

About That Recipe: Or, Revelation from Stuffed Waterfowl That Require Onions



This year, 2011, is a great time to be a food historian. Over the past decade and more, hundreds of books, journals and essays on food history and food studies have been published. Conferences on food history occur regularly and whole societies dedicated to the study of food exist. Even television and radio programs on food history have become a commonplace, helping food scholars reach broader audiences. In addition, electronic technology gives us easy access to all kinds of sources that, before this boon, were difficult if not impossible to see, much less acquire. Having first indulged my intense curiosity about what people in the past did with food long before this swell of connected talk and texts, I have to admit to sometimes feeling puzzled as to why it all came about. Do we owe all this to Julia Child—who has been credited at some point or another for most of the changes in American food culture over the past decades—as well?

Probably not, although certainly her brilliant job of interpreting French recipes to American cooks has played some part. By interpreting, I do not mean *translating* from French to English, although she and her co-authors did that as well. No, I refer here to how she approached each recipe as if it were a living thing, to be opened up and understood for what it was, where it was, how it should be treated and what it could provide. In other words, she understood the culture of her recipes, which necessarily implicated the French culture as well as the regional and local cultures, and interpreted that culture in a way Americans could fully understand. Such interpretation went beyond the techniques of cooking, which at the time in which she wrote were daunting in and of themselves, and into the realm of mastery, as the title, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, suggests.

It is this business of interpretation with which I have struggled in trying to understand not only what people in the past ate but what, beyond bodily fuel, their food meant to them. Food is a part of our material culture, like anything else intentionally created by humans. As such, it possesses multiple cultural meanings within the culture in which it is made. Additional or different meanings may be attached to any aspect of material culture by those who use it, particularly if they are not in the culture of origination. Getting at those meanings for any material thing is difficult, and it is even more so for the impermanent past, those things like food, music and the landscape that start disappearing as soon as they are made, or continually change. We have the directions and/or instruments for making them, but for food we don't have the ingredients. We can never grow the same hogs, turnips, apples or wheat that Americans ate in 1800. Unlike a chair, a painting or a building, the actual edible past cannot be explored with our senses. And, although people of the past spent a large portion of every day growing, processing, preparing and eating food, they seldom wrote what they thought about the meaning of it all. That is a recent phenomenon.

I have approached meaning in several ways, many of them examining what people wrote about meals they ate or foods they saw, how people shared or hoarded food, how they wrote about the people who ate—or didn't eat—certain foods, how people ranked foods (from animal fodder to fit for a king), how they argued about foods, what laws they passed about the production, distribution, preparation or consumption of food, and finally, the directions they left for making their foods. All of these approaches have been more or less successful in getting at part of the meaning of particular foods at certain points in time and space. They have revealed facts and feelings about food and eating that were not known. I'm not sure, however, that I adequately *interpreted* the past to the present.

Interpreters are couplers. They enable the two people, groups, or cultures to understand each other because they understand both. While the methods mentioned above can facilitate a further understanding of past food cultures, what about the other part of the connection—between people today and in the future? The historical interpreter has the unusual task of coupling people in one group

about which she can only know a part, one group she knows well, and, if she publishes her interpretation in any form, one group in the future, about which she cannot know. The question is, then, not only what can we learn about meanings in the past, but how can we interpret those meanings to people today and in the future?



1. Title page, *The Compleat Housewife: Or, Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion: Being A Collection of Several Hundred of the Most Approved Receipts ...* by Eliza Smith (Williamsburg, Virginia, 1742). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*

Of all aspects of food history, recipes are the most difficult to interpret. Lists of ingredients, sometimes with, sometimes without measurements or directions, they can too readily become mirrors in which we see the present instead of the past. In fact, that may be easier to do with recipes from the mid-eighteenth century forward that are written in a more standardized, modern English. The easier they are to understand—the more familiar they seem to us—the easier it is to telescope the present into the past and assume that cooks today find the same meaning in their foods and techniques as cooks of the past. So how does one interpret a recipe or even a cookbook, helping people of the present to communicate with the past in a way in which both maintain their integrity and the former understands the latter for what it was?

Take, for example, what is usually described as the first published American cookbook, Amelia Simmons's *American Cookery*. Published in 1796 in Hartford, Connecticut, it included recipes using natural ingredients indigenous to North America, such as maize and cranberries, and formulated ingredients credited to Americans, such as potash. One or more of these facts is usually the basis for its distinction. It was neither the first cookbook published in America (a 1742 reprint of the English cookbook, *Compleat Housewife*, by Eliza Smith) nor the first cookbook published for North Americans (an English cookbook by Susannah Carter retitled *The Frugal Colonial Housewife* [emphasis supplied] for its 1772 Boston printing) as opposed to citizens of the British Empire, although technically the term colonial housewife could include women in Ireland, India and other British colonies. Not much is known about Simmons other than what she stated in the preface: she was an American orphan who wrote the book so that other poor orphans or women like herself could teach themselves to be cooks in wealthier households. Whether Simmons was actually an American, a woman, or an orphan is unknown. Given the practice of exaggeration, dissimulation and plagiarizing in publishing at the time, such biographical stories should be noted more for what they say than their accuracy.

American Cookery's first-ness is usually why authors cite it, although scholars

such as Elizabeth M. Scott have examined it for other reasons, such as its mention of culinary material culture, or as an historical example of a political text in which “an isolated recipe is clearly the least interesting aspect of what [it] has to offer,” with its greater importance being “the relationship of recipes to each other, to complementary texts, and to political contexts.” This latter statement is striking, although not so much for its blunt character as for what it reveals about the nature of food scholarship. Taken in groups, recipes may reveal something from their time period of importance, such as the formation of a national identity or shifting social attitudes or changing consumption patterns or time. Single recipes themselves, however, hold no interest. This attitude rumbles around in academic—not just food studies—circles. I have come up against it while at the same time operating under a variant of it myself. It is time to question why.

Several answers come to mind. Perhaps it’s true. Recipes are just lists, nothing more, and therefore meaningless in and of themselves. Hmmm, I’m sure economic and other historians would be surprised to hear this. Maybe we are *still* rubbing up against a bias against the importance of women’s work that, while greatly depleted over the last 40 or so years, is not completely empty and holds a few odds and ends, like recipes and ironing. Is the single recipe a sort of territorial demarcator defining the rough and foggy terrain between academics and others? Chefs, dietitians and, yes, home cooks use single recipes; scholars do not. This could be because professional groups need ways to distinguish themselves from others, but ... really?

Maybe, just maybe, we have not yet figured out how to interpret those individual recipes. Anything but user-friendly, rather than resembling a little black box that refuses to reveal its inner landscape, a single recipe seems more like a perfectly clean, frameless, floating, and therefore nearly invisible, window. Rather than stopping short at the surface, our vision whisks right through it and out the other side. We see nothing, unless an exotic ingredient, an unfamiliar technique or something else visible to the modern eye sullies its surface. In short, perhaps because individual recipes are so *familiar* to us, in form, in content, and for the images and memories they conjure up, they challenge historical interpretation. We think we know exactly what they are and therefore find them of little use other than in cooking. To me, this is like going to England. Most people would think me mad if I, a native English speaker, requested an interpreter for my visit there. Yet, as one of my mentors is fond of saying, “We speak the same language but we are an ocean apart.”

Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting Our Heritage*

A possible solution to this dilemma may lie in the work of Freeman Tilden. A nonfiction and fiction writer by trade, Tilden became interested in state and national parks and the way in which park employees interpreted their natural and historical beauty. He was 58 years old and it was 1941. He began what became a four-decade career of writing about the parks and then about his

philosophy of interpretation. That philosophy is applicable to many types of interpretation, including historical interpretation. Indeed, his 1957 text *Interpreting Our Heritage* has been a primer for interpreters at those sites ever since.

Six basic principles form Tilden's philosophy:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than to any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

Straightforward enough, these guidelines are prefaced by two other pieces of advice: first, that "interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact" and second, that "interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit." Additionally, they are accompanied by several essays that further explain how to—and not to—employ them. Written in the 1950s at a time when history textbooks stressed facts and great men, Tilden's prose takes the imbalance to task, urging a more harmonious blend of art and science, a wider consciousness of viewers and listeners, and a broader contextualization of the subject at hand within the human experience, writ large. As if this weren't a tall enough order, it reminds the reader that "the recreation of the past, and a kinship with it" is the goal of all ideal interpretation. The changes that have taken place within American museums and national parks over the last several decades reflect these goals.

It is all well and good to have such lofty goals when interpreting the breathtaking grandeur of Yellowstone Park or the quiet activities of the figures on an exquisite ancient Greek vase. The Yellowstone area was set aside

as a national park for that very reason; the vase is in the museum precisely because of its incredible, silent beauty that speaks immediately to humans around the globe and through time. But what about the rest of our heritage that is neither sublime, breathtaking, nor an important part of our nation's story? Like, for example, the recipe? What would Tilden have to say about it? Yes, you are right, my interpretive guidelines will only work for those parts of our heritage that are important enough to be set aside in parks or museums? Or, yes, you are right, this method will only work on objects and not words, overlooking the fact that a recipe is an object? Just his life story will give us the answers to these questions. Anyone who worked energetically from the age of 58 well into his nineties to revolutionize historical and cultural interpretation was not the kind of man who would have been frightened by a recipe or a cookbook. Nor would he have dismissed either as too lowly. And he certainly wouldn't have found them uninteresting.

Freeman, Meet Amelia

But what would he have done? Well, of course he would have applied his six principles. Rearranged for speedy application they are:

1. Accumulate facts.
2. Experience revelation.
3. Interpret the whole artistically.
4. Communicate the results in a provocative manner which appeals to the whole person and relates to universal human traits or experiences.

Right.

The Recipe

Since numerous scholars have examined the uniquely American facets of *American Cookery*, I've chosen a recipe that does not have such a distinction, or at least that scholars have not yet determined to have, although some of the ingredients became significant in American culture in the ensuing decades:

To stuff a Turkey

Grate a wheat loaf, one quarter of a pound butter, one quarter of a pound salt pork, finely chopped, 2 eggs, a little sweet marjoram, summer savory, parsley and sage, pepper and salt (if the pork be not sufficient,) fill the bird and sew up.

The same will answer for all Wild Fowl.

Waterfowls require onions.

(Some of) The Facts

One can go in two directions in gathering the facts surrounding this recipe: outward to the context of the cookbook, its author, the time period in which she wrote it, and the tradition of which it was a part; and inward to the ingredients, proportions, techniques, and other characteristics of the recipe itself. The basic outward facts have been given above, so for now, we'll go to the recipe itself. At first glance, it appears to be very much like stuffed turkey recipes today, with its bread, fat, quartet of herbs that today are known as poultry seasoning, pepper and salt to taste, and deceptively simple "sew up." It even has some measurements. A wheat loaf would likely have been a one-pound loaf and, since the recipe doesn't call for a "fine wheaten loaf," it would have been whole wheat. By 1796, the ounce and pound were standardized, so a quarter of a pound of salt pork was a commonly understood quantity. That is not to say, though, that scales, particularly those of merchants, were calibrated and sealed by public authorities to assure that it actually was a common quantity.



2. Title page, *American Cookery, or The Art of Dressing Viands, Fish, Poultry and Vegetables ...* by Amelia Simmons (Hartford, Connecticut, 1796). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

While *American Cookery* doesn't explain the qualities of bread, it does describe some of the other ingredients in this recipe. With all poultry, females were preferred. The hen turkey, it said, was "higher and richer flavor'd, easier fattened and plumper—they are no odds in the market." Freshness could be determined in all birds by a tight vent and a fresh smell. Young birds had smooth legs and combs whereas old ones had "speckled rough legs." The best butter looked "tight, waxy, [and] yellow" and if gotten from a firkin, should come from the center where it wouldn't be in contact with the oils in the wood which were usually present, even if the firkin was made of old used oak. The best eggs—"clear, thin shell'd, longest oval and shapt ends are best"—had to be hand-candled or put in water. Fresh eggs laid "on their bilge" while stale ones "bob[ed] up and end." "Addled" eggs rose to the water's surface and weren't to be used.

The book lists parsley as a vegetable as well as an herb and devotes more text to it than any other food except potatoes and apples, giving directions for winter cultivation and storage. Simmons knew of three varieties of parsley and preferred the "thickest and branchiest" and felt it "good in *soups*, and to *garnish roast Beef*, excellent with bread and butter in the spring." Sweet marjoram was only for turkeys, summer savory for turkeys, sausages, salted beef and pork legs; and sage, although used in cheese and pork, was "not generally

approved.”

Unlike recipes today, this one doesn't tell the cook what to do with the turkey once it is stuffed. Although it is listed with roast mutton, veal, and lamb, a recipe for stuffing *and roasting* fowl succeeds it and calls for a very different stuffing, one with beef suet rather than salt pork, no parsley or sage and a gill (one half cup) of wine. The trussed, stuffed bird, after being hung “down to a steady solid fire,” needed constant basting with salt water until steam came out of its breast. Variations of this recipe suggest substituting parsley “done with potatoes” for the other herbs or stuffing the entire bird with three pints of potatoes mashed with sweet herbs, butter, pepper and salt. Potatoes, according to Simmons, took “rank for universal use, profit and easy acquirement” and Irish potatoes better than any other.

Finally, although the book gives some descriptive information about different kinds of waterfowl, that kind of detail doesn't seem important at this point. As for onions, while Madeira white onions had a “softer” flavor, the “high red, round hard” onions were superior. For economy, the largest ones were best; for taste, the smallest had the “most delicate” taste and were “used at the first tables.”

Revelation

Tilden offers some insight into what he believed to be enlightened interpretation. It addressed the whole story, not just the facts, and that whole story blended history and spirituality. Quoting Jacques Barzun, he wrote “‘The use of History is not external but internal. Not what you can do with history, but what history does to you, is its use.’” Interpretation, by its very nature, is highly personal and therefore, unlike facts, highly variable. One source can prompt many interpretations, all of them sound. This is why this part seems so difficult. It asks us to mind the facts but stray beyond them to find how they make a more comprehensible whole. For people trained in any aspect of the scientific method, this requires courage and, yes, faith—in oneself if nothing else.

As with other forms of revelation, this quest may be made easier by asking a few questions. Why, I wonder, does this recipe simply give directions for stuffing the turkey and not cooking it? Was it intended to be roasted but, in classic eighteenth-century style, the author or publisher assumed readers would know that? Or didn't it matter? If it didn't matter, then why was this recipe directly followed by another one specifically for stuffing and roasting? Another careless editorial mistake? If sage was undesirable, why put it in the stuffing? And last, but certainly not least, why do waterfowl require onions and landfowl not?

While all of these questions are good and I would like to pursue them sometime, it is the last question that intrigues me the most, in part because most turkey stuffing recipes today call for onions. And it is one of those questions for

which there may not be a definitive answer. It seems to me that this point is the key point of Tilden's interpretive scheme. Most historians today, I would suggest most inquisitive people today, are fact-oriented. Living in a science-based culture, when we have questions, we want answers. But remember what stage of the plan we are at. We have already gathered all of our facts, and so these questions don't *have* to be answered. They are, so to speak, revelational questions, ones that help us dig deeper into the recipe to understand it and the culture that created it. Questions we ask of the past seek explanation of what we don't understand and, thus, expose the differences that have been hidden by the similarities. They are the couplers, if you will. More than glue, nails or clamps that simply hold two things together, couplers connect in such a way as to allow communication.

Artistic interpretation

Artistry is a word seldom used in teaching people how to be historians. To those people who believe history to be a social science, it may be a word that should never be used. Not a graduate of any formal, "scientific" school of human studies, Tilden took a classical philosophical approach to history, suggesting that interpreters focus on the *form* of a thing rather than the material with which it was made, because the form is the essence. In the nineteenth century, writers called this Truth, a term dropped by historians and others sometime in the last sixty years or so. Even more shocking in this post-modern period, Tilden insisted that any good interpreter "will be somewhat of a poet." Furthermore, he believed everyone capable of it.

This is another point at which an interpreter can misstep, for it is very easy to mistake form for shadow. Form is the essential nature of a thing, what it must have in order to be that thing no matter the time or the place. A shadow is the shape created when the material of a thing stands in the light. In this exercise, the material is the facts. At this point, it is essential to not be artistic with the facts. This can all too easily lead to what is euphemistically called "poetic license" and end up in factual distortion. A recipe must have two parts—ingredients and procedure. This is its form, which is universally recognized and understood, and Tilden believes that using it to arrange or frame the facts for better viewing is the artistic act.

What makes this recipe so interesting to me is how flexible and inflexible ingredients and procedure are at one and the same time. The stuffing ingredients are specific but they can be used in any kind of bird. Any kind of bird, that is, except waterfowl. Waterfowl *require* onions. While we can understand the grouping of birds by habitat, why was it habitat and not how the birds lived, such as in domestic captivity or in the wild, that divided them? Why did Amelia Simmons build the wall between them with onions? What was it about those waterfowl, domestic or wild, that demanded onions when no other birds did? Were they thought toxic without them? Or, what was it about onions that made them the necessary accompaniment to waterfowl? Or, was it neither the waterfowl nor the onions but the eaters whose acculturated senses of taste made

them relish waterfowl with onion stuffing and reject as unpalatable anything less? Or, was it something else that we can't begin to imagine?

Appealing to the whole person

This artistic process has brought forth questions that suggest a larger and more universal appeal. From these questions can be taken interpretive lenses that look at how people organize their organic world (water or land) and why; what they see as harmonious or jarring in their world (waterfowl with onions or landfowl with onions) and why; how they organize themselves (who will and won't eat waterfowl without onions) and why; and what these questions have to do with culture, taste and what happens every time someone sits down to a table to eat. That is a larger interpretive point; as Tilden would say, "a whole picture" that readers or listeners will understand and take away.

Well, okay. Fine. But was it really necessary to go through all of these steps just to end up with what everyone already knows—that food, taste, cooking and recipes all go together? Why not just skip to that and save yourself a good deal of time, energy and hard work? I think Tilden would say, in fact Tilden does say in so many words, that the story is only the beginning and not the end. Think here of a murder mystery or a romance. Before you even open up the book or start watching the movie you know that someone has been killed or two people will fall in love. So although for the interpretive approach, the story is the point, for telling the story, it's not the point. The facts are. They are the details that flesh out the story and make it unique. By skipping to the end and avoiding the process, you end up with just another fact—food, taste, cooking, and recipes are related—that has lost its human, or in Tilden's words, spiritual, dimension. The connection between the present and past, the communication between the two, has failed.

Further reading

The "first American cookbook" by Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery* (Hartford, Conn., 1796), can be accessed electronically at www.fullbooks.com/American-Cookery.html. Important commentators on Simmons's book include Elizabeth M. Scott, "'A Little Gravy in the Dish and Onions in a Tea Cup': What Cookbooks Reveal About Material Culture," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 1 (2) (1997): 131-155, and Glynnis Ridley, "The First American Cookbook," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23 (1999): 114-123. For Freeman Tilden's helpful remarks on parsing the past, see *Interpreting Our Heritage* 4th ed., R. Bruce Craig, ed., (Chapel Hill, 2007).

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