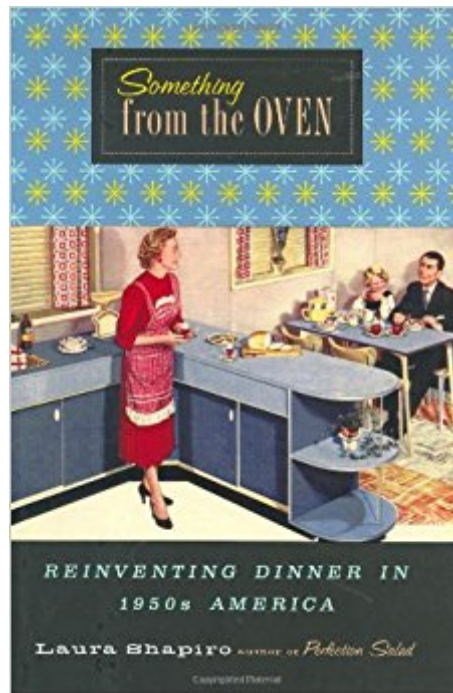


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Something From The Oven: Reinventing Dinner In 1950s America



Synopsis

In this delightfully surprising history, Laura Shapiro's author of the classic *Perfection Salad* recounts the prepackaged dreams that bombarded American kitchens during the fifties. Faced with convincing homemakers that foxhole food could make it in the dining room, the food industry put forth the marketing notion that cooking was hard; opening cans, on the other hand, wasn't. But women weren't so easily convinced by the canned and plastic-wrapped concoctions and a battle for both the kitchen and the true definition of homemaker ensued. Beautifully written and full of wry observation, this is a fun, illuminating, and definitely easy-to-digest look back at a crossroads in American cooking.

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Customer Reviews

In the fifties, we're always told, the food industry barged into the American kitchen, waving TV dinners, and destroyed home cooking. Not so fast, Shapiro says. As she reveals, women refused many of the new convenience foods. Fish sticks they accepted, but not ham sticks. Canned peaches, yes; canned hamburgers, no. The industry people hired psychologists to help them combat such resistance; the women's magazines, fond of their advertisers, told readers how, by splashing some sherry over the frozen peas, they could still make dinner look as though they had cooked it. The book is very funny, and also subtle. The most interesting character is Poppy Cannon, the foremost food columnist of the period, who, though she started her mint-jelly recipe with lime jello, was a serious feminist and had a long affair with "and eventually married" the head of the

N.A.A.C.P. After American cooking passed her by, Cannon threw herself off the balcony of her apartment. This chapter reads like a Russian novel. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker

When World War II ended, American industry was left with overcapacity in food manufacture and preservation. Before this could be transferred to domestic use, food manufacturers had to distinguish between what a soldier needed to eat and what a family wanted to eat. Canned and frozen foods appeared in groceries, but American housewives initially rejected most of them. Marketing and modern food science soon overcame objections, television advertising spread the gospel of efficiency, and the 1950s American kitchen and diet were transformed. Shapiro delves into this period of rapid change and comes up with absorbing stories of the era's women. In addition to the familiar tales of the fictional Betty Crocker and cultural icon Julia Child, Shapiro relates the astounding stories of other mid-century foodies such as Poppy Cannon, who publicized convenience foods while falling in love with Walter White, influential NAACP leader, in a time still suspicious of interracial marriage. She also tells of Freda De Knight at Ebony, who studied at the same Parisian cooking school as Julia Child and then brought French haute cuisine into the middle-class African American kitchen. Shapiro's graceful, flowing prose makes this history of both cooking and women utterly compelling. Mark Knoblauch Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

The book starts explaining how most of the pre-packaged food phenomenon got its start with WWII ration (although some frozen food and canned food was around earlier than that) and how marketers tried to convince housewives that there was a need for these canned and frozen items, even though the war was over. I enjoyed reading how most women still viewed cake mixes and other 'short cut foods' as lazy, even in the golden age of 1950's marketing. What the advertisements wanted us to believe is that women just did not have the time anymore to create cakes from scratch, even though making a cake from scratch only added an extra 17 minutes to your prep time. Shapiro delves into phenomenon's like the Pillsbury Bake-Off, and Gold Medal Flour contests, and the creation of the ubiquitous Betty Crocker. I also enjoyed learning about Poppy Cannon. What Shapiro hits upon hard is that women in this age still preferred to make from scratch even though shortcuts were being pushed. She also talks into great extent how home cooking was seen as a woman's job but gourmet food was only prepared by men, for men. Women just couldn't break into the gourmet top tier, even then.

For serious history lovers, especially those interested in social history, this book is excellent. Very detailed, and for me it explained why my mother cooked the way she did. (All convenience foods!).

If you like RETRO, come along back to the time when we were young, happy, and the Folks did all the work and worrying! Linda Muir

I felt guilty giving any less than 3 stars, tho I can't say I enjoyed the book (it is an easy/quick read). It's not really about what I thought it would be about, that's not the fault of the book being advertised. Thought it would be mostly about food trends and how people ate in America through the decades. It's far less about that (tho that is in there, to a lesser degree). It's more of a social treatise on women's "place in the kitchen" through the years, and how it evolved by the food industry, and the introduction of convenience foods, to social pioneers like Julia Child and Poppy Cannon. It almost at times reads like a college doctorate on women's social issues and how they were reflected in the home and kitchen..

Something From the Oven covers almost everything about American food culture during the post-World War II years until the mid 1960s. There are accounts of the advent of convenience foods, the literature of food, the rise of cooking shows on TV, and the phenomenon of cooking contests such as the Pillsbury Bake-Off. The topics seem loosely connected, with no particular conclusions drawn. But it's a pop history book, not an academic tome, so sit back and enjoy an entertaining look at food from several historical angles. Shapiro talks about the post-war need for convenience food. At least, manufacturers wanted there to be a need for convenience foods, whether American cooks agreed or not. There were a lot of experiments in the first days. Successful products included concentrated frozen orange juice and fish sticks. Unsuccessful product proposals included canned deep-fried hamburgers and concentrated distilled water. (I suspect if Shapiro is having us on with that last idea.) The section on domestic literature was especially fun, although a lot of it had little to do with food. Shapiro discusses Shirley Jackson, Erma Bombeck, Peg Bracken, Bette MacDonald, Jean Kerr, and the Gilbreths of Cheaper By the Dozen fame, among others. She reveals that there was often a big difference between their supposedly non-fiction works and their actual lives. I look forward to rereading these old favorites with this new information in mind, as well as looking up some authors Shapiro mentions that I was not aware of. The mini-history of Julia Child's career is entertaining, and the extensive bibliography is a treasure trove of further reading ideas. Recommended!

'Something from the Oven' by Laura Shapiro is subtitled 'Reinventing Dinner in 1950's America', referring to the conventional wisdom that home cooking in the 1950's was all about cooking with packaged, canned, frozen, and other commercially prepared foods. Oddly, the most interesting message I get from this book is that in spite of the great expansion of such preparations, home cooks, primarily housewives, did not embrace this trend and generally considered cooking with frozen foods and baking with cake mixes to be a second rate expedient to true home cooking. American home cooks in the 1950s still based much of their cooking on fresh meats, vegetables, and fruits. One of the other more interesting topics in this book is the fact that the packaged food marketing trend of the 50's was based to a great extent on the efforts the food packagers made to prepare instant food preparations for the American army during World War II. The most famous of these preparations was Spam, which survives to this day, although in the 1950's the book recounts a good half dozen similar brands. Another great impetus to the prepared food movement was the introduction of frozen foods before the war, which reached its apotheosis with Swanson's creation of the TV dinner, created as a solution to the company's being stuck with an especially large shipment of frozen turkeys. As I recall only too well, frozen food simply did not take off as well as we may believe from the vantage point of 50 years later. Most homes simply did not have large freezers and the technology to successfully freeze a lot of foods was simply not there yet. As someone whose father tried to make his fortune by getting into the frozen food distribution business, and wisely getting out of it almost as quickly, I can testify to the fact that the market for frozen food grew a lot more slowly than it's boosters had hoped. Another interesting perspective is the fact that canned fruits and vegetables date back to the beginning of the twentieth century and while they simply do not and cannot duplicate the flavor of fresh products, they, like Bisquik and Spam today, were simply accepted as a distinct product. Canned pears, pineapple, and fruit salad had their own niches, different from the fresh ingredients. Packaged cake mixes have not fared nearly as well as canned goods. In the 50's, they were the perfect products for flour companies to replace falling sales of plain white flour, but they were never accepted as a complete substitute for cakes made from scratch. There is no question that these products have improved over the years, but they never reached the point where they transcended their role as a less than perfect short cut, suspicious for their pharmacopoeia of additives. Aside from setting the record straight on trends in the 50's, the author gives several profiles of the major real and imagined trendsetters of the period. One of the most interesting by far is the story of Poppy Cannon who is probably just barely remembered by older Women's magazine readers and culinary journalists. In the mid-1950s, she broadly endorsed

the use of convenience foods, modern appliances, and quick simulations of classic dishes. In writing recipes, she invented words with abandon which would make modern Jamie Oliver's 'glugs' of olive oil look positively pedestrian. It is only just that Cannon is not remembered today since her doctrine was based on a basic inconsistency between gourmet dishes and convenience. Unlike James Beard who based good cooking on fresh foods and regional cuisines and whose reputation survives to this day, Cannon's key to gourmet cuisine was fancy preparation. One of the greatest ironies of her career was her association with Alice B. Toklas, whose basic French home cooking was about as different from Cannon's doctrine as you can get. Their friendship was strong, embracing even the gift of a mixmaster to Toklas, until Cannon started pushing Toklas celebrity, which offended Alice's reverence for the memory of her dead companion Gertrude Stein, as Toklas lived primarily to promote Stein's life and works. Another theme in the book is the dichotomy between home cooking, the world of women in the home, and gourmet cooking, the world of men in the professional kitchen and in gourmet food clubs. One of the oddest comments I have ever seen about a cookbook was a quote from someone who praised 'The Joy of Cooking' for having no 'womens' cooking recipes. The trend went so far at this time that the great American culinary essayist M.F.K. Fisher used her initials as her byline because it disguised the fact that she was a woman. As she ate her way through Europe, she constantly encountered the opinion that she had a man's taste for food. It is entirely appropriate that a fair amount of writing appears in the book about Peg Bracken who, unlike Poppy Cannon, is still fondly remembered today and whose book is still used by, for example Karen Duffy, author of 'slob in the kitchen'. Shapiro reveals that Bracken really did not hate to cook, she was simply offering ways of easing the demands on housewives to provide tasty meals for their families day after day. So, If cooking was not really your forte, she offered ways to get the job done well without guilt. It is part of Julia Child's immense legacy that she, and not James Beard or Craig Claiborne or any other male culinary professional changed the face of home cooking in America. She broke down the wall between male and female cooking ethos by demystifying the citadel of gourmet cooking, French cuisine, for the American home cook. She may not have turned American housewives into gourmet cooks, but she indelibly shifted the focus of cooking from cheap and easy flash to good ingredients and basic skills. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in American culinary history and its myths.

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