

# THE EARLY MODERN PRINTED COOKBOOKS, CA. 1470–1700

(Numbers in parenthesis refer to entries in the bibliography)



BY THE END of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, a special genre within European non-fiction literature began to find its modern form: the cookbook. Culinary recipes have a much longer history; the oldest documented recipes are written with cuneic script on Mesopotamian clay tablets, dating back more than 3000 years.<sup>1</sup> Collections of culinary recipes existed in Antiquity, and one surviving example from imperial Rome, the book attributed to Apicius, was known through manuscripts in medieval times and from 1498 in printed editions (1002). But even if many elements of Roman cuisine continued into the Middle Ages, there is no proven continuity or connection between the antique cookbooks and the texts from 1300 and onward.<sup>2</sup>

The new culinary recipe collections had their background partly in medieval dietetic literature,<sup>3</sup> practical handbooks, and partly in the culinary practices at European courts. We know of more than a hundred manuscripts from 1300 until the early sixteenth century that have been the subject for serious studies bringing insight into the genesis of this genre at the threshold to modern time.<sup>4</sup>

The invention of modern printing changed the situation for culinary literature. It did not so much affect the contents of the books, not even the visual aspects,<sup>5</sup> but the new technique made recipe collections available in a much larger number of copies than ever before. This meant that cookbooks, as all other books, were spread to a wider segment of the society, and in the course of two centuries were established as a distinct genre within the so-called “how-to” books. They were soon considered a necessity for housewives within the elite in all European countries.

## DEFINITION OF A COOKBOOK

The cookbook is only one genre among the vast literature about food and drink through the ages. There are texts offering nutritional advice, chemical analysis, historical overviews, moral and religious considerations, rules for table manners, carving, and practical information about agriculture, brewing, baking, winemaking, and household management. But in these books we only occasionally

1 See Jean Bottéro: *Textes culinaires mésopotamiens*. Winona Lake 1995.

2 Laurioux uses the expression “un genre nouveau”. He also discusses the literary models the new genre drew upon to find its form. Bruno Laurioux: *Le Règne de Taillevent*. Paris 1997, p. 218.

3 The word “recipe” (Latin for “take”) is first used in medical literature.

4 See for example contributions in Carole Lambert (ed): *Du manuscrit à la table*. Montreal / Paris 1992, where there is a bibliographical repertory of 133 European cookbook manuscripts.

5 As McKitterick has demonstrated, the difference between manuscripts and early printed books should not be exaggerated. David McKitterick: *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order 1450–1830*. Cambridge University Press 2003.

find the culinary recipes we identify with the cookbook. The cookbook can thus be defined partly by its contents, cookery, and partly by its form, the recipe.<sup>6</sup> The recipe is the basic unity, but many of the recipe collections have shorter or longer introductions with dietetic information, carving instructions, general advice about household work, menu suggestions, and recipes for confectionary, that are historically different from the culinary recipes proper. The question therefore arises: How many recipes does a book need in order to be called a cookbook? Lynette Hunter, editor of a culinary bibliography project in the United Kingdom, writes: “For convenience, since many cookery books contain household guidance, we defined a cookery book as one that is made up of roughly two-thirds recipes.”<sup>7</sup> But she also underlines the complexity and variation in the topic, and the author of the second bibliography in the series, Elizabeth Driver, includes general works on domestic economy containing chapters of recipes and cookery provided “their contents are made up of more than one-third cookery.”<sup>8</sup>

The question is not entirely one of percentage, but also of reception history. When Platina’s *De Honestâ Voluptate* (1001) was presented as the first printed cookbook, many commentators objected because only the second part contains recipes while the first part is mainly dietetic advice and other commentaries. But as Bruno Laurioux remarks, it was considered a cookbook by the readers.<sup>9</sup> Philip and Mary Hyman include it in their list of cookbooks because “son auteur faisait autorité dans le domaine culinaire, auprès de ses contemporains.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the problems in delimiting books as cookbooks is that the sections with recipes in some household books have a much higher number of recipes than some of the small recipe booklets, and in principle they may be considered bibliographical entities. But I have chosen to consider these larger books as belonging to a different genre, the encyclopedic work, with cookery as only one of many sections. Later I will come back to the principles for the selection of titles in this bibliography. Here I will only give the definition I follow in this historical introduction: a cookbook is a book with about two-thirds cookery instruction and is at least 40–50 percent in recipe form.

## THE NUMBER OF PRINTED COOKBOOK TITLES AND EDITIONS

If we look at cookbooks as just defined, a little more than a hundred different titles and about 650 editions of cookbooks were produced in Europe from the beginning of printing until 1700. These numbers are based on located or reliably recorded copies. The number is probably much higher if I only judge from my own research. I have found 7 titles and almost 50 editions never before recorded in any bibliography, only in the catalogues of their respective libraries.<sup>11</sup> Future

6 For a thorough discussion of the definitions of a cookbook, see Bruno Laurioux: *Les livres de cuisine médiévaux*. Turnhout: Brepols 1997.

7 Elizabeth Driver: *A Bibliography of Cookery Books Published in Britain 1875–1914*. London 1989. p. 10.

8 Ibid. p. 14.

9 Bruno Laurioux: *Le Règne de Taillevent*. Paris 1997, p. 281.

10 Philip and Mary Hyman: “Imprimer la cuisine: les livres de cuisine en France entre le XVe et le XIXe siècle”. In: Jean-Louis Flandrin et Massimo Montanari: *Histoire de l'alimentation*. Paris 1996. p. 643.

11 The number is much higher if I add the unknown editions of French books recorded, but not published, by Philip and Mary Hyman. On the other hand I have also reduced the number of recorded copies with about ten by proving that many of them are “doubles”.

research and new cataloguing in smaller collections all over Europe will probably bring forth new unknown editions.

Cookbooks have inevitably suffered more from active and frequent use than most other books. They are also more difficult to find among collectors because they had less prestige since they conveyed only practical, useful, and specialized knowledge as opposed to the more valued theoretical, liberal, and general knowledge of humanist scholars.<sup>12</sup> Their fate may perhaps best be compared to the popular literature “which filled the hawker’s pack” as Martin and Febvre say, “There are few of them on the shelves of libraries’ rare book collections today and they are rarely referred to.”<sup>13</sup> It took a long time before cookbooks caught the interest of collectors and libraries. Brunet, a French bibliographer, wrote in 1820 that the different editions of the French translation of Platina (602) were of little value, and he only mentioned the first edition from 1505.<sup>14</sup> Twenty-three years later he presented this first edition as “rare” and gave a full material description.<sup>15</sup> If a famous author like Platina took so long to interest collectors, it is easy to understand that less significant works have been ignored and consequently have disappeared throughout the centuries. Many of the cookbooks that survived often did so because they were bound together with medical or agricultural works.

The hundred plus located or recorded titles were not published in regular intervals between the 1470s and 1700, nor were they distributed evenly between countries and languages. They also had very different degrees of success, judged by the variable number of editions that were produced.

In a chronological perspective the production increased rather constantly until the middle of the sixteenth century, when it reached a peak. In the first half of the seventeenth century there was a marked slowdown reaching a low in the 1630s followed by a steep increase from the 1640s onward. More than 45% of all editions in the period studied were published in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The cookbooks represent a very small part of the total book production, especially in the earliest period. In 1480 when there were printing presses established in 110 towns and cities in Europe, only three of them had printed a cookbook. The cookbooks make up less than 0.1 percent of all editions in the incunabula years and 0.15 percent in the sixteenth century. Of course this low number has to be seen in the light of the dominant book genres of that time. About 75% were religious books or classical literature, mainly in Latin, while all non-fiction, non-scientific books were printed in insignificant quantities.

Even if the numbers are too low to be reliable as material for statistical methods, cookbooks seem to follow the same trends as books in general. Martin points to a book production peak in France in the 1540s and 1550s,<sup>16</sup> the same two decades when 40% of sixteenth century French cookbooks were published. Wittmann picks out the 1630s as the bottom years in German book

12 These opposite pairs are taken from Peter Burke: *A social history of knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2000.

13 L. Febvre and Henry-Jean Martin: *The Coming of the Book*. London / New York 1997, p. 257.

14 J.C. Brunet: *Manuel du libraire*. 3. ed. Paris 1820, vol. IV, p. 90.

15 J.C. Brunet: *Manuel du libraire*. 4 ed. Paris 1843, vol. IV, col. 691.

16 Henri-Jean Martin: “Classement et conjonctures,” in *Histoire de l’édition française*. Paris: Promodis 1982, vol. I. pp. 442–443.