

# Digital Recipe Curation

by Bailey Kelley

While cookbooks or celebrity chefs may seem like obvious places to start in an exploration of culinary media, I have been interested in producing scholarly work that takes up the more ephemeral, but arguably more useful, recipe card. In a seminar titled Media & Modernity, I analyzed the ways individual recipes have historically been recorded, produced, and circulated, identifying three distinct epochs in the domestic culture of the United States\*: 19<sup>th</sup>-century handwritten cards that indexed the housewife's domestic prowess; 20<sup>th</sup>-century printed cards produced by large food corporations; and 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital recipe cards, like those found on food blogs or Pinterest. A subsequent research project brought me back to the culinary archives at the University of Iowa where I worked with "household books," or personally curated collections of recipes (and other household flotsam such as cleaning tips) that functioned as sites of contestation, satisfaction, or escape from domestic labor. After learning about the promotion of recipe curation in the marketing of early personal computing technologies (thanks, Darren!), this neglected moment in culinary media history became a productive continuation of both of these projects.

First, this early form of digital recipe storage sits neatly between the highly processed Betty Crocker Recipe Library of the 1960s and the highly networked recipe collections in online spaces, adding to our historical understanding of how individual recipes (rather than cookbooks) are stored and/or shared by home cooks. This vantage provides insight into how an inherently impermanent medium – food – is captured via transcription into different media that allow for transmission but, more importantly, storage. A cake will not keep for more than a few days, but it's not uncommon for generations' worth

of recipe cards to be collected and inherited. Second, the explicit marketing of recipe curation as a function of “aspirational computing” suggests the ubiquity of home cooks collecting, organizing, and utilizing individual recipe cards on a personal scale. Although publishers have been printing blank books that facilitate the creation (if not the regular use) of household books for over a century, the inclusion of this task in materials used to advertise the utility of early personal computers highlights the un(der)theorized importance of selecting, classifying, and retrieving recipes that are meaningful, relevant, or pleasing to home cooks. By spending time in this archive, I hope to begin to address the following questions:

- What are the gendered discourses surrounding technologies that shift from an occupational or experimental (i.e., masculine) context to a domestic one? How did personal computers become/remain a masculine technology, despite their location within the home?
- What would be different if personal computing remained a feminine technology, specifically as a tool for managing the drudgery of domestic labor?
- How has personal computing engaged with/redefined/affected domestic practices, such as meal preparation? What are the feminist political implications of these effects?
- How are recipe collections curated on early personal computer different from or similar to analog recipe curation? To networked social media models such as the Pinterest board?
- What kinds of domestic problems do computer manufacturers articulate as uniquely solvable by personal computing? How does this contribute to broader discourses of gendered labor?

\*Because mainstream U.S. culture has historically defined

appropriate domesticity (and its authority) as decidedly white, bourgeois, and heteronormative, this project necessarily engages with this problematic construction of the housewife that fundamentally relies on un(der)paid labor of marginalized populations. This is not to say that questions of race, class, etc. are not relevant to this project; on the contrary, it can help us more clearly understand the ways the hegemonic construction of domesticity contributes to white supremacy, for example. It may, however, suffer from an overrepresentation of this relatively privileged figure due to the political discourses surrounding domestic practices in the United States.