

like to share an example to show that the reading of recipes from a literary perspective is by no means exclusively modern or feminine.

My entrée is a humorous essay by William Makepeace Thackeray entitled “Barmecide Banquets with Joseph Bregon and Anne Miller,” published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in November 1845. (This essay appears in volume 6 of *The Oxford Thackeray*, ed. George Saintsbury, London: Oxford UP, [1908], 521–37, from which I quote.) The piece is a review of a contemporary cookbook, *The Practical Cook, English and Foreign*, by Joseph Bregon and Anne Miller (London: Chapman, 1845). Thackeray’s interest in eating is well known, both from his life and from his work. (One of his early noms de plume was The Fat Contributor.) In this review essay, as in several of his other pre-*Vanity Fair* writings, he adopts the persona of George Savage Fitz-Boodle, a bachelor man-about-town. True to the tradition of recipe sharing, Fitz-Boodle phrases his remarks about the cookbook in the form of a chatty letter to a personal friend, “the Rev. Lionel Gaster, Fellow and Tutor of St. Boniface College, Oxon.” The Barmecide banquets of the title allude to an imaginary feast in one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*. Reading the recipe book excites Fitz-Boodle into imagining dinners that might be cooked with its aid, and he hastens to share this gustatory excitement with Gaster.

Fitz-Boodle’s joy of cookbook reading is evident throughout the essay. Mindful of his friend’s academic occupation (“I never saw men who relished a dinner better than the learned fellows of St. Boniface”), he suggests that Gaster will surely “relish this book.” As Fitz-Boodle puts it, “though your mornings are passed in the study of the heathen classics, or over your favourite tomes of patristic lore—though of forenoons you astonish lecture-rooms with your learning, and choose to awe delighted undergraduates—yet I know that an hour comes daily when the sage feels that he is a man.” In his enthusiasm, Fitz-Boodle envisions an edible literary tradition: “What a fine, manly, wholesome sense of roast and boiled, so to speak, there is in the *Iliad*! . . . What appetites Ariosto’s heroes have, and the reader with them! . . . In Sir Walter Scott, again, there reigns a genuine and noble feeling for victuals.” Fitz-Boodle speculates about the possible supernatural origin of this “gormandizing encyclopaedia”: “it is my firm opinion that the occult editor of the *Practical Cook* has tasted and tested every one of the two hundred and twenty-three thousand edible and potable formulae contained in the volume.” He also poignantly points out that *The Practical Cook* is an unsafe book to read in bed: “For some time I had the book by my bedside, and used to read it of nights; but this is most dangerous. Twice I was obliged to get up and dress myself at two o’clock in the morning, and go out to hunt for some supper.”

To be sure, while Leonardi discusses recipes as a route to cooking, Thackeray deals with them as a road to eating. The parts of the cookbook on which Thackeray

concentrates deal with table layout and sample menus. The point of view of his persona—the bachelor Fitz-Boodle—is also chauvinistically masculine: women cook; men eat. Illustrating this point of view, Fitz-Boodle offers an embedded story concerning a woman who callously serves her husband cold mutton and scorns his humble plea for hash. The husband flees to a club, where he falls into evil ways, and the marriage fails—a doleful result that could have been prevented, according to Fitz-Boodle, had the wife been able to read, and profit from, the suggestions for using leftovers in *The Practical Cook*.

Nonetheless, like Leonardi, Thackeray suggests that the line between recipe sharing and narrative writing is a thin one. He also offers a reply of sorts to her question, “What importance, after all, can recipes have to the reading, writing mind?” Fitz-Boodle’s counterquestion is, “Where is the fool or the man of genius that is insensible to the charms of a good dinner?”

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To the Editor:

The final course of Susan J. Leonardi’s “Recipes for Reading” refrains from bringing her essay full circle, for though the opening offers a tasty appetizer, the conclusion skips dessert: a Key lime pie is discussed but never presented. Significantly, the essay deals extensively with the activities of recipe sharing and recipe withholding. But is the omission of the pie recipe mere coyness or an invitation to follow in Leonardi’s direction? Are there not modes when hesitation invites response, when silences invoke assertions and openings call for answers? With a little effort, the Forum section of *PMLA* might even achieve the interactive, empathetic collegiality of the readers’ comments columns in *Women’s Circle*.

The Key lime pie that Leonardi mentions, the one that Rachel Samstat brings to the climatic scene of *Heartburn*, is a metaphor for the disintegration of Rachel’s marriage amid the rootlessness of her social class. Rachel’s pie is carelessly pitched together; it is a yuppified confection, a fast-food lime pie. No tradition grounds it; only a weak, flaky pastry crust supports it. Pasteurized shortcuts are described as acceptable, even recommended: “Even bottled lime juice will do,” Rachel announces in listing the ingredients. The poor pie goes directly from its maker to the freezer; no wonder it is fit for nothing in the end but to serve as a prop for low comedy.

To understand the significance of that circular metaphor in Ephron’s novel, one needs to know how to make a proper Key lime pie, a substantive pie—the kind that good cooks have created for generations in clapboard cottages along the quiet, hibiscus-lined streets of old Key West. Here is the way to do it:

First, catch your limes. This may not be as easy as it sounds. The true Key or Caribbean lime, *Citrus aurant-*

tifolia, is as different from the bloated green Persian limes depicted in soft-drink advertisements as Catherine Earnshaw from Dora Spenslow. Genuine Key limes are round, small, thin-skinned and juicy, yellow with a light charreusse cast, and difficult to obtain commercially. (For an extended discussion of this matter, see Raymond Sokolov's *Fading Feast*.) The Key lime tree bears best where its life is toughest, and its juice carries the complex flavor of fierce tropic storms. (Remember *Key Largo*?) If you are lucky enough to have a friend with a backyard tree or a fruit vendor with good connections, about six Key limes will provide the half cup of juice you need.

Next, make a thickish graham-cracker crust. The recipe is on the box.

Third, mix one fifteen-ounce can of sweetened condensed milk with three or four egg yolks and some sugar (anywhere from a couple of tablespoons to a third of a cup will do). Add the lime juice slowly, mixing rapidly and well. Pour the mixture into the waiting crust immediately, and put the pie in the refrigerator. To serve, top with homemade whipped cream (*not* the kind that comes out of a can through a pointy plastic spout) or—if you are a poverty-stricken graduate student—a meringue made from the leftover egg whites.

The resulting pie will be pale yellow (never green!) as tropical sunshine, heavy as deconstructionist discourse, rich with allusion, sweet and wild as an overextended metaphor. Enjoy.

BETSY HILBERT
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To the Editor:

Susan J. Leonardi makes good points about embedding discourse for recipes in dear old Irma Rombauer's rather foolish prose, in E. F. Benson's coy novels, and in Nora Ephron's personal *Heartburn*, but she also demonstrates the risk of canon stretching: some of it may stretch to the breaking point and get lost. Leonardi has lost the great biblical lament of David for Saul and Jonathan, and the *PMLA* editorial board has at the very least mislaid it. For Leonardi takes Benson's epitaph for Mapp and Lucia, "In death they were not divided," as a borrowing from the end of *The Mill on the Floss*; accordingly it suggests to her the gendered differing of pairs as of Maggie and Tom, and it suggests wrong. E. F. Benson, the son of an archbishop of Canterbury, knew perfectly well what he was borrowing, and so did George Eliot. Leonardi brings the pop-sociology word *sharing* into literary discourse, and this might bring to mind the concept of canon as a concept of something "shared." And the fact is: readers won't be able to "share" with Benson or George Eliot if they don't go on "sharing" the old canonical Bible.

RUTH APROBERTS
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Reply:

I hoped to provide some summer fare, light but nourishing. I am, therefore, a bit surprised that a few of my readers have found it less than digestible. Alas, I suppose I must answer in kind the heavy objections they have dished up. I would like to suggest to Joel Roache, whose detailed critique I don't have space to refute point by point, that the distinction between sex and gender can perhaps maintain itself *only* in the abstract. I'm sorry he was "burdened" by the "antimale subtext." Having myself been burdened all my reading life (including, of course, the being-read-to period) with antifemale subtexts (not to mention texts), I can work up very little sympathy. Quick to attack (to borrow his diction) my logic, he fails to observe his own lapses. The correct analogy, for example (if one must make it), would be to a black who is familiar with white culture, not the other way around. That he reverses it indicates again that he sees himself as oppressed and excluded—by castrating women? cooks? female academics? I worry, too, about his seeming equation of violence and vigor. I've made refreshing gazpacho without "assaulting" the vegetables and delicious cheesecake without "a good macho beating" of the batter. (And I cringe to think that my winding and leisurely argument has anything so phallic as a "thrust.") Finally, his reference to the "unembedded recipe written out for me by my wife before our marriage" suggests that he does not understand what I mean by embedding. Recipes exchanged by lovers cannot be unembedded.

Deborah A. Thomas's suggestion that I offered readers too much pasta and dessert rests perhaps on ethnic differences. Even for a third-generation Italian like me, there can never (I quote here my third-generation Italian flatmate) be too much pasta—and almost never too much dessert.

What puzzles me about Betsy Hilbert's virulent objection to Rachel Samstat's Key lime pie is that the *Heartburn* recipe is almost the same as Hilbert's, except that *Heartburn*'s adds grated lime rind (for me, without a food processor, the most time-consuming part) and makes allowances for those of us unlucky enough not to have a Florida or Caribbean friend with a backyard tree. The only other difference is that Hilbert's recipe adds sugar—but the addition hardly makes a pie more "substantial" or less junky. To my mind, much of the pie's charm is its tartness. I long for half a dozen Key limes, but in their absence I have made the pie with ordinary limes (good) and with bottled Key lime juice (better). Neither makes a green pie, and "even bottled lime juice will do" does not sound to me like a "recommendation." Thus the "yupified, fast-food" recipe of Hilbert's scorn seems a straw pie rather than the text's or mine. My omission of the recipe, by the way, was not coyness at all but reluctance to repeat what the reader can so easily find in *Heartburn*.

While I happily acknowledge that George Eliot knew she was borrowing from David's lament and that E. F. Benson knew that she knew, it seems clear from the flood