

Cookbook Politics: Decoding Food, Identity and the Culinary Consumer

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Cookbooks give recommendations on how to cook, and manage and navigate the household space through thorough directions, and useful instructions and hints. They put forth the principles that regulate personal routines, guiding readers in understanding how cooking rituals fit into the gendered division of work in the private sphere. They offer creative freedom for cooks to express their individuality, subjectivity, and aspirations, even while they welcome readers into specific subject positions, some of which are more achievable than others. In this paper, I have chosen to critically analyse two different cookbooks, both of which are the products of two completely different social and ethnic backgrounds. The first cookbook, namely, 'Weeknights with Giada' is written by Giada De Laurentiis who is an Italian-American female celebrity chef. The second cookbook is called 'Season: Big Flavors, Beautiful Food' authored by Nik Sharma who is a chef of Indian origin currently working in the United States. In my reading of the cookbooks, I have aimed to unearth their logic through a comparative analysis of their semantics, organisation and composition. By doing so, I have arrived at generative results concerning the reader, author and the politics of food-writing.

Cookbooks are pieces of work that often continue the prevalent discourse about women and cooking in domestic settings. Eating a meal prepared at home is linked to closeness and intimacy. This feeds into the logic of creating a typical, conventional and thus accepted, family dynamic. Domestic cooking, especially by women, is frequently a product of necessary or presumed labour rather than a recreation enjoyed in leisure time in real life. Making food for the family is not just about feeding them; it must also be food that satisfies the family. According to common rhetoric, women's cooking is significantly impacted by their husbands' and kids' tastes. Consider the example I have selected from the cookbook 'Weeknights with Giada.' The discourse in the recipes displays the female chefs' love for their spouses as well as the former's insistence that the meal is made in the manner that their husband prefers.

"Whole wheat linguine with basil, bacon and shrimp

Whole wheat pastas have become increasingly popular; they're far tastier now than when they were first introduced, and they come with an appealing health benefit. I made this dish for my husband, Todd, when I wanted to persuade him that whole wheat pasta can be delicious. Needless to say, with the shrimp and bacon in this recipe, he became a convert" (De Laurentiis, 2012).

As showcased in the previous paragraph, Giada making her version of a healthy pasta with her husband's favourite ingredients captures more than just her need to gratify him. The food acquires sentimental and symbolic value. Giada adopts the same gender and domestic ideology that has influenced cookbooks from the dawn of time—that cooking is a symbol of a woman's dedication to supporting the man of the house and tending to his health.

Additionally, the visual depictions of gender roles in the kitchen also reveal the hidden gendered meanings present in the fabric of cookbook writing. Photos of women sharing meals with their loved ones and friends clearly support the idea that cooking and feeding others may lead to personal fulfilment. In 'Weeknights with Giada', there are various images of Giada with her husband and daughter in the kitchen enjoying a meal together. It also includes pictures where she is hosting a party for her family and friends in her home.

Home cooking for women today is still perceived as laborious, even with the improved convenience of contemporary cookware and accessibility to ingredients. This makes Giada's emphasis on the attainability of her dishes and ways of life another intriguing observation in the cookbook. The dishes are frequently praised for being "easy," "simple," and "wonderful," which communicates ideals of practicality, effectiveness, preparation and

forethought. With words like “*extremely easy*”, or phrases like “*this is an easy recipe to vary*”, recipe narratives promote the discourse of simplicity. The exclamation mark, which is used for emphasis and all-caps textual representation, highlights the impressiveness of the food, and the author's surprise at how simple its preparation is. This plays into the gendered argument that women are primarily emotional beings and it's in their nature to be gullible. Therefore, just the use of suggestive language and marks persuades them to believe the contents of the cookbook to be true even before testing or examining the same. The cookbook's use of such language also suggests to its female readers that these recipes will be especially useful for them when they have to host guests in their homes, and that at the end, everyone will be pleased with the food she has prepared, leading to a feeling of personal satisfaction and fulfilment. These semantics also portray how cookbooks are written in a dialogic fashion, wherein the author converses with the reader in generally informal, familiar and affable ways. This tête-à-tête builds on intimacy to reach newer conclusions.

Cookbooks also make it possible for women to be skilled in the kitchen by providing simple and reliable recipes. Such a stance confirms historical studies showing women's cooking habits are one of the main ways through which they claim to be womanly. They can demonstrate the virtue of femininity in the kitchen while also developing personally and gaining self-confidence as they become more successful in the kitchen. Each cooking experience builds on the one before it in a way because each one results in the successful creation of a dish.

Additionally, women's cookbook discourse places a strong focus on competence, which is consistent with their identity being anchored in providing for and nurturing others. Men tend to cook on weekends, special events, over a grill, or for guests whereas women still handle most of the day-to-day cooking at home, hence simple and easy recipes are especially important to and treasured by the female cookbook readers. Women are less likely than males to find cooking to be fun because they have less autonomy over when and how they prepare food, and because leisure is frequently connected with choice and pleasure.

However, after reading and analysing the cookbook, it becomes clear that it does not fully advocate for placing women in a position of subordination. Instead, it gives the female readers more agency by emphasising the value of women cooking for themselves and for their own pleasure while employing the gimmick of self-fulfilment. As highlighted in the subsequent two instances taken from the cookbook ‘*Weeknights with Giada*’, Giada uses her favourite ingredients to make dishes that she enjoys eating, however the prerogative of cooking still remains on her. Cookbooks frequently use this deft masking of a gendered division of labour under the guises of enjoyment, wellness, or health.

“In an effort to eat healthfully and mindfully, we’ve started having meatless Mondays in our house, which has coincided with my discovering my new favourite ingredient, quinoa.” (De Laurentiis, 2012).

“One thing that never changes is my desire for a little something sweet at the end of the meal. I like to bake a batch of Peanut Butter Cookies with Blackberry Jam on the weekend so I can dip into the cookie jar each night.” (De Laurentiis, 2012).

Moreover, food plays a significant role in how people express their identities, and preparing and sharing food is directly linked to one's gender identity, particularly the idea of womanhood and the very essence of being a woman. Giada says she feels good about giving her readers, who are mostly female, something they would enjoy, and she compares cooking at home to doing one's duty or playing one's part in one's job as a wife or mother. This cookbook adds the cherry on top—that women can and should enjoy the cooking process—while continuing to flame the fire regarding the conventional narrative that they are the family's primary cooks.

‘*Weeknights with Giada*’ takes a more comprehensive view of cooking and eating as a lifestyle by looking at the larger social backdrop. The debate is not just about where to get ingredients and how to cook with them; it's also about who does this work and how. The idea of cooking as labour is replaced with the idea of cooking as joyful and fun, even though it is a woman's anticipated domestic chore. This cookbook can be seen as a guide or a primer for homecooks in mainly a couple of ways. Firstly, it answers the question of how to cook and secondly, it also tells the reader through pictures and images the person who should be undertaking the activity of cooking.

The difference in the portrayal of images in the cookbooks ‘*Season: Big Flavors, Beautiful Food*’ and ‘*Weeknights in Giada*’ was the first thing that caught my attention. Images of male chefs wearing uniforms convey the idea that men are in command and have authority in the professional kitchen, which in itself is primarily a masculine environment. It further emphasises that a kitchen is a place of craftsmanship and expertise and shows

that cooking is a job that requires skill, hard work and dedication. Moreover, the way that male chefs are portrayed with their arms crossed and with neutral facial expressions may be interpreted as a manner of symbolising the connection between professional knowledge and expertise and traditional masculine chef duties. In contrast, female chefs are seen in casual attire without a hat, with huge smiles on their faces, indicating that their status in the professional kitchen is still relatively low if not nil and that they should be confined to the domestic space of their home kitchen. Such representations of the dominating position of men and the subservient position of women within the chef hierarchy are replicated in various cookbooks.

With the exception of a single image of the author with his family, the cookbook, 'Season: Big Flavors, Beautiful Food', is devoid of any personal photographs or illustrations. Instead, it is filled with various pictures of different spices, ingredients, and dishes, keeping the attention of the readers' on the food rather than the chef, his private life, or his family. In stark contrast to the photographs seen in 'Weeknights with Giada,' the images are staged and photographed in a manner that gives the reader the impression that the cookbook caters to professional cooking rather than home cooking. Furthermore, there are images of locations like Bombay and the US West Coast to help readers understand the sources of inspiration for the chef's dishes and recipes. All of this suggests that the author views cooking as more than just a personal and intimate activity, a way to nourish one's family or a leisure activity; rather, it is his passion and his career, which transcends the private boundaries of his house.

Another detail that I think needs to be discussed is the absence of personal anecdotes in the descriptions of the recipes barring a couple of instances where the author talks about how the recipe is related to his friends and family. Consider for instance, the following two examples I have chosen from the text.

"Chipotle–Garam Masala Olives

Briny and crunchy, breaded olives pack big flavour into small, addictive bites. These are flavoured with chipotle and garam masala, an irresistible union of Western and Eastern tastes" (Sharma, 2018).

"Smoked Sardines and Kumquat Crostini

Crostini look fancy, but they're dead easy to make. And you can top them with anything you like. I make a salty, umami-filled topping of sardines or anchovy fillets paired with thin slices of sweet-tart kumquats, creamy butter beans, fresh dill, and lemon. You could also serve this topping as a dip for the bread" (Sharma, 2018).

The author in both the instances keeps to a narrative that lacks any personal or intimate connections and instead focuses on the flavour and taste of the ingredients, their places of origin, or the cuisines they represent. When he does go beyond just concentrating on the ingredients, he tends to ignore the preferences of his family, friends, or spouse in favour of telling the story of his preferences and how he likes to create the dish. This is in stark contrast to the discourse used in the cookbook 'Weeknights with Giada.' I believe that the author's gender and the fact that he works as a chef rather than a home cook are relevant factors in this situation. The cookbook places more of an emphasis on cooking as a profession.

Another way in which this cookbook is distinct from 'Weeknights with Giada' is in the type of readership it is targeting and catering to. Giada's cookbook specifically catered to women, especially those who were mothers or spouses, as seen by the frequency with which the cookbook's recipe descriptions contain phrases like "*so great for kids,*" "*Happy kids, happy parents,*" and "*I created this dish for my husband.*" No such words or phrases that tacitly or explicitly refer towards a type of audience that the author wishes to engage with or connect to are used in 'Season: Big Flavors, Beautiful food.' One might infer from reading the cookbook that it aims to attract and capture the attention of all kinds of readers who are interested in the art of cooking. There is no connection between the meal and the process of its preparation and concepts like family, familial affection, motherhood, or fatherhood. Here, the recipes are included in the cookbook since the author considers them to be delicious dishes that should be shared with the readers merely for that reason.

Furthermore, the kinds of meals that one would anticipate women or men to make, respectively, is another pervasive part of gender ideology that is frequently found in cookbooks. The latter is seen to create more 'masculine' meals like large chunks of meat or barbecues, whereas the former is more frequently seen preparing delicate foods like sweets and salads. This cookbook does not contain any such narrative of gender stereotypes. It does contain recipes for cooking meat and poultry, but they are not incessantly or frequently forced down the reader's throat. The emphasis of the cookbook is on great food instead since it features a variety of meals, including some that would be traditionally regarded as feminine, and thus, the focus of the cookbook is good food rather than adhering to any social or gender construct.

Reading the existing literature closely indicates that cookbooks, recipes, and other food-related representations have always operated with a subliminal emancipatory intention. It can also be observed that cookbooks have brazenly exploited prevailing gender stereotypes to create subject positions that centre the market appeal of their content around the performance of traditional female or male roles. These subject positions are typically embellished with vivid illustrations of the ingredients, the preparation, the finished products, and the cooks. Cookbooks, self-help books, and food television have all been shown to have trained women into the cult of feminine domesticity. On the other hand, men were praised by domestic food discourse as a parody of alpha male cavemen who cooked huge amounts of meat over an open flame. A comparative analysis of both the cookbooks uncovers the underlying logics, discourses and strategies that otherwise were seamlessly inscribed in the fabric of their making. A close reading of the texts has proved to be an exercise in re-thinking, unlearning, and meaning-making.

References

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