Representations of family meals even now when most married women work outside the home are often nostalgic evocations of warmth and safety—the haven presided over by father at the head of the table and mother serving some version of comfort food. As intimate as the experience of eating still may seem, our relationship to food in a capitalist economy is determined in large part by the food industry, and our relations of race, gender, and class are shaped by the social construction of cooking and eating. The essays in this section argue that in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States what came to be accepted as proper meals, even what mothers fed their babies, was constructed by large corporations.

Laura Shapiro’s essay demonstrates that Betty Crocker, a creation of General Mills, helped to sell the company’s products along with particular notions of femininity and masculinity. Gerber Infant Foods, Amy Bentley shows, changed not only preferred diet for infants but “modern motherhood” through their successful campaign to introduce solid food much earlier than had previously been usual. Of course, the most “modern” of foods was not what the mother might produce in her kitchen, but what she bought in those little jars with the picture of the quintessential white baby on them. In addition to what we ate and what we fed our babies, corporations also changed ideas about the equipment we used to prepare our food. The standard kitchen stoves that we now take for granted are not necessarily the most convenient or efficient design for cooking, but as Leslie Land demonstrates, uniform design was most efficient for maximizing profits for General Electric and Standard Gas, corporations that came to dominate stove manufacturing. Eating out is the food activity most associated with the marketplace, but as Jan Whittaker shows, the bland menu offered in restaurants at the turn of the twentieth century constructed white Anglo-Saxon cuisine as “healthy” food in opposition to the diet of the Eastern and Southern Europeans who were flocking to eastern cities in search of a better life. Ironically, it is precisely this diet, rich in vegetables, garlic, olive oil, and whole
grains, that is now hailed by many as the most beneficial for good health.

Most of us no longer look to General Mills and Gerber as paradigms of American values, and Betty Crocker no longer reigns supreme as she did in the 1950s. But the food industry continues to wield enormous power and constructs gender relations in its representations of women, albeit necessarily more subtly than it did before the women’s movement.
In the spring of 1954, some of America’s most popular magazines, radio shows, and television programs ran a food advertisement trumpeting “one of the great recipes of the year.” Great or not, Dutch Pantry Pie certainly summed up many of the nation’s culinary preoccupations at the time. It called for melting American cheese in Carnation Evaporated Milk, adding potatoes, and putting the mixture in a pie shell made with Gold Medal Flour. Then the mixture was covered with cubes of Spam and a top crust was added. For the sauce, the instructions were to mix more evaporated milk with a can of soup. Even for the early ’50s, an era when cookery was proud to be commercial, Dutch Pantry Pie led home cooks on a remarkable march through the food industry.

But what was equally striking about the recipe, at least as it appeared in the April issue of *Woman’s Day*, was the person offering it up. She was Mary Blake, well known as a spokeswoman for Carnation. Magazine readers may or may not have been aware that Mary Blake, per se, didn’t exist: Carnation’s home economists wrote her copy, signed her mail, and made her speeches. At Libby’s, home economists did the same for Mary Hale Martin; at Dole, she was called Patricia Collier; Ann Pillsbury presided over Pillsbury’s recipes, and there were dozens more, typically portrayed in the ads with pen-and-ink portraits of smiling women. These women weren’t real, exactly, although real women stood behind them. They were authority personified, lending a human face to food corporations bidding for the attention of female shoppers. But in the ad for Dutch Pantry Pie, Mary Blake did more than wear a human face, she made

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a strangely human gesture. The recipe, she told readers, was created “by my good friend Betty Crocker of General Mills.”

Her good friend? These two fictional figures were trading recipes? Betty Crocker, longtime spokeswoman for General Mills, was a credible source for any recipe calling for its Gold Medal flour. But a second glance at Dutch Pantry Pie hints at why this particular dish may have needed a more pointedly domestic backstory than even its name implied. The cheese was heavily processed, the milk came from a can, the meat did have animal origins but they lurked far in the past—plainly, if this meal was to qualify as home cooking, two human faces were none too many.

Mary Blake predicted that Dutch Pantry Pie would sweep the nation, and the ad did show up widely. But what really swept the nation were figures like Mary Blake and Betty Crocker, who forged a crucial link between old habits and new foods. Ever since the end of the Second World War, chemistry labs and assembly lines had been taking over more and more of the nation’s cooking. Now the food industry was overhauling the very concept of “cooking.” In ads and other promotional materials, such traditional kitchen chores as cleaning vegetables, chopping ingredients, measuring, and mixing were dismissed as old-fashioned drudgery. The new “cooking” meant opening boxes, defrosting foods, combining the contents of different packages, and decorating the results. When Kraft was promoting miniature marshmallows in 1955, for example, the company ran enormous newspaper ads featuring a “Kraft Kitchen Recipe.” Set up in standard cookbook format, the recipe started with a list of ingredients: one box of lemon pudding and one cup of miniature marshmallows. Then came the instructions: “Prepare the pudding according to directions on the package. Cool. Fold in the marshmallows.”

Right at the forefront of this effort to reeducate homemakers was the food industry’s busy sisterhood of pen-and-ink home economists. In person and in print, they taught women how to use new electric stoves, mixers, and blenders, how to cook blocks of frozen peas, how to garnish canned ham with pears dipped in food coloring, and how to make crepes suzettes with pancake mix. Known in the business world as “live trademarks,” these figures were designed to project specific, carefully researched characteristics to women shopping for their households. “Ideally, the corporate character is a woman, between the ages of 32 and 40, attractive, but not competitively so, mature but youthful-looking, competent yet warm, understanding but not sentimental, interested in the consumer but not involved with her,” explained a business publication
in 1957. To a historian tracking them, these women seem both ubiquitous and elusive, flourishing in a surreal universe that left purely optional the distinction between fiction and reality. In the pages of *Forecast*, a home economics magazine where real and invented home economists mingled especially comfortably, Mary Alden of Quaker Oats was given a byline for an article on nutritious oatmeal breakfasts, and Frances Barton of General Foods presided over a luncheon attended by the magazine’s real-life editor. When Irma Rombauer, author of *The Joy of Cooking*, published a cookbook emphasizing convenience foods in 1939, she listed and thanked all the “home economists” who had helped her but made no distinction between, say, Jeanette Kelley of Lever Brothers (real) and Martha Logan of Swift (fictional). On one notable occasion, Mary Barber, the real-life spokeswoman for Kellogg’s, took a cruise to Honduras courtesy of United Fruit, accompanied by its real-life representative, Ina Lindman. In an ad published in *Forecast*, Mary Barber acknowledged Ina Lindman but saved her most enthusiastic praise for another home economist at United Fruit: Chiquita Banana. “I came home with a new understanding of what makes Chiquita Banana the successful teacher she is!” wrote Mary Barber. “It’s Chiquita’s warmth, her sympathy, her *showmanship*.”

The most famous by far of these figures was, of course, Betty Crocker. A treasured property of General Mills, Betty Crocker has outlived her sisters by several decades. Over the years her job has varied—today she’s more symbolic than genuinely authoritative—but during the immediate postwar era she was a sure, steady voice guiding homemakers through a time of tension and change in the kitchen. Millions of Americans listened to her on the radio, read her column in the newspaper, and watched her on TV. In part she flourished because General Mills, unlike many of the other companies with live trademarks, recognized the value of her widely trusted persona and poured considerable resources into promoting her. But she also took up a permanent place in the nation’s culinary consciousness because of the food with which she was most powerfully identified—the classic, frosted layer cake. Few products emerging from the middle-class American kitchen have had the emotional heft of this iconic dessert, universally recognized as a triumph of love as much as skill. Betty Crocker knew very well the enormous resonance of a cake baked at home. “Cakes from every land have been introduced to America—but none is so glamorous as the typically American cake developed in this country—the gorgeous concoction of richly tender layers, crowned with luscious, creamy icing!” she wrote in a 1942 Gold Medal flour recipe booklet. “No wonder that
more cakes are made in American homes than any other type of baked food. They are a real achievement in the art of cooking. And cakes have become the very symbol of home life in our country.”

Home cooks didn’t need to be reminded that the stakes were high. Baking a cake is, in fact, a precarious undertaking: much can go wrong even in an oft-used recipe, depending on such factors as the weather, the size of the eggs, or the freshness of the baking powder. And when the cake is meant for a birthday or a company dinner, failure hits hard. Questions and lamentations about cake-baking had long predominated in forums where women had a chance to ask for help with cooking. Household magazine, published during the 1940s and ’50s in Topeka, Kansas, for a largely midwestern readership, ran a regular column in which a cooking expert answered readers’ questions; and month after month, their questions were about cakes. “I never had any trouble making cakes of any kind by hand. Since receiving my new electric mixer I do not have good cakes.” “After my angel food cakes stand a while the surface gets moist and sticky.” “What causes my chiffon cake to be heavy on the bottom?” In the columns of the Confidential Chat, a long-running readers’ question-and-answer forum in the women’s pages of the Boston Globe, letters on baking and cakes appeared constantly. “Will some experienced cook tell me why cakes fall on the bottom though they rise on top?” “Do you know how to measure shortening exactly, with the aid of water?” “When my beloved husband reached home this evening he as usual gave me a big hug and kiss and asked: ‘Did you make a cake or pie today?’ I’d just taken your wonderful ‘two-egg cake’ from my oven.”

Not surprisingly, it was trouble with baking that gave birth to Betty Crocker. In 1921 Washburn Crosby, the Minneapolis flour company that would become General Mills, ran a magazine promotion inviting people to complete a jigsaw puzzle and send it in to the company. Those who did so would receive a pin cushion in the shape of a flour sack. Thousands of people sent in the jigsaw puzzles, and many took the opportunity to include letters to Washburn Crosby, seeking advice on their breads, biscuits, and cakes. The company saw this as a good chance to communicate with customers, so home economists on staff answered every letter, signing them all “Betty Crocker”—“Betty” for its homey quality, and “Crocker” in honor of a longtime company executive. Betty Crocker was little more than a signature at first, but she gained a voice in 1924 when “The Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air” began broadcasting from a Minneapolis radio station, with a Washburn Crosby employee as Betty Crocker. The show ran for nearly three decades, registering more than a million “students.” Other radio pro-
grams followed, with different women over time personifying Betty Crocker, but the public had no problem fixing her identity. By the early 1950s, General Mills surveys showed that 99 percent of American housewives were familiar with Betty Crocker’s name, more than two-thirds correctly identified her with General Mills and its products, and some 20 percent spontaneously said “Betty Crocker” when asked to name the home economist they found “most helpful.”

Betty Crocker’s presence in print advertising was widespread, and millions of people requested copies of her recipe booklets, but she had her greatest impact on the public through radio. The radio, declared *Fortune* magazine in 1945, “made” Betty Crocker. Not only did it have a national reach that no print publication could match, it was also a peculiarly appropriate home for a figure whose relation to the real world was so intangible. To hear her voice was to add a dimension to her persona that print could not provide, but for a listener to complete the picture required imagination—itself a good medium for someone who was, in fact, imaginary. “And here she is, America’s first lady of food—your Betty Crocker,” the announcer used to proclaim on “Time for Betty Crocker,” underscoring the fact that Betty Crocker could be whatever her public wished or believed.

Betty Crocker’s radio shows, developed before broadcasting enforced any important distinction between editorial content and advertising, conveyed a remarkably fluid version of reality. They seemed to emanate from a world without boundaries, where real people conversed easily with made-up colleagues, and genuine discussions melted into commercial fantasies. “Time for Betty Crocker,” for instance, was a five-minute show that played nine times a week in the ’50s and reached more than eight million homes. The real-life Win Elliot—Betty Crocker’s longtime announcer and interlocutor—always introduced the fictional Betty Crocker. “Hello, everybody,” she would say cordially. Betty Crocker was portrayed from 1950 to 1964 by Adelaide Hawley Cumming, who had been a radio and TV commentator specializing in fashion and women’s news during the 1940s. Cumming’s voice was pleasant and confident, never intimate, and never coy. Her Betty Crocker was a grown-up and a professional, someone to be trusted for her expertise. “You know we’ve found that noodle casseroles are popular with most families,” she informed her listeners on a typical show. “But they can become pretty humdrum unless we’re careful to vary them. And our Noodles Cantonese recipe from my new Good and Easy Cookbook does just that.” Win Elliot, by contrast, spoke in warmer, less formal tones. “Hey, from all I gather, Betty Crocker, the gals are really going for *all* the recipes in that new cookbook of yours.” When the talk turned
to 4-Square Fudge Cake, the vehicle for discussing Gold Medal flour, it was Win Elliot who created the domestic context. His wife Rita, he said, had just made the cake for company. “The women all wanted the recipe, and the men—well, they wanted second and third helpings. What a success! The crunchy nuts in that moist, chocolatey, rich, tender . . . delicious cake . . . ummmm mmmmmm.” Betty Crocker then chuckled and told him, “Win, you’ve just been describing what we like to call ‘that good Gold Medal texture!’” And she went on explaining the merits of Gold Medal until Win Elliot said, “Well, Betty Crocker. It looks like time’s up.” “So it is, Win,” she agreed.17

Strikingly, while she calls him Win, he invariably addresses her as Betty Crocker. There’s an implicit hierarchy in Betty Crocker’s radio world, one that subtly reverses traditional sex roles. Betty Crocker is the professional, Win is the homebody; she’s the source of information, Win is the enthusiast; she’s authoritative, and Win is supportive. In her books and in print advertising, Betty Crocker often made a point of praising the housewife’s importance; but this message gained tremendous power by going undercover, in a sense, on the radio. Rather than overtly patting housewives on the back, she simply ran the show with confidence, described her work and travels, and emphasized that good cooking was an achievement in which women could take a great deal of pride. This kind of unsentimental esteem for housewives had begun with Marjorie Husted, one of the first Betty Crockers, who built up the home service department at General Mills through the 1940s and became a company executive. As she explained in a speech to advertising copywriters in 1948, her research among modern homemakers had convinced her that they felt “uncertain—anxious—insecure” about their work and its status. When she asked what they would need in order to feel satisfied with their domestic careers, the answers echoed one another: “Encouragement and appreciation . . . Appreciation and recognition . . . Family appreciation. . . .”18 Hence nobody in Betty Crocker’s vicinity was in danger of being identified as “just a housewife,” not even Rita, whose chocolate cake—“What a success!”—was applauded prominently by all. In any home where Betty Crocker reigns, her radio shows promised, the woman in the kitchen finally reaps the respect she’s due.

General Mills could see that Betty Crocker was unparalleled when it came to reaching homemakers and building trust in the company. The phenomenal success of Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book, published in 1950 with a then record-breaking first printing of nearly a million copies, showed just how much home cooks wanted the simply phrased reassurance and reliable advice they associated with her name. By the end of the 1940s, however, her traditional home base in radio was start-
ing to seem dowdy. Americans were in thrall to the new medium of television, and radio was fast losing ground as an advertising vehicle. Many of the country’s favorite radio personalities were moving to TV; why not Betty Crocker? Her radio shows continued, but in 1950 General Mills gave Betty Crocker her own TV series, filmed on location at company headquarters in Minneapolis. Now the nation would meet her in person.

This move to television coincided with one of the company’s most important new ventures. According to General Mills, American homemakers served more than a billion cakes a year, and the company knew from its own mail just how nervous many of those homemakers were about baking them. Along with its competitors, General Mills had been hard at work for years developing a cake mix. In 1948 the company launched its first one, called Ginger cake—italics in the original—and followed it with Devils Food Cake and Party Cake mixes. (Party Cake, explained a company newsletter, offered something for everyone. “With egg yolks, it produces a golden cake, with whole eggs, a yellow cake, with egg whites, a white cake and whole eggs plus spices, a spice cake. In combination with icing recipes that come with every package, it will make 64 different cake and icing combinations.”) Pillsbury and other companies also introduced their first cake mixes around this time, and ads for what Swans Down called “Miracle-perfect! Miracle-easy! Miracle-quick!” baking sprang up in magazines and newspapers.

Despite the trauma associated with cake-baking, the new mixes were not an easy sell. For women who believed, with Marjorie Husted, that family love was best symbolized by “the fragrance of good things baking in the oven,” a cake mix was guilt in a box. “Many women have resisted the innovations designed to make their job easier because they feel it makes their role seem less necessary and worthwhile,” reported advertising expert Janet Wolff. Much of the early publicity about cake mixes justified them by dwelling on the huge expenditures of time and strength that went into old-fashioned baking. Making traditional gingerbread, according to General Mills, called for “13 distinct steps, several of which involve two or more individual operations. . . . Only a homemaker who has gone through the ordeal can appreciate grandmother’s near heroism.” But if cake mixes were so very easy to use, the challenge and the sense of achievement dropped right out of baking—and by extension, homemaking. Moreover, survey after survey showed that of all their household tasks, women tended to like cooking best, perhaps because it did have the potential to be involving, demanding, and creative. Consequently, many ads urged women to think of a cake mix not as an end in itself but as the starting point for a burst of
imagination. “One of the best ways a woman can express her personality
is through the foods she serves,” counseled Ann Pillsbury. “Mixes are
not designed to destroy that creative instinct—but for the busy home-
maker, they are the base. The basic product is supplied—the frosting,
filling or topping is left to her.”

General Mills was counting on mixes of all sorts to dominate the
American kitchen in years to come. By 1950 the company was produc-
ing cake mixes and piecrust mixes as well as the familiar Bisquick, and
more products were in the pipeline. Television would be the key to
persuading women that these emblems of speed and certainty deserved
pride of place in modern housekeeping. Here, after all, was a selling
medium so new that Americans came to it without preconceptions.
Through television, they could be persuaded that what counted in bak-
ing were triumphant results—not genuine effort, not even genuine con-
tact with the ingredients. Betty Crocker would guide women as she
always had, but this time embodying a more dignified, almost imper-
sonal relationship to the kitchen. Only one show from her TV series
survives, the very first, and it hints at a persona and mission for Betty
Crocker very different from any she had before.

Broadcast on CBS-TV in the fall of 1951, the inaugural program
opened with a dramatic tableau staged far from sink or stove. A woman,
amonymous, stood on a promontory against the sky, two young children
clinging to her hands. Her chin was lifted, her gaze was unflinching,
and her purpose was grave, if not precisely definable. She seemed to
personify a valiant young America, defender of truth and protector of
the helpless. Then, as she paused with her little family on their arduous
though unspecific journey, a firm, masculine voice made clear to viewers
just what it was she stood for. “Homemaking,” he announced. “A
woman’s most rewarding way of life.” And with the theme thus pro-
claimed, the hostess of the show appeared—giving the nation its first
view of Betty Crocker as a live person. This transubstantiation from
fantasy to flesh was handled with great care. Adelaide Cumming’s name
was not spoken, nor did it appear in the credits. Instead, the announcer
welcomed viewers into the unmediated presence of Betty Crocker her-
self. And there she was, looking just like her famous portrait; Cum-
ming’s dress and hairstyle had been chosen to resemble it. Her greeting
was familiar, too: the well-modulated “Hello, everybody.” But Betty
Crocker did not take human form for the first time surrounded by
baking pans and measuring cups. When the camera zoomed in, she was
seated, with perfect poise and a gracious smile, behind a desk.

The show had what was known as a “service” format, providing de-
tailed information about cooking and baking with constant reference to
General Mills products. Interspersed with these segments, which were filmed in the General Mills kitchens, there was a patriotic soap opera in two scenes about a woman who invites an immigrant family for Thanksgiving dinner. Her need for a mince pie recipe gave Betty Crocker all the transitions she needed to get from the American way of life to piecrust mix. But during the frequent segments of the show devoted to rolling out pastry or making instant biscuits, Betty Crocker was never seen cooking. She did show up in the kitchen, but she shared it with a (real-life) General Mills home economist introduced as Ruth. It was Betty Crocker who gave the advice and instructions, and Ruth who did the work, swiftly and efficiently. Even more starkly than on the radio, Betty Crocker’s world was free of old-fashioned female drudgery. In fact, it was free of old-fashioned females. Ruth’s work was depersonalized, and Betty Crocker’s was managerial. Betty Crocker herself, though very much in the kitchen, was not of it. Tall, handsome, and perfectly at ease in front of the camera, Cumming had such beautifully molded diction she could barely say “Stir-N-Roll” pastry with the requisite slur. It came out “Stern Roll.”

This highly professional stance made a pointed contrast to the sentiment-drenched Thanksgiving dinner in the dramatic section of the show. With her new persona, Betty Crocker seemed to be distinguishing between home cooking and home cooks. Yes, the meal was still the heart of the holiday, she emphasized, but in these modern days the meal would practically cook itself with the help of the right products. What was truly important—and “rewarding”—were the intangibles of home life, summed up in the opening imagery of female courage and commitment. At the end of the show, seated once more at her desk, Betty Crocker urged viewers to pause during the holidays to remember the blessings of “family living and loving.” Then she read aloud a Sunday school hymn, one that thanked God for all the good things of everyday life, and bid farewell.

The series flopped. In 1952 General Mills tried again with another format, this one featuring Betty Crocker as the hostess of an entertainment show with guest stars. That flopped, too. Americans could listen to Betty Crocker on the radio, they wrote her thousands of letters a week, they bought her cookbooks in record numbers, but they were never comfortable with a real, live Betty Crocker who sat down in their living rooms once a week for a visit. Apparently the cognitive dissonance was just too overwhelming. The portentous message of the first program too was unpersuasive: women never wholly submitted to the notion that homemaking was their most rewarding way of life. Married women had been entering the workforce in steadily increasing
numbers since 1940. The decade that began with Betty Crocker’s TV debut ended with nearly 30 percent of married women working outside the home.

But Betty Crocker did continue appearing on television, and her new emphasis on depersonalized cooking settled in for a long run. For the rest of the decade she was featured in short commercials, where she pitched General Mills products—an unambiguous role that viewers apparently found less disconcerting than her experiment as a guest in their homes. Most of her work was confined to cake mixes, and her message was pared to their chief selling point: mixes were easy to use and infallible. Often in TV commercials she showed up in Gracie Allen’s house, just as Gracie was telling George Burns that she couldn’t think of what to make for her club meeting or a holiday dinner. “Why don’t you ask your friend, Betty Crocker?” George would say. In a moment, the two women were admiring a marble or spice cake that had been produced with almost no visible effort. “It’s so easy, even I can bake a Betty Crocker cake!” Gracie would exclaim with relief at the end. Perhaps because Gracie, like Betty Crocker, was a seamless blend of the real and the imaginary, the two women seemed thoroughly comfortable together. But unlike Betty Crocker’s radio world, where a woman’s voice took the lead and women’s accomplishments earned full recognition, she and Gracie had virtually nothing to do in the TV kitchen. It took no skill to come up with this particular marble or spice cake—indeed, that was the point of their delighted self-congratulation. Betty Crocker, who had started her career by sharing a vast store of culinary expertise, now wielded little more than an air of conviction. By the mid-’50s her persona in print ads followed the tone set by TV. “In strawberry season—or any time—you have it all over mother’s generation,” she told readers in a 1954 angel-food cake mix ad. “Much of the guesswork is gone from cooking. Kitchen time is cut way down. By the ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook foods. By magical appliances that practically think for you. . . . These days, you can even bake without experience.” During this period her TV commercials introduced a tagline that would become famous. “I guarantee a perfect cake, every time you bake—cake after cake after cake,” she assured viewers, conjuring an image of identical, flawless cakes rolling off an assembly line. With this, the woman in the kitchen effectively became redundant. In 1960 Betty Crocker herself disappeared from both radio and television (though she continued to thrive in print). In one of the TV cake-mix commercials that followed her departure, nobody cooked at all—a cartoon spoon merrily mixed batter in a cartoon bowl.

By the end of the 1950s, packaged foods had gained a permanent
place on the nation’s tables, and most of Betty Crocker’s sisters were out of business. Even cake mixes, which had been poor in quality at first, improved enough over time to lure many home cooks. “There are some good mixes on the market,” James Beard wrote to his friend and fellow cookbook author Helen Evans Brown in 1960. “I like the hot roll mix of Pillsbury and the buttermilk pancake mix of Duncan Hines, and their cake mixes aren’t so bad either.” But to many women, including some who cooked from boxes and jars, the hands-off approach to making dinner was fundamentally unsatisfying. It didn’t have enough to do with food, or genuine work, or the pleasure of eating. Analyzing theemptiness at the heart of “the housekeeping role” in the age of convenience, thepsychologist Lois Hoffman observed that “many a housewife is saddened to learn that with a package mix she can make an angel food cake two inches higher than the one she had previously made from one cookbook and twelve left-over egg whites.” Her essay was published in 1963—the very year that Julia Child first appeared on television, up to her elbows in flour, butter, and garlic. Here was a culinary authority different from any who came before. There was nothing corporate about her image, nothing packaged about her message; when she stirred the sauce you could practically smell the shallots. But what distinguished her most sharply from her predecessors was the way she spoke to home cooks. Julia Child offered no guarantees, and she never promised she could make cooking easy. Instead, she promised to make it understandable—and to make the woman in the kitchen strong. Homemakers watched and listened, hungrily. More than four decades later, her daughters number in the millions.

Notes

2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
27. I am grateful to the staff of the Corporate Archives at General Mills for making it possible for me to see a videotape of this show, which is not normally available for viewing.
29. Once more, I am grateful to General Mills for the opportunity to see a sample of these commercials on videotape.
Counterintuitive: How the Marketing of Modernism Hijacked the Kitchen Stove

Leslie Land

As a long-time cook, food writer, food editor, and short person, I have spent most of my life wondering: Why are all home kitchen stoves exactly 36 inches tall, in spite of the widely accepted dictum that work surfaces should be tailored to the height of the user? Why is the oven both low and in front, so it blasts you with heat while breaking your back? Why, in other words, is the most important appliance in the American kitchen so poorly designed, and why is this poor design so pervasive?

What’s especially galling is that ’twas not always thus. From their commercial introduction in the early nineteenth century until the turn of the twentieth, stoves came in a wide assortment of heights, and they offered ovens under, over, and beside the cooktop in a mind-boggling array of variations. Consolidations in the stove industry and the disappearance of hundreds of small foundries had narrowed the options by the end of the 1920s, but buyers still had plenty of different heights to choose from. The Sears, Roebuck catalog of 1927, for instance, offered stoves with cooktops anywhere from 29 1/3 to 33 3/4 inches tall.¹ And most of them had elevated ovens. But just after entering its most gloriously useful era, the kitchen stove turned its back on progress, devolving into a rigidly conformist box that was—and is—uncomfortable for almost everybody.

The raised oven was far from unknown in the nineteenth century, but it had its heyday in the early part of the twentieth, when freedom from the need to stoop was a major selling point. As the catalog copy for the 1907 Climax Estate gas stove pointed out, ranges with elevated ovens “must appeal to any one as being practical, common sense, and convenient. Access is easily had to the broiler, bake oven and cooking top without stooping or bending. Full view of the baking and broiling is a great advantage to the cook.”
The trend picked up steam as time went on. Most mid- and high-priced stoves built in the teens and twenties offered multiple ovens—a high one for every day, and a large, low one under the burners, known as a “holiday oven” because it was big enough to roast a really big turkey (and only needed on state occasions). Among the rest, chances were the whole works started at table height and the high oven was the only one you got. That was the case with the Hughes Electric, a pioneering model offered by the Edison Electric Appliance Company in 1920. It was common with the less expensive gas models, and a given with stoves that burned oil, which needed the space below the cooktop for the columnar burners. By 1928, the high oven was everywhere, from the oil-burning Perfection “modern as the swift-winged liners of the air,” to the offerings of the American Stove Company, which claimed to be the largest in the field and had high ovens on all six of its gas stove lines. As late as 1934, GE was showing high oven stoves in its demon-
How the Marketing of Modernism Hijacked the Kitchen Stove

The sell was the “Red Wheel” thermostat, but every one of these nifty new stoves had a high oven. At this point, they could let the pictures say “gas is better than coal or wood,” but they still had to reassure potential buyers that gas was available. Ad for American Stove Company, from Woman’s Home Companion, June 1929, p. 113.
more and more numerous in U.S. kitchens through the first decades of the century. But they remained freestanding items, just as the kitchens that housed them remained assemblages of discontinuous elements, right through the 1920s. Meanwhile, in Germany, home of the most influential architecture of the age, there were clear warnings of the shape of things to come. The Haus am Horn, a Bauhaus model single-family home displayed at Weimar in 1923, had a single-level sink and sideboard along one kitchen wall. There was a level L-shaped work surface in the experimental Weissenhof settlement, in Stuttgart, in 1927, and the Frankfurter Küche, also unveiled in 1927, took the idea to its illogical conclusion. All work surfaces in this kitchen were the same height, a triumph of simplified line much admired by architectural theorists.

Sigfrid Giedion described the Haus am Horn and Weissenhof kitchens in *Mechanization Takes Command*, a frequently quoted history of mass production that came out in 1948. The Frankfurter Küche is cited by Raimonda Riccini in “The Rationalized Kitchen,” a pair of essays in the huge, wide-ranging *History of Industrial Design* published in Italy in 1990. For these authorities, and others like them, the continuous countertop is an unmitigated Good Thing. Riccini, for instance, whose title speaks volumes, finds a lot to fault in the circa 1850 freestanding kitchen range: “The construction material, the amount of space it took up, and the smoke and heat given off made it impossible to place the stove alongside such pieces of furniture as old fashioned dressers or even worse, the early attempts at continuous work surfaces.” Giedion, for his part, refers to the Haus am Horn effort as “the earliest example of the kitchen in which organization is joined to form” and speaks approvingly of “the cooking centers, favored by surfaces and appliances at equal heights.”

Favored or not, the continuous counter was admired mostly by a small group of avant-garde architects, and if that had stayed true right through the thirties and forties, there’s a good chance that only patrons of the arts would still be stuck with the thing. But the German theorists turned out to have the zeitgeist on their side, and nowhere more strongly than in the United States. Inspired by the simplifications for which the Bauhaus was famous, American industrial designers removed the decorations from every consumer product from toasters to automobiles, radios to refrigerators; and they leveled uneven surfaces—including those in the kitchen—whenever they got the chance. Going the Bauhaus one better, they also rounded off sharp corners in a homage to aerodynamics known as the streamlined look. Though products like bathroom scales and pencil sharpeners weren’t measurably improved by
the reduction of air drag, the sense of modernity and forward progress streamlining conveyed turned out to have considerable sales appeal to people mired in the Depression.

The stage had already been set. Major advances in manufacturing and transportation that had started in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were fully assimilated. Locally produced necessities—wheat for porridge, lye soap for cleaning, horses for getting from here to there—were well on their way to being supplanted by brand-name consumer goods: Grape Nuts, Ivory Snow, Ford cars. There were more, and more various, factory-produced items for sale than there had ever been before, and as a result, advertising grew from being an adjunct of something else (manufacturing, publishing, retailing) into a full-fledged industry, complete with the forerunners of psychological profiling. The earnest, if often hyperbolic, descriptions of a product’s merits that had characterized late Victorian sales efforts gave way to what came to be called “Consumer Engineering,” an approach that appealed as much to buyers’ sense of style—and fears of failure—as it did to their desire for bargains. Simply selling people things they needed was no longer enough; it was necessary to persuade them that they needed things they’d never dreamed of. Since most household purchases were made by women, the newly created ad agencies targeted women particularly, and “promised to create a new market of consumers, indeed to systematize desire.”

But if advertising was becoming more convoluted, design was straightening out. Art Nouveau gave way to Modernism. “Clean” lines and simplified forms replaced sinuous curves and decorated surfaces in everything from furniture and textiles to dinnerware, while the idea of thematic unity in home décor gained greater and greater currency. Decorating itself moved toward widespread popular legitimacy, and for the first time since the prescient Beecher, kitchens were designed as wholes by professional “household engineers” such as Christine Frederick and Lillian Gilbreth (about whom more in a minute).

Even without these changes in fashion, some kind of radically new stove was probably inevitable; the industry was suffering an untenable overcapacity. During the 1920s, rising prosperity had combined with major improvements in both sheet-metal fabrication and gas and electric technology to fuel a major boom in stove sales. Appliance makers expanded. But almost before they could get to the bank, first recession, then depression hit. Companies such as General Electric and Standard Gas were desperate for ways to keep moving durable goods such as stoves and refrigerators, equipment which was all too likely to be retained rather than replaced since it was not only expensive but, well,
durable. A gas stove bought in 1925 was probably still working just fine in 1932, and hard times no doubt exacerbated the conservative tendencies of stove buyers, already a somewhat reluctant group when it came to adopting the latest thing.

With a nation full of useful old stoves and a depression on, the only way to stimulate consumption was to persuade buyers that the old models were seriously outmoded. But since the stoves were, by and large, perfectly adequate to their purpose, the only way to make them seem outmoded was to make them look outmoded, and that meant bringing in industrial designers, most famously Norman Bel Geddes, who eventually made his name one of the selling points of his designs.

Unlike old-fashioned industrial engineers, the designers came from the world of visual persuasion, and for them, outward appearance was just as important as functionality. Bel Geddes, for instance, had started out in theatrical design and then moved into advertising before he found what proved to be his true calling. It took a while for manufacturers to be persuaded of the designers’ usefulness, but they were almost all on board by the time the decade was half over.

No wonder. The designers sold themselves even better than their designs moved merchandise, and once the momentum was on their side no business could afford to be left behind looking old-fashioned. Between 1929 (when Frank Alvah Parsons, commissioned by the American Stove Company to design a range that would be seen as a piece of kitchen furniture, came up with a couple of flat-topped beauties called the Jonquil and the Patrician) and 1938 (when The Stove Builder, “Official publication of the Institute of Cooking and Heating Appliance Manufacturers,” declared “Streamlining now dominates all phases of the industry”) kitchen design entered the modern age. By decade’s end, the continuous counter was a catastrophe accompli; the stove was locked at counter height; and that height was an equally locked 36 inches.

At that time the average American woman was about five feet three and the importance of proper working heights—roughly 32 inches, in this case—had been well known and quite widely trumpeted for almost thirty years. (Frederick W. Taylor’s highly influential Principles of Scientific Management, source of the term “Taylorization,” and seed for a forest of time and motion studies, was published in 1911.)

There were two distinct groups that might have been expected to point out that these tall counters and the stoves that matched them were no boon to the average woman: feminists and the aforementioned household engineers. Unfortunately, the feminists by and large assumed that what women wanted was out of the kitchen, and while the household engineers were equally determined to keep them in it, their care-
fully considered proposals for improvements in kitchen design did not include criticism of companies they relied on for employment.

The feminists, as described by historian Dolores Hayden in *The Grand Domestic Revolution,* “demanded the transformation of the private domestic workplace, the kitchen,” into something large, centralized, and, preferably, cooked in by someone else. Marie Stevens Howland “passed over domestic work... as a job for ‘trained people.’” Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an advocate of the kitchenless home, where housework would be done “by experts instead of amateurs.” And Henrietta Rodman also envisioned “trained help from the domestic science departments of the high schools.”

As Hayden points out, the problem was succinctly stated by Laura Fay-Smith, who wrote in a *New York Times* article of 1915, “The feminist wants to climb high above the harsh labors of the house, on the shoulders of the women whose hard necessity compels them to be paid servants.” This disinterest in the actual physical labor—and enjoyment—of cooking left the field of consumer advocacy wide open for the “self-
proclaimed ‘efficiency experts’ such as Lillian Gilbreth or Christine Frederick who claimed that technology could achieve these same goals (less labor, less isolation) without transforming the traditional home or the woman’s role as housewife.”

Christine Frederick (1883–1970) was a home economist who became an efficiency expert by learning from her industrial-consultant husband, T. George Frederick. She built her own consulting business by turning their Long Island kitchen into “the Applecroft Home Experiment Station” and was, early in her career, a household editor both for the Ladies Home Journal and The Delineator. She spent most of her working years as an unashamed hybrid of consumer advocate and copywriter, lecturing and writing books about homemaking and home design while consulting on—and writing sales pamphlets for—a range of manufactured goods from Hoosier cabinets to Campbell’s soups.

But Frederick’s heart was really in advertising. Her best-known work, a guide for perplexed merchandisers called Selling Mrs. Consumer, published in 1929 and dedicated to Herbert Hoover, reveals her as an enthusiastic supporter of industry whose assessment of the average woman—sharp enough about what she wanted, but overly susceptible to emotional and visual appeals—was neatly matched by her opinion of the average manufacturer—a testosterone-blinded oaf who had better listen to her if he ever wanted to sell anything.

In contrast to Frederick, who had no outstanding academic credentials, Lillian Gilbreth (1878–1971) had a doctorate in psychology, and though she also came into the business through an efficiency-expert husband, she went on to become an engineer in her own right. The first woman elected to the National Academy of Engineering, she was also an advisor on women’s issues to every president from Hoover to Johnson. Along with her husband, Frank Bunker Gilbreth, she developed a theory of management they called “The One Best Way,” which posited that there was a single ideal method for every activity, and that every goal from business efficiency to personal happiness would be achieved if this ideal were found and followed.

However different their backgrounds, Frederick and Gilbreth shared similar views on the basics of kitchen design. Both were bewitched by the idea of equating cake-baking and dishwashing with widget-fabrication; and both were perhaps over-beguiled by the ease of moving objects on—and cleaning—a level plane. But both of them knew perfectly well that the best counter height for kneading dough is not the best for making sandwiches, and they certainly knew that fixing all kitchen counters in the country at any one height would be the antithesis of efficiency—at least as far as the user was concerned.
Along with step-saving, which got its first impassioned defense in *The American Woman’s Home*, making sure work surfaces were the correct height for the person using them was one of the cardinal tenets of the efficiency movement, at home as well as at work. The importance of individual tailoring was staple information in newspaper features, magazine articles, and books about home design. For example, Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose Helen Canon’s 1919 book, *The Manual of Home-Making*, addressed the subject frequently, and was one of the few that mentioned the stove specifically: “This [the importance of correct height] applies to cook stoves as well as to tables and sinks. It may be necessary to raise the stove on blocks to bring it to this level.” *House and Garden’s* Ethel R. Peyser stayed on the height message for years. In September 1920, speaking of the kitchen table (and bringing in the servant question, which was seldom mentioned in these prescriptions), she wrote “ordinary heights are from 32 to 28 inches. Get the height that fits your workers.” Three years later, in November, in an article titled “Laying It on the Kitchen Table,” she repeated, “In order to use the work surface with convenience the top should be about 32 inches from the floor. But if you always employ ‘shorties,’ 28 inches may do.”

Gilbreth put height first on her list, quite possibly because at five feet seven she was unusually tall. When she designed a model kitchen for the New York Herald Tribune Institute in 1930, only two of the many labor-saving principles on display were described as crucial: “1. Working surfaces adapted to fit the height of the worker. 2. The circular work space” [in essence, a close placement of stove, sink, and refrigerator now commonly called “the kitchen triangle,” though there were additional refinements].

The *Tribune* offered free copies of the model kitchen floor plan to anyone who asked for them, and it invited readers to “have one of our experts measure you by Dr. Gilbreth’s chart . . . and tell you just how high your kitchen tables and other working surfaces should be to prevent unnecessary fatigue.”

Christine Frederick was equally adamant, and sooner. On July 6, 1913, not long after her career had taken off, a *New York Times* article headlined “The Woman Who Invented Scientific Housekeeping” reported her observation that “the ordinary houseworker, whether mistress or servant, . . . works at a surface too high or too low. One need not enlarge upon this to the woman with aching back, yet how few think of changing the conditions even in their own houses. To obviate this, Mrs. Frederick has worked out a table of measurements for women of various heights.”
This table, as laid out in Frederick’s book, *Household Engineering* (1915), stipulated heights galore: to the base of sinks, for standing work surfaces and for sitting work surfaces. The standing work surfaces, presumably including stoves, ranged from 31 ½ inches, for a woman five feet tall, to 34 ¼ inches, for a woman who was five feet six. All this was in spite of the fact that, as she pointed out only two pages later, “No absolute rule can be given for invariable heights because not only the height of the worker must be taken into consideration but also the length of her arm, and whether she is short or long waisted, etc.”

In other words, Frederick had a firm grip—deathgrip might not be too strong a word—on the idea that it was important for each individual cook to have her work surface at an equally individual height. But she didn’t hold on. By the end of her career she had no trouble blithely announcing, “Today we have settled on 36 inches as the most comfortable counter height for most workers,” though she did allow you might be able to raise or lower the toe space of the base cabinets if necessary.

Other home economists were equally accepting, even when they knew the standard height was likely to cause problems. Consider Louise Peet and Lenore Thye, who covered the subject of kitchen layouts in a very thorough book called *Household Equipment*. True to accepted ergonomic wisdom, they pointed out: “The practice in modern kitchen layouts of having all surfaces on a level, using the 36 inch height of the range as the unit of measure, places more emphasis on appearance than suitability. Different tasks performed in the kitchen frequently require work surfaces of different heights.”

In spite of this understanding, Peet and Thye didn’t protest the height of the range, perhaps because they knew there was nothing their readers could do about it. And they seem to have taken for granted that the stove dictated the height of the counter. But the long history of variable stove heights, combined with their sudden jolt to rigidity just when the continuous counter became the sine qua non of American kitchen design, suggests that originally it was the counter that dictated the height of the stove, rather than the reverse.

Then why 36 inches? Just about everyone who was looking at women in the kitchen seems to have agreed that work surface height should be proportional to the height of the user, so even if you accept the idea that only an “average” woman could be considered, the proper height for her counter would have been quite a bit less than a yard.

It’s tempting to blame Lillian Gilbreth. Her demonstration kitchen for the *Tribune*, which had 36-inch counters, was “planned for a housekeeper 5 feet 7 inches tall, since that is the height of one of the home
economists on the Herald Tribune Institute staff,” and she did go on to design similar installations for General Electric.

Yet Gilbreth was so insistent about customized heights (tall women were advised to raise their counters on blocks, short ones to saw the legs off of anything too high) that it’s hard to imagine she would have proposed a universal standard so far off the average . . . hard, that is, until you remember that a continuous countertop cannot be all things to all tasks. If you don’t want to break your back when it’s time to do the dishes, all measurements derive not from the top of the counter but from the bottom of the sink.

In the women’s advice literature of the time, all routine domestic activities were seen as things to get through as quickly and efficiently as possible, but washing was the one that got the hideous drudgery prize. Though the creative aspects of cooking were given short shrift and meal preparation was seldom described as fun, the household engineers spent a great many more—and more eloquent—words on the back pain caused by too much bending over the sink than they did on any other flaw in old-fashioned kitchen layouts.

In the 1913 *Times* article, for instance, Mrs. Frederick’s remarks on height started with the words “architects or carpenters have decided that the standard kitchen sink shall be so many feet and so many inches high. Therefore at this sink works the woman who is only five feet two, the woman who is five feet ten, and all those in between. There is just one height of woman who works at it with ease. The others are under constant and unnecessary physical strain, with its consequent loss of time and energy.”

Gilbreth’s pamphlet-writer was equally ready to single out the sink. “No woman who has ever labored for even five minutes in an inefficient kitchen needs to be told that the most exhausting part of dishwashing, ironing and any other task usually done standing is the constant bending over.” It was a sore point that had staying power, as shown by this analysis from *The House, Its Plan and Use* (1948), by Tessie Agan. Describing the steps involved in making a Waldorf salad, she explains, “Cutting the apples, the celery and the walnuts and mixing and arranging on plates can be comfortably accomplished at a height anywhere near the center of the torso. But washing dishes is a longer and oft repeated activity so that a more exact location has been determined. For the bottom of the sink, which is the lowest point reached in this activity . . . the preferred height of the bottom of the sink which is 5 inches or more deep is 31 inches from the floor. If the sink is properly set and if it has work counters on each side, as is often the case, the height of these counters is 36 inches from the floor.”
The italics are mine because they are, in a sense, the smoking sink. In the early ’30s, countertops were generally about 31 inches tall, while the tops of the—freestanding—sinks were a sensible 36 inches. Proper working heights were old news by that time; as early as 1922, advertisements for the Standard Plumbing Fixture company were boasting: “‘Standard kitchen sinks,’ yard stick high, provide comfort and prevent back-strain. How high is yours?” When the mania for continuous coun-

Right idea, wrong homemaker. They couldn’t show her looking dumpy, so they had to cheat. By the yardstick conveniently provided, this woman is almost 6 feet tall. Ad for Standard Plumbing Fixtures, from Good Housekeeping, September 1922, p. 197.
ters decreed that everything from the breadboard to the stove burners to the sinktop must be the same height, the sinktop won, and the 36-inch stove was born.

After describing even deeper sinks and the even higher counters that should surround them, Agan admitted, “some activities in connection with the preparation of food are not done comfortably” at sinktop-counter height. Pastry-making, for instance, required a height similar to that of the sink-bottom, so “obviously, a special lower surface for mixing and rolling of doughs is desirable.” It was equally obvious that the stove ought to be lower, too, but the stove wasn’t mentioned. Something more than ergonomics was plainly at work, and that something was fashion, a fashion that was thoroughly entrenched by the time Agan wrote her book, a fashion so friendly to commercial exploitation that adjustable stoves never had a chance.

“Stoves are rapidly reaching the style consciousness which we are accustomed to in the Automobile Industry,” wrote designer Onnie Mankki in a 1934 article for *The Stove Builder* called “Coming Trends in Stove Design.” He went on at some length about the importance of form and color, then added, “The introduction of the cabinet type range also has brought certain features which are still controversial. Whether or not we are justified in lowering the oven door to the somewhat inconvenient low position necessary to produce a low table top, will find many people strongly defending both points of view.”

Not for long, at least not among stove makers. The streamlined look of the tabletop range was too powerful a selling point to be questioned for very long. “The modern range is demonstrated as an attractive piece of furniture to replace the homely and obsolete stoves of yesterday,” the magazine proclaimed two years later, describing the products displayed at the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland in 1936. By then, the transition was just about complete. The high oven was gone and so, in many cases, were the legs that might have made the stoves easily adjustable.

“Whereas we used to have woeful black, squatty, graceless ranges, today we have the console models,” gushed Ethel Peyser in *House Beautiful* in May 1931. “One outstanding new type is the cabinet—by some, we think wrongly, called the console-range . . . [it has] a flat top that can be used as a table when not in use for cooking,” various drawers, for both broiling and storage, and “The legs are adjustable and can be raised or lowered to suit the cook!” The exclamation point suggests Ms. Peyser was delighted by the adjustability feature; at last, here was a stove that could be the right height for any number of different women.

This good idea also occurred to Norman Bel Geddes, designer of the
prototypical modern stove-as-box (for the Standard Gas Equipment Corporation, in 1930). Geddes revamped Standard’s entire line, eliminating what had been almost a hundred designs and replacing them with a set of twelve modules that could be mixed and matched “to create quite different stoves . . . but the company found it cheaper to manufacture ‘a single piece stamped steel front frame’ for each model,” eliminating the possibility of adjustable height.25

A customer survey had flagged ease of cleaning as a prime consideration for stove buyers, and that may be why Bel Geddes’s design had a flat front instead of legs. He might also have been in efficiency mode; bringing the stove down to the ground made room for storage drawers. But there’s also a chance that the choice was primarily a visual statement, a way of setting the new stove apart—every previous stove had legs (leftovers from the days of solid fuel); this radical new model didn’t.

Regardless of the reason for amputation, refrigerators were next. Henry Dreyfuss took the legs off the GE in 1934, then Raymond Lowey lowered the Sears Coldspot. “When we began our design,” he later wrote, “the Coldspot unit then on the market was ugly . . . perched on spindly legs high off the ground.”26 Possibly taking a cue from Bel Geddes’s stove, Lowey used the space beneath the ‘fridge cabinet for storage. But while a flat front instead of legs is no hardship with a refrigerator—the time one spends standing in front thereof is brief—it was no favor to the users of stoves, who lost the generous toe kick that let them stand comfortably close to the work surface.

What they gained—if that’s the word—was an aesthetically unified set of streamlined appliances, all of which looked modern and proclaimed their owner an up-to-date possessor of the latest thing. Yet the puzzle remains. Legs would have made adjustability easier, but they weren’t essential. It wouldn’t have been all that expensive to stamp out bases of different heights, and stove makers certainly didn’t mind offering several versions of what was basically the same sheet metal box. The Hotpoint stove catalog of 1938, for instance, offered numerous “Special Features . . . Add them to Hotpoint’s basic features and you have a modern range specially designed to meet your own specific needs.” You could have a “choice of ovens” (the Royal and Deluxe ranges offered more wattage) and a “choice of broilers” (fancier ones were aluminum, standard was porcelain); there were choices in work surface arrangement, number of burners, number of ovens, and numbers of storage drawers. You could opt for extra outlets, get spiffier hardware, even, if you paid more, avoid burning your arms by getting the controls on the front of the stove instead of on the backsplash. The one thing you could
not get was—you guessed it. Under “Choice of dimensions,” which offered depths of either 23 or 25 inches, and lengths of 21, 39, 39 ⅝, 42, and 54 inches, there was the discouraging announcement: “Height of cooking top—all models are 36 inches from floor.”

Admittedly, most of those “special features” were little more than cosmetic, but not all of them. Hotpoint could at least have offered adjustability to those who were willing to pay for it. But if they did, it would have blown away the modern-looking continuous countertop, and along with it the chance to sell the modular kitchen cabinets produced by furniture manufacturers, the electric sink, complete with disposal and dishwasher, made by Hotpoint itself, and by extension the increased use of electricity that the fully modernized kitchen would consume.

The continuous countertop, child of the Bauhaus and the assembly line, rapidly grew up to be a mighty engine of cross-marketing. Once you were sold on the idea of the continuous counter, once you were safely locked in with the stove, the one essential piece of equipment that you could not hope to build or alter at home, none of your old kitchen furniture fit. But thanks to its locked, uniform height, all of the new stuff on the market was just the right size. The opportunities for cooperative advertising were enormous, and they were not overlooked. Earl Lifshey innocently described one way this worked in The Housewares Story, a history written for the National Housewares Manufacturers Association:

The trend toward more up-to-date kitchens got a big boost in 1935 when the National Kitchen Modernization Bureau was established jointly by the Edison Electric Institute (now the Electric Energy Association) and The National Electrical Manufacturers Association to actively promote kitchen modernization throughout the country.

Tied in with the Federal Housing Bureau on general modernization of the home . . . the new bureau launched an extensive program that included the creation of model modern kitchen displays; radio programs; distribution of modern electric kitchen plan books; a feature motion picture entitled “the Courage of Kay” in which the subject was dramatized with numerous tie-ins with retailers, appliance and kitchen equipment manufacturers, builders and others.27

Faced with a juggernaut like that—the project was stopped only by the onset of the World War—it’s not surprising that high ovens and uneven workspaces were the odd utilities out. Women never stopped
Cross-marketing in action. The modern GE kitchen has modular cabinets, a dishwasher, all electric appliances, and a bigger window. (Why the gas stove in the “before” picture needed a big black pipe is not revealed.) From The New Art, p. 9.
wishing for elevated ovens, though, and “Shopping for a Good Stove,” Joy Parr’s essay about how the business worked in Ontario in the early ’50’s, could as easily have been written about the United States:

Historically, the most common Canadian solid-fuel-burning ranges had had ovens beside rather than below the burners. Early gas and electric stoves followed this form. Buchanan [Donald W. Buchanan, head of the National Industrial Design Council], skeptical when he could find only one Canadian electrical range, a McClary, with the oven at what the housewives claimed was the right height, referred the matter to an authority, Dr. J. B. Brodie, head of household science at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Brodie made common cause with the housewives, arguing that plans “to ‘streamline’ everything and have a working space around the kitchen at one level . . . are evolved by those who do not work in a kitchen and we know that they are not efficient.” Her words were well chosen[.] Buchanan, a proponent of British Good Design principles, regarded streamlining as a heresy hatched by American salesmen.28

In spite of considerable pressure from consumer groups, most Canadian manufacturers were unwilling to try reintroducing high oven stoves, at least in part because American market tests had failed. The one model built didn’t sell, and that may well have been because it just didn’t look right. Henry Dreyfuss, who disavowed the later excesses of streamlining while proudly claiming his part in having hatched it in the first place, offered the following analysis in his 1955 autohagiography, Designing for People: “Our grandmothers used [the high oven range] twenty-five years ago, but it virtually disappeared when the industrial designer came along and created a revolution in the kitchen by making everything counter height, including the stove. Several years ago, however, research indicated a preference for a high-oven range and a manufacturer offered an improved model. Women liked its greater convenience . . . but they didn’t buy it. The table-top stove flush with the other cabinets in the kitchen had become such a style factor that the ladies refused to be budged away from it.”29

Regrettably, Dreyfuss seems to be right. The continuous counter still rules, probably at least in part because deconstruction finally solved the high oven problem at just about the time he was writing. By the end of the 1950s, wall ovens were a such a cliche of “contemporary” kitchen design that English music hall comedians Flanders and Swann could sing, “I’m delirious about our new cooker equipment with the eye-level
What a difference a decade makes (though cold storage remains aesthetically problematic and—not being for sale—isn’t shown.) In 1929, the kitchen is a cozy, social space. Ten years later, it’s a shrine to visual order at the expense of all else. Ad for Congoleum Rugs, from Woman’s Home Companion, June 1929, inside front cover; ad for Pabco Linoleum, from Woman’s Home Companion, April 1939, p. 34.
How the Marketing of Modernism Hijacked the Kitchen Stove

grill. This means that now, without my having to bend down, the hot fat can squirt straight in my eye.”30

Wall ovens are now commonplace in middle-class homes and almost a given in those of the rich. But the separate oven has done nothing to solve the counter problem, and though Modernism has been out so long it’s enjoying a revival, streamlining never stopped defining this aspect of kitchen design. Why would it? The continuous countertop is the best thing that ever happened to a multibillion dollar industry. All mass-produced kitchen cabinets are still built to the 36-inch standard; so are most dishwashers; and for those who must buy a kitchen range, the tyranny of the yardstick is as absolute as it was sixty years ago.

Notes

1. The 1927 Sears Roebuck catalog offered an assortment of stoves: 2 electric, 2 gas, 2 gas and coal, 5 wood and coal. Not all heights-to-cooktop were listed, but this group included models at 29 3/4, 31, 32, 33, and 33 3/4 inches.

2. The New Art, a promotional cookbook “presented by General Electric Kitchen Institute” (Cleveland, Ohio) in 1934, offered full-color illustrations of a couple of the latest GE kitchens, in each of which—for the last time—the stove had an elevated oven.


8. The first American gas stoves were made shortly after the Civil War, and had been considerably improved by the last quarter of the century, but the first edition of the Boston Cooking School Cookbook, published in 1896, gave the new fuel only a couple of brief mentions while devoting two full pages to a careful description of how to build a coal fire. Almost three decades later, in the 1927 edition, electricity (introduced for cooking in 1891, though it was almost 1920 before the first stoves were widely advertised) got the single sentence, and gas had been promoted to a short paragraph that began: “A gas range is used wherever gas is available.” Gas was by no means available everywhere, however. Careful instructions for building a coal fire were still central to the chapter on heat sources.

Both gas and electricity made great strides in the ’30’s and ’40’s, with some cities
almost completely converted by the mid-'30s. But as late as 1948, it still made sense for a treatise on home design to say, “the finish [of the stove] may be a smooth polish on the material, as is common on coal or wood ranges. Other ranges and some coal or wood ranges are finished with porcelain enamel” (Tessie Agan, The House, Its Plan and Use [New York: J. P. Lippincott, 1948], 351). The first edition came out in 1939, but this one is described on the title page as “completely rewritten and reset,” so Agan clearly had the opportunity to remove dated information if she felt it was no longer useful.

For a brief history of the spread of new stove technologies, see Never Done, A History of American Housework, by Susan Strasser (New York: Pantheon, 1982). She found that “95 percent of Cleveland homes cooked with gas or electricity in 1935, although a quarter of them continued to use wood and coal heating stoves” (264).

9. Meikle, Twentieth Century Limited, 83: “Product Engineering’s annual survey in 1932 revealed that only 48 percent of domestic appliance manufacturers concerned themselves with improving design appearance. By 1935 the figure had risen to 91 percent.”


11. Five foot three was the height of Henry Dreyfuss’s everywoman “Josephine,” in his guideline for designers, The Measure of Man, which was first published in 1955. Dreyfuss explained he had spent years gathering anthropometric data from the widest range of sources available in order to arrive at this figure, but that there were no truly universal statistics available. That’s doubly true for the 1930s (the armed forces did a lot of measuring while recruiting for the war). But given the gradual increase in the heights of Americans that was still taking place in mid-century, it seems reasonable to suppose the average woman was no taller in 1940 than she was in 1955.


13. Mrs. Christine Frederick, Selling Mrs. Consumer (New York: The Business Bourse, 1929). See particularly chapters 3, 5, 17, 18, and 29. In fairness, it should be pointed out that Selling Mrs. Consumer was not a compendium of manipulative tricks for advertisers—although they could have used it as one—but rather a genuine attempt to make manufacturers more responsive to the needs of their customers. Mrs. Frederick yielded to no one in her zeal for capitalism; the responsiveness was unblushingly in aid of selling as much as possible to as many people as could be persuaded to buy. But she decried the exploitation of factory workers by makers of cheap products and, at least at the beginning of her career, spoke out frequently against installment buying, which she feared led to crushing debt and knew was not based on friendliness to the poor. “Some of our industrial and financial leaders, who make their millions from installment selling . . . also talk, among themselves and not for public consumption, . . . about how labor must think thrice before striking if it has installment payments to meet” (386).

16. Ibid., 2.
19. Louise Peet and Lenore Thye, *Household Equipment*, 5th ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1961), 215. These women were, respectively, a “professor of Household Equipment” at Iowa State University, and the Chief at the Housing and Equipment Research Laboratory, Institute of Home Economics in the Agricultural Research Service of the USDA.
21. Ibid.
22. Agan, *The House, Its Plan and Use*, 337. The first suggestion that the counter problem might originate at the base of the sink came from Jane Langmuir, who at the time of our conversation was an Associate Professor of Interior Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design.
30. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, “Design for Living,” London, 1957 (from the musical revue *At the Drop of a Hat*).
Feeding Baby, Teaching Mother:  
Gerber and the Evolution of Infant Food and Feeding Practices in the United States  

Amy Bentley

The consumption of food is an extraordinarily social activity laden with complex and shifting layers of meaning. Not only what we eat, but how and why we eat, tell us much about society, history, cultural change, and humans’ views of themselves. What, when, and how we choose to feed infants and toddlers—the notion of “baby food” as opposed to “adult food,” and whether these foods are nourishing and satisfying—reveal how mass production, consumption, and advertising have shaped our thinking about infancy and corresponding parenting philosophies and practices. Because women have long been the primary caregivers, food procurers, and preparers, it is natural that women, as both mothers and consumers, are at the heart of this discussion of the development and naturalization of commercial baby food in the United States.

In this article I explore the naturalization of mass-marketed baby food through an examination of the origins, development, and early marketing of the Gerber Products Company. Specifically, I examine how in one generation, from Gerber’s beginning in the early 1930s to the 1950s’ postwar baby boom years, mass-produced solid infant food, especially fruits and vegetables, was transformed from an item of rarity into a rite of passage—a normal, naturalized part of an infant’s diet in the United States—and in becoming so helped to displace breastfeeding.

While much has been written on the shift from breast- to bottle-feeding in the United States and elsewhere, the important historical,

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cultural, and nutritional implications of solid infant food in this shift have not been adequately explored. An in-depth historical examination of the subject is important, as late-twentieth-century studies show that before the age of four months, an infant's gastro-intestinal system is ill equipped to receive anything but breast milk or its equivalent (though there is much debate over the adequacy of formula substitutes as well). Too early an introduction of solids can put undue stress on kidney functioning. Moreover, children who are breast-fed develop fewer bacterial and viral illnesses, food allergies, and incidences of diarrhea, ear infections, and perhaps even cancer. Anything displacing breast milk (solid food as well as formula) limits the ingestion of important antibodies, enzymes, hormones, and other substances that assist in a child's optimal development. Thus prevailing wisdom at the turn of the twentieth century admonishes breast-feeding to age twelve months—with the American Academy of Pediatrics advocating the nursing of infants to two years of age if possible—and the introduction of foods at four to six months.

In the space of about a hundred years (from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries) normal feeding patterns of infants in the United States changed from near-exclusive consumption of breast milk (whether by mother or by wet nurse) and an introduction to solids later in the infant's first year, to bottle-feeding and the introduction of solids at six weeks postpartum. These changes from breast to bottle and late to early introduction of solids, themselves related, are both products of the many well-known social and economic components of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: industrialization, mass production and advertising of the food supply; changing consumption patterns; the discovery and promotion of vitamins; evolving notions of the body and health; the promotion of science as the ultimate authority; and the medicalization of childbirth and infancy with the increased prominence and power of the medical establishment. While mothers and health professionals alike welcomed commercially mass-produced baby food as a convenient, affordable way to provide more fruits and vegetables year round for American babies, the creation and marketing of Gerber baby food, which from its inception has dominated the U.S. market, helped spur the introduction of solid foods into babies’ diets at increasingly earlier ages. Gerber baby food thus functioned as a supplement to, but also a substitute for, breast milk, playing an important role in the dramatic decline of breast-feeding in the twentieth century. To explore these issues, I will examine the discourse of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “pre-Gerber” infant feeding patterns, detail the origins and development of Gerber baby food, and analyze early marketing
campaigns in the 1930s directed toward women as both professional dietitians and mothers.

A word about sources and their interpretation. My ideas and arguments here are informed by my readings of (among other types of data) over two dozen household and childcare advice manuals. These materials, as well as the Gerber advertising campaigns and corporate literature that I examine, are documents largely prescriptive in nature, and thus problematic. While they divulge much about the ideas of the “experts,” they are less successful in helping us understand what and how women actually fed their infants: how they used the foods, what meanings women inscribed upon them, and how women received and made use of the advertising information and images. Historian Jay Mechling rightly views with skepticism any demonstrable connection between advice manuals and actual practice. Arguing that people gain most of their notions of “correct” child rearing from their parents as well as the larger culture in which they were raised, he regards any instruction through childcare manuals as supplemental at best. “Childrearing manuals are the consequents not of childrearing values,” Mechling argues, “but of childrearing manual-writing values,” which is to say, the values of those people writing the manuals, embedded in the existing culture. During the period explored here, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Mechling, the “source of advice is connected with the rise of a specialized subuniverse of knowledge, language, and power [and] communicate quite clearly that childrearing knowledge was specialized knowledge” possessed by a growing number of “experts,” whether they be in home economics, nutrition, or the medical profession. “To whatever extent there appears to be a sharing or at least a complementarity of these internal states across several authors,” Mechling concedes, “the historian can generalize further about some sector of the belief system of a historical American society.”

While this belief system may or may not coincide with mothers’ actual infant feeding practices, it is possible to tease out information from the experts’ publications regarding how, what, and when mothers fed their infants. Fortunately, for our purposes, we can use these sources of information for what they do best—to uncover a newly emerging discourse regarding infant food and feeding practices from such “experts.” While the manners in which women actually did feed their infants become visible here through a limited number of primary documents, a full understanding of actual practices must be saved for another day. Nevertheless, a focused examination of the “expert” discourse becomes the first step in unfolding the very important story of women and solid infant feeding practices in the United States.
Women and “Artificial” Infant Feeding in the (Pre-Gerber) Nineteenth Century

To understand fully the effects of mass-produced baby food it is important to revisit the development of artificial infant formulas, the forerunners of mass-produced solids such as Gerber. Existing scholarship indicates that in the pre-industrial Western world 95 percent of children were breast-fed, either by their mothers or by wet nurses. Breast-feeding, often called “wet-nursing” whether performed by the infant’s biological mother or by another woman, was in contrast to the remaining small percentage of infants who were “dry-nursed” or “brought up by hand,” that is, fed mixtures of boiled flour and water or cow’s milk, variously called pap or panada. While the existing literature does not make clear the age and extent to which infants were simultaneously breast-fed and fed pap mixtures (the earliest known infant feeding devices date back to the second or third centuries, but we know little about how they were used⁷), until the twentieth century, most infants fed artificially usually failed to thrive, because of either inadequate nutrition or contaminated animal milk or water.⁸

In the mid-nineteenth century, experts admonished (and there is evidence to suggest at least it was mainstream thinking) that infants live on a liquid diet of breast milk or modified cow’s milk for most of their first year.⁹ Women passed around home recipes for breast milk substitutes or, for those with the means or access, found them in published household advice manuals common to the period. A pediatrician writing later in the twentieth century described this practice as “the grandmothers’ aphorism, ‘only milk until the eruption of molars’ (twelve to sixteen months).”¹⁰ According to one researcher, “Milk alone was believed sufficient until the baby showed signs of failure, and often the young child’s diet was confined to little more than milk until he was two years of age. Meat was considered damaging.”¹¹ Advice manuals recommended that cereals or meats (not necessarily in that order) be introduced when teeth began to appear, between six and nine months of age, at first as thin gruel mixtures, or beef broth or juices. “The food for children should be light and simple,” advised Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale in 1857, “gruel alone, or mixed with cow’s milk; mutton broth, or beef tea; stale bread, rusks, or biscuits, boiled in water to a proper consistence, and a little sugar added.”¹² Hale recommended that complete weaning could take place as early as seven months, but more commonly after twelve months.¹³

While mothers fed infants the “strength-producing” meats and cereals in the first year, advice manuals recommended that children not
be given fruits and vegetables until two or three years of age. This was in part the result of the wary attitude in general toward fruits and vegetables. Medical opinion, as well as folk practice in the United States, was still influenced by the centuries-old Galenic theories of health and disease, which dictated that eating fruit made people, especially children, susceptible to fevers. Properties inherent in the fruits and vegetables were thought to cause severe diarrhea and dysentery, especially in the summer. An 1880s newspaper illustration, for example, depicts a skeleton disguised as a fruit seller offering produce to little children, indicating that raw, unboiled fruits and vegetables led to cholera. While there is no question that fruits and vegetables could cause harm, especially in such turn-of-the-century urban metropolises as New York City whose water and sewer systems were imperfect and overloaded, the actual culprit was most likely contaminants residing on the outside of the produce, or contaminated water or milk that happened to be ingested, rather than anything innate in the produce itself. Given the laxative effect of fruits and vegetables if consumed to excess, however, it is easy to understand how people made the assumption. Moreover, in this era before the discovery of vitamins, most people felt that fruits and vegetables provided excessive bulk and roughage, and contributed little in the way of nourishment helpful to infants. Advice manuals of the mid-nineteenth century reflect and even attempt to challenge this prevailing ideology. “The growing creature requires food that contains the elements of the body... food that abounds in albumen, fibrine, gelatine, and the earthy salts,” wrote Joseph B. Lyman and Laura E. Lyman in their 1867 advice manual. “What substances do we find richest in the constituents of perfect food? Flesh, milk, eggs and wheat bread” (italics original). However, the authors went on, “There is in the minds of thousands of anxious mothers a great dread of fruits of all kinds as being dangerous for the young.” Attempting to dispel these commonly held notions, the Lymans advised that the problem was children’s consumption of fruits to excess, not the produce itself.

By the late nineteenth century, the industrialization and advertising of the food supply laid important groundwork for changing recommendations concerning infant care and feeding. Before the turn of the century, most Americans’ diets were fairly monotonous regimes of soups, stews, bread, dairy products, fresh meat when available, salted or smoked when not, and seasonal fruits and vegetables only, unless preserved through pickling, jams and preserves, drying, and some home canning. Improvements in stoves and food preparation devices made food preparation easier, iceboxes and refrigerators kept foods fresher. All, in many ways, made cooking a less arduous task for women—al-
though there were most certainly tradeoffs, as many scholars have pointed out. Canned goods, especially canned produce, though commonly available in the late 1800s, were too expensive for most. By the 1920s, however, manufacturers produced canned goods in sufficient quantity as to become more affordable, allowing Americans to consume (among other things) more fruits and vegetables year round. With this industrialization of the food supply Americans’ diets became more varied and their nutrition subsequently improved, though it can be argued that canned goods and other processed foods diminished taste and nutrients, leading to Americans’ acclimation to salt and sugar in heavy quantities.20 To sell these mass-produced items the early twentieth century witnessed the proliferation of advertising firms creating increasingly sophisticated advertising. The increased number and circulation of magazines and newspapers, and the growth in population and literacy rates ensured audiences for corporate advertising.21

Along with industrialization and advertising, fin-de-siècle Americans turned increasingly to science as the ultimate authority.22 An effect of this was the increased stature, whether self-generated or not, of the medical community. Doctors supplanted midwives in the delivering of babies, and more of these were delivered in hospitals than in homes. Employing wet nurses as an alternative to mothers’ breast-feeding, a common practice among wealthier women, became frowned upon. Instead, during this “chemical period” in infant feeding, medical authorities took charge, partially by devising complicated “percentage” formulas as breast milk replacements only they could administer.23 As Rima Apple and others have amply demonstrated, the result was the “medicalization of motherhood.” Profoundly influenced by prevailing behaviorist theories of psychology, authorities advised that parenting instincts and common sense must take a back seat to science. Infants were to be fed on strict schedules, for example, and were not to be picked up when crying, which would only reward the negative behavior, women were told.24

Doctors and childcare experts still considered breast-feeding best, no doubt in part because of the high infant mortality rates occurring in the burgeoning cities that had limited access to fresh, clean cow’s milk. Marion Mills Miller in 1910 advocated that “no other milk, however skillfully modulated, no ‘infant’s food,’ however scientifically prepared,” could fully replace mother’s milk.25 But, the advisers often qualified, only if a woman’s breast milk supply was adequate. In their 1920 advice manual Martha Van Rensselaer, Flora Rose, and Helen Cannon, eminent Cornell University home economists, gave recipes for artificial formula, but called it “the next best thing” if a “baby cannot be fed by
its own mother.”26 “It is a great pity when a young baby cannot have his mother’s milk as his main food,” Carlotta C. Greer advised in her 1928 book, *Foods and Homemaking*. “A doctor who is familiar with the needs of a little baby is able to write a prescription of formula for modified milk.”27

With the medicalization of motherhood there were more and more reasons why breast milk became inadequate. Improved technology helped artificial formulas and cow’s milk to become a safer and more healthful alternative for infants. Optimistic faith in science required little reason why formula feeding was equal to—if not better than—breast milk. Formula feeding was easier for doctors to measure and regulate, allowing them to tinker with the makeup of artificial formulas when necessary. Anxious mothers, becoming less and less confident of their parenting abilities and common sense, wanted what was best for Baby and voluntarily relinquished their authority. Hospital deliveries that whisked babies away to the nursery fostered a sterile and awkward climate for mother-infant bonding and discouraged breast-feeding. Taking their cues from the medical community, home economics experts recommended not only that an infant’s mouth be swabbed and rinsed with fresh water after every feeding, but that a woman’s breast be cleaned with a boric acid solution before and after nursing as well.28

Mothers became more and more convinced that they did not have sufficient milk to nurse their newborns. Although most certainly some women could not physically breast-feed and significant numbers who performed paid employment outside the home found it logistically difficult to do so, it is not surprising that around the turn of the century the numbers of women breast-feeding their infants declined for other reasons as well. No doubt many simply did not want the bother of nursing their infants. Wealthier women, who had always breast-fed less often than other women, now turned to using artificial formulas instead of employing wet nurses. Middle-class women followed suit, with working-class women ceasing to breast-feed accordingly. Further, what little historical data exist indicate that women’s cessation of breast-feeding took place in stages not only with regard to economics, but by ethnicity and degree of urbanization: African American and Latina women and those in rural areas breast-fed much further into the twentieth century than Caucasian women and urban dwellers.29

By the late 1880s several brands of “proprietary foods,” mass-produced, mostly grain mixtures to be added to milk or water—the forerunners of today’s infant formulas—appeared on the market, including Leibeg’s, Nestle’s Milk Food, Imperial Granum, Wells, Richardson, and Company’s Lactated Food, Wagner’s Infant Food, Mellin’s
Food, as well as Borden’s Eagle Brand condensed milk. Some included cereal grains as part of their “formulas,” some did not, but all characterized their products as “food” rather than “liquid,” as formulas later became categorized. Brightly colored and elaborately etched trade cards, the popular turn-of-the-century advertising medium which women and children in particular delighted in collecting and trading, illustrate this demarcation of infant formula as food. Advertising slogans included: “Nestle’s Milk Food: Baby’s Friend”; “Imperial Granum: The Incomparable Food for the Growth and Protection of Infants and Children”; “Wells, Richardson, and Company’s Lactated Food: A Scientific Food for Infants and Invalids”; “Wagner’s Infant Food: Infants and Children fed on Wagner’s Infant Food are remarkable for muscular strength, firmness of flesh, and a lively and intelligent appearance”; and “Mellin’s Food for Infants and Invalids: The only perfect substitute for Mother’s Milk.”

Home economists and nutritionists—women in these newly emerging fields that employed the latest scientific discoveries about food and nutrition—did not much like proprietary, or patent, foods. “They cannot compete successfully with carefully made milk mixtures in substitute or artificial feeding,” advised Flora Rose of Cornell University’s recently established Home Economics Department: “Perhaps the strongest case against the patent foods is their lack of the food-stuff known as mineral matter or salts, which is so essential to healthy growth and development. Many cases of malnutrition result directly from the use of such of these foods as are deficient in fat and mineral matter. A common ailment among babies thus fed is rickets, an ailment that is serious and may be lasting in its effects.” She conceded, “When a patent food is made with milk, its bad effects are minimized and it may serve a useful purpose.” What Rose called “mineral salts” were indeed important.Confirming what many chemists and nutritionists suspected, within the next decade researchers discovered vitamins in foods, including vitamin D, which prevents rickets. What evidence exists indicates that most mothers, at least in rural areas, did not feed their infants mass-produced proprietary foods. While Cornell University home economics students in the 1920s added a small amount of Mellin’s Food to their month-old charge’s formula, a 1933 study of over 700 infants in upstate New York indicated that only 6 percent of mothers had ever fed their babies patent foods, half using brands which were to be mixed with milk and half with water. Still, the increasing availability and promotion of such products, along with the rise in safer, cleaner cow’s milk thanks to certification programs and pasteurization, contributed to the falling number of women who breast-fed their infants.
It makes sense that manufacturers and advertisers constructed these liquid formulas as solid rather than liquid. This was the infant food of the time, after all, the nourishment on which babies survived, as there was not yet a tradition of feeding infants under nine months real solids, especially fruits and vegetables. While there was available a very small supply of canned fruits and vegetables for infants, they were sold at apothecaries, and used as medicine. They were clearly not designed for everyday use. Without a mass-produced baby food such as Gerber there was no opposite solid baby food with which to contrast the infant formula. As parents and doctors became more acclimated to artificial infant formulas, however, it was only a small step to the earlier and earlier introduction of solid foods. In just a few short decades authorities’ opinions about the subject changed dramatically.

Women and Infant Feeding in the (Pre-Gerber) Twentieth Century

The first two decades of the twentieth century, a time characterized by historians and others as the arrival of the culture of modernity, was a period of great change not only for women, but in the realms of economics, politics, the arts, science, and social and religious thought. In the 1910s and 1920s, still before the arrival of Gerber, infant feeding practices had begun to change noticeably, and most prominently in the larger role fruits and vegetables were to have in an infant’s diet. Still, experts recommended a relatively late introduction of solids, and grass-roots evidence indicates that most mothers did not begin their infants on solids until after six months of age or later.

As earlier mentioned, during these decades scientists had begun to identify as “vitamines” (the spelling was later modified) the specific nutrients previously called “mineral salts” that existed in foods. Vitamins, scientists learned, existed not only in meat, grains, and dairy products, foods they had always considered vital to nourishment and growth, but also in fruits and vegetables, which had previously been regarded as benign at best and with suspicion by many, although there were several nineteenth-century groups that espoused the virtues of a vegetarian diet. The promotion of fruits and vegetables as vital to human growth and nourishment was heightened during the Great War, as the federal government found it difficult to recruit able-bodied young men and maintain their health while in the service. The new knowledge of vitamins was immediately employed and propagated to help solve this problem of the ill health of recruits. By the 1920s home
economists and dietitians were introducing Americans to the notion of vitamins, and advising them not only to consume more fruits and vegetables themselves, but to feed more such foods to their children as well.

Early-twentieth-century household advice manuals, though at times contradictory in their recommendations (as such manuals continue to be almost a century later), reveal this increased emphasis on fruits and vegetables, while still advocating the introduction of solids in the second half of the infant’s first year. A 1914 manual, with the delightfully straightforward title *How to Cook and Why*, by Elizabeth Condit and Jessie A. Long, for the first time enthusiastically endorsed fruits and vegetables specifically for their “mineral matter.” “As in all questions of feeding,” related the authors, “it is the food given the children which is of the greatest importance. Serious results follow in the unhealthy development of their bodies when their food lacks mineral matter and the acids found in fruits.” They recommended introducing a barley flour and water mixture and strained diluted orange juice at between six and nine months of age, but (still) did not advocate the introduction of solids until between nine and twelve months. Flora Rose recognized the importance of vitamins, referring to them as “fat-soluble” and “water-soluble growth-promoting substances.”

In 1928, on the eve of the development of Gerber baby food, Carlotta C. Greer in her *Foods and Home Making* gave both vitamins and vegetables a prominent place in advice about infant feeding. Experts advocated orange juice for infants, Greer informed her readers, “because it contains vitamins and minerals.” “Scientists working on the effect of food on the body are proving that fresh vegetables are needed to make us healthy.” “Both babies that are fed on mother’s milk and those that are fed on modified cow’s milk should have certain food other than milk,” Greer advised, although “the young baby must not be given solid foods.” Greer recommended a teaspoonful of orange juice introduced at three weeks of age, cereals at five to six months, vegetables at six months, toast or zwieback at seven months, and egg yolk at twelve months. While she advocated the introduction of certain foods, fruits, and vegetables, much earlier than previous advice manuals, striking is the relatively later introduction of cereals and meat, the latter of which Greer did not recommend during the first year at all.

In the 1920s, there were still well-known authorities advising that a one-year-old infant’s diet be composed only of whole milk or whole milk with a cereal dilutant, orange juice, and perhaps simple cereals and beef broth and beef juice, but increasingly these recommendations were called “conservative” or “old-fashioned.” More likely experts advocated a diet more along the lines of Greer’s: the early introduction of orange
juice and cod liver oil, and solids, specifically egg yolk and cereal, at five to six months of age.44

Grassroots evidence—what and how women were actually feeding their babies in the pre-Gerber decades of the twentieth century—seems to indicate that while some women no doubt introduced solids at an early age, the mainstream in consensus and practice was not to rush the introduction of solids, especially fruits and vegetables. For example, a collection of letters written in the 1910s to Cornell Home Economics Department professor Martha Van Rensselaer reveals glimpses of both early and later introduction of solids. The letters were written mostly in response to Flora Rose’s series of pamphlets *The Care and Feeding of Children*. The pamphlets, part of the Cornell Farmers’ Wives Reading Courses (later called the Cornell Study Clubs), contained study questions which women were to fill out and send back to the Home Economics Department. While most letter writers praise the courses and the information, some are testimonials to the good advice contained in the pamphlets, and a few take stern issue with the information.45

Mr. W. J. Gilchrist’s January 30, 1911, letter, for example, indicates that he and his wife followed Flora Rose’s advice to breast-feed exclusively until at least nine months: “We have now a fine healthy child of 9 months. No little credit is due to the information contained in the above mentioned tract. As the baby is about to start on artificial foods, would you kindly inform me where we can procure part 2 of [The Care and Feeding of Children]?” Another 1911 letter from a German immigrant whose English is self-taught, reveals the opposite.46 “Dear Miss Van Rensslear,” begins Mrs. Marie Christ. “I [raised] 6 babies myself and have got them all. 3 strong boys, and 2 girls, one girl got drowned, 7 years old.” Responding to the study question, Is it as common as it used to be for mothers to nurse their infants?, Christ replies, “I think no and these is lots of reasons for it”:

Some have to work to hard, and that was my reason, because I could not nurse a one. Some are to[o] [weak] in their whole system and some do not want the bother. . . . I think there is not hardly a one among thousands in the european country who thinks that just the nursing of the mother should be enough after a babie is 3 months old, and some start earlyer than that, to feed them something besides the nursing. They look at they nursing just as we do, to the tea and coffee given to a five year old one. Nobody would think that would be enough for a whole meal. They all feed them something besides the nursing, thousands of mothers just simple[y] cook a porridge from half watter, half milk and sugar and god wreath flour. The older
the[y] get, the less water the[y] put in. I know babies and my oldest boy never got a drop of water after he was 4 months old.

“What the american babies needs,” Christ concluded, “is more nourishing food, less [waking], less candy, and cookies, and [cakes], and a little toughening.”

While the letters indicate women were introducing solids to their infants at various ages, the 1933 Cornell study (still in the early years of mass-produced baby food) of the feeding practices of over 700 infants in upstate New York revealed on average the late introduction of solids. While 60 percent of infants were fed orange juice during their first 3 months and infants received cod liver oil at 5.2 months on average, the average age at which solids were introduced included: cereal at 7.5 months; vegetables at 9.4 months; fruit at 8.1 months; egg at 10 months; fish, 12.1 months; and meat, 11.6 months—much later than the practices that occurred only years later.

Gerber: Creation Narratives and Icons

Thus in the late 1920s, with the discovery and promotion of vitamins and changing attitudes toward fruits and vegetables, the market was ripe for the introduction of mass-produced canned produce for babies, and Gerber stepped up to fill the niche. According to company legend, a narrative prominently featured in late 1990s Gerber public relations, the Gerber Products Company grew out of not a corporate-driven search to develop a new product and generate a consuming public, but out of the genuine need and inventiveness of a mother trying to prepare mashed peas for her seven-month old child. While in the early twentieth century some mass-produced canned fruits and vegetables for infants were available, as previously mentioned, they were expensive, manufactured in limited quantities, and available only at drug stores. Women largely cooked and strained fruits and vegetables for their toddlers, an often tedious and time-consuming process. Thus, in the summer of 1927, Mrs. Dan Gerber, wife of Fremont Canning Company owner Dan Gerber, “following the advice of a pediatrician,” we are told, was trying to strain peas for her infant daughter. Finding the job tedious and time-consuming, she asked her husband to try his hand at the task. According to the company history, “After watching him make several attempts, she pointed out that the work could be easily done at the Fremont Canning Company, where the Gerber family produced a line of canned fruits and vegetables. Daniel Gerber, covered in strained peas, thought his wife had a good point.” From this, we are told, came
the idea to market strained vegetables and fruits along with the company’s regular line of canned produce. By late 1928, strained peas, prunes, carrots, spinach, and beef vegetable soup were ready for the national market.49

We do not know whether this creation narrative is “true,” especially since in its 1930s advertising Gerber related a much different version discussed later. However, the facts could most certainly be accurate. Since women at the time performed most of the work surrounding childrearing, it makes sense that one mother, frustrated at the time it took and messes it created to prepare the now-vital fruits and vegetables for infants, would seek time- and labor-saving methods. That the husband of “Mrs. Dan Gerber”—we never learn her given name—processed canned fruits and vegetables already makes it more plausible. Whether factual or not, the story creates a compelling, personalized portrait of the beginnings of Gerber—a homey, “authentic” happening far removed from the cacophony of noise and the mire of grease, steel, steam, and smoke of the industrial factory. The story of a woman’s ingenuity transforming childrearing in the United States enhances the purity and trustworthiness of the product, a key factor to Gerber’s success, and also conceals the profit motive of the company.

The baby food products were so successful that within a matter of years the Fremont Canning Company changed its name to the Gerber Products Company, and abandoned its line of regular vegetables to become the exclusive maker of baby foods. First producing pureed vegetables and fruits (the process was termed “strained” at the time), it soon opened a line of cereals, and within a few years introduced chopped produce and dinner combinations for older toddlers. Despite competitors’ quick development of their own mass-produced strained baby foods, Gerber managed to maintain its dominance of this new market. Evidently Gerber had hit a chord with consumers, mothers, and health professionals. Conditions were such that commercially canned baby food provided mass quantities of pre-prepared strained fruits and vegetables to a public primed to accept them: canned goods were becoming more affordable to more Americans; advertising was hitting its stride; fruits and vegetables were more commonly recommended for infants; and doctors and health professionals were becoming more and more involved in (and controlling of) infant health and everyday care. Women at home full time as well as a considerable number of working mothers—employed as domestics, factory workers, seamstresses, teachers, secretaries, clerks, or telephone operators—no doubt embraced and benefitted from already-prepared solid infant food. Moreover, Gerber baby food was not the only new phenomenon
emerging at the time that significantly altered childrearing. Commer-
cial diaper services, more homes wired for electricity, washing ma-
chines, refrigerators, and other innovations of technology in the home
altered women’s work in general as well as childcare in particular.50

Few Americans today are unfamiliar with the winsome, compelling
Gerber Baby that has graced the labeling and advertising of the Gerber
Products Company since the early 1930s. Indeed, since its first full-
scale production and marketing of commercially canned solid baby
food, Gerber has dominated such competitors as Clapp’s, Stokely,
Libby, Heinz, and Beech-Nut in United States market share. The Ger-
ber name is synonymous with baby food, and the icon of the Gerber
Baby traditionally has symbolized quality and trustworthiness, so much
so that a 1998 survey found Gerber to have the highest consumer loy-
alty in the United States.51 In 1928 the Fremont Canning Company
solicited illustrations of a baby face for the advertising campaign to
introduce its newly developed baby food. Dorothy Hope Smith, an
artist who specialized in drawing children, submitted a simple, unfin-
ished, charcoal sketch, indicating she could finish the sketch if it were
accepted. Again, according to the company narrative, Gerber executives
were so taken with the simple line drawing of an infant’s head that they
acquired it as it was. The illustration proved so popular that Gerber
adopted it as its official trademark in 1931, and offered consumers cop-
ies for ten cents. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Gerber Baby
continues to appear on all Gerber packaging and advertising, including
in its recently redesigned labels and new line of organic foods.52 The
sketch’s immense popularity has generated much speculation through
the decades about the actual identity of the Gerber Baby. Rumors held
that Humphrey Bogart, Elizabeth Taylor, or even Senator and presi-
dential hopeful Robert Dole posed for the sketch as an infant. Accord-
ing to the company, the real Gerber Baby is retired English teacher and
sometime mystery novelist Ann Turner Cook. Cook, still living in the
1990s, was heavily advertised as being present at the unveiling of the
redesigned Gerber labels in 1996.

The Naturalization of Gerber: Decline of Breast-Feeding,
Earlier Introduction of Solids

At the same time Gerber baby food took off in popularity, the average
age infants were first fed fruits and vegetables decreased dramatically.
In the late 1920s, just as Gerber began its national advertising and
distribution of canned baby foods, prevailing wisdom advocated intro-
ducing strained fruits and vegetables around seven months. By the
1930s, however, pediatricians advocated the introduction of fruits and vegetables between four and six months of age. Adhering to the “if a little is good a lot must be better” school of thought, by the 1950s the average age doctors recommended these foods be first fed to infants was four to six weeks, with some doctors advocating—and women feeding—infants strained cereals and vegetables within days of birth.\textsuperscript{53} At the same time there came a dramatic shift, from mothers breast-feeding their infants to the vast majority bypassing nursing altogether and starting out their infants on mass-produced formula.\textsuperscript{54} Evidence suggests the two phenomena are related; Gerber solid baby food functioned not only as a supplement to breast milk but as a substitute for it as well. To understand how this came about it is helpful to turn to early advertising campaigns of the 1930s.

Shortly after the Fremont Canning Company began to manufacture its baby food, it began to advertise. Mass-producing any industrial product, especially during the Great Depression as consumer purchasing slowed to a minimum, meant establishing and expanding a steady market of buyers by acquainting the public with products through advertising campaigns. Gerber, as well as other manufacturers of new products, found it necessary not only to educate and persuade the public to buy baby food, but to acclimate and familiarize them with the manner in which baby food was packaged and presented, the steel cans as well as the labeling. Only recently had fully automated canning factories been in operation, allowing foodstuffs to be canned and sold to consumers for reasonable prices, and Americans still held lingering suspicions about the quality of canned goods. Though it had been two decades since Congress had passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, some remembered well the days of adulterated and spoiled foods concealed by opaque packaging.\textsuperscript{55} Further, Americans in the first part of the twentieth century were still becoming acquainted with mass advertising designed to create new needs where none had existed before, or to promote products, such as Gerber baby food, which responded to and allowed for a more fast-paced life brought on by technological innovation.\textsuperscript{56} With the mass production and advertising of goods, packaging and branding became an essential part of the product, “an integral part of the commodity itself.”\textsuperscript{57} The Gerber Baby from early on became just that: an integral part of the commodity, allowing the Gerber Products Company to bypass such traditional middlemen as grocers and through advertising appeal directly to women as dietitians or as mothers.

By playing on parents’, especially mothers’, anxieties about the well-being of their infants, presenting medical doctors as the ultimate baby
experts, and positing the uncontested assumption that commercially prepared foods are superior to those cooked at home, Gerber advertising in the 1930s successfully imbued its products with qualities of exceptional purity and wholesomeness, convenience and modernity, and scientific efficiency. While not an exhaustive study of Gerber promotion pitches, a survey of 1930s issues of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* and *Ladies Home Journal* reveals how Gerber quickly undertook an ambitious national campaign to convert health professionals and consumers to its baby foods. In its earliest years of advertising Gerber focused on helping consumers and dietitians become comfortable with the idea of using canned goods in general and Gerber baby foods in particular, and persuading women that it was in their best interest, and in their babies’ interest, to use Gerber baby foods.

**Convincing the Dietitians**

In the late 1920s and well into the 1930s Gerber placed full-page advertisements in each monthly issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, the official publication of the American Dietetic Association (ADA). The ADA, founded in 1917, was the professional organization for the fast-growing, overwhelmingly female field of dietetics and nutrition. Whereas there were 660 ADA members in 1925, for example, by 1938 the number had grown to 3,800. The ADA in the 1920s and 1930s became influential in coordinating and promoting dietary policy and guidelines for optimal health and nutrition.58 Promoting Gerber baby food as scientifically prepared and thus free of contaminants, vitamin filled, and healthy and wholesome food for infants was clearly the primary goal of the company’s ADA journal advertising. “Care in every detail makes the Gerber products better for Baby,” began one 1932 advertisement.59 Two 1934 advertisements, each complete with photos of workers dressed in white operating sparkling clean machinery, began respectively, “Oxygen is excluded in the Gerber straining process [to conserve vitamins],”60 and “Careful sorting—rigid inspection, another reason why Gerber’s are better for Baby.”61 In the same issues the American Canning Company ran regular advertisements designed to resemble scholarly articles on the safety and healthfulness of canned foods. “The Canning Procedure,”62 “Vitamins in Canned Foods: Vitamin A,”63 and “Canned Foods for Infant and Early Child Feeding”64 were three such ads, each providing scientific information on the benefits of canned foods. Such ads, along with the Gerber ads, were attempting to combat suspicion toward canned foods. While many middle-class women in the United States used commercially canned goods with
some regularity by this time, food professionals in particular still held some justifiable suspicion about whether canned produce was as nutritious and safe as fresh. In what would become standard practice, some 1930s ADA journal issues also included bona fide research, funded by Gerber, touting the safety, health, and full vitamin content of canned baby foods. Flora Manning, in the Division of Home Economics at Michigan State College, published two such articles in the 1930s, “Canned Strained Vegetables as Sources of Vitamin A,” and “Further Studies of the Content of Vitamins A and B in Canned Strained Vegetables.”65 Both, not surprisingly, found little difference in the vitamin content of canned and strained foods.

Another set of Gerber ADA journal advertisements situates dietitians as the intermediary between women and their children’s doctors. Revealing the company’s faith in the power of persuasion through advertising, ads began with such openings as “Gerber advertises . . . so that mothers will cooperate with you”;66 “Yes, Doctor, we do talk to your patients . . . and we tell them facts which help you and help us (ellipses original)”;67 and “Thanks, Doctor, this helps me carry out your instructions.”68 The copy situates the reader, as female dietitian, conversing with the (male) medical doctor about how to persuade women to feed their children Gerber baby food. The ads and articles function to naturalize the idea that Gerber’s canned fruits and vegetables for baby are just as nutritious as fresh as home-prepared foods, and even more appropriate since they are so scientifically prepared.

**Convincing the Mothers**

Like those for many other new mass-produced and advertised products in the early twentieth century, Gerber’s first advertising campaign in 1929 focused on selling its products directly to women, since many grocers did not carry Gerber baby foods.69 The ads were placed in such women’s magazines as *Ladies Home Journal*, subscribed to by over a million women.70 In what was common practice at the time, the advertisements urged women to send in one dollar for a set of Gerber foods, and asked them to provide the name of their grocer, whom Gerber would then persuade to carry their products. Doctors, however, could request the products free of charge. Emphasizing its products as scientifically prepared and thus trustworthy, Gerber informed women that its foods “Provid[ed] in a scientific, wholesome manner . . . the important vegetable supplement to baby’s milk diet.” It also focused on the products’ ability to impart to women freedom and mobility, a notably
modern concept: “The new Gerber Products make Mother and Baby alike independent of the kitchen’s restrictions. Baby can really travel now.”71

Later advertising focused on this theme of freedom for Mother and Baby. Not only did Gerber provide freedom from kitchen drudgery, but ads informed that preparing baby foods by hand was essentially a disser-vice to the woman herself, her baby, and her husband. “For Baby’s Sake, Stay Out of the Kitchen!” read the headline of one 1933 advertisement. “It isn’t fair to baby—really—to spend long hours in the kitchen. . . . For baby’s sake and for your own—learn what doctors tell young mothers just like you” (ellipses original). Moreover, the ads stated, women could not provide the same quality no matter how hard they tried: “You can’t, with ordinary home equipment, prepare vegetables as safe, as rich in natural food values, as reliably uniform as ready-to-serve Gerber products!”72 The opening of another Gerber ad read, “Square Meals for Baby . . . and better for him than vegetables you could prepare yourself with ten times the work!” (ellipses original). “Don’t serve Gerber’s for your sake,” the ad went on, “serve them for Baby’s sake!” (italics original). “They’re the finest vegetables Baby can eat—and Baby deserves the best!”73

Most strikingly, the advertisements focus on a woman’s relationship with her husband. An early Gerber ad in Ladies Home Journal opens with a photo of a concerned-looking man’s face. Surrounding the male face is the text, “To puzzled fathers of rather young children. If you’ve had to exchange a charming wife for a tired mother who spends endless hours in the kitchen dutifully scraping, stewing and straining vegetables for your child—you’ll be glad to read this story.” The ad then continues with a version of the Gerber creation story different from the late-twentieth-century one, one that focuses on a male persona entirely. “Five years ago, Mr. Dan Gerber faced the same situation, and knowing a great deal about vegetables he set out to solve this problem.”74 Although there is an accompanying photo of a woman feeding a baby identified once more as “Mrs. Dan Gerber,” there is no mention of her involvement in the creation whatsoever. The narrative implies that it was Dan Gerber’s frustration and dissatisfaction at “having to exchange” his now un-charming, tired, and haggard-looking wife that led to Gerber baby food being invented. Although the advertisement carries a masculine persona, it was clearly designed for women’s consumption, appearing as almost an ominous warning to mothers of small children. The advertising as a whole functions not only to increase women’s confidence in the wholesomeness of the product, but also to
reduce their confidence in their ability to care for their infants—and also that hardworking provider—without the help of these experts and these products.

In addition, both sets of advertising indirectly or directly advocate the earlier and earlier introduction of these foods. Many ads mention the use of solids at three months or earlier. Under the above-mentioned photo of “Mrs. Dan Gerber” and her daughter Paula, for example, the caption notes that “Paula began to eat Gerber Strained Cereal at 3 months, and had her first Gerber’s Strained Vegetables at 3 ½ months” (again, this is in contrast to the 1990s creation story that mentions that the mother is feeding peas to her “seven month old,” an age no doubt assigned in light of the contemporary standards of introducing fruits and vegetables only after six months of age). Gerber’s competitors contributed to this trend as well. A 1937 ad for Clapp’s baby food introduces us to photos of three-month-old baby John Curlett being fed his Clapp’s Baby Cereal. “At 4 months,” the copy informed women, “he’ll be introduced to all of Clapp’s Strained Vegetables.” The final photo shows John at eleven months of age, “flourish[ing]” because of his Clapp’s diet. The most blatant ad, however, is a 1938 Libby’s baby food ad picturing a baby who can barely hold up its head. The caption reads: “Hurry, Mother, it’s Libby time! Tiny babies love the vegetables that Libby prepares so carefully.”

Not only did specific ad copy and photographs encourage the notion that infants under four months need solid food, but the icon of the Gerber Baby itself contributed. The drawing that has graced every Gerber product and advertisement since 1931 looks by several estimates approximately two to four months old: earlier than advice rendered just a decade previous, earlier than the four to six months advocated by most United State doctors and infant care guides for introducing solids, and well under the six months of age sanctioned by the United Nations International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes guidelines. The Gerber Baby itself, then, gave (and gives) the implicit impression that babies this young should be eating solid foods. It makes sense that Gerber and other baby food manufacturers would advocate early introduction of their foods. They of course sought to create and expand market share: by getting more mothers to buy the products; by convincing mothers that babies at early ages should be started on solids; and by eventually developing products that kept babies and toddlers consuming their foods for as long as possible.
The development and widespread success of the Gerber Products Company can be understood as a mixed blessing. There is no doubt that canned fruits and vegetables, for infants and adults, increased year-round availability and thus consumption of these foods vital to human health and well-being. Before the advent of readily available canned foods, prevailing feeding practices prevented infants from getting enough of these foods in their diet. Moreover, as any parent or childcare provider knows, there is a welcome efficiency to canned baby foods, especially when working, spending time outdoors, or traveling.

But are canned fruits and vegetables as nutritious as fresh, home-prepared ones, as Gerber continually claimed? Often not, especially in earlier decades of the twentieth century. Contrary to its advertising claims, canned foods such as Gerber’s have traditionally been overcooked, and have contained added salt, sugar, starches, fillers, artificial preservatives, and occasionally some dangerous contaminants (such as lead and pesticides). Canned vegetables and fruit also contain less fiber. Moreover, unless the precise percentage of each ingredient is listed on the label, the consumer has no way of knowing the percentage of water or fillers versus fruit or vegetable. A jar of pureed peas, for example, which lists as its ingredients “peas, water,” could conceivably contain 51 percent peas and 49 percent water.78

What is the status of Gerber baby foods at the beginning of the twenty-first century? With almost 70 percent of the U.S. market, Gerber remains the leader in solid baby foods, but it has been losing market share in recent decades and is trying to figure out how to maintain its dominance. Part of the loss has to do with a political, economic, and social climate that differs markedly from its counterpart one hundred years ago. The marked skepticism of the 1970s spurred a consumer-oriented, business-suspicious public ethos, becoming the catalyst for larger public discourses about science versus nature, patriarchal authority versus women’s knowledge, and faith in industry versus distrust of corporate America. The return to breast-feeding and the popularity of such alternatives as organic baby foods in the infant food industry are evidence of this cultural shift, in part a reaction to the aggressive push by multinational corporations to sell powdered infant formula in developing countries, and Beech-Nut executives knowingly substituting sugar water for apple juice, for which Gerber suffered by association.

Gerber does have its share of trouble that challenges its reputation as the arbiter of purity and nutrition. In the 1980s glass shards were
found in some jars of baby food—a distinct blow to its reputation.\textsuperscript{79} More recently the FCC charged Gerber with misleading advertising. A 1995 campaign claiming “4 out of 5 doctors recommend Gerber baby food” was found to be highly inaccurate. (The study actually showed that 88 percent of doctors polled had no opinion about choice of baby food. Of the remaining 12 percent, 4 out of 5 recommended Gerber.)\textsuperscript{80} Further, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and other groups claim that Gerber baby foods contain unacceptable amounts of pesticides (which Gerber strenuously denies), mislead consumers as to the actual percentage of food versus water and fillers, and contain unhealthy chemically modified starch (called “tapioca”), and unnecessary salt and sugar. In 1996 Gerber eliminated sugar, salt, and modified starch from most of its products, but is still criticized for not eliminating them in all of them, and for creating baby “desserts” that are arguably unnecessary and harmful for infants.\textsuperscript{81}

To maintain and even increase market share, Gerber is trying to break into European markets where it has never done as well. Analysts positively regarded its buyout by Sandoz (which was then absorbed by Novartis) as a way to penetrate these markets. It has focused on introducing foods for older children (Gerber Graduates), and by capturing more of the Latino market (whose birthrate is higher than Anglo Americans’) by introducing a tropical line of fruits, and by targeting African American women, who buy more baby food for their infants.\textsuperscript{82} As a means to maintain market share Gerber in 1996 opened its own line of organics called Tender Harvest, and after years of resistance has pledged not to include any genetically modified foods in its products.\textsuperscript{83} Most controversially, Gerber is aggressively pushing its products in developing nations, where birth rates are higher and, as economies strengthen, there is much room for growth. The Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America are all targets.

Gerber’s strong-arming of the Guatemalan government over the use of the Gerber Baby illustrates the ethical political economy of the infant food industry as it develops outside the United States, and demonstrates the power of the Gerber Baby as icon. In 1992 Gerber, seeking to enter the infant food market in Guatemala, was told by the government it could not use the Gerber Baby on its products or in its advertising, as the baby looked too young to pass the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes set up by the United Nations after the Nestle formula debacle.\textsuperscript{84} One very clear rule of the code prohibits advertising of foods with pictures of very young babies, which give the appearance (especially to illiterate women) that such products are acceptable substitutes for breast milk.\textsuperscript{85} Gerber fiercely fought restriction, persuading...
U.S. Congress members and the American Embassy in Guatemala to help get the Guatemalan government to change its policy. Although the matter was taken to court, Gerber has been able to spend huge sums of money lobbying its case and tying the matter up indefinitely. In the meantime it continues to do what it pleases, which is to use the Gerber Baby on its products and advertising materials. The Guatemalan government has not the resources Gerber has to fight it out.86

Since its first foray into national advertising Gerber has employed the same charcoal sketch of the original Gerber Baby as a main feature in its product advertising and label design. For good reason. An enormously compelling icon that is nationally and internationally recognized, it is an image on which mothers have depended and on which Gerber has relied to spur greater sales and market share. Yet once a symbol of American purity, abundance, and scientific expertise, at the advent of the twenty-first century the famous Gerber Baby, seen on every jar of baby food, had been scrutinized much more closely.

Notes


4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 56.

6. And, further, I might disagree a bit with Mechling and argue that, at least in the post–World War II era, most middle-class new parents are far enough removed from extended family, and thus inexperienced enough with infants (especially when it comes to post-1970s return to breast-feeding) that the manuals do reflect practice more than they might otherwise.


13. Ibid. 220.


15. Tice, Gardening in America, 53–54.


19. Ibid., 304.

20. Susan Strasser, Never Done: A History of American Housework (New York:
Gerber and the Evolution of Infant Food and Feeding Practices


32. Ibid.


34. Strasser, Never Done.

35. In fact, I would also like to know when the terms “artificial food” and “proprietary food,” used in all childcare and pediatricians’ manuals, were dropped, indicating that the use of such breast milk substitutes was now entrenched, if not the
norm. I know that the terms are used in the 1952 edition of Meyer's *Infant Foods and Feeding Practice*, but by the next edition, 1960, the terms are dropped.

36. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, chap. 7.
37. Ibid., chap. 9.
41. Ibid., 265.
42. Ibid., 501.
43. Ibid.
45. Collection of letters to Martha Van Rensselaer in the 1910s, found in the Home Economics Records 23/2/749, Box 24, Kroch Library, Cornell University.
46. 4/3/[1911] letter to MVR from Mrs. Marie Christ.
47. Ibid.
54. Blum, *At the Breast*, 38.
56. Ibid., 89, 95.
60. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 10 (July 1934): 183.
65. Flora Manning, “Canned Strained Vegetables as Sources of Vitamin A,”

69. Strasser, Satisfaction, 11, 126.
70. Ibid., 91.
73. Ladies Home Journal, October 1933: 127.
75. Elsewhere I have seen the baby’s name given as “Sally.” See Shapiro, “The Consultant Trap.”
84. Van Esterik, Beyond the Breast-Bottle Controversy.
85. The United Nations World Health Assembly has expressed concern about
the marketing of complementary foods in ways that undermine breast-feeding. Any food given to an infant during the period recommended for exclusive breast-feeding (until the age of about six months) will actually replace breast milk. Thus when it is marketed as suitable for feeding infants within that range, it can be considered to be a breast milk substitute. “Cracking the Code: Monitoring the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes” (London: World Health Organization, 1977).

86. June 13, 1997 correspondence from David Clark, Legal Officer, UNICEF, in author’s possession.
The art—and the allure—of home-cooked meals helped Anglo-American women to break into the restaurant business in the first third of the twentieth century. As outsiders in a field of business filled with immigrant males, they used domestic values to compete for success in the marketplace. By catering to a largely female clientele, they brought change to the nascent restaurant industry, domesticating a male-dominated sphere of production and consumption and introducing a middle-class dining culture into a marketplace previously bifurcated into high-class and low-class eating places. The home ideal on which they based their restaurants, though presented as universal, was rooted in a privileged and ethnocentric middle-class standard that did not grant working-class immigrant homes equal value. By the 1940s, however, it had become an industry norm.

Social and economic changes in the early twentieth century enlarged women’s opportunities to carry home-based skills and values into the sphere of business. As America industrialized, the urban workforce grew and more meals were eaten outside the home. No longer did eating out mean that the diner was a wealthy bon vivant, on the one hand, or virtually homeless, on the other, as had been true in the nineteenth century. The number of restaurants grew, and new types of eating places emerged as restaurant patronage expanded. The movement to prohibit alcohol increased demand for eating places free of liquor, and sandwich shops, cafeterias, and tea rooms appeared and flourished. Increasingly in the 1920s, the new types of alcohol-free restaurants began to attract a middle-class patronage which was learning to appreciate the convenience and pleasure of eating out.¹

In the 1910s and 1920s more women and whole families began to eat away from home. Sociologist Frances Donovan, engaged in a participant observation study of restaurants in 1916, found it remarkable that
suburban Chicago families had begun to patronize restaurants. This was significant for several reasons. For one, it suggested that middle-class women felt free to eat away from home without fear of being judged negligent or careless about their families’ meals. Second, it meant restaurants had begun to attract a new clientele who came to eat, not drink. It was precisely these kinds of patrons who gave women restaurateurs an influential role, particularly because the emerging restaurant industry believed the women had special insights on how to cater to the new clientele.2

The number of unescorted women eating in public was also growing rapidly due to an increase in women in the workforce around World War I, and to relaxed attitudes about what was respectable behavior. Around the turn of the century many restaurants had operated as men’s clubs in all but name. As places where men were free to drink heavily, smoke, and engage in rough talk, they were considered off limits to middle-class women. Nor were genteel women themselves eager to patronize restaurants, which many regarded as “the tail end of the saloon business.” Prior to National Prohibition in 1920, many restaurants underscored the idea that they were not proper places for ladies by refusing service to lone women or by segregating them in curtained-off areas, in separate dining rooms, or on upper floors.3

Only a few types of eating places—such as restaurants in downtown shopping districts and ice cream and confectionery shops—catered principally to women around 1900. However, as more women took jobs outside the home, their restaurant options widened. In the late 1890s, several women’s organizations in Chicago formed lunch clubs for working women. They were usually bare halls in the basements of office buildings, staffed by volunteers who provided soup and sandwiches to customers who served themselves. Seeing the popularity of these eating places, some women opened similar cafeterias as money-making ventures. Also in the early twentieth century, women introduced another new type of eating place, the tea room, which, like the early cafeterias, appealed mainly to women customers.4

Between 1890 and 1930 the number of women running restaurants in the United States increased almost seventeenfold, from about 2,400 to 40,000. Although women made up only about 18 percent of all restaurant-keepers in 1920, their influence was growing. In large part this was because Anglo-American women were entering the business. Frequently college-educated, trained in home economics, and inspired with zeal to improve the public’s eating habits, they brought new energy and ideas to the industry. Their choice of career often baffled their friends and family, who felt it was somewhat disgraceful. It is difficult
to appreciate how unusual it was for college-educated women to enter the restaurant business, but it would be analogous to women graduates of elite colleges today deciding to run motels or casinos.5

The more prominent women in the business asserted that by operating a restaurant they were providing valuable social services in keeping with women’s historical role. Some compared their work in the restaurant business to that of women social reformers whose mission had been to make the whole world homelike. Although such statements were meant to justify women’s presence in the male business world, they also seemed to bespeak a genuine calling. Some women spoke of the restaurant business as a way of recovering an ancient female vocation that had been wrongfully usurped by men. “This business of feeding humanity is logically women’s field,” concluded Clara Mae Downey, owner of the Olney Inn in Maryland. “It satisfies her inborn desire to serve the race,” she said. Mary Dutton, proprietor of the Chicago Ontra cafeteria chain begun in 1910, declared that the public restaurant was “a home dining room on an enlarged scale.” For this reason, she said, a woman in this field would “become so interested in seeing that everything is provided for the comfort and enjoyment of her guests, that she will forget the long and unusual hours which restaurant work necessitates.”6

Others believed that women belonged in restaurants because they were naturally superior to men in the culinary arts. But perhaps they meant that Anglo-American women were superior. For men had no monopoly in operating substandard eateries. Many immigrant women ran lowly restaurants that scarcely provided for their own subsistence and often violated health codes. Yet the new women in the business typically defined their competition as male and tended to ignore the many foreign-born women who ran little neighborhood eateries and boarding house dining rooms. Thus, when searching for historical female forebears in the hospitality business, they skipped back a century or two and discovered a handful of female colonial innkeepers.7

In disregarding their sister restaurant operators as peers and forebears, the newcomers reflected conventional middle-class opinion, which judged most ethnic restaurants as substandard. Even if ethnic proprietors used their own family kitchens as their workplace, as was sometimes the case, Anglo-Americans would not have regarded the meals they served as “home-cooked.” Home cooking tacitly referred to meals prepared in Anglo-American homes, not to food cooked in just any home. Cities were filled with small French and Italian table d’hôte restaurants which served low-priced meals of seven or eight courses. (Table d’hôte is French for table of the host, reflecting the practice of
opening one’s home to paying diners who historically sat at the family table.) Tables d’hôte were viewed as foreign, not as purveyors of home cooking. Not only did critics complain that everything on their menus tasted the same, they also thought that tables d’hôte were unsanitary. They were convinced, for example, that the reason napkins were elaborately folded was to hide stains and that sauces were meant to disguise spoiled meat. Even the relatively adventurous journalist Christine Terhune Herrick, who recommended that readers of her book *In City Tents* give tables d’hôte a try, reported that ethnic restaurants in America sometimes assembled meals from “the leavings of hotels and high-priced restaurants.”

Not that there weren’t many unsanitary practices in restaurants. Inspectors often found spoiled food served to diners. Sanitation was primitive in many restaurants, as a 1911 University of Illinois home economics restaurant checklist showed. Common problems observed in restaurants included proximity to stables, absorbent walls, unhealthy employees, worn china, uncovered food, “rank” flavors, and over-handling of food materials. But although these were real health issues, it was uncommonly easy for the middle-class imagination to associate them with foreign cooks and staffs. Thus adulterated restaurant food was often represented as a problem intrinsic to the European “chef’s art” (i.e., trickery), while unclean waiters were called “blackcoated,” a negatively nuanced reference to the customary European uniform.

By contrast, the Anglo-American home was portrayed as a place where highly trained and organized women were in command, where motives were pure and selfless, where no deceit took place, and where the latest scientific discoveries would be employed for the benefit of the family. Food produced in this environment, therefore, could only be sanitary and wholesome. Even if a middle-class family hired a foreign-born cook, the fact that the woman of the house supervised and directed her would insure that the family’s meals were authentically American.

Home cooking was not an objective description but, rather, a sumptuary ideal which prescribed how all Americans ought to live. Rather than reflecting prevailing meal customs, the new middle-class restaurants run by Anglo-American women modeled how the dining room should look, how the table should be appointed, how a diner should comport herself, as well as what food was proper to eat and how it should be prepared. The restaurant was as fully a model of the “all-American” home as were the advertisements in women’s magazines—a point not lost on major food manufacturers who were eager to introduce new products via public eateries. The home-cooking ideal ordained that food be prepared plainly and simply, and that the dining
environment be restful, harmonious, and subdued. Above all, it demanded thoroughgoing cleanliness.

The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), whose cafeterias provided an occupational training ground and springboard for home economists interested in improving public eating places, was a leading proponent of sanitation. A 1917 YWCA manual gave detailed instructions for maintaining cleanliness by scrubbing cafeteria walls, woodwork, and flooring. “Insist on each [garbage] can being washed inside and outside as clean as a plate, each time it is emptied,” specified the manual. It instructed servers to deliver food to patrons with gloved hands, in an environment “without noise or bustle, in quarters as clean as a new pin, flooded with the light of day.” Another exponent of the hygienic kitchen was Alice Bradley, a cooking teacher who ran Miss Farmer’s School of Cookery in Boston for many years. She advised tea room managers that guests should be invited “to inspect the kitchen, refrigerator, or back yard if they wish.” Similarly, the Mayflower Tea Room in New York City advertised in Vanity Fair magazine in 1918 that it was “spotlessly clean in its dainty Puritan primness.”

Many women who were squeamish about eating food outside the home felt that only their own gender could be trusted to keep a restaurant clean. Men, they believed, were naturally slovenly and too impatient to clean thoroughly. “The restaurant needs the sharp eyes of ‘mother’ to look for dirt or worse things in the corners,” advised one female restaurant consultant. Many women who ran restaurants said they would not hire men to work for them because they believed that women cooks and kitchen managers held a higher standard of cleanliness. Sociologist Frances Donovan confirmed women’s higher standards in her study of Chicago restaurants. After spending months working as a waitress, she reported in 1920 that the only clean restaurant kitchens she had seen were those managed by women. Cooking expert Anna J. Peterson, in an address to the National Restaurant Association in 1924, told of a struggle she had waged with an Italian restaurant chef with bad habits. In a war of wills, she eventually triumphed and won him over to her clean and “scientific” approach to cooking, she said.

Women educated in home economics were also eager to introduce plain food to restaurant menus. Many of the restaurants operated by the new women entrepreneurs featured food that tended to be bland by today’s standards, with many pale or white food selections prepared with an abundance of butter and cream. Overall the cuisine found in many cafeterias and tea rooms was reminiscent of nineteenth-century invalid and nursery dishes, a particular specialty of women caterers. Meatless recipes, and dishes in which meat was minced and combined
with other ingredients, were believed to be less taxing to the system of a fragile individual (that is, a sick person, a woman, or a child). Restaurant consultant Gertrude Sanborn observed in 1912 that there was a need “in public eating places everywhere . . . for good, plain, home-like cooking” such as scalloped fish, spinach and egg salad, meat and potato cakes, and creamed eggs. Cooking expert Alice Bradley recommended dishes such as creamed chicken on toast, which became a favorite on tea room menus.\(^{13}\)

Tea rooms, women’s restaurants par excellence, made invalid cookery a specialty, though they did not use this term. Women’s Exchanges were a type of tea room which offered affluent women a clublike environment, while raising money for indigent women by selling hand-sewn and craft items they made. The New York City Women’s Exchange was something of a shrine to plain cookery, exemplified in its baked apples, waffles, and fried mush. Lest they miss out, regular patrons were sent notices when waffle season began. One wealthy patron returning from her summer house in the Adirondacks reportedly confessed that the shock of returning to the city was eased by the anticipation of eating fried mush at the Exchange. Another success story built on plain fare was found in restaurateur Grace E. Smith, who built a thriving empire in Toledo, Ohio, serving 5,000 diners a day with roast beef hash, rice pudding, tapioca, and mashed potatoes.\(^{14}\)

Women advocated plain food for reasons which, while ostensibly health-based, reveal an undercurrent of moral judgment. In a 1911 *Good Housekeeping* article, for example, young working women were warned not to add sugar, salt, catsup, or pickles to their food, as these seasonings and condiments might induce mood swings. Women reformers worried that young shopworkers were too fond of rich food like clam patties and cream puffs, recommending instead that lunch should consist of a cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread and a glass of milk. Criticism of cream puffs, for example, was based more on their effects on character than on health, possibly because eating for enjoyment was regarded as dubious.\(^{15}\)

A liking for plain food was lodged deep in Anglo-American cuisine, which did not favor strong seasonings. The odor of onions was considered socially embarrassing, and garlic was rarely used in middle-class Anglo-American kitchens well into the twentieth century. A 1925 spaghetti sauce recipe from a cookbook by a YWCA manager reveals what happened when immigrant food was Americanized; the recipe calls only for tomato puree, sugar, salt, and pepper. Poet Octavio Paz has criticized traditional North American cuisine for its lack of sauces and seasonings, observing that “a Yankee meal is saturated with Puritanism, is
made up of exclusions.” He then asserts, “The maniacal preoccupation with the origin and purity of food is the counterpart of racism and discrimination.” As a class, women restaurant operators were scarcely “maniacal,” but they did come from a milieu which had taken up the causes of food purity and the Americanization of immigrant diets, and it would scarcely be surprising if their conviction that plain food was better sprang from a sense of cultural superiority.16

Another cultural factor behind the preference for plain food was the prevalent Puritan-like belief that appetite should result from honest exertion. Sauces, for instance, were believed to be appetite inducers for the jaded palates of debauched socialites. Earnest middle-class reformers were fond of saying, “Hunger is the best sauce.” According to this logic, if a diner did not earn her appetite through hard work then she should skip a meal.

Simplicity also ranked high as a virtue in Anglo-American cookery. Simple food preparation meant using readily available fresh ingredients (no imports!) and manipulating those ingredients as little as possible. The opposite of simple food was fancy food, a category which included the products of French cuisine. At times the proponents of simple food came close to equating a taste for fancy food with degeneracy. Helen Ewing, a columnist for the trade magazine The American Restaurant, suggested that attraction to “elaborate concoctions” was un-American. This can be seen as a translation into culinary terms of a belief, widespread among social reformers such as Jane Addams and her associates, that Europe was old, tired, and corrupt, and had little to offer young America.17

French cuisine was no more popular with women restaurant operators than with American culture at large. Although it had been fashionable in the 1870s, like all things French, it became associated with nouveau riche tastes and with social ostentation in the 1890s. The excesses of wealth displayed in that decade doomed French food, linking it with decadence in the eyes of the reformist middle class of the early twentieth century. Cookery reformer Ellen Richards, creator of the New England Kitchen, a lunchroom in Boston, in 1917 affirmed a belief that there was a causal connection between rich food and “the increase of crime, of insanity, of certain forms of disease, of moral recklessness.”18

City tea rooms, generally more upscale and expensive than sandwich shops or cafeterias, carefully rode the line between fancy and simple food. They were not about to serve their patrons cheese sandwiches on whole wheat bread. They found a way to rehabilitate French cuisine by Americanizing it, in much the same way as had been done by The Boston Cooking School and presented in its magazine American Cook-
ery. Although tea room food was simply prepared, it was expected to be more artful and dainty than what would be served at a lunch counter. Without the seasonings and sauces (except for white sauce, which was highly approved), items such as patties and puffs were staples on tea room menus. When presented on the menu of a tea room, a clam patty was no longer foreign, but American food. Patrons could trust its wholesomeness, and it satisfied the requirement enunciated by New York restaurateur Alice Foote MacDougall that “eating should be a fine art.”

Tea rooms also excelled at creating a homelike environment which put women at ease and convinced them to trust the quality and preparation of the food they were served. Hash might be served in the tea room and hash house alike, but in the tea room it represented home cooking, while in the grease-filled atmosphere of the noisy hash house it suggested dyspepsia and food poisoning. Supposedly the hash house entirely lacked home atmosphere. A homelike eating place, according to temperance advocate Frances Willard in the late 1890s, was “quiet” and its food was “dainty.” A restful dining room to many women such as Willard around the turn of the century would very likely have light gray walls and carpeting. Voices would have been kept to a hush. It simply did not occur to native-born American women of the middle class that a good meal at home could be spicy, noisy, and lively or that the room in which it was consumed could be messy or lacking a genteel decorative scheme.

Middle-class restaurants run by women, especially tea rooms, were renowned for their ability to evoke “atmosphere.” Typically this was achieved by soft lighting, attractive table appointments, and tastefully artistic furniture and decor generally of the understated Arts and Crafts or Colonial Revival styles. Even cafeterias were models of good homes, albeit in the lower ranges of the middle class. Although many cafeterias were starkly plain in the early days, by the 1920s they had become more inviting, with decorated entryways, fountains, mirrored walls, potted plants, and live piano music.

Restaurants that excelled in creating the cuisine and the ambience held dear by the new restaurant women were Schrafft’s and Mary Elizabeth’s in New York City. Perhaps no other restaurant fulfilled middle-class women’s notion of home-away-from-home as successfully as did Schrafft’s. Although it was owned by a man, William Shattuck, it was from the start managed by his sister Jane. Its expansion to a chain of twenty-one restaurants by 1925 was credited to her and to the all-women staff she employed, many of whom were college-trained in domestic science. Schrafft’s strove to convey an air of middle-class
feminine gentility in its personnel, its decor, its crustless tea sandwiches, and its ubiquitous paper doilies. Mary Elizabeth’s, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 36th Street, had a white front with a big window decorated with flower boxes and emblazoned with the Mary Elizabeth signature. Inside, its windows were curtained with dotted Swiss, and its large fireplace, inglenooks, and “scrubbed look” color scheme of yellow and white gave the impression of a cozy cottage. An article in a 1923 trade magazine noted that Mary Elizabeth’s decorations, “though simple, are in the best of taste, nothing ornate or elaborate.” Put in other words, it looked nothing like the typical immigrant home in which anything ornate, elaborate, or Victorian would probably have been cherished as a beautiful treasure.22

The gentility of Schrafft’s and Mary Elizabeth’s was equaled by many department store tea rooms, inns, and small dining rooms managed by women. They succeeded in supplying the quality that 1920s restaurateur and coffee wholesaler Alice Foote MacDougall described as “the intimate feeling we used to have when we gathered around the dining-room at home.” The homelike atmosphere was typically evoked with candles, flowers, and noninstitutional tableware and furniture. MacDougall was one of the many women restaurateurs who used peasant pottery rather than restaurant-supply china. Many women restaura-
Prohibition’s end that women would patronize barrooms if they were designed to look like early American taverns.24
Remaining true to home values, the new women in the restaurant business often decried the profit motive. Although they sought financial success, many said they found their gratification in terms of self-expression. This was particularly true of tea rooms, which were seen as a demonstration of the owner’s taste and an extension of her individuality. Proprietors who ignored business realities failed, of course, yet tea rooms in particular minimized the appearance of commercialism by keeping money out of sight, catering to patrons’ special needs, and offering second helpings without charge.

They also tried to hire help who appeared to want to serve rather than to gain big tips. Some tea rooms with women managers, notably those in department stores, did not permit waitresses to accept tips. Much middle-class opinion in the early twentieth century was set against European-born waiters, who were perceived as too mercenary and inclined to fawn over and manipulate their patrons in order to win a larger tip. Some women also distrusted waitresses in popular-priced restaurants who increased their tips—and risked their virtue—by flirting with male customers. Restaurants run by women almost always had female help, not only because they were supposedly neater and cleaner, but because men would not take orders from women. Older women or female college students with “breeding” made ideal workers in tea rooms and cafeterias, and helped to make patrons feel as though they were at home. It is likely that patrons accustomed to having domestic servants would have responded well. Being waited on at home was a disappearing luxury around the First World War as many former servants left domestic service to work in factories, hotels, and restaurants. Alice Foote MacDougall, a woman of means whose husband’s illness had forced her to support herself, discovered one day that a waitress in her restaurant had once been a servant in her own home.25

But there were limits to how well the home could serve as a model for the restaurant. A home, quite obviously, is not run to make a profit. Tearoom correspondence courses, such as Alice Bradley’s “Cooking for Profit,” often extolled the thriftiness of homemakers and implied that this would serve them well if they ran a restaurant. But no matter how well tea room or cafeteria managers conserved and stretched their resources, no matter how many stale cakes they recycled, their success depended on many factors not in the usual repertoire of the homemaker. Amateurism took a high toll in business failures among women proprietors. Those who truly ran their restaurants like homes failed, while those who succeeded learned that a restaurant can resemble a home only in appearance.

Patricia Murphy, proprietor of Patricia Murphy’s Candlelight, is a
case in point. When she opened her first restaurant in Brooklyn Heights, New York, in 1930, she imagined herself a “housewife planning a family meal.” She was a keen bargain shopper, but had no idea of how to keep accounts. She figured that if she netted a dime on each meal she could stay afloat. Although she turned a profit, she had to work weekends, late nights, and holidays. Her restaurant literally was her home. She reported she was willing to make it her life because she was a “frustrated housekeeper” who never had a home of her own.26

Murphy’s formula of good food and atmosphere proved successful, and she opened a second restaurant in 1939. Meanwhile she had learned a thing or two about business. She installed a bar as soon as Prohibition ended, and when her Christian Scientist landlords objected to liquor being served, she bought them out. Later she opened a restaurant in suburban Manhasset, grossing nearly $1.5 million the first year. Murphy’s success led her to hire executive chefs, institute employee incentive plans, and eventually build her own restaurants in Westchester and Florida. Although she continued to portray her activities as “entertaining guests,” she had mastered the psychology of selling. She designed her new establishments to accommodate large crowds and to engineer waits in the bar or the gift shop (on some busy days at the Westchester Candlelight in the 1950s, as many as one thousand patrons waited for seating), yet she retained an intimate homelike feeling with small dining rooms, outdoor gardens for strolling, candlelight, floral arrangements, and the provision of individual loaves of bread.

Murphy’s career demonstrates how inappropriate homemaking was as a model for a business enterprise. Joseph Dahl, editor of a number of restaurant industry publications, expressed the contradiction like this: women using the home as a model have improved the industry in terms of food quality, sanitation, decor, and a cozy atmosphere, yet their success has unleashed a flood of amateurs (i.e., women) who have “pathetic” expectations of success.27

Increasingly, many of the successful women restaurateurs of the 1930s adopted a rationalized approach to running eating places. Home cooking, with its variability, was one of the first casualties, replaced by the standardized recipe which allowed the cook no culinary choices. The Ware sisters, restaurant owners in New York City, proclaimed that standardized recipes took decisions out of the hands of cooks who were “generally uneducated, untrained people.” Another expert, Linda Spence Brown, said standardized recipes assured patrons of a “uniform product” and that their use was the “most successful substitute I know for the practice and skill of the mothers in our homes, or for the expe-
rience and knowledge of the old-time chef.” Mother, clearly, was no longer wanted in the restaurant kitchen.28

It is hardly surprising that the new women restaurateurs adapted so easily to managerial authority. The domestic social role of many of the women of this class was supervisory, directing the labor of women of other classes and ethnic groups who did the hard and dirty work of the household. In this sense the restaurant modeled on the home accurately reflected reality. For example, when white women supervised the cooking of Black women, they found the situation comfortably familiar. The mother and daughter proprietors of the Gingham Shop explained in Woman’s Home Companion in the early 1920s that their tea shop’s special waffles cooked by their home servant, “faithful Dinah,” were exactly like those she prepared for them at home. In Elizabeth Eager’s Chimney Corner in Baltimore, a woman’s magazine reported, “Negro waitresses of a high grade give deferential service, and an old family servant . . . gives the cooking the home flavor that is so rarely found in a public restaurant.” It seems doubtful that the old family servant cooked what she ate in her own home (if she was lucky enough to have one). If she worked for Alice Foote MacDougall, for instance, her cooking had to please the mistress. MacDougall instructed her Black cooks on how to prepare food like that served in MacDougall’s home.29

The “home-cooking” slogan in restaurants soon became a gimmick. In the 1920s Kansas City cafeteria owner Myron Green ran a billboard advertising campaign which claimed, “The pies I serve are made by real housewives.” How could they be real housewives, the public might have wondered, if they were employed in a restaurant? The advertisement assuaged—even as it validated—widespread fears that women were deserting homemaking for paid employment. Throughout the 1920s the home was seen as imperiled as more women entered the workforce and showed little desire to cook. A 1927 questionnaire at the University of Kansas revealed that only seven out of the 1,513 women students surveyed wanted to be homemakers after graduation. Many women with families relied on packaged food or took the family out to dinner as never before. In 1927 an estimated 25 to 30 percent of all meals in larger cities were eaten in restaurants, according to industry analyst Joseph Dahl, who attributed this to more women working, smaller homes and kitchen facilities, difficulties in hiring servants, a higher standard of living, and a desire for recreation.30

The credibility of restaurants which claimed to have home-cooked meals grew weaker by the 1930s. “Its virtue has been completely destroyed,” complained Helen Ewing, columnist for The American Restau-
rant. “It is like [an] over-emphasis which announces a lie,” she declared in 1931. Preserving home values in the public marketplace proved impossible. In the process the home was crafted into an advertising tool while the further winnowing away of homely arts and crafts continued unabated.31

In the restaurant industry, women failed to win a predominant share of the business, contrary to what some experts, such as Dahl, had predicted. By 1940, 24 percent of restaurants were operated by women, showing only a small increase from 1930. Nor did women’s influence continue to increase within the trade. Once the industry had learned how to draw women patrons into restaurants, it tended to lose interest in what women restaurateurs had to offer. The trend, in any case, was toward larger restaurants and chains that demanded the kind of capital few women had access to. Nevertheless, by World War II, the middle-class restaurant was a firmly established institution, attracting women alone or in groups, the fastidious of either gender, and families with children. Not until the 1960s, however, would mainstream Americans learn to appreciate ethnic restaurants.

Notes


3. An example of the impropriety attached to dining in restaurants that served alcohol is revealed in Florence Wenderoth Saunders’s Letters to a Business Girl (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1908). Describing the high-priced cafe as “seductive,” Saunders paints a scene of moral danger in which young women drink too much and fall prey to male companions (135–137).

4. On lunch clubs and early cafeterias, see “The Origin of the Cafeteria,” Journal of Home Economics 17 (July 1925): 390–393. It took men a while to warm up to the idea of serving themselves, and they did not accept the new cafeteria idea at first. On this, see “These Things We Have Learned about Cafeteria Service,” Cafeteria Management, December 1924: 11. My Tea at the Blue Lantern Inn (New York:
103

St. Martin’s Press, 2002) describes the types of tea rooms found in the first half of the twentieth century.

5. See “Occupation Statistics” in the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th Census of the United States. In 1900 approximately 30 percent of all restaurant-keepers were foreign born, and another 20 percent were of foreign-born parentage.


8. On the distrust of ethnic restaurants and European cuisines generally, see for instance “The Triumph of the American Idea,” by E. H. Nies (Cafeteria Management, November 1923: 11). Nies exalts cafeterias where “the food they sell is American food devoid of à la’s or mit, undisguised and unafraid. . . . There is no need here for that school of cookery which aims to disguise those skeletons and ghosts upon which the hungry population of Europe regales itself.” American food by contrast he hailed as “sanitary and sane.” See also Christine Terhune Herrick, In City Tents (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1902), 174.


11. The sanitation practices of the Y are described in Blanche Geary’s Handbook of the Association Cafeteria (New York: YWCA, 1917), 64. Alice Bradley advised prospective tea room managers in her correspondence course entitled Cooking for Profit, rev. ed. (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1922), 228. The Mayflower advertisement is found in “The Shops of Vanity Fair,” Vanity Fair, January 1918: 21.


13. Sanborn’s suggestions are found in “The Lunchroom in Business,” Journal of Home Economics 4 (February 1912): 10. She observed that in most public lunchrooms “the chef has not as high a standard as the housekeeper at home.”


15. In “The Young Business Woman’s Lunch” by Bertha Stevenson, Good Housekeeping, November 1911: 696. Stevenson asks “How can a girl who feeds
herself on cream puffs be anything but mercurial?,” perhaps foreshadowing Dan White’s “Twinkie defense” in his trial for the murder of Harvey Milk.


19. MacDougall said her disgust with the average restaurant led to her determination to provide high-quality food in an atmosphere refreshing to the “soul” as well as the body. See her “Eating Aesthetically” in *The Forum*, September 1928: 394–397.


24. Colonial decor was recommended to tea room proprietors in Clifford Lewis's correspondence course *The Tea Room Training Course* (Washington, DC: Tea Room Institute, 1923). Documents on The Crumperie are found in the papers of Mary Aletta Crump, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

25. Cafeteria owner Lenore Richards explained that in order to create a home-like atmosphere, she was careful not to hire “the so-called experienced girl,” but instead sought out the “simpler, more wholesome type.” Quoted in Dahl's *Restaurant Management*, 93. MacDougall related this incident in Alice Foote MacDougall: *The Autobiography of a Business Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1928), 200.


28. The Ware sisters recommended standardized recipes in “The Tea Room Business,” *Journal of Home Economics* 16 (October 1924): 569. Brown is quoted in

29. See Lois Borland’s “The Gingham Shop” and Eager’s “The Chimney Corner” in *The Tea Room Booklet*, 32 and 10, respectively. “I work with the cooks until the dishes suit me and are similar to those I have in my own home,” said MacDougall in “Alice Foote MacDougall Talks about Control,” *Catering Management*, October 1930: 10.

30. Myron Green’s slogan is in “75 Years of Food Service History,” *Restaurant Business* 75 (May 1976): 95. The Kansas questionnaire is reported in “Home Cooking Stands No Chance with Co-Eds,” *The Restaurant Man* 2 (January 1927): 20. Across the United States about 14 percent of all meals were served in restaurants, according to Dahl, *Restaurant Management*, 2.

31. By 1924 *Cafeteria Management* was complaining “this ‘mother’s cooking’ claim is intensely overdone.” See “‘Mother’s Cooking’—But Can You Really Boast It?,” *Cafeteria Management*, April 1924: 17. See also Ewing’s “What about This ‘Home Cooking’?,” 45.