A “Jewish” Joy of Cooking? How a 20th Century Cookbook Containing Frog’s Legs, Snails, and Ham Became a Beloved Jewish Icon

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Abstract

Folklorist Charles Camp notes that “food is one of the most, if not the single most, visible badges of identity, pushed to the fore by people who believe their culture to be on the wane, their daughters drifting from their heritage.” This essay will address culinary nostalgia assigned to the blockbuster fundraising cookbook entitled The Way to a Man’s Heart: The Settlement Cook Book. Drawing on personal interviews, reviews, and mentions in fiction and memoir, this essay will analyze the importance placed by contemporary American Jews on a cookbook initially meant to Americanize immigrants. Why is this non-kosher cookbook still seen by so many as a “Jewish” cookbook? How is it used? Can the use of The Settlement Cook Book be analyzed as a ritual practice? This essay examines the legacy of this seminal midcentury text in the later part of the 20th century and beyond.

Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake’s cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes—goyish. Black cherry soda’s very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish—very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish.

Lenny Bruce

A few years ago, Lenore Skenazy wrote a brief lament entitled, “What Remains of a Jewish Home When Even the Challah Seems Haunted?” Skenazy writes of walking into her mother’s Skokie apartment, a mother ailing with Alzheimers, and wondering “What makes a home Jewish?”¹ Now that her mother is forgetting who she is, and her Christian caregiver lives with her and leaves her Bible tracts on the sofa, what is left that gives the home its Jewish character? Skenazy writes, “Well, of course, there are still my mom’s cookbooks.”² The one book she mentions by name is The Settlement Cook Book.

² Ibid.
Originally entitled *The Way to a Man’s Heart: The “Settlement” Cook Book*, the text emerged in Milwaukee as a 1901 fundraising pamphlet in support of a Jewish settlement house that catered primarily to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The book was the brainchild of Elizabeth Black Kander, Lizzie to those who knew her, Aunt Lizzie to those who loved her, and Mrs. Simon Kander to those millions who bought her cookbook throughout the twentieth century. A runaway hit from the start, *The Settlement Cookbook* (as it later became known) went through forty printings, selling well over two million copies and earning itself entrance to the James Beard Hall of Fame. Famous in the Midwest, one historian claimed: “It is no exaggeration to maintain that this book rivals beer as Milwaukee’s most notable product.” The eloquent Michigan-born food writer M.F.K. Fisher was raised upon the *SCB*, calling it “Mrs. Kander’s oil-covered masterpiece.” And culinary historian Barbara Haber (a native of Milwaukee) further remarked, “I never heard of Rombauer’s *Joy of Cooking* until I was grown. . . . Go into most homes in [Wisconsin] and you will find [the] *Settlement Cookbook*.” A traditional bridal shower gift, this cookbook became almost ubiquitous in many mid-twentieth century American kitchens. One *Milwaukee* magazine writer declared: “There are two things no bride should be without. One, of course, is a bridegroom; the other, . . . is a copy of *The Settlement Cook Book*.?”

Skenazy is therefore not alone in her nostalgia for this cookbook. And while it was universally acclaimed, the cookbook particularly struck a chord with Jews. Regional studies of American Jews, from New York to the Midwest to the South, still turn up mentions of the *SCB* as the classic reference book in the kitchen. It is rare to find any survey of Jewish cookbooks in America that doesn’t mention it and the *Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* calls it “probably the most important cookbook for many American Jews during [the first half of the 20th century].” The book finds prominent placement

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