Workingman's Bread

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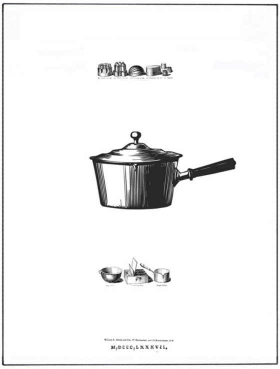

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"How well can we live," Juliet Corson asked herself, "if we are moderately poor?" On the radical origins of home economics.

As it was for many who went to school in the early 1990s, my junior-high experience with home economics was brief. In theory, I liked cooking, but the idea of doing it in a dour classroom outfitted with fridges and Formica conjured visions of trembling Jell-O molds and glaucous mounds of pistachio-cream salad, crumbly refrigerated biscuits and mushy pinwheels of deviled ham, all tasting the way the cafeteria smelled. I registered for Beginning Consumer Sciences not out of a great love for things domestic but because I wanted to avoid physical education (the only other available elective) and to get an easy A. But my first assignment, broccoli salad, proved unexpectedly difficult: I glopped on too much Miracle Whip and burned the bacon, mistakes that earned me a C- and a gentle admonition to "follow the recipe."

Thanks to the guidance of a teacher both cheerful and good-natured — as you inevitably must be when supervising a roomful of 13-year olds employing sharp knives and hot ranges — I managed to reverse my course. I soon found myself chopping, roasting, and frying with brio, turning out soggy but delicious pineapple upside-down cakes and loads of peanut brittle more salty than sweet.

As I was baking and cooking in that classroom, with its four small avocado-green ovens, little did I think that I was participating in something of cultural importance. But recently, academics and food critics have called for a return of home economics to high school curricula. In a 2011 National Public Radio interview, Michigan State University history professor Helen Zoe Veit sang the praises of instruction in the domestic arts. "Just by virtue of making foods at home," she said, "you're almost guaranteed to be making them much more healthfully than they would be if you buy them at a fast-food restaurant or in virtually any restaurant where fats and sugars are used in … enormous quantities." In summer, Slate ran an article by Torie Bosch, who claimed that "home ec is more valuable than ever in an age when junk food is everywhere, obesity is rampant, and few parents have time to cook for their children." What's more, she argues, a course in home economics could help students to teach their cash-strapped families to stretch their dollar. Frugality and thrift, watchwords of austere times past, would once again see recession-wracked Americans through their present ill fortune.

Americans' present ill fortune has persisted for a number of years now and threatens to grow worse, because most politicians appear to agree that present economic realities have made inevitable a rollback of New Deal programs. In a time of diminished prosperity, the thinking goes, citizens are summoned to tighten their belts further. Talk of austerity has the attractive effect of conflating notions of individual conduct with those of economic justice, and so shows itself utterly befitting a neoliberal age. Yet as history demonstrates, the present morality play involving a people perched perilously on a "fiscal cliff" has seen several dress rehearsals.

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The association of clever cookery with economic security had long abided in pre-Roosevelt America. Early home economists thought a well-cooked roast could quell or eliminate everything from public drunkenness to factory riots. For them food was a way not only to ease the bitter pangs of poverty but also to curtail its more disruptive social repercussions. Juliet Corson, founder of the New York Cooking School, was one such advocate of better living through sensible-meal prep. The good life could be had through good cooking, she believed. Eager to show the working classes how to make the most of available foodstuffs that, thanks to the railroad's aggressive expansion over the course of the 19th century, had increased in both variety and quantity, she penned one of the most popular cooking guides of the era, *Fifteen-Cent Dinners for Workingmen's Families* (1877). Its simple, sensible advice helped thousands weather the period's financial panics and made Corson one of the century's most notable social reformers.

Many Americans were in desperate need of Corson's brand of social reform. The economic dislocation caused by rapid industrialization and cycles of financial panics mired millions of families in poverty. The panic of 1873, precipitated by the failure of the investment banking firm Jay Crooke and Co., arrested the economic momentum that had been achieved during the preceding decades. The New York Stock Exchange closed for 10 days. Factories shut down. Credit evaporated. Of the country's 364 railroads, 89 went bankrupt. The next two years saw 18,000 businesses fail. By 1877, more than 20 percent of working people found themselves unemployed, while another 40 percent settled for part-time work. Between 1865 and 1900 the number of people employed in low-wage manufacturing jobs increased from 1.3 million to 4.5 million, and the number of factories (or, perhaps more accurately, sweatshops) rose from 140,000 to 512,000. Government assistance, if it came at all, was irregular and arbitrary. Shanties popped up in field lots like so many mushrooms.

With the appearance of shantytowns came demonstrations, protests and mass strikes by workers grown tired of 14- or 15-hour shifts, dangerous working conditions, and low wages. Riots broke out in larger cities, the most notorious of which, the Tompkins Square riot, took place in New York City on January 13, 1874, after police canceled at the last minute a scheduled meeting between unemployed workers and city authorities. The workers assembled anyway, and mounted police armed with clubs charged them.

Though Corson knew she could not right the wrongs of industrial capitalism, she did believe that she could teach the poor how to keep hearth and home together as they waged their battles. "How well can we live," she asked herself, "if we are moderately poor?" She directed every effort to answering this question.

Corson knew little of poverty as a child. The only daughter of a prosperous Roxbury, Massachusetts, produce wholesaler, she moved with her family to New York City, where she enjoyed an eclectic education from age 6 onward. Tutored by her mother in the classics, Corson spent hours in her uncle's large library reading Latin and Greek history and poetry. With her brothers, she took up rowing, fishing, and shooting. Though unorthodox, Corson's childhood was nothing short of idyllic.

It came to an abrupt end some 10 years after her family's move to New York. Her mother died, and her father remarried. His new wife turned her stepdaughter out of the house, insisting that she was old enough to earn her own living. Corson found work as a librarian at the Working Woman's Library, where she earned four dollars a day and a place to sleep—in the library. She supplemented her income by writing poems and short newspaper articles. She would later credit this time of relative poverty with instilling in her fellow-feeling for people of small means.

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After the onset of the 1873 depression, Corson offered her services to the Women's Educational and Industrial Society of New York, which provided vocational training to women at a time when thousands of them needed to support themselves but lacked the knowledge and means. It sought to keep these women in work to prevent them from succumbing to "moral degradation," as one contemporary circular phrased it. The school's administrators tapped Corson to teach culinary arts. Having had little previous experience beyond that of making coffee and grilling steak, she turned to the best European cookbooks for guidance. "The thoroughness of the German and the delicacy of the French" impressed her, and she synthesized these two Continental influences into "a philosophy of her own."

This philosophy proved immensely popular, because it informed an approach to cooking that appeared almost effortless. Just about anyone could whip up tasty, economical meals. Women flocked to hear Corson, whose instructional method was immersive. With basket in hand, she led her students to Fulton Market for lessons on selecting fresh meat, fish, and vegetables before adjourning to the cooking school, where, behind a brightly polished range topped with copper saucepans and boilers, she demonstrated how best to prepare them. So successful were her lessons that they attracted the notice of upper-class colleagues. They encouraged her not only to continue penning articles and books but also to open her own school, which she did in 1876.

Corson's New York Cooking School, initially based in her own home, charged tuition on a sliding scale and taught both practical and more advanced cooking skills to everyone from ladies' maids to young housewives. Her specialty, however, remained economical cookery. The 34-page *Fifteen-Cent Dinners for Workingmen's Families* elaborated its finer points. "The cheapest kinds of food are sometimes the most wholesome and strengthening," Corson insisted. On three nickels (the equivalent of $2.78 today) the poorest laborer could eat, if not like a king, then perhaps like his boss. "In Europe provinces would live upon what is wasted in towns here," Corson lamented. *Fifteen-Cent Dinners* revealed veritable plenty in the midst of apparent dearth. Simply by eliminating waste, Corson claimed, a household could find nourishment to spare.

Nourishing and palatable, the recipes in *Fifteen-Cent Dinners* derive from the close study Corson made of working-class diets by haunting the city's public markets and surreptitiously peering into the baskets of the more shabbily dressed women. The slim volume opens with a list of "Daily Bills of Fare for One Week," which begins with a breakfast of boiled rice and scalded milk. For dinner, there's corned beef with cabbage; for supper, peas simmered in stock. Similar meals mark the rest of the week's menu: stewed tripe, salt pot-au-feu, beans boiled in broth, barley boiled in broth—all filling, all nutritious. Sunday permits a touch of luxury. A working-class family starts the day with a relatively lavish breakfast of fried lentils, cocoa, and bread. Noontime sees them digging into haslet stew and a slice of suet roly-poly, and the evening they greet with a hearty cheese pudding.

Dried herbs, piquant relishes, a lemon tincture made from peels steeped in alcohol—all appear with regularity enough to break up any dietetic monotony. Her Christmas menu features roast turkey, baked potatoes, applesauce and plum pudding. For the rest of the year, Corson recommends that housewives use lentils, macaroni, greens (the first two being ideal "heat foods," as she terms them), and other then-exotic ingredients she considered regrettably overlooked. "Americans are beginning to realize the wealth of green food abounding in their gardens and fields," she writes, "which they have too long abandoned to their beasts of burden." Dandelion, corn salad, chicory, mint, sorrel, fennel, marshmallows, tarragon, chives, mustard, and wild cresses ought to adorn the proletarian table. And always on the stove should simmer stock—a nourishing Continental touch. "The hardy and thrifty working classes of France, the country where the most rigid economy in regard to food is practiced, never use tea or coffee for breakfast, and seldom use milk," she writes in the preface to *Fifteen-Cent Dinners*. "Their food and drink is BROTH."

Corson's uniquely cosmopolitan approach to economical cookery won her audience's approval. Critics hailed *Fifteen-Cent Dinners* as a panacea. The *Chicago Tribune* claimed that between its covers lay "the secret of economy which gives skill to conceal cheap things," and another prominent newspaper, the *Christian Union*, assured readers that, if faithfully followed, the recipes would "put upon the rich man's table food more nourishing and palatable than nine out of ten well-to-do people ever taste outside of first-class restaurants." Yet Corson's book failed to please union leaders, who accused its author of conspiring with capitalists to suppress wages, reasoning that if workers learned they could subsist quite well on 15 cents, they would lose interest in agitating for much more.

Nonetheless, an 1879 issue of *Harper's Monthly* contained a flattering article on Corson, characterizing her as "the benefactor of the working classes, for she teaches them how to make two dishes where formally they made but one; and the friend of women, for she has shown them the way to a useful and honorable profession." Hundreds wrote to Corson asking her to mail them copies. "Please send me a book," one man requested, "for people of refinement and education reduced me almost to starvation. God will reward you tenfold." "I work in a shop where we are getting 80 cents to a $1.44 day," wrote another. "If any person with an intelligent eye would walk through our shops and take notice of our lean, haggard, worn-out faces and bodies, he would come to the conclusion we need some advice."

Corson wanted to get *Fifteen-Cent Dinners* into as many Americans' hands as possible. She mandated that the booklet be free to those whose daily wage was $1.50 or less. The *Baltimore Daily News* gave away 1000 copies, and the *Philadelphia Record* reproduced the entire text in its pages. Demand prompted her to expand her cooking school, and she continued to pen cookbooks that promoted the virtues of thrift and good food. In demand as much domestically as abroad, Corson helped establish cookery classes in public schools across the U.S. In 1893 she was asked to organize the New York Cooking School Exhibit and was awarded a medal there for her life's work.

Unwed and impoverished at the time of her death in 1897, Corson won wide acclaim for her ascetic devotion to the culinary cause. Throughout her career she remained a staunch advocate for improving the lives of the poor. “I hope to live to see the time when workingmen can earn enough to supply all their wants,” she once said. “Until then my duty is to show them how to make the best of what they have. And I hold that in doing so I am proving myself a better friend to them than those who try to make them still more discontented with the lot that is already almost too hard to bear.”

For many turn-of-the century American workers, safe and equitable working conditions would continue to prove elusive. Some of Corson’s successors insisted that courses in practical cooking did more good than all the anarchists, unionists and socialists’ propaganda combined. Nourishing, economical meals would ameliorate the nation’s social problems and keep civil peace. Armed with ladle and stew pot, the humble American cook had the power to influence the nation’s political direction. “I verily believe if the rigid instructions for food and feeding were implanted in the minds of our girls during their early school days,” wrote home economist Sarah Tyson Rorer after the 1893 crash, “the labor element would not be such discontented individuals.”

Many agreed with this sentiment. By the 19th century’s end, settlement houses, YWCAs, girls’ clubs, city missions, and cookery schools dotted the landscape. And though they failed to quell the nation’s burgeoning labor unrest (and pity the worker who would sell his labor rights for a mess of roly-poly pudding!), they made clear a fact that still rings true: The kitchen anchors the country’s economic, social, and political life, and the cook, as its figurehead, exercises far more influence over its course than is commonly thought.

And the cook should not be too reticent in exerting that influence. In their ideal form, home-economics courses encourage a radical re-skilling, fostering familiarity with food in its natural state (as opposed to the likely more familiar state of being wrapped in plastic or Mylar) and a respect for the kitchen wisdom that determines our health and contentment. The return of these courses to American schools should be sparked then not by that old spirit of “making do” but by a desire to mount resistance to those forces that would reduce the whole repertoire of recognizably human activities to so many one-click purchases or so much frictionless “sharing.” Corson devoted her life to dispelling the ignorance that often accompanies privation. Cooks today must defend against a more insidious enemy: a modern food industry that profits from that ignorance and blights with degenerative diseases—Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol—spawned by its goods. The sooner we warn children against this goblin market and teach them culinary self-sufficiency, the sooner we can wrest our health and happiness back from the food conglomerates, the factory farms, the lobbyists and the adulterators.

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