



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

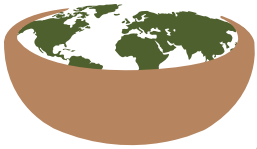
Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage: Two Hundred Years of Southern Cuisine and Culture.

John Van Willigen. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. 299 pp.; includes notes, reference, index and annotated bibliography.

By: Jess Lamar Reece Holler (*Western Kentucky University*)

Although University of Kentucky Professor Emeritus of Anthropology John van Willigen coyly reminds us that “one does not really eat tradition; one eats food,” the line between the two is often delectably hazy (149). Van Willigen’s *Kentucky’s Cookbook Heritage: Two Hundred Years of Southern Cuisine and Culture* (2014) is an impressive tour-de-force of the history of Kentucky’s cookbook culture. The book takes up the complex process by which certain foods assume regional icon-status. Van Willigen pays equal attention to print culture, foodways, and social and technological contexts for food writing, and his enthusiasm for historic cookbooks’ power to index wider changes in food culture pervades the book. *Kentucky’s Cookbook Heritage*, however, is also a book that’s as much about gaps as it is about continuities: while focusing primarily on the print culture of cookbooks, Van Willigen nonetheless gently interrogates the complications involved in attempting to reconstruct historic foodways from extant documentary sources.

Kentucky’s Cookbook Heritage is devoted to a series of inter-woven close readings of particular cookbooks, authors, and genres, from the single-authored celebrity cookbook to the iconic comb-bound community cookbook to popular *Louisville Courier-Journal* food columns. It uses these close-readings as springboards for a larger consideration of food culture and social history. Chapters are organized chronologically and centre on time period and trends that include Lettice Bryan’s 1839 *The Kentucky Housewife*, the post-Civil War era, the turn-of-the-century, the Great Depression, mid-century convenience crazes and bicentennials, and recent sustainability-themed volumes. Throughout, the author is keenly interested in the timely question of contemporary local food culture. He explores



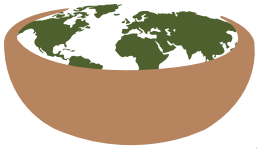
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

the fascinating ways that Kentucky's cookbooks, which by necessity started out as "local," have tracked the emergence of a "distant" food culture in the 19th and 20th centuries - one that has only recently returned to home-grown priorities.

Van Willigen is especially attentive to the way that the history of cooking technology has shaped and been shaped by cookbooks. Early chapters interweave discussions of the format of recipes and cookbooks with fascinating histories of open-hearth cooking and the rise of gas and coal stoves. Later chapters trace the rise of standard measurements, refrigeration, hydrogenated fats, and, yes: even the coming of JELL-O and Spam. Van Willigen also attends to gender, class and race-making as a part of changing domestic service technologies in Kentucky homes. Traces of food as technology also appear throughout. Van Willigen, for example, uses the preponderance of eggs in the earliest Kentucky cookbook recipes (many averaging over a dozen) to illustrate the startling fact that eggs have literally grown in size over time. Other antiquated food technologies like pearlsh and saleratus--predecessors of baking powder with now-extinct aftertastes all their own--also come alive in rich social context. Van Willigen even tells today's readers - now, don't act like you weren't wondering -- where one can procure a good vintage-style wood-burning stove (62)! The result is a work that combines diligent, engaging history with a keen sensory experience.

Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage truly shines in its consideration of cookbook genres and recipe format. Van Willigen traces the rise and transformation of once-popular sub-genres like the women's charity cookbook (and its close relative, the community cookbook) alongside more contemporarily forms like the single-authored celebrity cookbook or restaurant-themed collection. Van Willigen takes pains to chart the influence of attribution, anonymity and collective authorship on Kentucky foodways and the canonization of a pantheon of iconic Kentucky foods. The question of the social implications of "block" format recipes versus the now-standard spatial separation of ingredient lists from procedures (popularized, as van Willigen argues, not by Fannie Farmer, but by her predecessor, Mrs. D.A. Lincoln of the Boston Cooking School, in 1884) runs throughout. The author's most virtuosic moments come, however, when he traces the influence of national expert-led "domestic science" cultures in the early 20th century on the print and material technologies of Kentucky cookbooks. Van Willigen likewise glows in his excavation of visionary New Deal-era Works Progress Administration foodways print projects like the Pack Horse Library recipe compilations and the Kentucky edition of the unfinished but recently revenant Federal Writers' Project "America Eats!" national



Digest

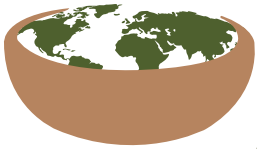
a journal of foodways & culture

foodways initiative.

One of the book's strongest suits is its frequent inclusion of period recipes from featured cookbooks to illustrate Van Willigen's larger social histories. Although Van Willigen notes that his historic recipes "have not been tested," their prominent presence certainly invites spates of historic cookery, and adds an immediate and tactile dimension to the reading experience (201). *Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage* also comes equipped with many gorgeous full-page and half-page reproductions of original covers Van Willigen's touchstone cookbooks. Regrettably, though many of Van Willigen's discussions focus on the material culture and layout of historic Kentucky cookbooks, few facsimile recipes are included. Scholars of race-and region-making in the American South may wish Van Willigen's discussions of racial representation in Kentucky cookbooks to go deeper and stay longer, but, on the whole, the book manages to synthesize a remarkably diverse number of historical narratives, constellated around evolving genres of Kentucky cookbooks, in a compelling and digestible span and format.

In sum: *Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage* is brightly written for an intelligent, involved general audience. It should have value both for home cooks interested in the history and politics of regional foodways and for historians who cook. The book should also appeal to folklorists, Americanists, and scholars of popular literature and food culture. These readers may be especially interested in Van Willigen's thoughtful treatment of the politics of tradition and the creation, circulation and commodification of regional cuisine in national and global markets. That's not to mention, of course, the obvious appeal for fans and residents of the Commonwealth.

The most tremendous offering of van Willigen's *Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage*, however, comes after the main course. Van Willigen has lovingly compiled a powerhouse annotated bibliography of Kentucky cookbooks spanning the last two centuries. Van Willigen's bibliography is especially attentive to access: wherever possible, he notes a library or archive in Kentucky that houses a copy of a particular cookbook. The bibliography also diligently tracks many early volumes' availability through GoogleBooks, the Internet Archive, and other digital repositories. Don't be surprised if *Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage* starts you scouring eBay and estate sales for prime mid-century (or earlier) editions, whether you have an icebox or not.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Kentucky's Cookbook Heritage is a delightful, chock-full survey of the region's cookbook cultures and traditions that combines smart argument, local color and ample human interest. Van Willigen's cast of characters--and their labors of love and contexts of cookery, both rescued from the apparent kitchen-less-ness of the archive--are as clear, distinct and enticing as the iconic Kentucky recipes they helped to create. The book is a must-read on any Southern foodways shelf. And, just in case the inspiration for some Chicken Fricassee à la 1899 strikes, throw a working copy on that shelf near the oven while you're at it.