

*“Women can spin very well, but they cannot make a good book of cookery”*

*Dr. Samuel Johnson*

IMAGES: PAVEL MISHKIN

Food Writer Angela Clutton sets out to prove quite how absurd the above statement from one of Britain's most respected men of letters is.

I don't mean to cast doubt on Dr Johnson's overall credibility but if he's looking down now from the big dictionary corner in the sky I'm guessing he must feel just a little daft for one thing he is known to have said: *“Women can spin very well, but they cannot make a good book of cookery”*. Now Samuel, come on. It was wrong when he said it; I can't begin to think how many women across the world in the night on 300 years since have proven him wrong; and while it is my privilege to count several terrific female food writers as my friends to my knowledge not one of them is much cop at spinning. What they are good at is doing what female food writers have done for centuries: responding to and shaping what and how we cook in our kitchens - or at least, how we aspire to.



Dr J made his comment to question the 'real' authorship of the cookbook by Hannah Glasse which was taking Britain's households by storm in the mid-1700s. He thought it was so good it must have been written by a man (it wasn't). You could think of that as some kind of backhanded compliment, I suppose. It may even have been understandable given that so many cookbooks prior to then were written by men under the names of women so as to give the impression of being by someone who knew what was what in the domestic sphere. Yet Hannah Glasse was even not the first woman to be a professional published food writer. That particular credit goes back a further hundred years and to another Hannah.

Hannah Wolley wrote five books in the mid-1660s covering how to across the gamut of domestic life; from recipes and medicines to letter-writing and advice for servants. She started out self-publishing but - in a move recognisable to modern food bloggers who win book deals - as her popularity grew the publishing industry was quick to catch on. Hannah's success as her books were reprinted several times is all the more impressive given that everything about them was in stark contrast to Robert May, the period's pre-eminent food writer. He was cook to the aristocratic families of the royal court and wrote with all the male authority he could summon about cooking as a male profession. To women trying to run households of good but not royal means Hannah's books must have come as both a breath of fresh air and a genuinely useful relief.

Like many of the women food writers who followed in Hannah's footsteps she was doing it because she genuinely needed to make a living and there were not too many opportunities then to do that. Other clever, entrepreneurial women after Hannah saw that writing cookbooks could be lucrative if successful. Success was - and still is - so often to do with timing; coming to food

writers as attuned to the zeitgeist as Hannah Wolley was; who combine their knowledge of the domestic, with sensitivity to the changing needs and aspirations of society, and their literary skill at writing for that.

This includes women like Eliza Smith whose recipes of the 1730s were drawn from her experience as cook to wealthy households and whose book was squarely aimed at the rural gentry aspiring to live similarly well but finding themselves with more limited resources to draw on. The kinds of families we'd all recognise from Jane Austen's books later that century. Or Elizabeth Moxon whose cookbook for *‘Mistresses of families. Higher and Lower women servants’* was the first to breakthrough from outside of London having so successfully tapped into how the ladies of Leeds wanted to run their homes.

By the time Hannah Glasse's book came along in the 1740s literacy in England was spreading. More and more women and servants were able to read, and it seems that at least part of what they wanted to read was good, clear, basic guidance on how to cook. The title of Hannah Glasse's book gives away the crux of its appeal: *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (Which Far Exceeds Any Thing Of the Kind Ever Yet Printed). Hannah had judged perfectly that there were many women - because that was who Hannah was writing for - desperate for the kind of kitchen confidence her book's title promised. This book was about the basics of choosing food and cooking food and it was a triumph. What followed was an explosion in books about food and the home with more female food writers finding the right angle for what their readers wanted.

For the Victorian era that angle was the practical advice needed by the increasing swell of middle-class families in towns and cities who were keen to know how to lead the kinds of lives that previously had been unattainable for them. That included the ways they ate and

entertained. The pressure on housewives and their comparatively smaller household staff must have been significant; and once again female food writers saw a need and stepped forward bearing recipes and reassuring voices in equal measure.

One of those was the wife of Charles Dickens, Catherine. Her book *What To Cook For Dinner?* was based on fifty-five 'bills of fare', comprising a guide for planning menus for different occasions and times of year. It was a success but very different in scope and scale from the period's landmark book by Eliza Acton, (interestingly, she was the food writer Catherine's husband reached out to for advice about putting food into his books). Her *Modern Cookery For Private Families* was perfectly pitched for the middle-class mistress of the house who was choosing what to eat, and the cook who needed to know how to do it.

Eliza was the first to separate the ingredients needed from the method - a step which makes food shopping and household planning so much easier than what went before. She gave alternative ingredients that could be used; a guide to cooking times; a table of weights and measures. There are sections on butchering meat at home. She is known to have painstakingly tested her recipes (rarer then and now than you might think). With *Modern Cookery* Eliza strove to enable less experienced cooks to learn to cook confidently. She made a real difference to how well middle-class families ate at home.

The Victorian age's drive towards progress is epitomised by a food writer who Heston Blumenthal has called one of the great culinary pioneers: Agnes Marshall. She brought ice-cream to Victorian dinner tables and that is a much bigger deal than it might first sound. Agnes sold hand-churn ice-cream makers that used ice and salt; moulds to shape the ices; ice-caves to store them; and then capped it all off with a brilliant recipe book. It is full of simple,

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I said before that good timing is crucial in food writing and certainly the impact of Elizabeth David's impact post-War owed much to that. Her 1950s books such as *French Country Cooking* and *Mediterranean Food* opened the eyes and appetites of a generation emerging from rationing to the flavour possibilities of other cultures. Her exotic and exciting writing was almost intended to be aspirational then. Sixty years ago few would have been able to get the ingredients to cook her recipes but for so many of us now the kind of food Elizabeth wrote about is how we cook and eat everyday.



delicious recipes for water ices, ice-creams and sorbets; with interesting flavour combinations too. Happily, given that build up, it is still in print.

It sits second to Hilda Levely's *The Gentle Art of Cookery* as one of my favourite 'old' cookbooks for modern use. That was published in the period shortly after World War I when there was an increased focus on the quality and provenance of food in Britain. Hilda combined the traditional with the modern; the local with the seasonal. Her book should be waved in the face of anyone who tries to dismiss the imagination or quality of British food in the past. Another of hers is a lovely book of picnic recipes for motorists and - once again - shows a cookery writer rising to the needs and aspirations of a changing society. This time it responds to the growing appeal of the motorcar and our leisure time.

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Since Elizabeth David the last half century of food writing has seen women come through who are so much a part of their own respective zeitgeist, just a single name is all that is needed to identify them: Delia, Nigella, the 'Helmseys'... A direct line can be traced between their cookbooks and their food writing predecessors. We also have food writers covering the diversity of cultures and styles of cooking that modern society craves in our never-ending desire to eat well and live a certain kind of life. Anna Jones offers us healthy, hearty food to feel good with. Olia Hercules is showing us the way to embrace Ukrainian cuisine. There are so many.

But there is something different as well: cookbooks from women who fall the other side of the line between cook and chef. Remember Robert May clutching so tightly his masculine mantle of professional cook? He'd only have to look at April Bloomfield, Angela Hartnett or Skye Gynge to see how the influence of women in food and food writing has firmly settled itself beyond the home now too.

*So put that in your pipe, Dr Johnson.* 🍷

