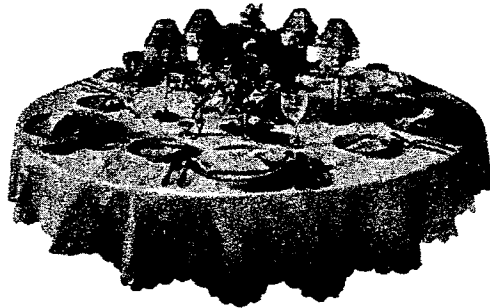


Perfection Salad
Autora: Laura Shapiro
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Prologue
Toasted Marshmallows
Stuffed with Raisins

In the spring of 1923 a woman wrote to a popular food magazine called *American Cookery* with a question that may have been bothering her for some time:

Q: Are Vegetables ever served at a buffet luncheon?

A: Yes, indeed . . . provided they appear in a form which will not look messy on the plate. . . . Even the plebian baked bean, in dainty individual ramekins with a garnish of fried apple balls and cress, or toasted marshmallows, stuffed with raisins. . . ."

History almost never records the struggles of anxious middle-class cooks, so it is not possible to know whether this uncertain hostess really did toast a dozen or so marshmallows, pick out their sticky centers, insert a few raisins in each one, and arrange them around ramekins of baked beans; perhaps she settled for the apple balls. But the question and its answer reflect a culinary idealism that held powerful appeal for several generations of American women, beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This was the era that made American cooking

lace to the wholly nutritious beans. The juxtaposition of a major protein source such as baked beans with an emblem of pure carbohydrate, moreover, represented to these enthusiasts a rational approach to balancing one's diet, with symbolism so stark the platter might have been a *tabula vivant* of nutritive strategies. Other women, especially the non-professionals who cooked only for their friends and families, would have admitted the reigning influence of the sweets upon the baked beans. The "plebian" baked bean, old-fashioned and economical, was given new status by being garnished with marshmallows, because sweets were very much a lady's way of assuaging her delicate hunger. To enclose the baked beans in ramkins was to lift them yet another notch in society, for nothing was more repulsive to a refined appetite than food that looked "messy on the plate." With a few raisins the dish became fit to meet the most demanding standards of health and social breeding, and might be expected to exert a pleasing moral influence as well, since a higher class diet was known to be higher in every sense.

Of necessity, these women were proud of their lifeless palates. The naked act of eating was little more than unavoidable, as far as gently raised women of their era were concerned, and was not to be considered a pleasure except with great discretion. Domestic scientists were inspired by the nutritive properties of food, by its ability to promote physical, social, and, they believed, moral growth. The flavors of food were of slight, somewhat anthropo-logical interest. They did understand very well that many people enjoyed eating; this presented still another challenge. Food was powerful, it could draw forth cravings and greedy desires which had to be met with a firm hand. Their goal as a group was to transubstantiate food, and it didn't matter a great deal whether the preferred method was to reduce a dish to its simplest components or to blanket it with whipped cream and candied violets. Containing and controlling food, draining it of taste and texture, packaging it, tucking the raisins deep inside the marshmallows, decorating it—these were some of the

major culinary themes of the domestic-science movement, and they gained credibility far beyond the hopes of the cooks. Americans found a cuisine based on such principles very compatible with their fondness for mechanized and plastic substitutes of all kinds. Frozen peas and onions, packaged in a frozen sauce, never look messy on the plate even after they've been microwaved, and the cooking process that puts the dish on the table may very nearly have taken place, as an old slogan had it, untouched by human hands. Hardly anybody is concerned with the flavor or authenticity of these vegetables—it's the package and the speed that deserve attention. Of course, the domestic scientists, a relatively small group of females, did not re-create the American way of eating all by themselves. On the contrary, they enlisted, and were enlisted by, some of the major institutions of their day: the universities, the public-school system, the government, and the food industry. This combination of influences helped Americans to forget what they once knew about food and to content themselves with convenience, which has long been indistinguishable from progress.

The moment in their history when they turned to institutions for help and legitimation was a crucial one for domestic scientists. Until 1899 they were working in a high-spirited hurry to bring traditional methods of cooking and housekeeping into the twentieth century by opening cooking schools, publishing domestic-science magazines, organizing clubs, and traveling across the country on lecture tours. After that date, which marked the first in a definitive series of domestic-science conferences, they continued all these activities but changed their name and their identity to "home economics." Then they quickly assembled all the appurtenances necessary to a full-fledged profession: syllabi for course work at every level, degree-granting programs of study, a professional organization, a journal, and annual meetings. As home economists, self-anointed professionals, they felt better equipped to tackle a world that still thought of them as a lot of house-keepers with wild ideas. Moreover, they could now join

in feeding the poor; and on the other hand there are luncheon ladies, dishing out exact portions of gray pot roast and boiled carrots in a hot, noisy school cafeteria. But the domestic scientists, who planted the seeds for all these developments, included both extremes at once without regard to caste or tradition or even the rudiments of proportion. They wanted to create a profession for themselves and a creed for women at home, and they wanted to do so by charging ahead into the future. By their reckoning, domestic science was a more radical solution than socialism to the problems of urban poverty, and a more visionary response than feminism to the indignities suffered by women.

The women who chose domestic science had no quarrel with women's rights, but neither did they have any desire to call themselves feminists. They wanted a career and they needed a cause, but they weren't interested in breaking very many rules, reordering society, or challenging men on their own turf. What they really wanted was access to the modern world, the world of science, technology, and rationality, and they believed the best way for women to gain that access was to re-create man's world in woman's sphere. They had no desire to jettison the signs and privileges of middle-class femininity, but liked the notion of a perfectly refined lady with a brisk, manly mind. As they saw it, domestic science would recast women's lives in terms of the future and haul the sentimental, ignorant ways of mother's kitchen into the scientific age. Eventually, and inevitably, the domestic scientists gained second-class citizenship in man's world and died feeling victorious.

The domestic-science movement was a solution for its own time to the same problems ambitious women have always faced. Indeed, the blind faith that characterized the domestic scientists and undermined their idealism is still with us. We live in a time when feminism is considered passé, when rational assessment tells us that all the battles have been won, all the laws are in place, and the only decision women have to make is where to jump



forces with institutions that might help them solidify their position. Home economics easily won a place in industry, education, and government—it won woman's place—and the arrangement satisfied everyone concerned. Home economists were able to convince themselves that these institutions would work to ennoble the American home by modernizing it, and would raise the homemaker to a position of power and dignity by modernizing her, as well. Educators greeted home economics as an excellent solution to the insults posed by coeducation, while in government and industry, women who could be trusted to promote the splendors of domesticity—and the necessity to buy new products in order to realize those splendors—were welcomed heartily.

From at least one bleak perspective, the most prominent achievement of the domestic-science movement was the imposition of "home ec" on resentful high-school students who chose cookery as their cause and helped turn the nation toward Wonder Bread hardly quality as feminist heroines according to the terms of our own time. However passionate, their quest for the germ-free kitchen bears none of the glory we associate with the long struggle for suffrage, birth control, and the rights of citizenship. Yet it would be a mistake to view these women simply as antifeminist throwbacks or activists gone astray. In truth, their legacy is enormous, albeit by our standards politically unweidly: it ranges from federal nutrition programs to gelatin salads, and from female chemists to the feminine mystique. Today we are aware of that legacy only insofar as we perceive it in the kind of categories that usually make sense to us. On the one hand there are scientists, pursuing important research in nutrition; and on the other hand there are female home economists, teaching schoolgirls how to make baking-powder biscuits. On the one hand there are great chefs, until recently always male; and on the other hand there are women at home, making gravy out of canned soup. On the one hand there are government spokesmen announcing new policies

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same way. After all, there were laws throughout the country that permitted married women to keep their own earnings; public schools for girls existed in many cities; there were a few female doctors in New York; a female lawyer was arguing cases at the Supreme Court. How much further could society go without embracing total androgyny? The fact that women couldn't vote, that equal pay was an almost unimaginable concept, that birth control was a notorious crime, while rape and wife-beating were best left unmentioned—none of these realities cast much of a shadow on the nation's complacency about free American women, whom patriots liked to contrast with the veiled slaves of the benighted lands of the East. Nowadays, too, successful women can compare themselves with the dimly remembered females of the past and feel smug. They've learned to put feminism behind them, to dress for success, to play the game by men's rules, and to think like men—and they are making the domestic scientists' mistake all over again. There is still a place in every institution for women who think like men, and it's still woman's place.

Their exemplary mistakes are not the only things that make the domestic scientists' story worth telling. What distinguishes them from high-achieving women today and makes them heroines in their own way is their passion. Domestic science was the banner they carried; to change American eating habits was their holy charge; and the recalcitrant nature of the American appetite was their cross. Of course they failed in their crusade, how could they not? They chose domesticity as a way of getting out of the house, and food as a means of transcending the body. But they carved out an identity for women so powerful that we're still trying to clamber out of it, and their influence on American cooking was devastating. They failed, but like only a handful of men and women in any generation, they did their damndest.



One

Drudgery Divine

Marylet Beecher Stowe once suggested that a special place in heaven be reserved for certain women she called "domestic saints." Her own aunt Esther was a good example—"and her name shall be recorded as Saint Esther"—a spinster who cheerfully gave her life to caring for children, nursing the sick, and silently helping out wherever she saw need. Here was a calling worthy of canonization, wrote Mrs. Stowe: "to be truly noble and heroic in the insipid details of every-day life."

This tribute first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1864, a time when home life was considered to be our point of closest contact with heaven. Indeed, the boundary between those two pleasant realms was sometimes indistinct—one best-selling novelist of the day explicitly furnished her heaven with pianos, and provided the angels with gingerbread. Motherhood, of course, best personified the mingling of home and heaven, for a mother was a saint by definition. But while maternity never lost its eminence, during the next few decades an increasing amount of public attention was turned to the actual work involved in home life. Mrs. Stowe's admiration for the