

# COOKBOOKS AND FOOD STUDIES CANONS

Within my academic lifetime, the use of food as a means to examine critical questions about the causes and consequences of production and consumption has grown dramatically. Indeed, the growth of scholarly interest in food has been so rapid and extensive that the various approaches to such questions—historical, cultural, behavioral, biological, and socioeconomic—are now often grouped under the rubric *food studies*. As such, food studies can be considered to constitute a new movement, not only as an academic discipline but also as a means to change society.

Food studies has deep roots in foodways and other aspects of the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless, it was only in 1996 that this collective term began to describe a legitimate field of academic study. That year, my department at New York University (NYU) recruited Amy Bentley as its first food studies professor and admitted its first undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students to food studies programs accredited by New York State.

How we were able to create programs under this title was a matter of fortuitous circumstances and a certain amount of preparation. The department, then known as Nutrition, Food, and Hotel Management, already offered courses in food and nutrition. The administrative transfer of its hotel programs to another school at NYU created a vacuum that new food programs could fill. A few years earlier, Julia Child had inspired development of the gastronomy master's program at Boston University. We thought we could do something similar at NYU, but more academically focused. Because "studies" would be consistent with existing programs in such fields as Africana, cinema, French, gender, and liberal studies, we were certain that the title "food studies" would work better.

From the start, we considered food studies to encompass foodways, gastronomy, and culinary history, as well as discipline-based approaches to investigating critical social questions about food production or consumption. Today NYU food studies students can focus their research along the entire spectrum, from food culture to food systems.

Also from the start, this broad definition of food studies immediately raised questions about its scope, methods, and content. To deal with such questions, our department's advisory committee suggested that we identify a food studies "canon"—a set of books that every food scholar should be expected to read, understand, and use. In our innocence of the minefields of such a suggestion, we embarked on the project. For some months, we sent out questionnaires, collected suggestions, and struggled with the responses. At the end of this process, beyond Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, we could not agree on which books—or whose—should be in or out, and we abandoned the idea.

Subsequently, food studies has expanded into the academy in the United States and elsewhere. I visited the former program at the University of Adelaide and the one still going strong at the University of Gastronomy in Italy. In addition to NYU's food studies programs and the gastronomy program at Boston University, new programs, some formal and some relatively informal, have emerged at the New School in New York (general studies) and at Indiana University (anthropology). Others are under development in Minnesota, the University of California at Davis, and elsewhere. Dillard University in New Orleans has appointed food scholar Jessica Harris to the Ray Charles Chair at the new Institute for the Study of Culinary Cultures. Although I don't have data, I have plenty

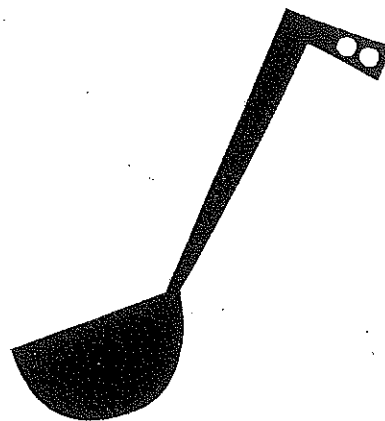
of anecdotal evidence that it is much easier for doctoral students in humanities and social sciences to develop food dissertation projects now than it was in 1996 when we started all this at NYU.

Even so, something was missing. Many academic libraries did not collect primary texts about food other than those published by academic presses or the occasional title by journalists like Michael Pollan. Bibliographies of books about food were scarce. One notable exception was William Cagle's 1999 catalogue of the thousand or so rare international books on food and drink in the Gernon collection, housed at Indiana University's Lilly Library. We needed a collection of books to support graduate and doctoral level research at NYU. In seeking ways to support that research in our emergent food studies programs, we had another lucky break. The Fales Library and Special Collections section of the NYU Libraries chose food studies as a new focus. Since 2003 the Fales has acquired more than 55,000 books about food and cooking and more than 7,000 pamphlets, and is actively engaged in collecting restaurant menus, food brochures, personal papers,

oral histories, and other such documents. The Fales Library now has the largest collection of food studies materials held by any library in the United States and has become a center for food research.

Today we have a better sense of the canon of books that make up the core knowledge that every food studies scholar should know. But we had not tackled the same question for cookbooks. So many are published, more each year than any other type of book. Yet food history is inscribed in cookbooks. Recipes are gateways to understanding how people ate and thought about foodways in the past. *101 Classic Cookbooks* brings together some of the most important cookbooks that shaped American eating in the past century. The selection advisory committee includes the top food writers, historians, journalists, academics, and chefs working in food studies today. They have done the seemingly impossible: They have suggested a canon of some of the most influential cookbooks that explain who we are, why we eat what we do, and why we should advocate for the best possible foods and diets for everyone.

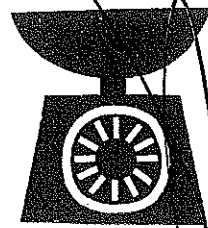
—MARION NESTLE



2012

# 101 Classic Cookbooks

501 CLASSIC RECIPES!



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