

Shortcuts, Mixes, and the Transformation of American Home Baking: The Pillsbury Bake-Off and the Promotion of Convenience Foods, 1949-1969

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This paper explores changes in home baking practices in American kitchens during the immediate postwar decades, using the Pillsbury Bake-Off competition as a focus of analysis. The Bake-Off, which originated in 1949, offers unique insight into the changes in food marketing and promotion as well as the actual practices of home cooks. Contestants were encouraged to submit family favourite recipes or innovative creations which highlighted Pillsbury products. Finalists came from across the country to re-create their recipes in a hotel ballroom. Over time, the competition shifted from the high level of skill required by the home cook to replicate the winning recipes to a new emphasis on ease and convenience. The contest requirements evolved so that contestants formulating new recipes were required to use not only Pillsbury flour (the only requirement in 1949) but other prepared ingredients and shortcuts like frozen foods, cake mixes, premade piecrusts and bread dough. By 1967, the contest had introduced new categories which specifically required the use of refrigerated dough and mixes.

The paper demonstrates how Pillsbury encouraged home cooks to view these new convenience foods as essential to modern cooking, and changed the parameters of the annual Bake-Off to encourage the consumption of new product lines. For their part, contestants embraced this new style of food preparation, taking pride in their ability to transform packaged goods and turn them into something new. The 1959 Bake-Off Cookbook referred to the contestants as “Great American Inventors.” This view of cooking as assembling a few convenience items in new ways encouraged home cooks to view shopping as an essential part of the cooking process, where selecting items like Crescent Dinner Rolls, Hungry Jack Buttermilk Waffle and Pancake Mix, Slice ‘n’ Bake Cookies or Pillsbury Frosting Mix might be key to a recipe’s success. Pillsbury promoted this new style of cooking in print advertising, radio commercials, and its own cookbooks. The company also partnered with the American Home Economics Association, encouraging teachers to use the contest as a learning opportunity for high school students. In classrooms across the country, teachers encouraged students to develop their own recipes and enter the contest. The company sent entry blanks and rules to teachers, and encouraged classroom activities like comparisons between “standard” baking methods and “the new quicker methods.”

The Bake-Off originated at a moment in American history when many home cooks increasingly turned to manufacturers and advertisers for advice about food preparation. The processes of suburbanization and postwar migration meant that more women were likely to live away from their mothers and grandmothers, so advertising icons like Betty Crocker and Pillsbury assumed new roles in teaching American women the basics of cooking. New household technologies including convection ovens, stand mixers, electric can openers, frost-free refrigerators and toaster ovens further promised to reduce the time and effort involved in cooking and baking. For American manufacturers, this presented a unique opportunity to shape cooking practices by developing new recipes that were predicated on the use of processed foods. To be clear, this was not an entirely one-way process, with manufacturers dictating to home cooks across the country. The Pillsbury Bake-Off offers one way to gauge the ways in which consumers participated in this transformation. The autobiographies supplied by contest finalists suggest that those who chose to participate in the Bake-Off took pride in their cooking and baking skills, and embraced convenience products as ways to improve old recipes and innovate using the latest technology.

Methodology

This study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, exploring archival materials from Pillsbury, media coverage, advertising, and recipes. Key to the analysis is an examination of the 100 recipes chosen as finalists for the contest in the 1st, 5th, 10th, 15th, and 20th years of the competition, spanning the years 1949-1969. I have created a database of these 500 recipes, noting the number of ingredients, the steps required, state and region of the contestant, and the inclusion of prepared ingredients. The database enables me to track changes in recipe format and content, exploring how home

cooks in America came to adopt this newer style of convenience-oriented cooking. Pillsbury rewarded contestants who “short-cut” or “modernized” old recipes using processed foods.

Context

In the past decade, there has been a tremendous increase in both scholarly and popular interest in food history. New journals devoted to food studies, series of academic monographs, and an explosion of popular websites, podcasts, and online archives devoted to food history reflect the recognition of the history of food as a central facet of the human experience. Not surprisingly, scholars have capitalized on the rich materials and personal perspectives that can be gleaned from using cookbooks as primary sources. (Driver, 2009; Neuhaus, 2001). In the area of women’s studies, the gendered labour of food preparation has received attention (Inness, 2006; Avakian and Haber, 2005; Inness, 2001; Shapiro, 2001). Scholars have explored women as cookbook authors (Theophano, 2003) and the role of cookbooks and recipes in fostering group and community identity, particularly for American immigrants. (Chen, 2014; Gabaccia, 2000; Diner, 2001; Pilcher, 2012). Less attention, however, has been focused on corporate-produced recipes and the role of manufacturers in food culture more broadly. Perhaps because of the more impersonal, “ordinary” and ubiquitous nature of these types of recipes, they can be more easily dismissed as inauthentic or unworthy of study. The Pillsbury Bake-Off provides a means to explore both the practices of American home cooks and the power of food manufacturers to shape notions of modernity and skill.

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