Recipes: A Socio-Historical Tour of the Palate Genre

Jayna Leipart Guttilla

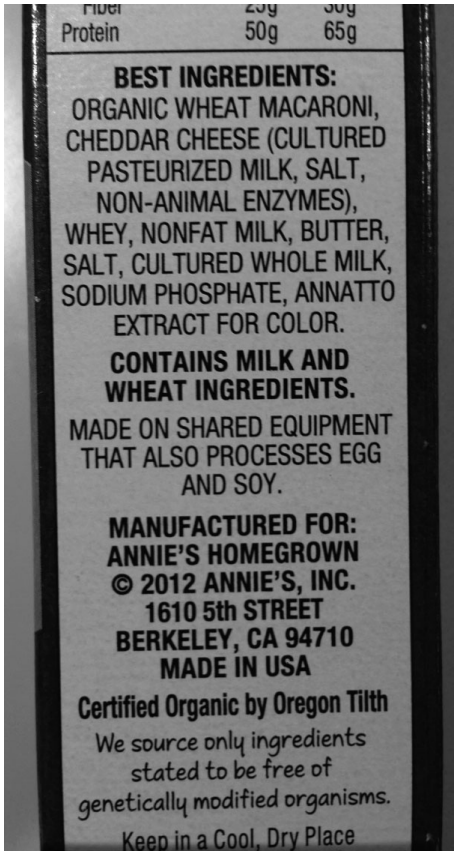
In this article, Leipart Guttilla explores the genre of recipes using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to find connections between her own cooking methodologies and those in other cultures and historical periods. She explores the connections between food and family, considering not just how people approach their daily meals, but more importantly how they approach one another.

Here I am once again, faced with the ever present, thrice daily question: what should I eat? In the past, this question could be easily solved by dialing up the local pizzeria and ordering a medium-to-large thin crust pizza, please, with sausages, mushrooms, and, if I am feeling fancy, diced tomatoes. Ordering in or dining out presents a problem, however, when small children are thrown into the culinary equation. Presently speaking, I now have to account for not only my own nutritional needs, but also my five-year-old's perpetually evolving (but most often devolving) appetite, my 16-month-old's now expanding dietary needs and my partner's unfaltering "let's-make-whatever-is-easiest" mentality. As a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu's College of Culinary Arts, I should be the expert chef-in-residence. Yet, day after day and night after night, I am confounded and intimidated by the seemingly simple question of "What should we eat?"

It is not as if I am bereft of recipes. I have, at the current count, 87 cookbooks on my kitchen bookshelf, and this is not including the wooden box of recipes that was given to my husband and myself by my Grandmother (Queen of the Crock Pot chicken recipes), the too-many-to-count Word document recipes that fill up my hard drive, and the folder labeled "Food"

in my Firefox web browser, many of which have been printed and stored in said kitchen bookshelf. Perhaps my inertia is rooted in the sheer amount of recipes available to me, or more likely, perhaps I am simply bored by the recipes that are most familiar to me and need a proverbial kick-in-the-butt to get motivated.

Most recently I have fallen into the trap of making blue box Mac and Cheese with chicken nuggets and ketchup (and *of course* a vitamin to ensure that my family is taking in the necessary amounts of nutrients) with a side of milk. It was during one of these blue box fails, as I happened to be stirring together the florescent colored powered cheese with the mushy macaroni noodles, that I suddenly wondered "Who came up with this horrendous and yet brilliantly simple recipe?" Clearly, the magic of the recipe was embedded in the powdered cheese mixture, because in the recipe for macaroni and cheese that I make from scratch (courtesy of Alton Brown & Martha Stewart), the powdered cheese mixture is replaced by butter, flour, powdered mustard, and cheddar cheese, all things wondrous and beautiful. Looking at the box itself revealed a not unholy combination of ingredients (ahem, I do use the organic blue box after all) which included cheddar cheese, non-animal enzymes, sodium phosphate—which according to *livestrong.com* is a "generic term that may refer to any sodium salt of phosphoric acid" and can be used as a texturizer, emulsifier, leavening agent, neutralizing agent or for added nutrition—and "annatto extract for color." Anyone who has made from-the-box mac and cheese reads the box to decipher or decode the instructional content. The preparation of the recipe on my box is quite simple; so simple in fact, that my five-year-old insists on "doing it all by myself," and indeed, with my assistance, she is quite capable of combining the necessary ingredients to form the final cooked product.


Protein 50g 65g

BEST INGREDIENTS:
ORGANIC WHEAT MACARONI, CHEDDAR CHEESE (CULTURED PASTEURIZED MILK, SALT, NON-ANIMAL ENZYMES), WHEY, NONFAT MILK, BUTTER, SALT, CULTURED WHOLE MILK, SODIUM PHOSPHATE, ANNATTO EXTRACT FOR COLOR.

CONTAINS MILK AND WHEAT INGREDIENTS.

MADE ON SHARED EQUIPMENT THAT ALSO PROCESSES EGG AND SOY.

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Certified Organic by Oregon Tilth
We source only ingredients stated to be free of genetically modified organisms.
Keep in a Cool, Dry Place

Figure 1: Macaroni and Cheese Ingredient List

The construction itself is brilliantly designed with numerical steps and emboldened titles, it reads simply: **BOIL**, **STIR IN**, **DRAIN PASTA**, **ADD**, **SPRINKLE**, and finally, **ADD**.

After partaking in this gloriously prepared meal of mushy cheesiness and sodium phosphate, I continued to meditate on the genre of the recipe. How did its present form of numerical instruction (or rather, the step-by-step process) become the stable identifier of "recipe" that we all know and use

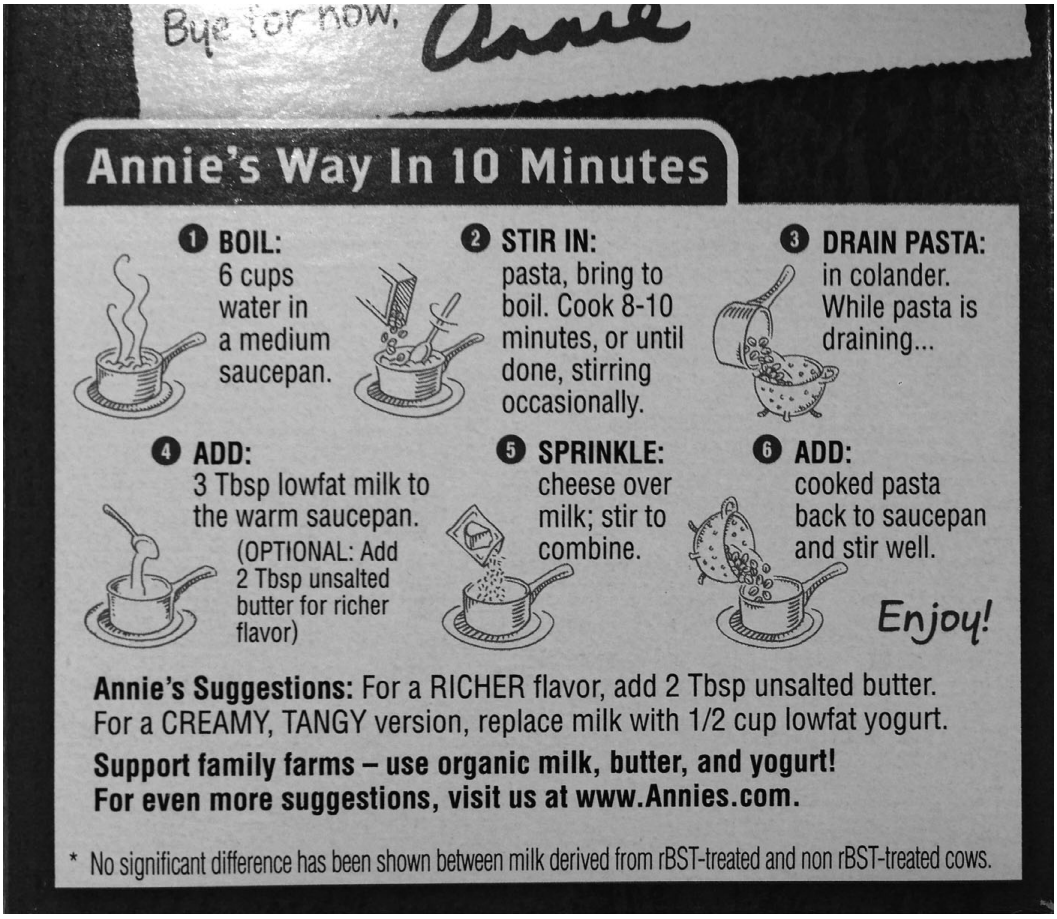


Figure 2: Macaroni and Cheese Cooking Directions

today? As a graduate of culinary school, reading, deciphering, and utilizing recipes has become a naturalized and somewhat instinctive activity for me; however, the simplicity of the text itself guarantees that anyone who is able to read can decipher its message—and this construction can be displaced when one thinks of pictorial/imagistic recipes. The genre of the recipe was designed to be an accessible, comprehensible document that would help the survival of the human species by diversifying and then propagating conversations about food. Talk about a whopper of a genre. Its utilitarian functionality is ingenious and yet where and how did it originate? How did the present day ubiquitous recipe become a genre in and of itself?

In thinking about genre and before we go further with the historical roots of the recipe, it might be pertinent to discuss cultural-historical activity theory, otherwise known as CHAT. Joyce Walker, in her article "Just CHATting," writes that CHAT is a useful tool to use when we encounter new or unfamiliar genres:

> Now, breaking down a particular genre into its component parts to discover its boundaries and key features is a great idea . . . The problem really comes in when we don't spend enough time and effort to really understand the genre we're working in. We just

> try to follow the "rules" we're given, making assumptions about how we can use what we already know about writing (or about the genre). This isn't always very successful. (2)

In other words, Walker is making the case for a doubling-down of sorts and really getting into the details of a genre that you are interested in exploring. For my part, recipes encapsulate the perfect way to explore CHAT and genre theory because they provide insight into worldwide cultures as well as providing a window into how people not only approach their daily meals, but more importantly how they approach one another. One could explore the trajectory of a particular recipe and the implications of its place in society at the moment that one is encountering it. If we were to apply CHAT to macaroni and cheese, we would first have to ask which macaroni and cheese recipe are we investigating? And then ask ourselves how do we trace the trajectory of what it once was and what it now has become.

Before I became a parent and a grad student and started using blue box macaroni and cheese, my recipe of "Mac and Cheese" was actually an amalgamation of two recipes: one from Martha Stewart and the other from Alton Brown. How did I know to combine two recipes into one and what to leave in and what to leave out? Moreover, how did I know that it would work? I couldn't really ask my Mother these questions as her macaroni and cheese recipe is literally opening up the blue box and following the labeled instructions. Likewise, my husband certainly would never be able to perform that seemingly simple task as he views the recipe as an already structured document, one that cannot be tampered with, as if it were a divine message sent down from the firmament. I think, in his case, this block arises from his unfamiliarity with the recipe genre as a whole rather than anything to do with recipes as a gendered knowledge form, and this unfamiliarity with the genre can also extend to my Mother. Leave it to CHAT to provide a framework for me.

In thinking about the history of recipes that are delivered via media sources like television or the Internet, one certainly has to be aware of the very public, and therefore transient, nature that they inhabit. These sources have become like outsourced familial resources that one can utilize when one does not have access to a family recipe box. In a sense, these new forms of recipes, especially recipes that allow for public comment, are engaging in conversations with the private participants and thus allow for marginalia to appear. In other words, I understood that I could take a little piece of the Martha Stewart recipe and a little of the Alton Brown recipe and "make it new" in a way that was uniquely my own and yet still actively a part of and engaged with the content received publicly. In working within the digital sphere, where anonymity rather than familial engagement is the norm, the cook can create a space where they carve out their own recipe boxes that are

curated from their own experiences. Moreover, I recognize that both Stewart and Brown received these recipes from sources that existed prior to themselves and that they then reshaped and outfitted the recipes to fit with their social identities. In short, when we are attempting to work with a particular genre, recipes or otherwise, CHAT is such a powerful tool to utilize because it allows the investigator to at once take a step back to see the "bigger picture" and also look closer to find how the nuances of the particular genre were formed and why this should matter to our cultural selves.

Returning to the aforementioned history of the recipe, we need to look way back to the beginnings of agricultural human history, as it so happens, to begin the story of the recipe. As CHAT helped us situate how we formulate and distribute our known recipes, the history of the recipe itself importantly reveals how little our interaction with food has changed since humans began domesticating wild foods into stable crops. William Sitwell writes in his book *A History of Food in 100 Recipes* that discovered within the funerary tombs of Ancient Luxor in Egypt were "images of hunting, plowing and sowing [as well as . . .] depictions of bread-making." This early recipe was thankfully translated for our enjoyment and is as follows:

> Crush the grain with sticks in a wooden container. Pass the crushed grain through a sieve to remove the husks. Using a grindstone, crush the grain still finer until you have a heap of white flour. Mix the flour with enough water to form a soft dough. Knead the dough in large jars, either by hand or by treading on it gently. Tear off pieces of the kneaded dough and shape into rounds. Either cook directly on a bed of hot ashes or place in moulds and set on a copper griddle over the hearth. Be attentive while cooking: once the bottom of the bread starts to brown, turn over and cook the other side. (Sitwell 9)

I can follow that recipe! I can follow a recipe that was created over 4,000 years ago and somehow it still resembles our present-day conception of what a recipe should look like. Yes, today we have the convenience of buying already processed wheat flour, but as anyone who owns a KitchenAid stand mixer knows—this is not a requirement to participate in this conversation, so please stay with me here—there is a grain mill attachment available to purchase that will grind oats, grains, and so forth, thus I could in theory follow this recipe step-by-step and come out with something that approximates pita bread, which is the same product the Ancient Egyptians created.

Moving forward from ancient Egypt to Medieval Europe, the modern researcher can see that the recipes a cook would encounter then, much like the Egyptian recipe, do not sound the least bit unpalatable to today's gourmand, save for the descriptions that include how to butcher and de-feather the fowl

one is preparing. This murderous inclusion may seem unsavory to today's recipe preparer; however it is not as if the chef could run down to the local Jewel to purchase an already slaughtered, de-feathered and packaged chicken. In a recipe for Roast Goose or gosling, the passage reads:

> Cut the gosling's or goose's throat; pluck it thoroughly and singe it; cut off the feet, remove the innards, and wash it well: then take the verjuice and garlic, or if you have none, take aromatic herbs soaked in vinegar, and sew up the cavity and put it on a spit, and roast it; and if it is not fat put some pork fat inside. Then put a little water in a dish and catch the fat that comes from within. And when it is properly cooked, take it off the fire and serve it with the juice of oranges, lemons, or sweet limes. (Redon 113-4)

Again, my first reaction to reading this recipe is shock in how similar it is to a recipe one would find today. The effort and time that it would take to prepare the dish, however is most frightful in that clearly the person preparing the dish would have other household chores to accomplish as well as prepare the meal, unless the person in question is the cook in a Manor House and "cook" was their sole position. This being said, I can hardly believe that a meat course would be an everyday occasion for the average person in Medieval Europe, so one would have to assume that this recipe was intended for a splendid table or at the very least a very special occasion indeed.

This brings to mind the division of labor within a household, especially if the household was that of plebeian, or lower to middle class stock. These households could not afford to engage in such extravagant preparation as indeed they would take away from other, more pertinent household duties, such as tending to one's crops, walking to market, or simply daily housekeeping. The modern reader has to suspend their knowledge of household management in order to catch a glimpse of what it would be like to engage in a household economy during this time. There was no immediate access to hot water, so one could not simply turn on the faucet to soak their dishes or clean their soiled laundry. One important facet here that modern readers may not fully comprehend is the notion of time. Can you imagine how long it takes to boil a pot of water? You would have to first consider how much water you would need, and then you would have to actually go out and obtain the water, as you would not have water pipes running directly into your house. Moreover, you would have to think about how much water you would be able to carry. (Can you imagine carrying a cast iron pot full of water from your front yard to your back yard?) Now once you have the water, you have to consider just how long it takes for a pot of water to boil. According to my own personal estimations, I would say that a full five quarts of water, with the lid on, would take about 15 minutes to come to a rolling boil.

So, this is an enormous amount of effort just to obtain hot water and, if you remember, the above recipe did not even call for hot water, which means that the cook/housekeeper could spend a good portion of their day simply engaging in menial tasks like the fetching and boiling of water and laundering their clothes even before they begin cooking, something that needed to be done multiple times during the day. We can return to CHAT again, as it can be a useful theory to help us understand that recipes like Roast Goose above are never simply recipes that one acquires and uses. The recipe encodes socio-political, economic, and gendered meanings that determine seemingly simple things like access to water (water which may not even be clean), food and land. The Roast Goose recipe for a lower to middle class household might signify all of the items that members of this household do not have access to; in contrast, an upper middle or higher class household might receive the recipe as simply Sunday dinner.

As I write this, I cannot help but begin to reflect upon the personal economy that surrounds the gathering, purchasing, preparing, and finally consuming of the daily meal. Domesticity has been normalized in Western societies as the purview of women; indeed it was perceived as a highly feminized activity, but certainly this is not to suggest that men were never allowed to participate in kitchen affairs. It was not uncommon to find males working in the kitchens of large estates and many of them ran entire kitchens like one would operate in a restaurant today.

When one considers how limiting a women's life was in medieval and early modern Europe, it is momentous that the recipe—a small, seemingly innocuous domestic document—could authorize a woman's power in a sphere where men were largely excluded. Indeed, as Sara Pennell argues, ". . . the recipe [is] a gendered knowledge form, one which carried particular resonances for the woman who gathered . . . [and] shaped recipes . . . who were identified as authors of published culinary works" (237). Pennell continues by noting that:

> The diversification of domestic literature out from the socially circumscribed precious 'closet open'd' genre of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries meant that the rhetoric of this particular seam of femaleness was increasingly preached inclusively (albeit with subtle socio-economic shadings). The 'compleat housewife' emerged not only as a household ideal, but as a national exemplar by the early eighteenth century. (239)

The paradox of female autonomy rested within the paradigm of gendered domesticity: women were powerful but only within the parameters of their personal kitchens. More problematic was the usurpation of this new feminine power structure by the society at large. Women's newfound authority was in a sense de-authorized when culinary knowledge was taken

up and re-packaged [re-formatted] as properties of a consummate and thus marketable housewife. It is very disheartening, as a woman, a mother, and a chef, that women have been sequestered and monopolized as "rulers of the domestic"—or readers are perhaps more familiar with the phrase "domestic goddess"—gaining a smidge of autonomy only to have it taken away again by the weight of the household economy. Once again, CHAT helps us remove our cultural blinders to see and then consider how seemingly simple documents like recipes are encoded with such rich socio-political and gendered meanings.

From my own experience, I can wholeheartedly declare that any epicurean notions of grandeur that one harbors is at once displaced when there is a child tugging at your knee wanting you to help build "the most biggest LEGOs castle ever" and an infant needing to be fed. Did I mention that your child also is out of clean underwear and there is a pile of dirty bath towels lying on the floor? But once you go down to the basement to engage with said dirty laundry, another dirty laundry of sorts assaults your olfactory system: the two litter boxes which your three unruly cats use more than should ever be necessary. When you throw your homework assignments into the mix, you most definitely say au revoir to any epicurean expectations that you once harbored. It is no wonder then that I turn so often to the blue box of processed pasta and chemically altered powdered cheese, but thank goodness I have a hot water knob on my kitchen sink.

These activities that I am engaging in are directly related to CHAT in that the use of the genre of the recipe is an activity, just as is boiling water or doing one's laundry. My example of recipes is like any other genre that one might encounter in that it is a complex contextual system filled with activities that are encoded with culturally historical information that I have myself decoded meaning from. Understanding the genre is ultimately about understanding all of these elements (the boiling of water, the slicing of a goslings' throat, and even soiled underwear) past and present, and how they affect the "doing" of using the genre of the recipe.

Recipes are doubly, if not triply encoded with the socio-political and gendered meanings of their authors and thus have explicit and very significant meanings to all parties who encounter them. For instance, if my husband came from a household where cooking was something that held special meaning for his Mother, perhaps he would then be more resistant to cooking a meal for our family and instead consider it a gendered activity. Gendering the act of cooking and framing it under the domestic and thus feminine realm of household management turns culinary exploration into just another chore that must be accomplished before the end of the day. With days like these in mind, it is not difficult to imagine why women then banded together to form

cooking clubs and authorize the stability of the matrilineal line by passing down recipes from one generation to the next. Returning to early modern England, but certainly not unlike today, Pennell illustrates this point by highlighting that within the domestic literature that was promulgated during this time, it was very common for women to receive whole manuscripts of recipes from aunts, grandmothers, mothers, and cousins. She also points to an obvious downside to the oversaturation of recipe manuscripts: "Of course, donation of recipes, and indeed of whole manuscripts . . . was no guarantee of practice. The inside front cover of the Granville/Dewes manuscript is pointedly inscribed 'Mrs. Ann Granville's book, which I hope she will make a better use of than her mother' and signed by the disinclined mother in question" (243).

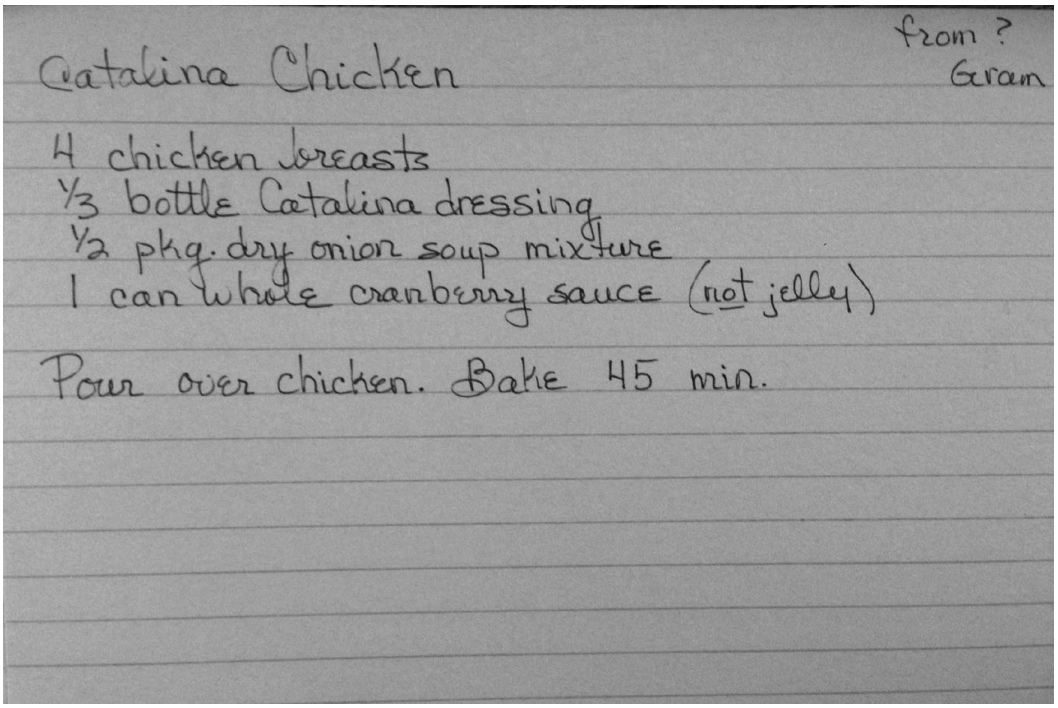


Figure 3: Gram Nancy's Catalina Chicken Recipe

Despite the previous line being written during the late seventeenth century, it seems eerily modern. So modern in fact, that it was essentially the same message that my own Grandmother (Queen of the Crock Pot) wrote when she gifted her box of family recipes to my husband and myself. Indeed, Figure 3 shows just how adventurous she was in the kitchen. Putting her culinary ability aside for a moment, I think that it is important to note the story that she tells in these recipe cards. First, the cards were gifted to me in a magnetic wooden recipe box with a handwritten inscription noting the occasion (my wedding day) and a personal message. What is so powerful about her gift is that, despite her distaste for cooking for a family of eight every day—every day for 30 years, that is—she is giving me the gift of memory, love, and family. She is passing on a tradition, however bland some of the dishes were, that ultimately is embedded

with warm memories of home and family. Second, on every card that she hand wrote and placed inside of the box, she also included a message that indicated where and from whom the recipe originated. Without having any knowledge of CHAT, my Grandmother was engaging in the very important element of trajectory, which one uses to help illustrate how genres progress throughout time. This can be seen in her recipe for the Club 21' Margarita, in which she lists the trajectory of the recipe as originating at Club 21, progressing to her and then finally being passed on to myself.

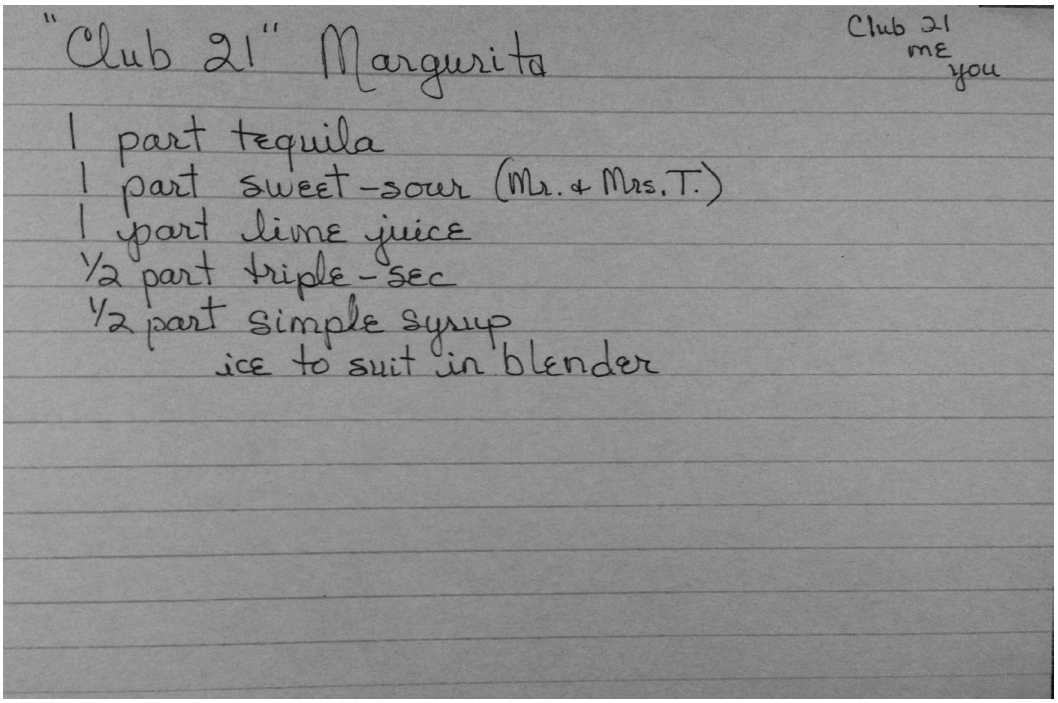
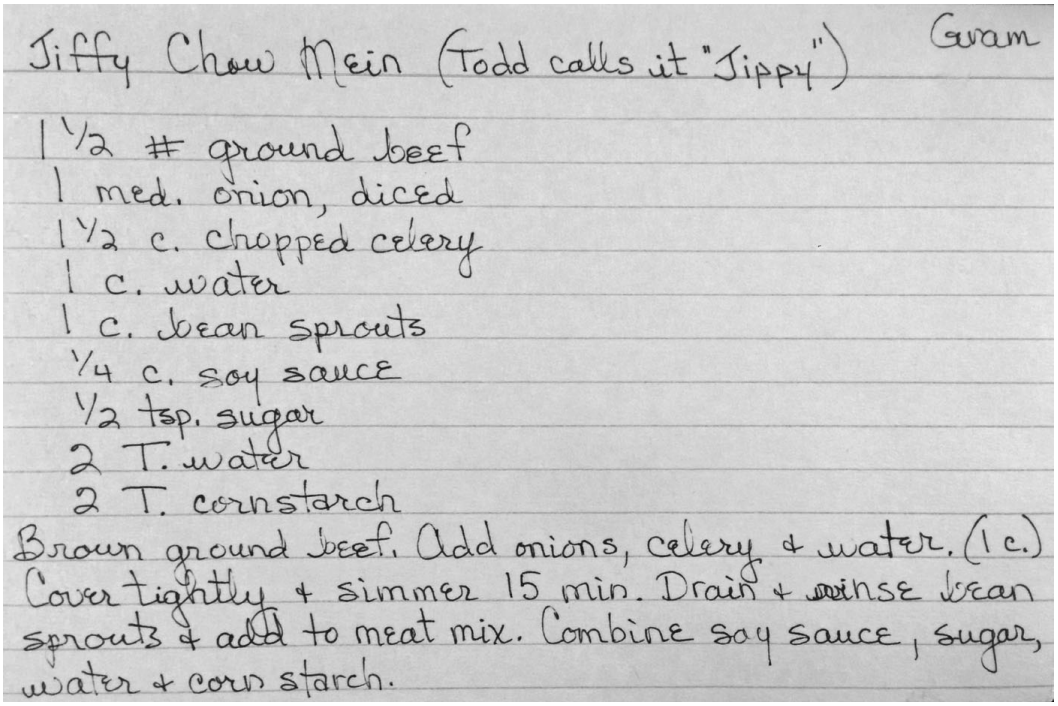


Figure 4: "Club 21" Margarita

This gift, ultimately holds more meaning for me because the tradition of handing down family recipes or recipes that one would have collected haphazardly over the years (similar in fashion to what I do) is becoming an antecedent genre in itself. In the past, recipes were forms of dialogue between families of different generations whereas now, I can simply go online and instantly have access to millions of different recipes from whatever cuisine that I happen to be craving at the moment. I wonder how this discursive diversion has changed how families communicate with one another. Certainly the movement toward new technologies has contributed to a loss in the ways that generations relate to one another. I can no more email my Grandmother a copy of the latest Pioneer Woman recipe than she can tag me in a photograph on Facebook. Juxtaposed between the paper recipe cards that are splattered with spaghetti sauce and the glossy iPad filled with hundreds of recipes that were created to appeal to a mass audience is a communication void that needs to be filled. Perhaps I am wrong (or tend toward the old-fashioned) with this assumption, as indeed the movement from index cards to e-recipes is itself

another example of trajectory. But the meaning made from the "Jiffy Chow Mein" index card, with its splatters of my own attempts at re-creating the recipe as well as my Grandmother's message that as a child my uncle Todd "called it 'Jippy'" cannot be replaced with an electronic format, however much appeal it has to a wider audience.


Jiffy Chow Mein (Todd calls it "Jippy") Gram

1½ # ground beef
1 med. onion, diced
1½ c. chopped celery
1 c. water
1 c. bean sprouts
¼ c. soy sauce
½ tsp. sugar
2 T. water
2 T. cornstarch

Brown ground beef. Add onions, celery & water. (1 c.) Cover tightly & simmer 15 min. Drain & rinse bean sprouts & add to meat mix. Combine soy sauce, sugar, water & corn starch.

Figure 5: "Jippy" Chow Mein

The trajectory of a genre, or the ultimate progression of it, is not always easy to move along with, and indeed, when memories are attached to a certain genre, and there are explicit cultural and historical meanings that arise out of the activities surrounding the genre, it's not so hard to see why I might perhaps have difficulty with such a progression. Who knows, perhaps my own children will not share the same sentimental memories that I have with my families' recipes; however, with hope and perhaps blind faith I expect to alleviate this seeming void by folding my children into the daily ritual of cooking. Despite the notion that cooking can be perceived as a gendered activity, I want my daughters to appreciate the wonder of a home-cooked meal, and moreover, of having had experiences that are rooted in the fundamental human experience, so basic that we somehow overlook and thus code them as domestic and therefore boring. And despite my reluctance to fully engage in the online world of recipes, if only because it excludes people like my Grandmother who do not engage in online activities, I think the trajectory of the recipe genre will be a fascinating one to watch. In the very distant future, some treasure hunter might even discover a recipe of mine, and the tradition of "Jippy Chow Mein" will continue.

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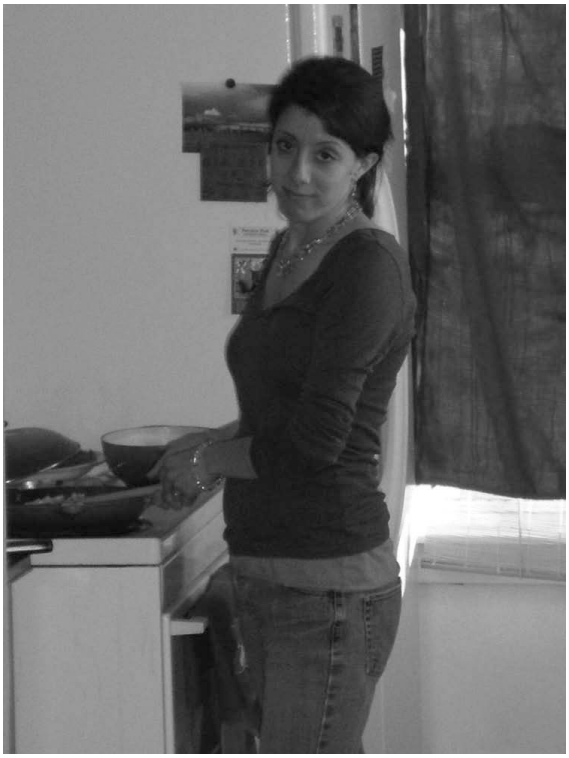

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