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Chop, taste and read: Examining the diary cookbooks of Stephanie Alexander

I have decided to keep a journal as I did in 1992, which was later published as *Stephanie's Seasons*. It is intriguing to ponder whether a new year will just reflect more of the same, or whether there will be genuine change ...

This year does not open before me as a blank sheet. Already some chapters are partly written.

The proofs of a year ago are now a thing of the past. *The Cook's Companion* was published in early October [1996] and is selling like mad. It is a personal triumph, not just because it will earn me a new car, and then some, but because its message, that everyone can cook well with a bit of help from a friend, has been embraced wholeheartedly. The evidence is that there are a whole lot of Australians out there who have taken up their wooden spoons, opened their copies and are cooking! ("Journal" 3-4).

So begins Stephanie Alexander's eighth cookbook. Since 1985 Alexander has published ten cookbooks — nine written by herself including two editions of *Stephanie's Menus for Food Lovers* and *The Cook's Companion*; and one written in collaboration with Maggie Beer, *Tuscan Cookbook*. The two books I will examine in this article are those written in diary format — *Stephanie's Seasons*, which was published in 1993, and *Stephanie's Journal*, published in 1999. The diary format is an unusual way to present a published cookbook — women have used this method, most commonly in manuscript cookbooks, but these manuscript cookbooks were never intended to be published (Newlyn 32). This is what makes Alexander's diary cookbooks unique — they were written with the intention of being published.

In this article I will analyse the significance of women's writing through two traditionally gendered forms of writing — diaries and cookbooks (Edwards 55). I will also explore a particular genre of cookbooks — diary cookbooks, or what Kelly has classified as "autobiographical cookbooks" and how such books provide a means of incorporating aspects of a writer's everyday life with cookery writing and recipes (257). Importantly, the diary cookbook allows the writer to explore the minutiae of everyday life, including cooking and eating, whilst simultaneously articulating the performance of multiple identities — in Alexander's case, as entrepreneur, mother, restaurateur, friend, writer, daughter, community leader, activist and chef.

Below I will provide a brief biography of Stephanie Alexander and then discuss some aspects of the two diary cookbooks, *Stephanie's Seasons* and *Stephanie's Journal* that illustrate how Alexander combines elements of her daily life with cookery writing.

Biography

Stephanie Alexander was born in Canberra in 1940 and is the eldest of four children. Her father was a public servant in Canberra until the family moved to the small coastal town of Rosebud in Victoria in 1949. Her mother, Mary Burchett, “was enraptured with food” (“Menus” 1) and loved to cook. It is her mother’s influence that Alexander acknowledges over and over again in her books and in interviews. Her mother also published a cookbook, *Through My Kitchen Door*, which Alexander updated and re-published as *Recipes My Mother Gave Me*. Alexander credits her mother with providing her with the inspiration, skills and creativity for her cooking.

Alexander attended the University of Melbourne in the late 1950s (started in 1958) and over a number of years undertook further studies in librarianship. After graduating, she travelled to England and France as many Australians did in this time period. During her time in Europe, Alexander worked in France, first as an au pair and then as a language assistant — it was this experience that confirmed her ideas about the importance of good food, meal rituals and eating.

In 1964 after returning to Australia with her first husband she opened the restaurant *Jamaica House* in Lygon Street, Carlton. This restaurant was relatively successful (and up until 1999 still operated). Jamaica House opened when Alexander had just given birth to her first daughter and it was an extremely stressful period in her life (“Journal” 39). Her partnership with her husband ended, as did her involvement with Jamaica House in the late 1960s.

Her second restaurant and the one that she is most famous for, *Stephanie's* opened in December 1976 in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. As the popularity of *Stephanie's* increased, it became obvious that she would need to move premises, and this is when she and her second husband bought the large, rambling National Trust listed house in Hawthorn. A second daughter was also born during this time. *Stephanie's* restaurant existed for 21 years, finally closing its doors in December 1997. The decision to close *Stephanie's* is well-documented in the diary cookbook, *Stephanie's Journal*. Also in 1997, Alexander with three partners opened the Richmond Hill Café and Larder in Bridge Road, Richmond. Alexander did not cook at the café — her role was one of consultant and business partner (earlier this year she and the partners sold their interest in Richmond Hill Café & Larder). Closing *Stephanie's* and opening the Richmond Hill Café and Larder allowed her more time to write. She states that due to the phenomenal success of *The Cook's Companion* writing fulltime became a possibility.

The profound effect that Stephanie Alexander has had on Australian restaurants, the use of regional and specialty food, the development of the kitchen garden initiative in schools and her food writing cannot be underestimated. Stephen Downes in his book *Advanced Australia Fare: How Australian cooking became the world's best* begrudgingly acknowledges her input:

Stephanie's 'life in food' — as she calls it — corresponded with a gigantic leap in Australian gastronomic appreciation. Nonetheless, she is clear about her contribution. She raised restaurants' standards, made owners think about the style of their service, helped them to eliminate obsequiousness. She also helped to establish several small suppliers of unusual quality produce such as snails ... And her books, which had educated, encouraged and inspired thousands of Australians, were written out of the restaurant. In particular, they had been an 'enormous influence' on young people, many of them men ... A new project at Collingwood College that excited her enormously enabled students from prep to year 12 [sic] to grow, cook and eat their own food on the campus (178).

Even though Alexander revolutionised restaurants and restaurant eating, it is her contribution to food writing in Australia and improving cooking at home that is the main focus of her books, in particular *The Cook's Companion*.

Cookbooks as diaries

Perhaps it is disingenuous to state that *Stephanie's Seasons* and *Stephanie's Journal* (from now on I will refer to as *Seasons* and *Journal*) are just cookbooks — they do not follow the ‘conventional’ format of a cookbook, that is, pages of recipes listing ingredients and categorised either by main ingredient or place within the meal structure, entrée, main course and dessert. All of Alexander’s books include recipes embedded within a narrative. In particular these two books are exceptional because of the combination of autobiography and recipes. Traci Marie Kelly identifies three types of women’s culinary autobiographies — the “culinary memoir”, the “autobiographical cookbook” and the “autoethnographic cookbook” (255). According to her schema I would classify Alexander’s diary cookbooks as “autobiographical cookbook(s)” which are characterised by “a complex intermingling of both autobiographical and cookery traditions ... [in which] the authors try to balance and illuminate the inter-elemental nature of how the recipe reveals the life story” (257).

According to Kelly’s classification of culinary autobiographies, one of the main reasons Alexander’s diary cookbooks can be regarded as autobiographical is because the recipes are indexed and they play an important role in the story telling and the evocation of her life. Kelly argues that in autobiographical cookbooks the recipes “play an integral part in the revelation of the personal history. Because they are part of the self that is being revealed in the prose, the recipes are not removed from the prose flow”— this is evidenced in both of Alexander’s diary cookbooks (258). The indexing of recipes is also important because it “convey(s) the notion that the author wants the book and its reader to move readily between the reading room and the kitchen” (258). I would argue that for many women, the kitchen is the reading room. The publisher’s blurb on the back of *Journal* states: “A book of the head and heart, to be read late into the night and carried into the kitchen”.

It might be possible to argue that these books are “culinary memoirs” because they deal with snapshots. However, in culinary memoirs the recipes are not indexed, and therefore, the reader is not encouraged to use the book as a cookbook, and secondly, the

absence of an index is a signal to the reader to concentrate primarily on the life story (Kelly 256). Even though Kelly's classification is useful, in the case of Alexander's diary cookbooks, it is important to remember that she is writing about only one year in each case. Details are included and she provides contextual details to the stories she tells as each day unfolds, but the books were never intended to tell the story of her life from beginning to end as many autobiographies set out to do.

Alexander's cookbooks and the recipes she provides employ a "narrative strategy" that tells a story and provides a context (Leonardi 340). Susan Leonardi argues that recipes and cookbooks contain an "embedded discourse" (340). She discusses the etymology of 'recipe' and its root in the Latin word *recipere*, which "implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be" (340). In many cases, but not always, recipes 'embedded' within the story provide the context for the recipe and there is a direct link between the story and recipe. For example, Alexander acknowledges that where recipes come from is integral to reflecting her life. She states:

In much the same way as in my mother's scrapbook and my grandmother's scrapbook it says on the corner of the recipe, from Aunty Jean or from Phyllis. It no longer means anything to anyone who's alive but you still get the feeling that this has been somebody's treasured recipe that they've handed on and it was considered good enough to be put in the book. So that is a very conscious thing of wanting it to reflect my life (Interview 24 May 2005).

Alexander makes an important point — the recipes provide insight into her everyday life and significantly the two diary cookbooks exemplify this desire. Many recipes in *Seasons* and *Journal* are named after special friends and those that have influenced Alexander's cooking. For example, in *Journal* eight recipes out of thirty-eight feature the names of friends and colleagues — "Carol's Lavender Scones"; "Michael de Jong's Chicken Liver, Leek and Tongue Terrine" (14-15; 173-5). In *Seasons* there are nine recipes out of eighty-six, including two named after herself — "Julie's Game Ravioli"; "Jessica's Lemon Squares"; "Stephanie's Turkey Ham as perfected by John" (261; 278; 43).

Alexander also employs another narrative strategy. The narrative in which her recipes are embedded in *Seasons* and *Journal*, for example, often does not have any immediate relation to cooking; rather she is more interested in developing a story. For example, the opening entry of her diary in *Seasons* relates information about the New Year's eve party she attended, discussion about the garden of the house she was staying at with friends and a visit to the local fish-market, where she purchased ingredients for lunch and her "first culinary creation for 1992" — "Queenscliff Mussels and Whiting for the New Year: A Substantial Sauce for the Pasta" (2-3). The entry is descriptive and evocative — the garden is brought to life by her succinct descriptions of the plants and their colours. The depiction of the fisherman's morning catch is equally evocative. Importantly, the opening paragraph sets the scene for the entire diary; in particular, it draws the reader into her private life and begins a relationship of intimacy:

This morning I woke to a year full of hope. Last night the usual group of friends gathered to welcome in the New Year. Holly [her second daughter] decided to join the adults this year and listen to the stories. I mentioned having had an inspirational flash about a new project whilst driving to the party. Clever Helen suggested that maybe I should be henceforth known as Pephannie. Jean [her oldest friend] had to remind those not reared in a church-going household of Saul on the road to Damascus — Saul who became Paul (2).

In this opening paragraph Alexander introduces the reader to her family, her close friends and begins a story — the "new project". There are many instances in both books where she discusses a new project or idea, and these are used to structure the 'story' in which the recipes are placed. Alexander uses the embedded discourse to create her plot. As the diaries progress, the reader is drawn into the development of projects over the year, we see a psychological development of her as a person and the 'plot' is maintained and well-developed.

However, women's diaries have not always been regarded as well-structured. Sarah Edwards, writing about Edith Holden, author of *The Country Diary of an Edwardian*

Lady, argues that garden diaries and cookbook diaries have only recently been considered worthy of scholarly examination. Edwards argues this is because the

diary form in particular has traditionally been negatively identified with the feminine due to both its diverse, unsystematic formal qualities — its often irregular entries, occasionally informal or terse style — and its perceived thematic and material purpose — its association with spontaneity, dailiness, the private sphere and trivial matters, rather than with studied literary construction and weighty issues. This has been remedied by many critics who have drawn attention to the patterning, use of literary modes and frequent editing to be found not only in the famous ‘writers’ diaries of, for example, Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin, but also in the works of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women (55).

Alexander’s diaries do have irregular entries — she does not write everyday — but it is quite formal, and the style is conversational and detailed, rather than terse. Her themes are daily, domestic, and there is an element of spontaneity. But importantly, she engages in social and political debates — in *Journal* she discusses the Wik¹ decision and other aspects of Aboriginal reconciliation, the Kennett government’s industrial reforms in Victoria in 1997 and the importance of encouraging biodiversity and the use of regional and local food. By discussing these issues she opens up these debates to sections of the population that might not ordinarily engage in them. Elspeth Probyn, writing about Margaret Fulton’s autobiography, argues that her cookbooks might be an avenue to bring political debates into popular discourse: “In her autobiography [Fulton] decries John Howard’s stance on reconciliation ... [and] there’s a good chance that some of the millions who buy her books are listening to her message” (35). In the interview I conducted with Alexander, she stated why she felt it was necessary to address these debates:

It [the Wik decision and reconciliation] was such a burning, burning issue in that particular year and it’s sort of gone off the boil for a lot of people since. It’s still a very important thing, I think, for Australia to resolve. I don’t believe I am going to be able to do anything really very much about it but, again, because it was a burning issue at the time and a lot of people were disgusted ... I wanted to make sure that my position there was very clear (Interview 24 May 2005).

Alexander continues and states that by discussing these issues in her cookbooks, “It will find an audience that would not necessarily sit down to read a serious article on Aboriginal reconciliation” (Interview 24 May 2005).

Hence, the diary cookbook format provides an avenue for Alexander to express ideas that are not necessarily directly related to food. In my interview with Alexander, I asked her how she came to write these cookbooks in a diary format and if she had always been a diary writer. She states:

I’ve never been a diary writer and, in fact, I found the discipline of writing a diary interesting, but quite difficult and you’ll notice that the entries aren’t every day. I mean, I didn’t ever feel that I had to be that slavish. I guess, the guts of that question is that I see myself as a writer, rather than as a cookbook writer and as such I feel that I’ve got as much interest in what the weather’s like, you know, whatever I’ve done that day as what I’ve eaten. Certainly I’ve got a special focus on food and on being with people around a table but I am interested in words and language as a communication tool ... I suppose I used to often find that I would have little thoughts as I was moving around during the day and I’d think, ‘how can I communicate that thought?’ (Interview 24 May 2005).

The diary format gives Alexander the chance to record the minutiae of everyday life, and in so doing, the reader is taken into her life and in a sense becomes a confidante. She develops an intimacy between herself and the reader. She states in *Journal* that it is the most intimate writing that she has done publicly. Janet Theophano writes in her book, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, that cookbooks, as autobiographical writing, are an “act of self-representation” (121). Further, cookbooks provide “opportunities [for women] to write themselves into being” and in so doing, Alexander writes her life into her cookbooks, allowing her to construct a life story that is agential (121). However, I am not suggesting that her account of her ‘self’ is “unified and organized” (Eakin ix). Following Eakin, I suggest that the construction of self is always in process and it is possible to trace this fluidity by examining the trajectory of her changing subjectivity in *Seasons* and *Journal*.

I will provide one brief example. In *Seasons*, Alexander's approach is somewhat less intense and, I would suggest, more circumspect than in *Journal*. Although it is not light-hearted — she deals with the coming recession of the early 1990s and its effects on her business, the poor state of children's food knowledge and eating, the lack of many Australians to be able to cook reasonably well and also her own self-doubt. However, I would suggest that *Seasons* provides a more 'guarded' view of her life:

I have never been a risk-taker, at least not in my own eyes. I always believed that my restaurant would be a success. It would be a success because I knew what I wanted to achieve and I believed I had the skills necessary and that was that. It was so obvious to me. I found it surprising that others such as my husband and the bank manager did not share my conviction. ("Seasons" 65).

However, *Journal* has a different feel to *Seasons* that is altogether much more intimate, revealing and confessional in a Foucauldian sense (McHoul & Grace 90).² Over three pages in *Journal* she 'confesses' the hurt and pain of losing her first love, the demise of her first marriage, the devastation of her second marriage, and the death of her mother.

I have had the blues lately. I had hoped to steer a careful course towards a bright future without encountering resentment. It doesn't seem to be possible. Can one equate a business disappointment with a broken marriage or the death of someone loved? I don't think so ...

The day my first husband and I finally separated, after a couple of false starts and delirious reunions, has to register as one of the biggest traumas of my life ("Journal" 119-120).

She continues with a description of the tragedy of her second marriage and the impact of the death of her mother on her. These pages are written with depth and an honesty that is as painful and poignant to read as they must have been to write. More significantly, whilst reading these pages, the reader is drawn into her confidence and shares her inner-most disappointment and despair. This level of intimacy is not reached in any of her other books.

There was six years between the publication of *Seasons* and *Journal*, and in that time Alexander published *The Cook's Companion*, her most successful cookbook. During this time Alexander cemented her status as one of Australia's leading food celebrities. As with Margaret Fulton and UK writer Elizabeth David, Alexander was embraced by the Australian public as a doyenne. It was possible for Alexander to take a risk and discuss her life — 'confess' her self-doubts, her pleasures, intimacies, disasters and pain. However, there is also a power relation at play between Alexander and the reader. The reader has the power to judge Alexander — her decisions, her roles, her life. Just as Alexander has the power to present her version of herself. This is an important point. *Journal* and *Seasons* were diaries written for publication; hence the performance of subjectivity is necessarily a more self-conscious performance, even more so than in a private diary not intended for publication. I am suggesting that Alexander presented a version of herself that was simultaneously 'real', but was also necessarily a fabrication. That is, there is a schism between the 'real' Alexander who tries to show herself in all her complexity and the Alexander that has written a 'story' of her life.

This does not diminish in any way the impact of the books on the reader and on Alexander. In fact, it would suggest that Alexander, by 'baring her soul', enhanced her popularity. For example, her willingness to share her life story enhances the readability of her books and has made Alexander a successful author. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, Kirsten Galliot stated that in the publishing industry if a cookbook sells over 10,000 copies, it is regarded as successful (23 April 2003). Alexander's books far exceed publishers' expectations. The first edition of *The Cook's Companion* sold 360,000 copies; the second edition, only released in October 2004, has already sold over 80,000 copies. *Stephanie's Seasons* sold over 18,000 and *Stephanie's Journal* over 27,000 copies. Furthermore, *Seasons* and *Journal* are, besides *The Cook's Companion*, the two books for which Alexander has received considerable reader feedback. In my interview with her this year she stated, "I've probably had more feedback from the general public ... no, *The Cook's Companion*, I've had more, but of all the other books it's been those two that have struck chords with people and they've written me very personal letters about them" (Interview 24 May 2005).

Conclusion

Stephanie Alexander's diary cookbooks can be read as autobiographies, as cookbooks or both simultaneously. Writing books in this way creates an intimacy between her and her readers — the reader is drawn into her life and becomes for a little while a friend (see opening quote). I suggest that this relationship of intimacy that she has developed over many years with her readers is a primary reason why she has been a successful writer. The 'chop, taste and read' of my title exemplifies the style of cookbook that she writes. Alexander shares a snapshot of her life story whilst simultaneously enabling her readers to cook and enhance their food knowledge.

Furthermore, Alexander's cookbooks engage with daily life and tell stories that demonstrate her multiple identities and importantly, acknowledge the value of women's work and women's writing. Previously, cookbooks have been read only as texts that provide instructions on how to cook, not as texts that might illuminate women's lives. Through analysing the life narrative contained in Alexander's diary cookbooks, other dimensions of textuality can be examined. The diary cookbooks employ narrative strategies that expand traditional definitions of what a cookbook should contain. The diary cookbooks interweave recipes with life narrative, exemplified by the 'writing-in' of everyday life and autobiographical details, whilst also describing how to cook a lamb roast. Finally, the combination of recipes and life story evokes a long tradition of women's writing that is only just beginning to receive the scholarly attention it deserves.

Notes

¹ “The Wik decision followed action by the Wik people of Cape York in Queensland who claimed native title could coexist with current pastoral leases and by the Thayorre people who claimed native title on neighbouring Crown land which was briefly covered by pastoral leases early this century [20th century]. The [High] Court [of Australia] held that native title rights could exist side-by-side with the rights of pastoralists on cattle and sheep stations ... The court explained that pastoralists had an exclusive right to pasture, but not exclusive rights to possession of the land. Despite this, the Wik decision led to an hysterical attack from pastoralists and conservative leaders, who demanded that native title be extinguished, or wiped out, on pastoral leases ... The Wik decision was significant not only because it recognised native title rights on pastoral leases, but also because these leases cover a vast area – some 42% of the Australian land mass.” http://nlc.org.au/html/land_native_wik.html accessed 30/11/05. It was the “hysterical attack” that Alexander felt that she needed to respond to and wanted her position regarding reconciliation and native title clearly understood by her readers.

² I am grateful to Dr Jean Duruz for pointing out this reference.

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