

## Review of Walden, Sarah W. *Tasteful Domesticity: Women's Rhetoric & the American Cookbook 1790-1940*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2018. 220 pages.

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In *Tasteful Domesticity: Women's Rhetoric & the American Cookbook 1790-1940*, author Sarah W. Walden crafts a detailed historical account of the rhetorical work of cookbook writers in the U.S. Walden analyzes the concept of taste via the 19<sup>th</sup> century American cookbook, examining the genre to explore how women used rhetoric to gain a voice in the public forum while still upholding the status quo by remaining in their domestic space. Similarly, the rhetoric of taste at the time (from taste preferences in food or fashion to moral and ethical beliefs) blended public and private concerns. Drawing from Hugh Blair, Walden describes taste as serving a dual role: "Taste simultaneously indicates an individual preference and a cultural standard, as well as physical and intellectual labor" (1). She does not provide a finite definition of taste, implying that its complexity and flexibility would make any single definition useless. In this text, taste is shown to be a barometer of culture, its definition changing focus as culture develops over the centuries. Taste was a discourse that women, despite their limited gender role, could participate in through cookbook authorship. Inspired by Cheryl Glenn's call to re-map the rhetorical tradition to include work by women, *Tasteful Domesticity* is a thorough examination of the contributions of women cookbook writers to the history of rhetoric.

This 2018 publication is, as Walden observes in her introduction, the first book-length study of cookbooks and rhetoric. As such, it represents a significant step in the study of women's rhetorical practices. Walden provides a detailed introductory overview of past research on cookbooks, from historical, sociological, and rhetorical viewpoints. While it is the first long-form study of cookbooks and rhetoric, it is (as Walden notes) far from the first scholarship on cookbooks in the field, as contributors to and readers of this journal can certainly attest. It seems an extreme statement to call cookbooks a "widely overlooked" area of study in rhetoric (168), though it would have been true several years ago when this text was in its early drafting stages. Today, conferences such as RSA and Feminisms and Rhetorics frequently have multiple

food- and cookbook-related panels, demonstrating the increasing interest in this area of study. Walden's study is distinct in her focus on the rhetoric of taste and the ways in which cookbook writers engaged with that discourse at several points throughout American history. Walden uses the cookbook as a starting point to explore assumptions and arguments regarding taste through the progress of the long nineteenth century in America. While cookbooks are certainly a central feature of the text, this isn't a study of the cookbook genre. In each chapter, Walden uses cookbooks as a jumping-off point to study societal beliefs about taste, considering how cookbook writers engage in debates around these beliefs. Thus, while cookbooks are a central feature of analysis in the book, Walden spends a great deal of time mapping the connections between cookbooks and culture, showing the varied points of influence that food writing reaches. As Walden explains in her introduction, "Women participate in the formation of knowledge and community through their adaptations and revisions of discourses of taste" (17). Cookbook writing is productive; it allows women to have a voice regarding taste and to use that voice to persuade readers of their beliefs. Women were able to define their own community and identity through their writing, claiming a space for themselves in print while staying within their domestic sphere.

Walden's text is divided into seven parts: an introduction, five chapters, and a very brief conclusion. Each of the five chapters focuses on one aspect of taste (taste and science, taste and race, etc.) during a particular time period in American history, beginning in the 1790s with the first American-published cookbook to antebellum nostalgia and its pushback in the 1940s. Each chapter chooses three or more cookbook authors to discuss as representative of taste discourse during its respective time period. Walden admits in the conclusion that the study is not comprehensive, and indeed it doesn't need to be; her text selections in each chapter are highly representative of the period and are useful for her argument without need of more examples.

The first chapter, "Taste and Virtue," focuses on the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the first American women cookbook authors began to publish. Prior to the 1796 publication of Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery*, available cookbooks were written by British authors and re-published in the new world. Thus, these first American cookbooks were able to engage in taste discourse in order to unify the new nation. As Walden argues, these women rhetors were able to use taste as a rhetorical device in their cookbooks, linking taste with virtue. Selecting cookbooks by Amelia Simmons, Lydia Maria Child, and Mary Randolph, Walden explores the ways in which taste discourse was intertwined with virtue in the 1790-1830 period in America. A person's individual taste was rhetorically connected to their community; "good taste" had the potential to unify and support a community and a nation. Exploring the concept of

republican motherhood—the ideology claiming that teaching morality had a positive effect on the raising of children, the young boys of which would grow up and become future leaders—Walden shows how these women authors' statements about taste influenced the rise of the republican motherhood ideology. Capitalism is also discussed, as these authors focused on the economic roles of women in the home and argued that domestic facility can lead to strong finances and national success. To Simmons, taste meant to develop an American character or virtue. To Child and Randolph, who wrote more generally on all sorts of domestic matters beyond cooking, having good taste meant to be frugal and to run a well-organized home. These good habits, the authors suggested, would lead to the advancement of the nation as a whole.

Chapter two, "Taste and Morality," takes on the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the cult of domesticity that so rigidly defined gender roles. Identifying key texts from Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale, Walden observes the use of taste discourse to imply a connection to Christian morality. In the 1840s, the good taste of a woman would mean her connection to God. Instead of a focus on a woman's economic value, this time period was concerned with her moral value. The Victorian cult of domesticity linked women's roles to morality and the Christian church; the domestic advice text popular at this time claimed an almost sacred position in society, as it taught women how to run a more efficient, moral home, thus making her closer to God. This belief was even stronger regarding motherhood—the increase of clubs and publications catering to mothers and linking them to the church demonstrates the social value of women as the moral center of the home. For instance, the texts Walden uses in this chapter link the practice of good manners to taste. Being the moral center of the home, women were tasked with policing both virtuous thought (morality) as well as virtuous behavior (manners). While the previous chapter aligned taste and virtue, this time period narrows the concept to focus on taste and moral virtue, specifically.

"Taste and Region," Walden's third chapter, is the centerpiece of the text. While not that much longer than the other chapters (31, compared to a chapter average of 25 pages), this chapter is the most polished and information-rich of the book, indicating that the author's own personal interest lies here. References to this chapter are included in nearly every other chapter, making this chapter's topic more thoroughly discussed than topics of other chapters. Indeed, this chapter could be the focus of its own book. Instead of concentrating on a time period as previous chapters did, the third chapter explores a particular cultural region, looking at cookbooks of the Southern United States in the periods just before, during, and just after the Civil War. Walden argues that Southern cookbook writers—white Southern women—wrote to preserve Southern identity and culture during a time of turmoil. Going into great depth

on the South's use of the community cookbook subgenre, Walden argues that "taste constitutes southern identity," (86) examining what she names as the constitutive function of these texts during the Civil War era. Also considering single-author cookbooks, Walden investigates how Randolph, Lettice Bryan, and Sarah Rutledge were the first authors to take antebellum Southern domestic culture and compose those foodways traditions in print.

Chapter four, "Taste and Science," brings the study to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the domestic science cooking reform movement. Beginning with Henrietta Goodrich's call for a "democracy in taste," the cooking reform movement of the Victorian era provided taste education for women who otherwise viewed domestic work as drudgery. As Walden argues, women cookbook authors of this era manipulated taste discourse in order to push for public reform goals to improve efficiency and economy in cooking. Taste is regulated and regimented so as to fit a narrow scientific standard, and science is put forward as the one clear solution to improving women's lives in the domestic space. This narrow construction of taste, not surprisingly, is limited to the white middle class of the era. Domestic scientists attempted to rebrand housework as vital to a woman's maternal duty and her identity, as the text references chapter two's discussion of the cult of domesticity and the woman as moral center of the home. Walden discusses writer Catherine Owen's novelized cookbooks, in which recipes were given throughout a fictionalized account of a woman learning to value the cooking reform movement. Texts like these were created to persuade women to adopt the scientifically proven methods of the movement. Walden ends the chapter with a particularly disturbing discussion of the ways in which taste discourse was racialized. One major argument of domestic scientists was in support of "euthenics," similar to eugenics, as they believed that taste education improved nutrition, economy, and quality of life, thus stabilizing the future of the (white, middle-class) race. While eugenics focused on genetics and hereditary traits, euthenics supporters believed that an improvement in one's environment could have a better, quicker impact on quality of life, thus bettering the (white) race immediately rather than through future generations. Walden quotes euthenics author Ellen Richards, who argued that "Euthenics precedes eugenics, developing better men now, and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future" (137). Instructions for the betterment of women's domestic lives was specifically meant for white women, in order to ensure racial superiority. This section in chapter four is one of the most memorable in the book. Laura Shapiro, in her comprehensive history of the domestic science reform movement, *Perfection Salad*, did not even mention this dark aspect of our past.

Picking up logically where the previous chapter left off, chapter five, "Taste and Race," begins with a discussion of euthenics and belief in white

superiority. Again with a nod to Southern regional culture, Walden compares the rhetorical moves in two types of racialized cookbooks of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: “Mammy” cookbooks with their antebellum nostalgia and cookbooks written by black women who were professional cooks. She analyzes African-American women’s reclaiming of taste discourse for themselves, through their own domestic writing. Previous to this point, cookbooks had generally established taste and domesticity as the domain of whiteness. As for the “Mammy” cookbook written by white Southern women to wax nostalgic about having servants during the slavery era in the South, Walden argues that they were “a form of representational eugenics,” as these white women used the space of the cookbook to whitewash history and disrespect black women’s lived experience (158). Walden also observes the racialized debate regarding how black and white women viewed cooking. White women authors, with the help of the cooking reform movement, viewed cooking as intellectual labor, as a standardized, rule-governed practice. In contrast, black women authors portrayed cooking as instinctual and organic, as something that provides joy. This fifth chapter attempts to make up for the lack that is evident throughout—a discussion of race. Even in the extensive, detailed third chapter on Southern regional cookbooks, there is only a passing reference to race, a disappointing lack in an otherwise excellent chapter. Saving this discussion for the final chapter of the text seems unnecessary, as the reader finds race to be missing in the analysis of the other chapters. The fifth chapter, while excellent in its comparative analysis, seems like an afterthought in terms of its fit with the other chapters.

Another issue with the study is that it reads like a dissertation. While it is masterful in its use of historical details and a wide range of sources, chapters often get heavy on literature review, a practice embraced in dissertation writing but not necessary for publication. Additionally, while Walden makes excellent connections between cookbooks and other aspects of American culture, several of these points would be better as footnotes that would not interrupt an otherwise solid argument. The reader might wonder what audience is intended for this text, as the introduction goes so far into details about cookbooks and women’s writing that, at least for those who are within this area of study, is already known. Again, it is essential for dissertation writing, but seems out of place in a published work.

In all, Walden’s *Tasteful Domesticity* is an important first long-form publication in the area of cookbooks and rhetoric, scholarship that is (surprisingly) a long time coming. Her facility with historical details and connections made between cookbooks and culture is fascinating, and her argument regarding the rhetoric of taste is solid. Walden’s text raises the profile of cookbooks as objects of rhetorical study for future scholars.

## Work Cited

Shapiro, Laura. *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.

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## About the Author

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