television cooking show, The French Chef, which debuted in 1963. In one of her more evocative analyses, Shapiro compares Child’s practical, unfeminine but sensual approach to food and cooking, which encouraged “women’s cuisine [to] burst its boundaries
at last" (230), with the work of another cultural icon of the time, journalist Betty Friedan, whose *Feminine Mystique* (1963) exposed the "trapped housewife" syndrome. Despite their differing perspectives, both Child and Friedan “nurtured the image of a world in which men and women sailed freely about the kitchen without bumping into sex roles” (246–47), an image that would come into clearer focus in following decades. One only hopes that Shapiro will explore those final decades of the twentieth century as intelligently and entertainingly as she has in her first two books.

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As Lillian Robinson acknowledges in the introduction to *Wonder Women*, this is the first critical study of comic book female superheroes. In a slim volume, Robinson examines a wide selection of super females from both Marvel and DC comics, ranging from Mary Marvel and Black Cat through Supergirl and Invisible Woman to She-Hulk and Scarlet Witch. At the center of her inquiry is William Moulton Marston’s World War II Wonder Woman, the Amazon princess who left Paradise Island to help the United States fight the war against fascism. Robinson claims that Marston’s original Wonder Woman remains the only feminist female superhero to date.

The author proves her point by analyzing and comparing depictions of female superheroes as examples of empowerment—not solely as role models for female readers, but also as representatives of a worldview that prizes social—and in particular, gender—equality, democracy, and collective action. Robinson’s idiosyncratic first-person narrative helps us relate to her love affair with the heroic Amazon princess, beginning with the author’s childhood attraction to Wonder Woman’s physical power in the 1950s, continuing with her first incursion into comic superhero criticism with an article entitled “Looking for Wonder Woman” in the late 1980s, and culminating in the present book.

Robinson divides her argument into five sections. “The Book of Lilith” includes the complete text of “Looking for Wonder Woman,”
Something from the Oven. Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America. by Laura Shapiro. 0 Ratings. A fun, lively history of the revolution in American cooking that took place in the 1950s traces the innovations, cookbooks, products, techniques, and marketing campaigns that changed the way Americans prepared food forever. Read more. Read less. Download Citation | Laura Shapiro, Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America | This very intelligent book, relates and analyses, not without humour, what happened in the American home kitchens in the 1950s. After the Second | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. The correspondence expressing sympathy following the death of a young Corsican woman in 1939 presents, from the angle of the sharing of tasks between men and women, the private and social dimension of death and of Corsican society on the eve of the Second World War. The anthropological lessons to be drawn from these writings by women about death in Corsica have to do with gender, the [Show full abstract] Mediterranean heritage and individual traumas. View full-text. Something from the Oven book. Read 120 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In this captivating blend of culinary history and popular ...Â Start by marking â€œSomething from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s Americaâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦ Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Other editions. Enlarge cover. It took up some of the older Victorian ideals of the feminine and put it to a more modern taste. Women were ideally supposed to care for their families, in lovely suburban homes, full of appliances to help with ...Â Electronic reference. Annie Hubert, « Laura Shapiro, Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America Â», Anthropology of food [Online], 4 | May 2005, Online since 01 May 2005, connection on 01 April 2021. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/aof/233 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/aof.233. Top of page. Michael Ezra Sonoma State University Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America. Laura Shapiro. New York: Viking, 2004.Â In Something from the Oven, Shapiroâ€™s always lucid and engaging prose uncovers how the burgeoning commercial food industry furthered this â€œscientific cookery.â€ It effected a sensory distance between the home cook and the foods that she prepared, in the mid-twentieth century, by inventing an array of dehydrated, canned, and frozen foods and, in order to market the new products, creating a now-familiar image of the ideal 1950s white middle-class American housewife.