Berney’s Mystery of Living and Other Nineteenth-Century Cooking Magazines

In a previous issue of *Gastronomica* I described in detail *The Cook*, a most informative nineteenth-century American culinary magazine. Here I introduce and comment briefly on ten additional early journals, chosen from the large but little-known repertoire of serial publications that are increasingly being recognized and made available for research. The magazines selected differ in many ways. Some appeared in only one issue (apparently); others ran for more than fifty years and greatly influenced American food habits.


**i. The earliest cooking magazine** I have uncovered is a curious item: *Berney's Mystery of Living* (NY: A. Berney, 1868). Its cover indicates that it will be a quarterly publication, complete with recipes, including in this issue “over 1,100 Economical Cooking Recipes.” The recipes—all numbered—are of two kinds: those written and tested by Mrs. Prudence Winslow, “an old, experienced housekeeper,” and others, not tested or written in Mrs. Winslow’s style. The Winslow recipes indicate the time required for preparation and a list of ingredients, followed by the directions. The others were “printed as received” from readers. I can find no suggestion that this magazine had a life beyond this single issue.

Yet there are intriguing, yea, enticing morsels in this one issue, which beg for questions answered. I would like to know more, for example, about a full-page notice in which the publisher, Alfred Berney, explains that, in an attempt to help feed the poorer and working classes, he is soon planning to open near City Hall *The Household*, “The Cheapest Eating-House in the United States.” This venture was to satisfy two questions: “Why should the poor mechanics, the clerks, the laborers, of both sexes, be unable to procure good meals at fair prices?” and “Why should the poor, hard-working families of our large cities and towns be always kept poor?” The Household was to be a home, dining room, and kitchen showing the people that “good meals can be furnished at nearly one-third of the price now charged in the common eating-houses.” Sample bills of fare, with costs, are given. We are informed that the cooking will be done by “New England and French cooks” and that the “waiters will be young girls.” Did any of this come to pass? If so, what was its fate?

**ii. Next in our chronology is The Table: A Monthly Publication Devoted to the Refinements of the Table.** Alas, this gastronomic treasure also had a short, though glorious, life (January–August 1873). In its first issue the editor, Barry Gray, sets forth its purpose: “THE TABLE will be
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devoted exclusively to subjects connected with the Pleasures of the Table, the Science of Cooking, and the Art of Good Living. It will treat all matters pertaining to Eating and Drinking, Public Banquets, Dinner Parties, Social Breakfasts, etc.” And more! There is an elegant and very early discussion of “Oriental Gastronomy”; a restaurant and eating house directory for New York City; and several unusually informative articles about dining in New Orleans.

The Table has a lively book-review column. One of the books reviewed most favorably is The Servant Girl of the Period: The Greatest Plague of Life. What Mr. and Mrs. Honeydew Learned of Housekeeping. “The volume tells the experiences of a newly married couple, in the matter of servantism. Their hopes, trials, disappointments and success.” One issue has a hilarious article about the proper color for wine glasses—“bilious Bohemian yellow, sickly pink,” or gold and silver are not suggested; simple, clear glass, to show off the color of the wine, is de rigueur!

iii. On a totally different, and much less sophisticated, level is a virtually unknown magazine, titled American Cookery: A Monthly Dining Room Magazine,

which appeared from 1876 to 1877. It was edited by Mrs. Laura E. Lyman, author of The Philosophy of Housekeeping and editor of the Home Interests Department of the New York Tribune. It contains many informative articles. In one called “The Table” we are reminded that “Perhaps in no one place is the innate refinement of the individual more apparent than at the table. Certain it is when persons from remote country places visit our cities, they suffer more from embarrassment and the not knowing exactly how to conduct themselves at public or private tables than at any other time.” Articles such as this are most useful to scholars for understanding the differences between city and country life that still existed in the 1870s, soon to be narrowed by the industrial revolution.

A continuous thread about the battle of the sexes runs through all of these magazines. For example, one article here indicates that there is a difference between the behaviors of men and women in restaurants. The men always say, “Do they cook oysters decent?” but the women always ask for the bill of fare, read the figures first, then ask, “What do they cost?”

iv. Another important but little-known magazine was The Caterer and Household Magazine (1885–1887), issued by James Parkinson of the respected Philadelphia catering family. In addition to hundreds of recipes and excellent hints on cooking methods and preparation, there is a column on “Aesthetics of the Household,” which “treats of all matters relating to the home, wherein good taste might be exercised, to the elevation and delectation of the family; and the cultivation of beauty, and, consequently, of happiness.” (Emphasis mine. Just think of the multiple interpretations one could place on that statement!) The article continues: “The ennobling and refining influence of a little education in the pure principles of household or decorative arts, cannot be overestimated; nothing else will make the gentleman.”

One issue contains an “Ode to Bogle,” a long poem praising the famed Philadelphia Afro-American cook, assuredly one of the more unusual such tributes in American food history. Another has yet one more plea for culinary education, especially for the American female (a ubiquitous subject for nineteenth-century male editorial writers). An article on the preeminence of French cookery informs the reader that “good French Cooks command salaries almost equal to those of cabinet officers.”

Another article contains a detailed history of Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations. There are periodic columns on “How Famous Dishes Were Named” and/or the history of certain dishes, sometimes correct and sometimes simply regurgitating old saws. Features on the etiquette of dinner-giving pronounce that “There never was a man of intellect in the world who didn’t know a good dinner from a bad one,” while “There is one female failing in respect to dinners… the very inconvenient love of garnish and flowers, either natural or cut in turnips and carrots, and stuck on dishes so as to greatly impede carving and helping.”

A column titled “Things Worth Knowing” offers advice for making and using various household chemicals and cleansers. There is much discussion of entertaining in Washington, D.C.—of who held various dinners, who attended, what was served, the decor and decorations, etc. Likely there is information here that is unavailable in any other single source.

v. The Cooking Club, By Every Day Cooks For Cooks Who Cook Every Day: The Only Culinary Publication Adapted To Use of Families With Limited Incomes is unusual in that it reflects the Midwest, not the Northeast. This monthly magazine was issued by Cooking Club Publishing Co. of Goshen, Indiana (1895–1917), and edited by Mary Starr. It appears to have been affiliated with an organization called The National Cooking Club Circle. In addition to recipes and suggested menus, there are numerous articles on the foods of other cultures. Among the intriguing ads is one for devilled crabs, one dozen in original shells “as fresh as

when taken from the ocean,” which will be sent to you, in the Midwest, from Hampton, Virginia, for thirty-five cents.

In a full page of self-promotion and subscribers’ letters, one Kansas housewife writes: “I received a copy of THE COOKING CLUB, and was so well pleased with it, I am raising a club. Secured 35 names during part of two days. Want to make it fifty to get advantage of 50-club rate.”

The editor adds, “The following week we received from Mrs. Pinkerton a list of 64 subscribers, and she wrote: “I might have secured 100 if I had not got weary.”

vi. Table Talk is a major resource. In his invaluable A History of American Magazines, F. L. Mott writes: “The outstanding culinary magazine of the nineties was Mrs. S. T. Rorer’s Table Talk (1886–1920), of Philadelphia, a well-printed dollar-a-year monthly. Mrs. Rorer left Table Talk in 1893, and after editing the short-lived Household News (1893–1896), she became famous as the cookery expert of the Ladies Home Journal,” where she was a most influential food editor for fourteen years. Table Talk billed itself as “The American Authority upon all Culinary and Household Topics,” and perhaps it was. All you want to know about contemporary cooking and household matters is here. The 1894 issues, for example, contain a splendid discussion of the true New England Baked Bean and an interesting column on “The Nursery of the Period,” which attempts to answer the question “What Constitutes the Ideal Nursery of Modern Requirements?” There are articles on “Old Silver Hall-marks” and a column called “Juvenile Book Shelves.” Much attention is paid to the Washington social scene, with detailed listings of all presidential receptions and entertaining. The January 1, 1894, article ends: “The hours from eleven in the morning until two in the afternoon will be given over to hand shaking and hearing the same thing said in pretty much the same manner by thousands of different people. However, a President must expect to make some sacrifices for the honors bestowed on him.”

The November 1894 issue has a long article on “Calling Card Etiquette for the 1894–95 Season.” The March 1894 issue, in “Healthful Dwellings,” discusses plumbing problems in a most discreet manner: “A certain amount of plumbing is, of course, absolutely necessary. After that, the less one has of it in the house, the better for its inmates.”

In the volume for 1899, we find much discussion of holiday and special-occasion celebrations. A monthly column called “All Through the Year” aims to cover the many lines of general interest to women — education, fashion, children’s amusements, the latest ideas in entertaining, correct social form, decoration, appointments, service, etc. All inquiries requesting suggested menus for special occasions or an answer by private letter were to be accompanied by a fee of $1.00. Articles on “China Closets—Past and Present,” “The Fan and Its History,” “Oriental Rugs—Their Origins and Manufacture,” “The Umbrella,” “The Renaissance of Kitchen Pottery,” a five-part series on “Early Training of Children,” a historical discussion on “Lenten Fare,” and “Dish-washing As It Should Be Done” are all of interest.

vii. The Hotel Monthly, published by John Willy in Chicago (1893—still in print in 1965), was a professional magazine. It contains, perhaps, the most complete listing available of contemporary professional chefs, wine stewards, hoteliers, and bartenders. Each issue lists “A Hotel Directory of the United States.” The ads are quite remarkable. The issues in 1899, which contain detailed information on hotel laundry practices, have many illustrated ads for laundry equipment, including prices.
Magazine’s Achievements: How It Has Fought for Pure Foods and for the National Food Law, which Has at Last Been Enacted.” The complete history of the lobbying effort to pass pure-food laws can be followed in this magazine, to say nothing of thousands of recipes, menus, household hints, information on etiquette, entertaining, food fairs, exhibitions, expositions, etc. What To Eat contains some of the most detailed discussions and photos of the 1904 St. Louis Fair to be found anywhere. Other articles contain hard-to-find information, such as on railroad dining, as well as many photos of men and women engaged in food-related activities.

Among the most influential and longest-lived cooking magazines was The Boston Cooking-School Magazine, later renamed American Cookery. It had a life of more than fifty years, from 1896 to 1947. A complete run of these, along with a complete run of Gourmet magazine (1941 to the present), would offer the researcher insight into one hundred years of American culinary history and foodways. The breadth of subject matter here is amazing. A casual perusal of article titles for 1905–1906 yields: “Colonial Hearths,” “Moravian Domestic Life,” “Salem’s Old-Fashioned Flower Gardens,” “Some Interesting Verandas,” “Old New England Hallways,” “Old Time Arts and Crafts,” “The Public Schools of Today,” “Salem Porches,” “Artistically Papered Walls,” “The Evolution of the Dinner Plate,” “Old Easter Customs,” and “Old-time Lights.” Most of these articles are illustrated with photos. Some of this material eventually was published in book form; much of it is not available elsewhere, as far as I can determine.

In 1905–1906 alone, the magazine offered hundreds of recipes and menus, thousands of illustrated ads for household items, book reviews, and articles on etiquette, entertaining, servants, waitresses, famous women of the period, the life and foodways of dozens of foreign countries and peoples (Jamaica, Turkey, Japan, the Azores, Cuba), holiday celebrations and parties, amusements and sports, health, diet and nutrition, famous restaurants and inns, etc. The early issues of American Cookery offer remarkably complete information on the history of the cooking-school phenomenon in America—who taught, who attended, what the alumnae went on to do (the traveling cooks, as today, crisscrossing the country, giving lectures and cooking demonstrations). The articles illustrate the role of cooking schools in the nascent women’s movement.8

Our last entry is the rare western magazine The Caterer, published in San Francisco from November 1891 to October 1892. In addition to general culinary and

Table Talk, vol. v, no. 5 (May 1890).

viii. One of the most beautiful and influential magazines begun in the nineteenth century was What To Eat: The National Food Magazine (1896–1920). This publication has magnificent covers, ads, and illustrations, as well as useful historical information. For example, beginning in February 1905, a lead article in each issue titled “The Slaughter of Americans” looks at food contamination. Introducing the column, the editor writes:

In view of the wide spread adulteration of food in America, that is adding so greatly to the death roll, and causing more sickness and more misery than all other sources combined, WHAT TO EAT has decided to publish a series of carefully compiled articles revealing to Americans the actual condition of the food we eat today. We believe that the publication of this information will not only aid the consumer in the selection of his foods to avoid poisonous adulterations, but that the exposure will result in a general improvement of the food conditions in the country and we hope that they may ultimately cause some of the fraudulent manufacturers and dealers to be punished as they deserve to be.

Following this series, in August 1906, and opposite a very handsome early Coca-Cola ad in color, we find “WHAT TO EAT’S TENTH ANNIVERSARY. Being a Recounting of the...
gastronomic information, this magazine offers unique insight into professional life in the hospitality industry of the western United States. In the “Hotel and Restaurant Brieflets” column, each issue has notices of chefs, hotels, and restaurants in California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Nevada. We learn of chefs and hoteliers, their building plans, openings and closings, travels, marriages, deaths, costs of building, rebuilding, insurance, and bankruptcies; who has moved where, who has changed positions, been promoted or fired, where fire has wiped out a culinary enterprise (tragically, a very common occurrence of the era), which chef has committed suicide, who has purchased what—all the inner workings of professional culinary livelihood in the West. I know of no other source with this kind of detailed information.

The research opportunities offered by these magazines are limitless. Where else can one find such data (subjective as it might be) provided by contemporary, sophisticated, professional culinary informants? Original issues of these magazines (and others) can be found (or found “missing”) at a number of libraries throughout the United States; some are available in microfilm or microfiche. In future columns I shall discuss additional nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culinary magazines.

NOTES
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1. Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture 1, no. 4 (Fall 2001).
2. Please note the word “briefly.” This survey is intentionally an appetizer, to pique your curiosity, to tempt you to examine and utilize the early culinary magazines. They are a treasure trove, a firsthand, contemporary account of America’s culinary heritage.
3. Perhaps this is the time to issue a warning. The printing history of these magazines is very difficult to establish, almost impossible in some cases. Many merged with other magazines, changed names, editors, locations, etc. Often one discovers information not in the usual printed bibliographic references, but by serendipity, finding a single issue that either clarifies or clouds what has previously been known.
4. Barry Gray is a pseudonym for Robert Barry Coffin (1826–1886), a well-known writer and gastronome on the New York City scene in the 1860s and ’70s.
5. This is not to be confused with the very influential The Boston Cooking-School Magazine, later called American Cookery, which is discussed below.
8. Useful information on early cooking schools can also be found in the New England Kitchen Magazine and Home Science Magazine.