

Wendy Wall. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*.

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In *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*, Wendy Wall draws on a wide range of manuscript and print evidence in order to offer a persuasive rehabilitation of the humble recipe. Early modern recipes, Wall, argues, are not dull, technical lists of ingredients and instructions; rather, they manifest the sociability, ingenuity, and intelligence of those who recorded, used, and modified them. As such, early modern recipes testify to a domestic culture which gave scope to the creative and intellectual ambitions of the literate and resourceful women from across the social scale who inhabited it. Divided into five chapters, plus an introduction and a short coda, and generously illustrated in black and white, Wall's book addresses recipes as loci for understanding early modern taste, pleasure and play, literacy, temporality, and knowledge and epistemology in turn.

The introduction, "The Order of Serving," outlines some key themes. Recipe collections, Wall argues, challenges the notion that domesticity constitutes a self-enclosed, private sphere: recipe collections were collaborative productions, functioning as points of contact and exchange across time and space, as they were loaned, gifted, and bequeathed between family and friends, accruing additions and emendations along the way. In describing and prescribing the transformation of natural elements into shaped, contrived cultural artefacts intended for consumption, they also participated in the culture's broader literary and philosophical concern with the relationship between art and nature. Wall pitches her insistence on the creative and intellectual significance of the recipe in opposition to a broader historical and scholarly tendency to take domestic labour as tedious and restrictive; in this regard, aspects of her argument will be familiar to those who have benefited from her book *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (2002). While there bare bones of her argument may be familiar, however, there is much material here that is both fresh and thought-provoking.

The first two chapters address printed recipe books across the later sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. Chapter 1, "Taste Acts," explores paratextual materials in order to identify the ways in which such collections generate specific locales for reading, thereby shaping culinary (sub)cultures, taste communities, and reading publics. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's influential notion of "cultural capital," Wall suggests that early English recipe books register the changing meanings of taste, as a term which could indicate both sensory perception and social and aesthetic discrimination. As such, early recipe books participate in acts of social classification, mapping elite status onto the physical, technical practicalities of culinary skill, and promising aspirational housewives access to the secrets of aristocratic kitchens. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the status quo began to change: Wall identifies a shift in printed recipe collections away from a concern with social mobility, towards a concern with the consolidation of national identity. Until the 1660s, recipe writers were almost unanimous in celebrating exotic ingredients, especially spices, as a marker of wealth and exclusivity.

Around the time of the restoration, however, recipe books started to associate culinary skill not with the (generally female) aristocratic closet, but rather with the (generally male) professional kitchen. Concurrently, we find an emerging interest in a new, French-influenced cuisine which rejected the strongly flavoured dishes of previous centuries in favour of simplicity and subtlety. Resistance to this shift emerged in the form of the works of Hannah Woolley, which reaffirmed the association of culinary skills with elite female spaces. Woolley's collections eventually proved more popular than similar works authored by professional male chefs: a victory, according to Wall, for the native taste for exotic spices over the newer, French methods. In the eighteenth century, however, we see further transformations in culinary practice, as aristocratic ladies become instructors, overseers, and judges of culinary practices carried out by servants, rather than directly engaging in such practices themselves. In Wall's words, "whereas recipe producers of the early seventeenth century had... envisioned recipe culture as a means of proving gentility, eighteenth-century recipe writers reconceptualised domesticity so that the leisured lady's status depended on her removal from the nitty-gritty details of work" (57). This distancing, Wall argues, was linked to the aestheticizing of taste. Drawing on the work of Denise Gigante, Wall suggests that in eighteenth-century recipe books taste was emptied of physical and sensory significance in order that it might function more effectively as a term for disinterested aesthetic judgement.

Chapter 2, "Pleasure: Kitchen Conceits in Print," explores the intertwining of pleasure and intellection in the culinary "conceit," a capacious term which in this context refers mainly to edible artefacts. Such artefacts, often wrought from sugar made manipulable by combination with other ingredients such as gum arabic, imitated features of the material world (from plants and flowers to family coats of arms). The term "conceit," however, also gestures to a broader range of meanings, including the physical instantiation of witty ideas and ingenious mottos in the form of poesies, mottos and inscriptions. Reading recipe books alongside passages from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Jonson's paratexts and masques, Wall argues that, like their literary counterparts, culinary conceits were simultaneously mental and material constructs, which "engaged the critical philosophical problem of yoking the abstract to the concrete" (66). Between the 1570s (when printed recipe books become increasingly popular in England) and the 1650s (when, according to Wall, the wit and pleasure of conceits was largely expunged from culinary discourse) such conceits were enormously popular. And no wonder: Wall describes the domestic production and consumption of conceits as a source of pleasure and playfulness. Such pleasure, moreover, was founded partially on intellectual engagement with key philosophical questions: edible conceits, Wall contends, "interrogated and explored" the relations between "nature, art, representation, form, essence" (68). For example, Wall suggests that the practice of reproducing luxury goods, such as plate-ware, gloves, and jewellery, in the form of sugar models to be broken and consumed served to reveal the shallow and ephemeral nature of such vanities. Drawing on but also revising Patricia Fumerton's *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (1991), Wall shows how the dissemination and accommodation of banqueting conventions to the capabilities of middle-class kitchens and purses led to a proliferation of interpretive possibilities. For upwardly-mobile merchants and their ilk, Wall speculates, the use and consumption of malleable edibles such as marzipan and sugar paste signified a world that could be "moulded at will" (97) to an individual's needs, desires, and ambitions.

The following three chapters foreground manuscript recipe collections ranging from expensively bound folios to scruffy working notebooks. Chapter 3, "Literacies: Handwriting

and Handiwork,” follows scholars including Francis Dolan and Pamela Smith who have recently argued for a more capacious understanding of literacy. Recipes, Wall asserts, can be understood to cultivate “taste literacies” (115), whereby the formation and deciphering of written letters develops in tandem with the embodied acts and sensations of cooking and eating. Recipe collections reveal the contiguity between reading and writing, and domestic tasks of various kinds (including the textile arts, as well as cookery). Penmanship, for example, was an important domestic skill, with some collections providing recipes for handwriting. Wall emphasises the shared skill set required by writing and domestic work, both of which involved manual dexterity, precision, and physical force. In terms of instruments and materials, too, writing and housework overlapped: quills and penknives were used in the kitchen as well as the study, whilst book pages were used to line pans and wrap spices. Indeed, Wall suggests, food-work – especially the production of confectionary conceits – could be considered a form of writing in itself. The popularity of pastries and sweets formed into letters suggests that diners might have indulged in the kinds of linguistic play that were so common within literate culture – anagrams and acrostics, for example – at the table. Such edible letters highlight the materiality and sensuousness of language: “letters,” Wall hypothesizes, “could have been experienced as crisp, doughy, aromatic, gooey, sweet, and/or spiced” (150). In uncovering the affinities between domestic competence and literary skill, Wall challenges the notion that handwriting and domesticity served regulatory functions within a broader civilizing process that curtailed women’s agency. *Pace* Jonathan Goldberg’s *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (1990), Wall draws on the evidence of marginal annotations, inscriptions, and manuscripts in order to argue that, rather than disciplining the hand, writing lessons were a source of entertainment, self-assertion, and creativity. Consideration of the archive reveals that the prescriptive ideologies of literary instruction and domestic labour rarely translated into practice: to be domesticated is not necessarily to lose agency.

Chapter 4, “Temporalities: Preservation, Seasoning, and Memorialization;” offers a fascinating account of the ways in which recipes engaged with broader philosophical concerns about death and time. In particular, the term “preservation” unites a practical concern for the preservation of foods, with a desire to preserve the health of the human body that consumed such foods. Using processes such as seasoning and distilling, recipes promised to combat time by delaying the onset of decay in edible goods, but they also promised to prevent or defer the onset of disease and aging by balancing the humours. As such, Wall notes, “humans and edibles shared a structural place, as things in need of survival and duration” (174). Kitchen work confronted mortality even as it strove to temper it, as cooks butchered animals and baked pies into crusts known as coffins. Through a powerful and penetrating reading of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Wall shows how Shakespeare explores the multiple significances of preservation via the figure of Helena. As a physician who utilizes written recipes, Helena functions as a preserver of life, in the process exposing the philosophical and intellectual concerns of kitchen-work as a form of labour which strove to manage a changeable and transient world. The written status of Helena’s prescriptions is important, for recipe collections themselves “kept” the recipes they contained, preserving hard won-knowledge of how to preserve foods and bodies for the future. “Recipe books,” as Wall puts it, “acted as technologies of memory” (190). Often bequeathed through the generations of a family, accruing revisions and additions along the way, and sometimes containing family histories of births and deaths alongside practical culinary and medical instructions, manuscript recipe books evince a deep concern with relating the past to the present and with commemorating the dead. Again, the eighteenth century is seen by Wall as a turning point in this regard: whilst

recipes continued to record genealogical information and include instructions for preserving foods, the decline of humoralism meant that, after the seventeenth century, the preservation of bodies via dietetic regimes was no longer a primary concern.

Chapter 5, “Knowledge: Recipes and Experimental Cultures,” makes the bold claim that recipe compilers participated actively in the generation and authentication of the new forms of empirical and experimental knowledge-production more usually associated with the elite men of the newly-formed Royal Society. Building on the work of scholars including Lynette Hunter and Rebecca Laroche, Wall argues that women across the social spectrum constituted an informal community of experimenters who engaged, in their domestic lives, with the same chemical, botanical and medical concerns that occupied their more well-known male peers. Importantly, “scientific and domestic communities were not just analogous but overlapping communities, with recipes providing a shared medium of communication” (211). Domestic competence – like experimental natural philosophy – worked on the presumption that operative knowledge about the material world depended on active, human intervention in it. Even the tendency of manuscript recipe collections to credit specific prescriptions to individual family members, friends, acquaintances, and experts, is no bar to conceiving of them in this way: attribution of a recipe to a named individual, Wall contends, was not so much a claim to an authoritative origin as a way of distinguishing it from other, similar recipes. Indeed, the fact that recipes were written down and circulated textually enhances their claim to participate in the construction of the epistemological principles that we today associate with modern science. Drawing on the work of Steven Shapin, Wall confirms that the Royal Society allowed a role for testimony in the production and dissemination of natural knowledge: such knowledge was communal and communicable, subject to testing by those who accessed it via written accounts as well as first-hand. Similarly, Wall argues, “when men and women circulated, copied, and excerpted recipes they subjected their own truth claims to review by a community of knowers whose individual experiments then underwent... reverification” (231). The citational nature of recipe collections therefore indicates not a slavish reliance on authority, but rather the distribution of processes of verification across communities of knowers.

The short but suggestive Coda explores some of the metaphysical and affective aspects of recipes and recipe collections. For Wall, the allure of recipes resides partly in “a fervent belief in structured rules that might guarantee material and personal transformation, a basic longing to be other than oneself... recipes fundamentally rest on fantasies that the world can be other than it is” (253). This utopian instinct, Wall implies, drives the consumption and use of recipes in the twenty-first century, as well as in early modern England: a suggestion which is intriguing and provocative, albeit unsubstantiated.

A key facet of Wall’s argument throughout the book is that recipes not only reflect or represent key practices and concerns within early modern culture, they also actively reflect on, theorize, and even help to produce such practices and concerns. This is particularly clear in the second and fifth chapters, which make significant claims for the ontological and epistemological engagements of early modern recipe collections, but which nonetheless leave open the important question of just how self-aware such engagement was. In chapter 3, for example, Wall imagines that “when the recipe reader chose among radically different options for naturalizing artificial flowers or counterfeiting natural ones, she *inadvertently* engaged a consequential topic of the day [namely the relationship between art and nature; my emphasis]” (87). On the other hand, at points the engagement seems to be more intentional:

when Wall writes in chapter 5 that “recipe writing was not an ancillary legitimizing of what was already ‘known,’ but a fundamental defining of knowledge itself” (241), the implication is that early modern women contributed actively and consciously to the redefining of knowledge as empirical and experimental. Ultimately, the question of intention and awareness is left unresolved, although Wall is open to conjecture, registered in the form of occasional bursts of semi-rhetorical questions. She asks, for example: “Might mistresses and servants in the eighteenth century imagine themselves as taking on the rehabilitated role of ‘daughters of Eve’ not as sinners (as the phrase often suggested), but as aesthetically sensitive chefs? Were they to imitate a primal shaping of ‘tastes’ as a moral and artistic act?” (63). The implied answer is, of course, “yes”: how satisfying one finds this kind of speculation will depend heavily on the level of the individual reader’s investment in recovering the intellectual agency of early modern women. Overall, this is an absorbing, learned, and generally cogent piece of scholarship, written with a light touch, and providing much food for thought.