

Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles

Food for Thought

Vanderbilt's History of Nutrition Collection spans nearly five centuries of diet, food, and cooking and their integral role in the development of global culture By KAY WEST

“Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.” The aphorism is the fourth of 20 written by Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, which served as the preamble to the French magistrate and celebrated gastronome’s renowned book, *Physiologie du gout*. First published in December 1825, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* was the talk of Paris, and has remained one of the most influential, engaging, and oft-quoted tomes on what and how we eat.

Its most famous translation to English was done in 1949 by the acclaimed food writer M.F.K. Fisher; it was not the first, but is regarded as the most brilliant. In an introduction to a gorgeous limited-edition volume published in 1994 by Arion Press and adorned by nine color lithographs and some 200 drawings by California artist Wayne Thiebaud, her translation is praised as “a stunning feat of intellectual complicity achieved by writers separated by more than 100 years.” Fisher’s translator glosses comprise more than 20 percent of the text, and the semi-posthumous

partnership is called “one of the most spirited flirtations in all of literature.”

Fans of these legendary and timeless food philosophers can find their work among the nearly 5,000 volumes that compose the History of Nutrition Collection at the Eskin Biomedical Library, one of 10 divisions of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt. The collection was begun in 1975 and spearheaded by the late William Darby, for more than 20 years the chair of VU’s biochemistry department who later went on to become president of the Nutrition Foundation in New York.

He was aided by his friend and colleague, the late Neige Todhunter. A native of New Zealand, Todhunter came to New York in the 1920s and earned a doctorate in biochemistry and nutrition from Columbia University. She moved south and was for many years dean of home economics at the University of Alabama; upon her retirement, at Darby’s invitation, she came to Nashville to serve as visiting professor of nutrition at Vanderbilt.

Aside from her noted gifts as an educator, lecturer and public speaker, Todhunter also brought to Vanderbilt a stunning library of nearly 2,000 food and cookbooks she had

spent a lifetime collecting. According to Mary Teloh, special collections librarian at EBL, both Todhunter and Darby subscribed to Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism, shortened in contemporary language to the maxim, “You are what you eat.”

That principle guided the pair as they built what has become one of the world’s most superb collections on the history of nutrition, and the largest collection of cookbooks in the South. Nutrition and cooking, the pair divined, belonged in a medical library. “Dr. Todhunter very much believed that cookbooks were part of medicine,” says Teloh. “She believed that your health depended on what you eat.”

Todhunter was fascinated with the history of food and eating habits, and how that relates to social customs and history. Her family had emigrated to New Zealand from England, and she had a passion for early English cookbooks; she traveled frequently to London, Bath and New York in search of rare volumes. Darby’s field was nutrition, and he found food adulteration particularly noteworthy. The pair did not want to duplicate, so each focused on their area of interest. In creating the History of Nutrition, they made substantial personal contributions and worked hard in their lifetimes to build the collection. (Todhunter died in 1991, Darby in June 2001.)

The collection is divided, with 19th-century works and those preceding housed on the third floor of the library among the History of Medicine Collection, and 20th-century books in another room in the basement. The entire collection is open to anyone to use,

and interest comes from many fields, including medicine, nutrition, women’s studies and even engineering, referencing the information available on the invention of forks, which did not occur until the 16th century.

The art of cookery, says Teloh, was developed in Italy and, fittingly, the first cookbook as we might recognize it today was by Bartolomeo Platina and printed in Italy in 1475. In the 17th and 18th centuries, many cookbooks were written by doctors and included medicinal recipes as well as those that would eventually come to the table, or in some notable cases, to the front lines of battle and the soup lines to feed the poor.

Alexis Soyer, a French chef who lived and worked in England, directed the development during the Crimean War of safe food storage and cooking techniques in response to the hundreds of British soldiers dying on battle fields and in wartime hospitals from contaminated foods. The resultant book, *Soyer’s Culinary Campaign*, was published in 1857 shortly before Soyer’s death in 1858. Soyer also set up the first soup kitchens to feed the poor dur-

ing Ireland’s potato famine of 1847, and was regarded as a great humanitarian.

The oldest book in the History of Nutrition Collection was printed in 1541, with recipes from Caelius Apicius, a third-century A.D. Roman writer. The Historical Collection also includes a two-volume, first edition

ing, making wine and wholesome bread, Accum is regarded as the originator of the pure food movement.

Among the 20th-century books filling 37 shelves in the basement are contemporary printings of some of the books in the Historical Collection. Among them is *Apicius: The Roman Cookery Book*, a critical translation by Barbara Flower and Elisabeth Rosenbaum of the 1541 volume.

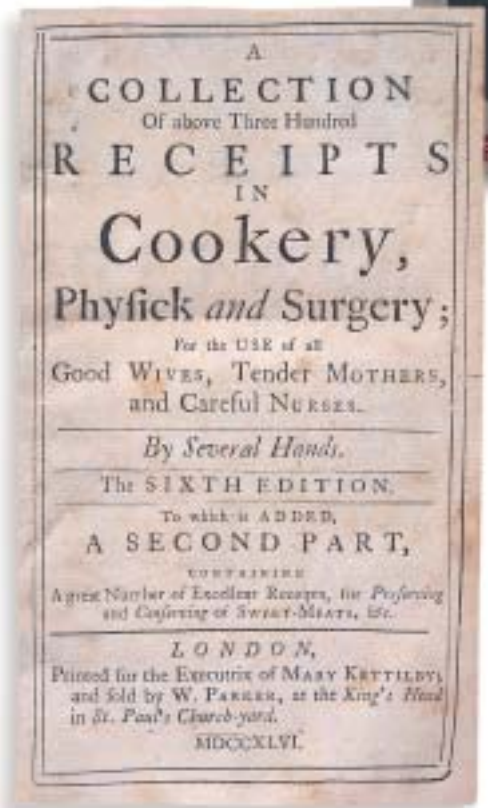
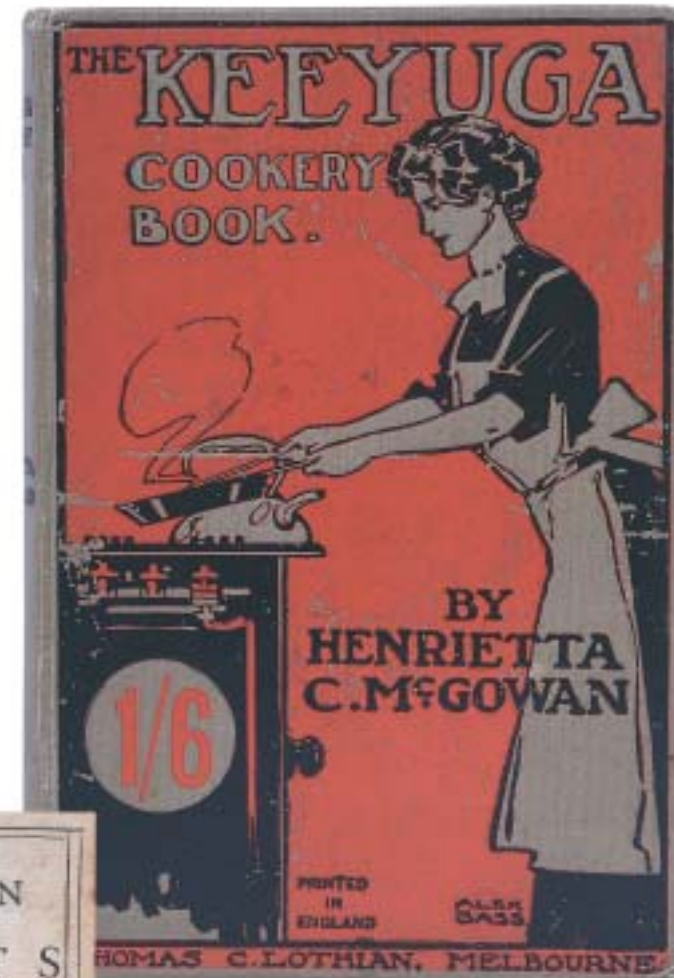
To the King’s Taste is a book printed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1975 of the recipes from *Forme of Cury* adapted for modern cooking by Lorna Sass. In the introduction, we read that according to contemporary chroniclers, the king daily feasted with more than 10,000 guests “and employed three hundred cooks to prepare the royal repasts.”

Todhunter’s contemporary cookbook collection is of vast breadth, spanning the culinary globe, though lacking somewhat in French and Italian books. Every region of the United States is visited by at least one volume of recipes, though the professor was particularly fond of southern cookbooks. Of particular interest to Middle Tennesseans might be *The Sewanee Cook Book* published in 1926. The slender blue book contains recipes from “southern homes and plantations” and is sprinkled with advertisements from notable

Nashville businesses of the day like the Hermitage and Andrew Jackson hotels, Carl E. Weisse Prescription Druggists, and Life & Casualty Insurance. *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* is a book written by African American sisters Norma Jean and Carole Darden of recipes and stories culled from their relatives all over the South. It was later made into a Broadway production.

Familiar names and modern classics like *James Beard’s American Cookery*, *The Joy of Cooking*, *Pillsbury’s Family Cook Book*, and Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* are immediately recognized by their spines alone. Taking up at least three inches of shelf space is the hefty and invaluable reference

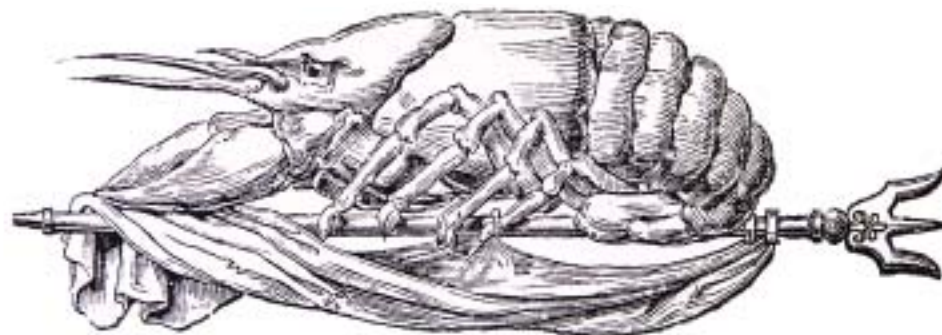
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The collection ranges from historic works on nutrition to cookbooks by celebrities, both real and fictional.

of Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du gout*. One of Todhunter’s most treasured books is *Forme of Cury*, or *Manner of Cooking*, a volume printed in 1780 and translated from Middle English to modern from a manuscript of 196 recipes collected at the request of King Richard II in 1390. (The original manuscript is in the British Museum.)

Darby collected and donated volumes of work by Frederick Accum, a professor of chemistry at the Royal Institute in London. Thanks in large part to his authorship in 1820 of *Treatise on Adulteration of Food and Culinary Poisons*, as well as other books on brew-



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patient's own DNA, her immune system would have no reason to reject it.

Clayton shrugs. "But do I think that we're anywhere near therapeutic cloning in humans? No." She points out that all these goals are still in their infancy, and that scientists aren't even sure if stem cell research—assuming that Congress doesn't ban it in the U.S. entirely—will live up to expectations. "It seems to me that, unless you're driven entirely by the notion that you can't destroy an embryo *ever*, then *if* it turns out to be effective, we really do have to think about what to do about somatic cell nuclear transplant for therapeutic purposes."

One misconception that Clayton sees growing in force among the public, thanks to extensive (if not always careful) media coverage of

genetics, is "the idea that it's creating among people that if you just know your genes, you know what's going to happen to you. Now that's simply untrue," she insists of this different sort of Frankensteinian vision. "I'm an anti-determinist. I certainly don't think Genes-R-Us. So I am much more open to the notion that the genes give us a range of opportunities, and we have to figure out where we're going to be within that range."

Ellen Wright Clayton is used to offering informed opinions. She leans back in her chair and quietly declares a position based upon experience that goes back to the early days of this challenging and still young discipline: "I'm not even a philosophical anti-determinist. I just think the biology tells us that environment makes a huge difference." ▼

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guide, *LaRousse Gastronomique*, this one in its original French language.

Celebrities, both real and fictional, take turns in the kitchen: *Peter Rabbit's Natural Food Cook Book* (with Beatrice Potter illustrations); *Dining With Sherlock Holmes*; *The Pooh Cook Book*; *Hotel Bemelmans* by Madeleine author and illustrator Ludwig Bemelmans; and an impressively bound and photographed volume of recipes from famous restaurants around the world compiled and published in 1965 in *A Treasury of Great Recipes* by Mary and Vincent Price.

Budding young chefs are not forsaken: There is a whimsical children's book—*Mud Pies and Other Recipes*, and *The Teen-Age Cook Book* with recipes for a Sunday dinner they might prepare featuring roast mutton. Some of the titles are not quite so appealing: *The Mayo Clinic Renal Diet Cook Book*, *The Prudent Diet*, *The I Hate To Cook Book*, and *The School Lunch Cook Book*.

But certainly the collection as a whole will whet the appetites of cooks and gourmands and would prove invaluable in undertaking Brillat-Savarin's final aphorism: "To invite people to dine with us is to make ourselves responsible for their well-being as long as they are under our roofs." ▼

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rience and election outcome with insight and humor, noting that he is working to mend political fences in Tennessee and staying involved in national politics and issues. Again, the students put tough questions to the Vice President, and he pulled no punches. It was a great finish to the course.

I had begun this class with an idea, helped along by John Geer's tutoring in the art of the classroom presentation, University politics, and the challenge of grading student's papers. It was thrilling to be back on the campus and gratifying to teach with one of Vanderbilt's finest professors. But I especially enjoyed getting to know these students and watching them dive into a new subject with great interest.

Early in the course one of our best students told me of her new-found passion for political science. This young woman works as a waitress during every school break throughout the year to help pay Vanderbilt's hefty tuition. She thought this class was worth her hard work, and that was all the reward I needed in my return to the University. And, yes, she got an A in the course.

Roy Neel BA'72 is Chairman of the Jackson Group, a consulting company specializing in corporate strategic planning for public policy initiatives. During 2000, he was Director of Vice President Gore's presidential transition planning, and managed transition efforts during the post-election challenge in Florida. ▼

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cities are as segregated as the deep South ever was. However, people who say we haven't made progress should try to imagine the South of the 1950s. The fact is that we had a system of apartheid almost as rigid as that in South Africa. Water fountains, restrooms, waiting rooms at bus stations and movie theaters were just as segregated as were our schools. When it came to things like hotels and restaurants, most were simply not available for African Americans. While young African American students today have hurdles to overcome that are greater than their white counterparts, the fact is that the hurdles facing young African Americans in the segregated South were so high that only a very few could overcome them, and they were usually people with extraordinary talent, like a Leontyne Price or a Hank Aaron.

As for the situation at Vanderbilt today, my biggest disappointment, and one that is shared by a large percentage of the faculty, is the difficulty we face in significantly increasing our African American population here. In that regard, the position of people who are opposed to affirmative action seems difficult to defend. We kept people in chains for 200 years, then put them in a segregated society not that much better than slavery, and then grudgingly tore that down only two generations ago. And now we don't want to give any special provisions to try to help members of that group catch up. The analogy that has often been used, but which is true, would be that of a race in which one runner has his legs tied together while the other runs halfway around the track. At that point, the ropes are untied, and from then on it is regarded as a fair race. That just doesn't hold water.

Fortunately, the current leadership at the University is committed to diversity, and rightfully so. They know that Vanderbilt's goal of being in the top tier of American universities will never be realized until our student body and our faculty begin to mirror the make-up of the nation as a whole. Then again, they also know that developing a more integrated, inclusive university is simply the right thing to do. ▼