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The Queer Dish: Gay Cookbooks after Stonewall

Introduction

Like all cultures, gay and lesbian culture has been reaffirmed through its cookbooks. These cultural texts have seen significant changes since the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, an event that injected gays and gay rights into American discourse. These important texts also carve out a uniquely queer culinary space in opposition to the heteronormative views presented in mainstream cookbooks. This space is carved out in three areas unique to gay cookbooks: queer hospitality, queer dishes, and queer politics and activism.

This paper will examine three gay and lesbian cookbooks to see exactly how these important texts resist the heteronormative ideas found in other cookbooks. The first cookbook, The Myra Breckinridge Cookbook, was written in 1970 by Howard Austen, the longtime friend and romantic companion of Gore Vidal, and Beverly Pepper. Austen wrote the book from the perspective of Myra Breckinridge, a character from Gore Vidal’s novel of the same name. The second cookbook, Dinner for Two, was written by Rick Leed in 1981. This cookbook focuses on romantic dining with smaller portions. The final, The Queer Cookbook, published in 1997, consists of gay and lesbian dishes from the U.S. and U.K. compiled by Donna Clark. All of these cookbooks contain insights into queer culture and its cuisine.

Queer hospitality
Hosting parties and displaying good hospitality towards dinner guests is vital to queer culture, as all three cookbooks contain sections detailing how to host a successful party or prepare dishes for friends and guests. This tendency shows the importance in the gay and lesbian community of sharing a meal with friends and making sure those friends are welcomed appropriately.

In The Myra Breckinridge Cookbook, the authors introduce the idea of preparing dishes for guests in their chapter entitled “Gangbang Buffets (What to eat after)” (Austen and Pepper 255). This chapter contains several recipes with “Gangbang” attached in front of their titles such as “Gangbang Ham with Port Sauce” (259), “Gangbang Lasagne” (261), and “Gangbang Couscous” (263-264). These dishes are not as suggestive as the chapter title suggests. Instead, the authors use the “gangbang” designation both to stay with the theme of the cookbook and to indicate to readers that the dishes serve at least 16 people. The use of “gangbang” keeps with the characterization of “Myra” as she participates in an orgy in Gore Vidal’s original novel. The authors indicate that they are remaining within this characterization by including quotes from that section of the novel at the beginning of the chapter (255).

The introduction to this chapter contains the following advice from “Myra”:

The guests must be chosen with care and forethought. At the least, they must be congenial and have more in common than not. What will each one’s contribution be—will he or she sit like a wallflower just watching, or will each help out, in his own way? The good sport is always welcome while the greedy and aggressive who grab anything in sight, or the bores who end up with their hands in their
pockets, so to speak, must be avoided at all costs. (Austen and Pepper 255)

In writing this advice, the authors intend to provide the reader with a guide to selecting who they should invite into their homes. The importance of a good time is emphasized along with making sure that each guest has a place in the party and will feel welcome in the host’s home. Action is also extremely important to the authors, as they do not wish their readers to have guests that simply “watch,” but guests that will join in the fun and actively contribute to the party. This focus on action reveals how the gay and lesbian community places a premium on hospitality only for those who actively seek out activities in the community and participate in those activities.

In Dinner for Two, the focus is less on entertaining large groups of people and more on smaller, more intimate encounters. Rather than emphasizing action, as “Myra” does, Leed emphasizes the intimate relationship between guests and the host making dinner for them by saying:

   Your guest’s personal tastes and eating habits must be given a high priority. One obviously cooks differently for a confirmed vegetarian than for a “meat and potatoes” man. And don’t forget the dieter who may be weak-willed enough to eat anything you put in front of him. […] If you’re going to have to rush home from the office, shop, and begin the entire meal from scratch, you’ll probably want to stick with the quickest, lowest-fuss meals. But if your dinner guest will be there to help with the preparation, cooking, and clean-up, you’ll have the option of choosing
something a bit more elaborate that can be a participatory project, if you’re both so inclined. (Leed 9)

Here the author uses his authority to place the focus squarely on the guest’s wishes. This passage exhibits the author’s special attention to the detail of the dinner party. He makes sure that his readers will have the best experiences with their guest by considering all factors and preparing for all contingencies. If a host has given careful thought to the meal to make sure that his or her guest’s enjoyment is maximized, then the needs of the guest clearly have been prioritized over the host’s preferences. In this way, the author reveals how gay and lesbian cooks are like their heterosexual counterparts in that they are expected to give up their preferences and make sure that the needs of whomever they cook for are met first.

However, queer hospitality differs from standard, heterosexual configurations in that these relationships are fully voluntary rather than enforced by American society. A gay man or lesbian chooses to cook for their guest or partner: it is not expected of them as in heterosexual configurations. Gays and lesbians do face other expectations from American society, but no one specific partner is expected to constantly subsume their needs to the needs of others. In short, gay and lesbian hospitality does not represent a “separate sphere” for one partner as in heterosexual relationships.

The Queer Cookbook presents the most interesting examples of queer hospitality as it represents a truly collaborative effort on the part of the gay and lesbian community. The beginning of the cookbook offers some pointers on “queer etiquette.” This section contains ways for the host of a dinner party to act. These tips include:
Never run out of alcohol – a dry party is a no-no for your average boozing homos. Presentation is always key. Wash the cutlery, tablecloths, and serving gloves – no self-respecting homosexual wants to eat with soiled apparatus. Modesty is very important. You must strike a delicate balance between ‘oh, it took no time at all’ and ‘I’ve been rouxing since Thursday last’… Don’t be too adventurous if you’ve invited a delicate mix of strangers and acquaintances. Something that could be humorously disastrous to you and your lover will seem embarrassingly burnt to the guests … Use colour to liven up a bland meal. I’m not saying that homosexuals can be superficial but attention to detail is essential, and ‘batons’ sound much more appetizing than ‘chunks’ (Clark 5)

These suggestions focus much more on the practicalities and details of dinner parties than on the personal relationships they breed. In this cookbook, queer hospitality is fully about maintaining appearances rather than breeding relationships. A successful homosexual cook cannot “be too adventurous” while in the presence of strangers, as a failure may result in negative perception of the host. Instead, successful queer hospitality presents the guests with clean, appetizing, perfect food and never takes too much credit.

In sum, the cookbooks discussed here present a queer hospitality where appearances are extremely important, a guest’s preferences must be placed above the host’s, and only those who are willing to act and to have fun are to be extended its benefits. This principle leaves us with the clear picture of gay and lesbian culture as one where appearances to strangers (especially in the matters of cleanliness and talent) must
be kept up, where hosts willingly sacrifice their needs for the needs of their guests, and where only those who risk something and join in the game will reap its benefits.

**Queer dishes**

As all three books are cookbooks, each contains a variety of dishes to serve any tastes. All three books also feature dishes representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds and using a variety of ingredients. What then, is a queer dish? Simply put, a queer dish is one that encourages creativity on the reader’s part and allows for the freedom for the reader to substitute rarer ingredients and cooking methods.

The *Myra Breckinridge Cookbook* is the cookbook with the simplest and largest number of recipes. The cookbook also features a great number of queer dishes. Each chapter features a variety of dishes with a simple ingredients list and short directions for baking. In the introduction to the book, “Myra” encourages readers to select their own ingredients by saying:

> Indeed, I have discovered no irrelevant vegetables, no cut of meat—no matter how low its status—from which cannot be drawn some vestige of aromatic succulence. It is true that in America today, all taste has given way to illusion—the luscious may tomato devoid of all flavor, the blood-red, beautiful piece of meat that contrives to conceal its origin of genus from us—this is the price we must pay for so-called progress. But there are ways. Just as one creates oneself… one also creates in the kitchen. At the same time, you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.
…Insist on quality—the key to success. There are no bad cooks, but there are bad ingredients (Austen and Pepper xiii).

This paragraph serves as a tool to entice the reader into trying ingredients he or she may have not formerly considered useful to the cooking process. Only if the reader incorporates his or her sense of good taste and creativity into the cooking process can the queer dish truly come out in his or her creations.

One example of a queer dish from The Myra Breckenridge Cookbook is the recipe for “Southern Fried Chicken” found in the chapter entitled “The Immortals”:

2 3-pound frying chickens, disjointed
2 eggs
1 cup milk
2 teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon pepper
1 cup flour
Shortening (for deep fat frying)

Clean chickens carefully. Beat eggs well. Add milk, salt and pepper. Mix chicken pieces in the mixture. Be sure each piece is coated. Allow to stand 10 minutes in the mixture. Remove chicken. Roll in flour. Heat shortening to 360°. Place a few pieces of chicken at a time in a frying basket. Lower into fat. Fry until golden brown on all sides. As pieces are removed, keep them warm until all of the chicken is fried. Serve with a cream gravy (Austen and Pepper 146).
What is interesting about this queer dish is that it does not feature any suggestions for seasoning for the fried chicken. Most recipes for fried chicken at least casually mention some kind of spices for the reader to use in the breading of the chicken. This recipe, on the contrary, only suggests that the reader use the plain flavorings of salt and pepper. This omission allows the reader to consider which spices they truly think will compliment their dish and encourages creativity in the kitchen. The recipe provides the reader with a short list of non-specific ingredients (for example, no mention is made of what specific kind of milk the reader should use) and some simple directions to cook the dish. The reader is left alone to create his or her own version of the dish with little input from the authors.

Both Dinner for Two and The Queer Cookbook contain queer dishes, and both contain directives similar to “Myra’s.” Each cookbook tells its readers to use their creativity in preparing dishes and to substitute ingredients whenever necessary due to scarcity or personal preferences. One particularly queer dish from Dinner for Two is the recipe for “Pollo El Greco,” found in the “Chicken for Two” section of the cookbook:

2 whole small chicken breasts, boned and skinned

2-3 cups milk (optional)

½ tsp. white pepper (optional)

1 medium onion

1 clove garlic

3 tbsp. butter

3 tbsp. olive oil

1 cup seedless white grapes
½ cup whole pitted black olives
½ tsp. dried mint or 1 tsp. finely minced fresh mint
½ tsp. thyme or marjoram
½ tsp. salt
1 pinch white pepper
1 tbsp. finely minced fresh parsley (Leed 28).

This recipe, unlike the “Southern Fried Chicken” from Myra, requires several specific herbs and an involved systematic process in order to prepare the dish. Why is this dish queer, even though it features several specific ingredients and appears to allow no room for improvisation? This dish represents the author’s take on it, and the reader still has room to create their own version of the dish. There are two optional ingredients (involved in soaking the chicken) which the reader can choose to either use or discard. The reader can then choose which spices and seasonings he or she wishes to include or exclude on the dish. While the fundamental composition of the dish is unchanged, the seasoning appears to be one place where queer dishes can fully realize their potential. The seasoning is often omitted from some dishes and the reader can choose whether or not to use a particular seasoning or substitute it for one that they prefer.

One queer dish in The Queer Cookbook is the “Chicken and Lemon” dish from the chapter entitled “Main Meals.” The ingredients list for the dish is:

4-6 oz mushrooms (depending on how much you like them)
1 clove garlic
2 oz seasoned flour
2 boneless chicken breasts
2 tablespoons olive oil

teaspoon lemon juice (or more to taste)

teaspoon fresh parsley, chopped (Clark 59).

Once again, the recipe’s author indicates that the reader can substitute or change the amount of seasoning, particularly the mushrooms and lemon juice, depending on the personal tastes of the reader. One can also assume that the recipe’s author would allow substitutions of different herbs for the parsley and garlic if the reader preferred different ingredients.

As we have seen by examining the recipes found in three cookbooks, the queer dish is a vital element of queer cuisine, emphasizing both the creativity and improvisation needed in the kitchen and valued in the gay and lesbian community. The cookbooks seek to breed a sense of independence from established norms as each dish, though chicken at its core, allows the reader to change and to substitute seasonings to create their own sumptuous chicken delights.

**Queer politics and activism**

One important element found in gay and lesbian cookbooks that is not found very often in heterosexual cookbooks is the inclusion of political causes and a call for activism by the community. Each cookbook, in its own way, contributes to the cause of gay rights and carves out a space for the homosexual community in the American cultural discourse. As each cookbook was written during different decades, these cookbooks each take approaches that the conditions and times required of their authors.
For example, The Myra Breckenridge Cookbook engages the political issues of the 1970s through its liberal use of sexual innuendo to express the sexual freedom the gay and lesbian movement sought to gain in that era. The cookbook is told from the perspective of one of the most sexually transgressive characters of the age, Myra Breckenridge. The preface and introduction to the cookbook captures this hypersexual behavior by saying:

For as long as I can remember, movies have always “turned me on.” It seems only yesterday that there I was, sitting in the dark, being molested, and praying that Lana Turner would crush me in her creamy arms and cover me with hot little kisses, while whispering sensuously in my ear, “Myra, you precious darling, love of my life.” Fortunately, this lesbian phase passed quickly. To be precise, it ended on March 21, 1944, to be known always as the day of the “Big O”…Indeed, to this day I cannot emerge from a theater without feeling hungry or horny (Austen and Pepper xi)

This passage almost becomes a parody of itself as it features so much sexual language as to make the reader think that the author is not serious in featuring these frank discussions on feminine sexuality in a genre as bland as cookbook writing. These discussions also serve to destabilize the traditional, heterosexual model of cookbooks, where the woman offers her cooking expertise without discussion of the connections between food and sex. A woman is supposed to want to cook and prepare food in order to serve the needs of others, not to satisfy her own needs and wants or her own sexual desires. While the cookbook does rely on the stereotype that women who have voracious culinary appetites
also have large, unruly sexual appetites, the book is groundbreaking in its interjection of feminine sexuality into the formerly sanitized discourses of cookbooks. The passage, written by a homosexual man and a woman, serves to destabilize the traditional boundaries found in heterosexual cookbooks and express a desire for the reader to become more like Myra Breckenridge – that is, more open in expressing desires for both food and sex.

Dinner for Two’s political activism is interesting, because it advocates a much less sexual discussion and more intimacy between partners, as the title suggests. This advocacy is clearly a result of the time in which the cookbook was written. The 1980s were an extremely debilitating time for gay and lesbian activists as AIDS ravaged the burgeoning gay rights movement. Many within the movement began to advocate for portraying homosexuals as monogamous, committed partners in order to counteract the notion that all homosexuals had multiple partners. Rick Leed, the author of Dinner for Two, clearly wishes to reverse these negative stereotypes and create a positive portrayal of homosexuals as people who can be committed to one partner.

Leed shows his agenda in the introduction of the cookbook by saying:

My original idea was to write a “how-to” cookbook for gay men who never learned to cook but found themselves wanting to cook dinner for a lover, a date, or other guest. In our sex-role-oriented society, many men were never encouraged to learn to cook (“A man’s place is not in the kitchen,” etc.), so I thought it would be helpful to start with the basics and work upwards from there.

Recently, however, I’ve become convinced that more and more men
have learned or are learning the basics of cooking, at least in part through the recent popularization of cookbooks. So I decided that my cookbook should be a “dinner for two” cookbook with a gay accent but designed for those with all levels of experience in the kitchen. I hope this book will appeal to a wide range of people who enjoy sharing the experience of cooking and eating with someone else and who also feel that no matter how much you know or think you know, there’s always something more to learn about cooking.

This passage clearly reveals that the author based his original assumption that gay men could not cook on bad information. In fact, the author realized that many men were exposed to the basics of cooking and that they just needed a little bit more instruction to make that cooking truly special.

This passage also reveals the author’s intention to become a teacher to the reader. As he based his original idea on a mistaken notion, he asks readers to correct any mistaken notions they have about gay men by examining his cookbook and seeing how it reflects on the gay community. The author also expresses a desire to reach a large general populace and to correct that populace’s mistaken notions on homosexuals and their relationships with others. The cookbook seeks to redefine the reader’s knowledge of both homosexuals and cooking. The author’s words reflect the toned-down nature of the gay rights movement during the 1980s, when stereotypes about gays and lesbians thrived during the AIDS epidemic and most gays and lesbians sought to prove to the heterosexual community that their relationships were monogamous and long-lasting.
The most blatantly political cookbook is *The Queer Cookbook*. Released during a period of intense gay activism in the 1990s, this book reflects the revitalization of the gay rights movement after the struggles of the 1980s and the increasing pressure gays mounted on remaining vestiges of discrimination. Since the cookbook is a collection of gay and lesbian recipes from the general community, the book reflects the community’s concerns and the mobilization to deal with these concerns.

One good example of this cookbook’s activist tone is the recipe for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgendered Pride Breakfast,” the first recipe in the “Breakfast” chapter. The recipe contains the following introduction:

> A Pride breakfast is a must for the culinary queer calendar, it peps you up for the day’s events and starts Pride with a bang (or a pop depending on the quality of the sparkling wine). Not the most energetic of breakfasts but let’s face it if you’ve got several hours of marching, blowing whistles, listening to naff acts you’d forgotten existed, drinking warm beer and avoiding all the people you’ve stood up in the last year, you won’t want to be up to your armpits in washing up when you finally stagger home (Clark 9)

This recipe and introduction is significant because it indicates to the reader the importance of gay pride events in a modern homosexual’s life. On a day where gay rights and equality must be emphasized, a gay man or lesbian does not want to come back home to a staggering amount of household chores. The breakfast provides an easy way for gays and lesbians to get moving on an important day without much preparation or clean up. By emphasizing the importance of political activities such as pride, the cookbook shows the
reader how important it is for gays and lesbians to take pride in themselves and their community and to fight for their rights and equality throughout the year.

**Conclusion**

Gay and lesbian cookbooks offer an excellent look into the inner workings of the gay and lesbian community. These cookbooks offer readers insight into how the community evolved over time from the seminal event at Stonewall. Even though this field is sadly overlooked by scholars and food experts, it provides a useful example of how minority communities can use the cookbook to transgress and redefine boundaries as they see fit. The areas of queer hospitality, queer dishes, and queer politics and activism engage the reader and present a clear picture of a space carved out from the traditional heterosexist norms.
Works Cited

