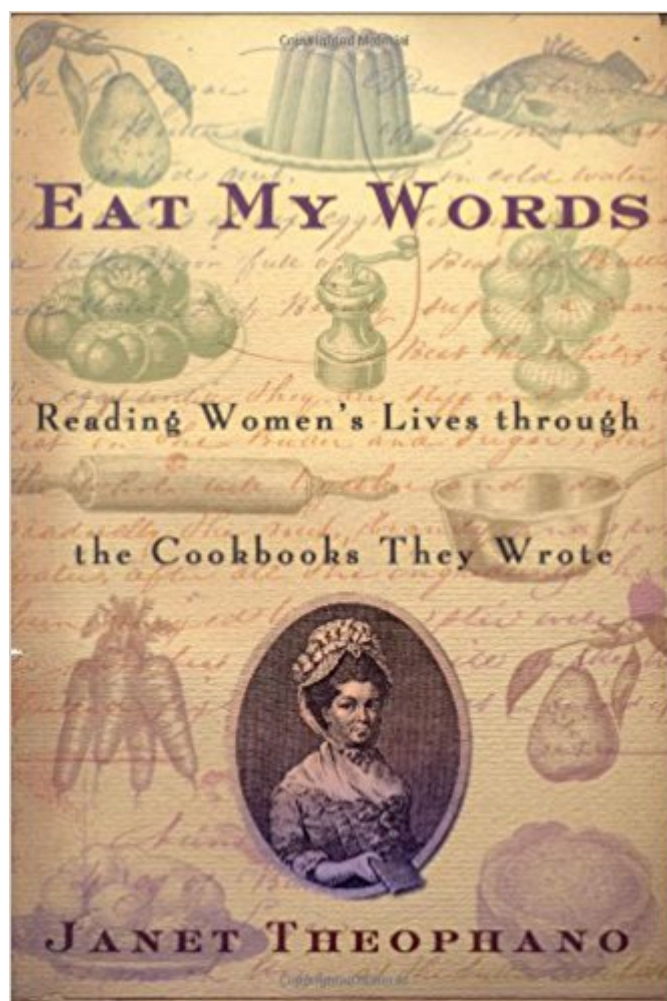


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# Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through The Cookbooks They Wrote



## Synopsis

Some people think that a cookbook is just a collection of recipes for dishes that feed the body. In *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, Janet Theophano shows that cookbooks provide food for the mind and the soul as well. Looking beyond the ingredients and instructions, she shows how women have used cookbooks to assert their individuality, develop their minds, and structure their lives. Beginning in the seventeenth century and moving up through the present day, Theophano reads between the lines of recipes for dandelion wine, "Queen of Puddings," and half-pound cake to capture the stories and voices of these remarkable women. The selection of books looked at is enticing and wide-ranging. Theophano begins with seventeenth-century English estate housekeeping books that served as both cookbooks and reading primers so that women could educate themselves during long hours in the kitchen. She looks at *A Date with a Dish*, a classic African American cookbook that reveals the roots of many traditional American dishes, and she brings to life a 1950s cookbook written specifically for Americans by a Chinese immigrant and transcribed into English by her daughter. Finally, Theophano looks at the contemporary cookbooks of Lynne Rosetto Kaspar, Madeleine Kamman, and Alice Waters to illustrate the sophistication and political activism present in modern cookbook writing. Janet Theophano harvests the rich history of cookbook writing to show how much more can be learned from a recipe than how to make a casserole, roast a chicken, or bake a cake. We discover that women's writings about food reveal--and revel in--the details of their lives, families, and the cultures they help to shape.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Beyond their recipes, what can cookbooks tell us? Much, says Janet Theophano, whose *Eat My Words* explores women's history as revealed by the cookbooks they wrote, used, or in many cases created, and through recipes, family and historical memorabilia, and other clippings. Beginning in the 17th century and bringing us to the present, Theophano examines cookbooks as repositories of female identity. Whether focusing on early English estate housekeeping books, which served as both cookbooks and primers for self-education; a 19th-century cookbook whose list of servants' tasks reveals aspects of female domestic life; or 20th-century works like Freda DeKnight's classic 1948 *A Date with a Dish*, which limns black female culture, the book, at its best, fulfills the promise of its exciting premise. But Theophano is hampered by her choice of materials. Though works like the above do tell about women's lives, others, like that of an early 20th-century Pennsylvania housewife, yield little of consequence no matter how dexterously Theophano squeezes them for meaning. This leads her into a speculative freefall and from there to overgeneralized (and often redundant) conclusions. ("Mrs. Downing gave a lot of thought to the delectable and proper meals she would serve her guests" is one of many examples.) Nonetheless, most readers will find the book an engrossing window through which to glimpse much more than how to roast a chicken or bake a cake. --Arthur Boehm

Theophano, a folklorist teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, attempts to show that cookbooks can "dramatically expand and enrich our understanding of women's lives." Her discussion covers a select group of English and American cookbooks from the 17th century to the mid-20th, including many she found in antiquarian book shops and archives. Some of them do say a lot about women and their worlds for example, a 17th-century English receipt book where the writer lists all her worldly possessions, or the 19th-century recipe book containing lists of servants' tasks. In *A Date with a Dish*, published in 1948, the cooking editor of *Ebony* magazine pays homage to her cultural heritage. In *Memory's Kitchen*, written by Jewish women interned in Theresienstadt during the Holocaust and published in 1996, contains Central European recipes that represent a "lost world and its flavors." A number of cookbooks are included because their owners used them as scrapbooks, annotating the recipes and placing newspaper clippings, favorite poems, biblical verses and handwritten notes between the leaves, but here Theophano can only speculate, for the information about the cooks is often very limited and not particularly revealing of their social and

cultural worlds. While the book is painstakingly researched, with copious footnotes and an extensive bibliography, its title promises more than it delivers. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Excellent.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and reading the author comments. Good reading and great insight into the daily lives of it's heroins!

I like the book but found it hard to follow at times due to the old ideas and choice of words.

In "Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote" folklorist Janet Theophano attempts to reconstruct the lives of underrepresented women through contextual interpretation and supposition based upon the contents of their cookbooks. Though her discourse to this end becomes increasingly strained throughout the book's progression, Theophano ultimately proves that historical cookbooks' greatest value derives not from the culinary information they possess, but from the windows they open into the lives of the women who made them. Cookbooks, she shows, are records of their creators' lives and comprise miniature archival collections unto themselves. A single cookbook can document multiple generation's viewpoints, experiences and socioeconomic situations for individuals, families and society at large. However, Theophano's approach is at worst fallacious and at best quixotic. It relies highly on conjecture, supposing that the items found in these cookbooks were directly related to their creators' lives and not just items of esoteric value. Accuracy aside, "Eat My Words" still demonstrates how even the most innocuous of records can hold far more value than its obvious nature would belie.

I picked up this book off the shelf because I am very interested in cooking and collect cookbooks. It wasn't light reading, but was very interesting. Like the women the author discusses I too collect recipes from family, friends and other sources to make a cookbook of my own. Mine is in 3 separate binders, a modern equivalent to those that women have been making for hundreds of years. The discussions of women, food and the preparation of it were interesting. I was motivated to weed out my own cookbooks and reorganize my own recipes to better represent who I am and how my family eats. It is a legacy of my own to hand down to my own children. A scrapbook of our eating habits.

Eat My Words isn't just a recipe collection; nor is it a survey of cookbook history: it reads between the lines of recipes through the ages to consider the women who developed them, from 17th century English estate housekeeping books to primers which encouraged women to educate themselves. Eat My Words is very highly recommended as an excellent blend of culinary history and biography.

This book was a great disappointment to me. The author has fallen into the trap of reading what she needs from her sources, whether they provide the evidence she wants or not. I will admit I couldn't finish the first chapter and it may improve further along, but her rationale for her conclusions escapes me. The handwritten recipe books/journals/scrapbooks she studied could have provided a fascinating look at how women's lives and priorities have changed over the centuries, but her insistence on broad societal conclusions from these very personal documents left me cold. When she directly discussed the documents and individuals she did a wonderful job, but when she tried to apply to the society at large there was a huge gap between her evidence and her conclusions.

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