



THE AUSTERITY  
KITCHEN  
BY CHRISTINE  
BAUMGARTNER

Where the alimentary is  
elementary.



"Every bachelor has a wife of some  
sort. Mine is a Chafing Dish; and I  
desire to sing her praises." — Frank  
Schloesser, *The Cult of the Chafing  
Dish* (1904)

## The Cult of the Chafing Dish

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER



Bachelor, spinster, pensioner, penniless artist, yachtman,  
marksman, shift worker, stockbroker, picnicker — each prized  
his chafing dish.

A forerunner of the fondue pot, the chafing dish, with its  
small spirit lamp and nickel-plated pans, catered to those  
whose needs were modest. Though it rendered Lilliputian  
portions, it could cook anything from deviled lobster and  
macaroni rarebit to fig cups, peanut drops and wine punch.  
This versatility made the chafing dish the favorite of lonely  
hearts, transients and other solitary sorts, who esteemed its  
ability to elevate dinner from mere utility to true tastiness.



The chafing dish's virtues, however, didn't end with its  
versatility. Minimizing both waste and expense, it naturally  
appealed to mid-twentieth century prophets of thrift.  
Convenient pretty much anytime, the chafing dish on laundry  
day proved a godsend. Or so thought home economist Sarah  
Tyson Rorer. Anything that could simplify preparation of the  
evening meal on such occasions of sudsy drudgery sold itself,  
she insisted. Among students of The Boston Cooking School,  
where Yankee reserve bred a taste for modest edibles, the  
piece of cookware became something of an icon. They could  
be seen wearing lapel pins that featured its unmistakable  
silhouette. Around this icon also sprang up a body of  
literature. Guidebooks bearing such titles as *The Cult of the  
Chafing Dish* and *The Bachelor and the Chafing Dish* graced  
bookstore shelves. Enhancing this cultic appeal was the  
chafing dish's ancient origins: The Greeks used it table-side to  
heat eggs and bits of fruit. Indeed, its aura of classical  
refinement was such that the plainest gruel simmered in it  
could conjure images straight from Plato's *Symposium*.

### Sophomore Year



Perhaps this association inspired a group of co-eds at a  
certain unnamed American college to make the chafing dish  
the crux of a most inventive celebration. They decided to  
commemorate the final semester of their senior year by  
hosting a "progressive dinner." To advertise this event, they  
passed around hand-illustrated menus. The bill of fare  
reflected the simple party they intended; in place of the  
gelatin salads and champagne characteristic of swanky hotel  
buffets appeared homey chafing-dish selections.

The dormitory proved as adequate as any ballroom when it  
came to staging the affair. The young women who occupied  
the largest rooms served as hostesses. Each hostess had  
assigned to her one or two "helpers." Each helper stationed  
herself behind a chafing dish in order to serve the attendees,  
whose movement from room to room followed the order of  
courses listed on the menu.



A hostess bearing a small pitcher of cream and a dish of  
oyster crackers occupied the premiere room. Into a chafing  
dish of tomato soup she added both ingredients to produce a  
first course of quiet sophistication.

The hostess of the second room had prepared for her guests a  
chafing dish of creamed chicken and lettuce sandwiches. Not  
to be outdone, the third hostess filled her room with plates of  
salad — small tidy nests of lettuce into which she piled  
bananas, oranges, white grapes and apples dressed in  
mayonnaise and cream. Her guests pronounced them  
delicious.

### Junior Year



As much of a splash as the salad in the third room made, the  
dish awaiting guests in the fourth made an even greater; the  
hostess therein had whipped up a terrific orange mousse. A  
resourceful girl, she planned well ahead of the event, blending  
cream and the juice earlier that afternoon and pouring the  
mixture into a tin, which she then placed in an ordinary  
bucket packed with snow scraped from the campus green. She  
hung the whole thing out her window to freeze in the winter  
air. The result of her confectionary ingenuity, which she  
served with wafers, triumphantly capped the meal.

### Senior Year



The final room belonged to a hostess who had the good  
fortune of owning a percolator. Here guests drank coffee and  
played banjos and sang. High spirits infected all. The party  
had been the nicest of the year, and had been made all the  
nicer because the burden of preparation had fallen on no one;  
and the expense, which had been divided, was less than  
dinner elsewhere. They agreed that it is far more fun to cook  
and eat together than to savor a smart dish alone.



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Illustrations from *College Girls'  
Record: A Chronicle of Memories*  
(1910)

"When the eye of the convalescent  
brightens and his appetite is  
stimulated by a choice tidbit  
prepared on the chafing dish, then  
its value is most appreciated." —  
Fannie Merritt Farmer, *Chafing  
Dish Possibilities* (1898)

Definition of "Blue-stocking" from  
*Encyclopaedia Americana* (1836):  
"A pedantic female; one who  
sacrifices the characteristic  
excellences of her sex to learning....  
In Germany, blue-stocking (*blau-  
strumpfe*) signifies a traitor, a  
slanderer, an infamous lover."

"The only effort of which I know  
that has been made toward  
collecting statistics regarding social  
customs in the co-educational  
institutions of the United States has  
been made by the Inter-Sorority  
Conference Committee appointed  
in September, 1904.... In this  
report, the committee states that  
while changes in social customs  
must come through changes in  
public opinion, public opinion is  
best aroused in the discussion of  
facts, and it is hoped that the report  
may at least start discussion and  
lead to clearer ideas of the best  
there is, both as to the form and  
spirit in college social life." — from  
the Proceedings of the Annual  
Session of the Iowa State Education  
Association (1907)

Previously by  
CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

*Coweye Burgers and  
Plastic Malts*

*Dinner with Caligula*

*A Contrary Image of  
Steaming Excrement*

Recipe for Tomato Bisque from  
*Chafing-Dish Dainties* (1898): "In  
the hot water pan heat one pint of  
tomato liquid, one teaspoon salt,  
one-half salt-spoon soda, and  
pepper to taste, adding if desired  
either Paprika, cayenne, or about  
two or three drops Tabasco Pepper  
Sauce. When this is hot remove,  
and in the blazer over open flame,  
put one tablespoon butter and one  
and one-half of flour, blend, and  
gradually add one pint of milk.  
When all is blended add the tomato  
liquid, stirring well and serve hot,  
with dry toast cut into small bits."