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Crafting British Superiority:

A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Cookbooks

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Abstract – This paper explores the development of British culture through the foreign foods it scorned and appropriated during its imperialistic reign. This has been done through analyzing five British cookbooks from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, noting the presence and presentation of French cuisine, non-culinary recipes, and colonial foods. Based on this analysis, the paper argues that Britain crafted a sense of cultural superiority through their ability to consume foods from whichever countries they chose, denying the legitimate dependence they had on other countries for recipes and ingredients. This provides a new perspective on the rise of the British Empire, showing that an examination of food integration and description within cookbooks and other literature can provide historians with a stronger understanding of how national identity is created.

I. Introduction

Imperialism and competition between European powers made the creation of national identities necessary, though more difficult than it had been prior to globalization. Britain struggled with this, not having a well-defined culture to spread to their colonies or hold over their opponents. In the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, Britain's upper classes tended to adopt French culture rather than practicing their own. Through accepting French culture, Britain created instability within its colonies. British colonizers craved French cuisine as much as they did their own. Why would their colonies accept British culture when their own people did not? To combat the idea of Britain as culturally subservient to France, Britain gave prominence to aspects of their colonies' cuisines that would demonstrate their global dominance. While successfully lessening the power of French culture, the adoption of colonial cuisines provided more ammunition to those who would point out Britain's lack of a strong culinary tradition of their own. Cookbooks trace this insecurity of identity and the strategies used to prove Britain's superiority. Authors used a variety of methods over the course of

the eighteenth and nineteenth century to combat their cultural competitors, all with the intention of showing that, despite an obvious reliance on French cuisine and colonial resources, the ability to selectively accept or reject foreign cuisines proved their power. To explore that idea, this essay will analyze the presence of French cuisine, non-culinary British recipes, and colonial cooking, specifically Indian curry, in five cookbooks from 1750 to 1850: *The Art of Cookery* and *A New and Easy Method of Cookery* from the late eighteenth century, *Culina Famulatrix Medicinae* from the start of the nineteenth century, and *The Cook's Oracle* and *The Modern Cook* from the middle of the nineteenth century.

II. French Cuisine

The handling of French cuisine in eighteenth-century British cookbooks suggests an attempt to alleviate the culinary dissonance that was created by the consumption of the food, and thus culture, of an opponent. Despite a vocal rejection of French culture, the British people were accustomed to having access to French cuisine and expected cookbooks to contain at least some reference to the food that they preferred. It should be mentioned that the majority of citizens were not invested in French cuisine, as they were unable to afford it. The wealthy—the target audiences of most early cookbooks—were the primary consumers of French cuisine. Because of this, it was necessary for cookbooks to include French cuisine in order to establish credibility as knowledgeable cooks and cater to the desires of the wealthy, though French recipes were often highly Anglicized in ingredients and scorned by the authors. The Anglicization was most likely done out of practicality: it was difficult to have access to ingredients from a country that the British were at war with. The scorning held much deeper political motivations. John Thacker provides an excellent example of this practice, including both French bisques and Spanish olio (the Spanish were only slightly less hated than the French), yet stating in both the preface and the recipes themselves that

traditional British cuisines were far superior to the foreign recipes included.¹ It is no coincidence that this cookbook, straying from previous trends of exalting French cuisine, was published two years into the Seven Years War. The scorning of foreign cuisines was done to transition the appeal of such foods in the minds of the people, developing pride in national cuisines and attempting to eliminate the reliance on French cuisine in formal circumstances.

The introduction and proliferation of female authors helped to drive this transition, as female-authored cookbooks made the majority of disparaging comments towards French cuisine.² The increases in wealth and resources in the eighteenth century allowed for the wider production and consumption of literature, including cookbooks written by women who had extensive knowledge of cooking but were not seen as professionals because of their gender. These cookbooks were less highly esteemed, and thus were consumed more frequently by the middle and lower-middle classes. This audience was more willing to reject French cuisine because it was more expensive than they could afford on a regular basis. The transition of audiences and frequency of scorn successfully limited the honor given to French cuisine within British cookbooks. Elizabeth Cleland's *A New and Easy Method of Cookery*, published seventeen years after Thacker's book, was able to incorporate French cuisine again without active negative commentary due to five years of peace between the two nations. By this time, however, the damage had been done. While there were not frequent condemnations any longer, there was very little direct reference to French cuisine in cookbooks at all. By then, the idea that British cuisine was superior to French cuisine had been integrated into the structure of cookbooks and was not going anywhere anytime soon.

Cookbooks of the nineteenth century continued this assertion, promoting British superiority through their supposed ability to accept or reject aspects of international cuisine at their discretion. At the turn of the century, the technique of disparaging

French cuisine continued to show up on occasion, though it blended with the emergence of a new tactic: not emphasizing French cuisine at all. This combined technique can be seen in one cookbook that complains at the unhealthiness of several dishes, even comparing a couple to Pandora's Box, yet does not even reference the recipes' French origins.³ By scorning them, the author suggests that his readers not eat what is, in actuality, French cuisine. By not addressing them as such, the author denies the French their claim to the food and places himself in a position of power wherein he (and Britain, by extension) may claim the rights to any country's food and make it their own. As the century went on, many cookbooks did not bother to condemn French recipes at all, simply including them alongside other foreign recipes. This served to explicitly mark French cuisine as separate from British cuisine and to eliminate the image of superiority that it had held for so long. By placing French cuisine on the same level as Italian, Dutch, German, Russian, and even Polish cuisines, authors implicitly stated that French cuisine was in fact inferior, as their opinion of these other countries was not high. The inclusion of all of these different cuisines presented Britain as a country capable of sampling the world. In fact, a key recipe included in both *The Cook's Oracle* (1830) and *The Modern Cook* (1846) was a dish called "Poor Man's Sauce", specifically mentioned as a French reprieve from their usual excessive and rich fare.⁴ This functioned as an attack on French superiority, as the dish's popularity seemed to prove that the French themselves disliked, or were overwhelmed by, their own cuisine. It also established that the British were able to choose the French recipes most suited to their own palates for consumption. No longer were they accepting another country's cuisine without scrutiny. Now, they chose what they wanted and rejected all else. The idea of superiority that the British constructed is challenged by looking at *The Modern Cook*, written by Queen Victoria's own cook, which includes bills of fare and lists of dinners prepared for the queen; these contained a much higher proportion

¹ John Thacker, *The Art of Cookery* (East Sussex: Southover Press, 2004), Preface, 239, 288.

² Elizabeth M. Schmidt, "Elegant Dishes and Unrefined Truths: A Culinary Search for Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 6 (2016): 65-8.

³ Ignotus, *Culina Famulatrix Medicinae*, ed. A. Hunter, 3rd ed. (York: T. Wilson and R. Spence, 1806), PDF, 51, 64-5.

⁴ William Kitchiner, *The Cook's Oracle* (New York: J & J Harper, 1830), 243. Francatelli, *The Modern Cook* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 38-9.

of French dishes than the cookbook as a whole did.⁵ The consumption of primarily French dishes by the Queen and other members of the upper classes showed that very little had changed in the actual practice of food consumption, though the idea of rejecting French cuisine had been deeply integrated into the literature.

Another tactic used by the British to eliminate the place for French recipes, particularly in female-authored cookbooks, was to simply change the purpose of the books from pure cookbooks to all-purpose guides for housekeepers and lower-middle class wives, including sections on beauty, cleaning, and medicine. Household literature was more readily accepted by the masses than British culinary recipes, both in Britain and in the wealthier households in the colonies. Because of this, the new integration of household recipes into cookbooks provided a way for British culture and cuisine to trickle into the colonies alongside the non-culinary recipes they likely acquired the book for. This is particularly true during the early integration of household recipes, which was done somewhat haphazardly, with little separation between culinary and non-culinary recipes. For example, Cleland's cookbook contains a chapter, "Of Wines &c", which contains recipes for all sorts of spirits as well as "Plague Water", face wash, medication, and more.⁶ Those looking for a new face wash would flip through all of the alcoholic recipes before they found what they were looking for, and, with any luck, they would find something that caught their eye. Beyond this, middle class homeowners would typically acquire as few resources as possible to complete their required tasks. By combining cooking and household maintenance into one text, authors practically guaranteed that their cookbooks would be purchased. In addition to a true change in audiences, the shift to combining these books was made in an effort to present cookbooks as sources for the general populace, who were unlikely to make French cuisine because of the cost and time in preparation that it required.⁷ This change in perceived audience allowed authors to leave out foreign dishes that might threaten British national

identity and created some aspect of British culture that would be universally accepted. As time wore on and this technique became more deeply engrained in what a cookbook was understood to be, authors designated specific chapters to non-culinary recipes and advice for running a household. The tricks of integration were no longer necessary as developments towards "British cuisine" had already been made.

III. Colonial Cuisine

A major component of the new British cuisine was the presence of colonial recipes and ingredients alongside traditionally British meals. Despite the imperialistic insecurity that had been so overwhelming when the British looked at the French culture's impact on their meals, colonial recipes and ingredients were frequently promoted. Recipes for Irish stew were present in Kitchiner's *The Cook's Oracle*, and comparable meals, typically considered to be for the lower classes, were present in most nineteenth century cookbooks, though the specific colonial recipes and ingredients were varied enough that it would take a far longer study to analyze the full extent of colonial cuisine in British cookbooks.⁸ Curry was the most common colonial recipe by far, occasionally placed alongside Anglo-Indian dishes such as Burdwan stew. Because of this frequency and the relatively universal acceptance of curry in British culture, it will be the primary focus of this section.

Where French cuisine was openly rejected yet widely eaten by the wealthy, curry and other colonial foods followed nearly the complete opposite path. The British people appeared to accept curry with overwhelming eagerness at the start of the nineteenth century. It had first become commercially available in London in 1784, during Company rule of India.⁹ While this essay does not examine any sources closer to that time to see the immediate impact of curry on British society, it is worth noting that each of the cookbooks examined from the nineteenth century on has at least

⁵ Francatelli, *The Modern Cook*, 513, 569. There is an entire chapter devoted to this concept, but these pages are particularly good examples.

⁶ Elizabeth Cleland, *A New and Easy Method of Cookery* (Berwick upon Tweed: The Paxton Trust, 2005), 202-4.

⁷ Anne Willan, Mark Cherniavsky, and Kyri Claflin, *The Cookbook Library* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 197-201.

⁸ Kitchiner, *The Cook's Oracle*, 305.

⁹ Susan Zlotnick, "Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 16 (1996): 59, doi:10.2307/3346803.

one recipe for curry, with *Culina Famulatrix Medicinae* containing an astounding eight curry recipes. Curry's presence in popular cookbooks was extremely widespread, but that does not mean its value is equivalent to what its frequency might suggest. Though *The Modern Cook* includes a recipe for "Indian curry sauce" and several other colonial products, it is worth noting that these products are not present in the book's Bills of Fare for formal dining at the Queen's feasts.¹⁰ Curry was important to the construction of British culture but not consumed by the wealthy, which makes it clear that its popularity came not from the superiority of the food but because the government made it seem superior. Britain was no longer self-sufficient, having spread its resources towards creating an empire.¹¹ Cookbooks, advertisements, and the like were creating a demand for colonial goods because they were what Britain had the most access to. Thus, the frequency of colonial products in cookbooks points to a need to sell colonial products, the opposite of the suppression that French cuisine had garnered.

Britain was weakened by their imperialistic mission, but claimed that their acceptance of colonial meals was intentional and a show of power, a typically British spin on why their culture was so deeply reliant on other nations. The adoption of colonial cuisine was a complex issue to spin. If they were truly the superior culture, then it would seem as though they should be pushing their culture onto their colonies rather than adopting the traditions of the supposedly "inferior" peoples. Susan Zlotnick attempts to explain this contradiction as likely being due to "...ways in which the Victorians understood India to be theirs."¹² If India was part of the British Empire, they reasoned, then they had every right to claim whatever resources they found to be valuable. This argument is almost certainly the way by which the British government sold curry's sudden importance in their society, but it seems to be somewhat weak when the sheer strength of the arguments in favor of curry are examined. Unlike the treatment of European foreign foods, curry was either not expounded upon or heavily praised. The author of

Culina Famulatrix Medicinae even goes so far as to counter arguments that presumably had been made in the past, claiming that "to those who are not in the habit of eating curry," the recipe may seem to be too spicy or too highly seasoned, but in fact only tastes too heavily seasoned when the consumer does not appropriately combine the curry with rice.¹³ While the majority of the arguments against the French were as a result of their overwhelming flavor, curry was seen highly enough that British consumers, who had been praised in other portions of this book, were told that if they found curry unpalatable, they were uneducated. This comment shows just how strongly curry was being pushed; the author was willing to almost explicitly state that those accustomed to Indian food were superior to those who were not. The force of this claim and others like it show that those in power had a vested interest in the integration of curry and other colonial products into the larger British identity.

IV. Conclusion

When Britain began its imperialistic mission, it did not have much of a culinary culture of its own to share with its colonies. Instead, Britain created a societal understanding of superiority that came not from having a superior culture, but rather from having the power to claim the cultures of those who were more clearly developed. This excuse, and its diffusion into popular society, was present in the subtle messages of cookbooks that claimed that the reader, as a British citizen, was above all others. Through this examination, the insecurity and development of national identity in Britain can be seen from a new angle that clearly presents both the ideal and the actual British identity. The history of cultural construction is difficult to trace, as it is infrequently mentioned directly in sources. The examination of cookbooks and other sources intended for the consumption of contemporaries provides an excellent methodology to study ideological shifts, a methodology which is crucial to the furthering of the field as a whole.

¹⁰ Francatelli, *The Modern Cook*, 44.

¹¹ Thomas Prasch, "Eating the World: London in 1851," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no. 2 (2008): 589, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40347206>.

¹² Zlotnick, "Domesticating Imperialism," 64.

¹³ Ignotus, *Culina Famulatrix Medicinae*, 166.

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