

What Did My Mother the Chemist See in Betty Crocker?



By CELESTE NG JULY 3, 2014

Growing up, I loved looking at the photos in my mother's old Betty Crocker cookbook: the chocolate cakes, the cookie house, even the cheese balls and fondues. Then, as an adult, I actually read the text and discovered that woven into the recipes were tidbits of advice for the 1960s homemaker: *The man you marry will know the way he likes his eggs. And chances are he'll be fussy about them. So it behooves a good wife to know how to make an egg behave in six basic ways.*

If you care about pleasing a man — bake a pie. But make sure it's a perfect pie.

Does anything make you feel so pleased with yourself as baking bread?

Those lines, equally hilarious and horrifying, stuck with me. Every time I saw the cookbook, I felt compelled to read it again, as if to convince myself I hadn't made them up. "Didn't you ever notice them?" I asked my mother recently, when I went to visit. "Didn't they bother you?"

"Oh, sure, I saw," she said, leafing through her mail. "But I just thought: I'm not a housewife. I've never been a housewife. So. . . ." She went back to perusing her mail.

The Betty Crocker from my mother's cookbook is the quintessential all-American homemaker. But in 1968, my mother was neither American nor a homemaker. She was 22 and had just left Hong Kong for West Lafayette, Ind., where my father was starting a Ph.D. program at Purdue. Some new friends gave her the cookbook for Christmas, thinking she could use an American one: Until then, she made only Chinese food, when she cooked at all.

At the time, my mother had a bachelor's degree in physics and math; at Purdue, she worked as a research technician, extracting enzymes. But another of her tasks was killing the lab rats. I vaguely recalled that it was her job to put them into a shoe box and crush it.

"I didn't put them in a box," my mother corrected. "I swung them by their tails and smashed their heads against the table." She paused, reflecting. "You know, I'm not squeamish about killing things, but I don't really like it."

I looked down at the cookbook in my lap. *Dessert! It's the high point of the meal. It's your chance to go dramatic, to be a little daring, to show you've been around.*

My mother is deeply pragmatic by nature. Perhaps you had to be, as an immigrant. You made do. (Even today, she uses our old dining-room table as a desk.) You got used to people looking at you a certain way, making certain assumptions about you. There wasn't much you could do about it, except keep going.

Chicken every Sunday . . . turkey on Thanksgiving . . . wishing on a wishbone . . . squabbling for the drumstick. If one or more of these isn't a part of your family tradition, you must have grown up somewhere else.

When my father finished his Ph.D., my mother went back for another bachelor's degree, this time in environmental science.

"But you already had a degree, in physics," I said.

"Having two physicists in one family is very difficult," my mother explained. I assumed she meant psychologically, like having two writers in one family: lots of moodiness, no money. No, she said; it was hard for a couple to find jobs in the same field. The two-body problem, academics called it. So she simply chose another field and started her education again.

My mother ended up getting a Ph.D. of her own, in chemistry, and eventually became a tenured professor. By the time she retired, she was department chairwoman and had not only joined the National Honor Society for Women in Chemistry, but had also been its president.

But she still kept that Betty Crocker cookbook. She had run a lab of her own and published dozens of scientific papers — yet, years after my father died, when she'd downsized to a condo, when she'd thrown out my grade-school drawings and my dollhouse and given closetfuls of clothes to Goodwill, she kept this cookbook, with its cheery, casual sexism, its almost desperate exhortations: *Impress weekend guests with a continental breakfast! . . . It won't be hard to win high praises with these!*

There it sat on her shelf, a little faded, its spine mended with packing tape. A relic, but still there.

"Why did you keep the cookbook?" I asked.

My mother didn't even look up from the mail. "I need to know how long to roast my turkeys," she said.

After the holidays, she placed the cookbook back on the shelf, right next to "Lagrangian Dynamics."

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