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Stirring the Pot in the Midwest

Adding the Story of *Chicago Tribune* Food Editor
Ruth Ellen Church

Newspaper food sections do not have a well-documented history outside of brief mentions of the women's pages, which predated what later became the lifestyle sections. The few newspaper journalism employment options for women prior to the early 1970s were in the women's pages.¹ These sections were known for the four Fs: family, fashion, food, and furnishings. The sections also included women's club coverage, society news, and wedding announcements. Of the more traditional content of the women's section was food, a rare area in which women could claim authority at a newspaper in the 1950s and 1960s—considered the golden era of the women's pages.² At the same time, these women appealed to the average home cooks in their communities.³

The food sections of the women's pages ran daily and often included a bigger standalone section that included content produced days in advance and made thick with department store advertising. This meant that food editors had to fill a daily food page along with the weekly standalone food section on Wednesday or Thursday and occasionally twice a week. Unlike food or women's magazines, the newspaper food sections across the country were truly local. For example, the *Akron Beacon Journal* food editor Polly Paffilas wrote of her role:

The newspaper food editor is the homemakers' best friend, mother, confessor and mentor. Mrs. Jones calls us when she can't understand a recipe in a national magazine or when Graham Kerr talks about clarified butter. Mrs. Jones doesn't call the magazine or the TV station. She calls me.⁴

One of the most significant American newspaper food editors was Ruth Ellen Church, the food editor at the *Chicago Tribune* from 1936 to 1974. In the early decades, she typically wrote under the pen name “Mary Meade.” Four other women used the byline “Mary Meade” prior to Church’s tenure, although she was the one typically associated with the nom de plume.⁵ In fact, several of her cookbooks noted that Church was actually “Mary Meade.” She did use her maiden name, Ruth Ellen Loverien, in her initial stories with the newspaper in the 1930s. Writing under own name, Church became the country’s first newspaper wine editor in 1962, according to the *New York Times*. She married and raised two sons during her newspaper career and wrote her numerous cookbooks at night. Longtime Associated Press food editor Cecily Brownstone mentioned that Church’s food section was one of the best in the country.⁶

Although Church was a noteworthy food editor who made significant contributions to her culinary and professional communities, she has been left out of both journalism and culinary histories. Midwestern food editors are often overlooked for the culinary spirits of New York City and New Orleans or the foodways of the South, though some organizations have begun to delve into midwestern culinary histories.⁷ One way of looking at midwestern cooking is through the food sections of newspapers. The 1952 cookbook *Coast to Coast Cookery* noted the role of newspaper food editors. Editor Marian Tracy wrote that these women put “traditional and often half-forgotten recipes into a workable idiom for present-day cooks, unfamiliar with the terse and sometimes cryptic instructions of our ancestors.”⁸ The stories of food editors’ careers are also important. Church’s background was in home economics journalism, a female dominated field in which women could often find employment. As an effort to write women into midwestern history, this is a biographical sketch of a significant newspaper food editor, Ruth Ellen Church, and what she wrote about.

Newspaper food editors played a significant role in the story of food in their communities and across the country. They helped home cooks balance their budgets while making good food. They shared recipes that defined communities and exposed readers to the dishes of new cultures. They also explained new nutrition discoveries and governmental regulations about food. The recipe columns and the cookbooks that came from the newspaper food editors were an early form of social media, linking the food journalists with the home cooks of their communities. After all, women often communicate with friends and family by sharing recipes.⁹ Readers regularly wrote or called the food editor at their newspapers requesting

recipes. Responding was part of these editors' jobs, as Church explained to her *Chicago Tribune* readers in 1950: "You, dear readers, are always losing your recipes! That's all right. Go ahead and call us or write. We'll find the recipe for you if it was ours. That's what we are here for."¹⁰

Background

Ruth Ellen Lovrien was born in Humboldt, Iowa, in 1909 to George Washington Lovrien and Jessie Marilla Carter. Her father died in 1918. Church graduated from Iowa State University in 1933 with a degree in food and nutrition journalism. This was a common combination for women's page journalists. While in school, she was a staff writer for the yearbook, editor for the student magazine *Iowa Homemaker*, and an editor of the *Green Gander*. She briefly worked as a society reporter for a small Iowa newspaper before returning to graduate school at Iowa State from 1935 to 1936.

In 1936, she began a thirty-eight year run as food editor at the *Chicago Tribune*—one of the first American newspapers to have a test kitchen. She oversaw numerous projects at the newspaper. As early as the 1940s, Church ran a weekly recipe contest in the *Tribune*. The newspaper bestowed a \$5 prize upon contest winners and published their recipes. Readers were advised to test the recipes and be specific with the measurements and directions.¹¹ Most winners were rather simple dishes, such as a recipe for orange sweet potatoes. This was typical of many newspapers at the time as food sections served as both news and service to readers.

Food products and technologies changed significantly in the post-World War II years. In 1955, Church described the changes in the food industry and available products during the previous decade as "revolutionary." In fact, by the 1950s, one of every three food products available at the grocery store was in a can.¹² Church explained to her *Tribune* readers that canned foods would add variety to menus.¹³ In another story, she explained that canned foods were economical.¹⁴

She was the first newspaper food editor to have a wine column, and it continued for seventeen years. She traveled extensively and shared her adventures with her *Chicago* readers. For example, she spent three months abroad for her "What's Cooking in Europe" series, which ran for fifty-six days in the *Tribune*.¹⁵ During her career, she wrote a daily food column plus a special section each Friday. She also directed all of the food photography, which often included illustrated recipes that showed step by step how to prepare a dish.¹⁶

In the early 1950s, newspaper food editors from across the country submitted recipes representing the communities they covered for publication in the cookbook *Coast to Coast Cookery*.¹⁷ Church wrote about the complexity of the “midwestern menu.” There were breakfasts of bacon and eggs or oatmeal with cream. Lunch could be macaroni and cheese or a lettuce and tomato salad. Dinner could be fried chicken or a pork chop. She wrote: “Those foods are typically Midwestern, but Midwestern families, particularly Chicagoans who have access to city markets, also enjoy more cosmopolitan foods.” Her examples of these dishes included Mexican chili, Hungarian goulash, and Chinese egg rolls. She noted that home cooks were becoming more experimental, writing, “Midwestern cooks are beginning to cook with spices, herbs, and wines, but their basic cooking accessories are and always have been milk, cream, cheese, eggs and butter.”¹⁸

When it came to the recipes in the book that represented the Midwest, Church included a variety of dishes. There were instructions for turkey casserole that include green peppers and ripe olives. Other recipes featured chicken-baked pork chops, pepper steak, and oven barbecued spareribs. She also included description for the dish Shrimps De Jonghe, which she wrote had originated in Chicago. Reportedly, the De Jonghe brothers, Belgium immigrants, created the baked shrimp casserole dish in the United States when they opened their first restaurant on Chicago’s South Side for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition.¹⁹

The most popular request from newspaper readers to food editors was for recipes. This was a way for an editor to understand her community. Requests ranged from a mix of high end to everyday foods. In 1952, Church wrote that *Tribune* readers requested:

Recipes for French pastry, Italian cannoli, East Indian curry; they want to know how to cook pheasant in wine and to make rich, extravagant desserts. But they also want to know how to fix the more everyday foods of such as potato salad, coleslaw, bread pudding, and corned beef hash.²⁰

Meeting of Food Editors

Newspaper food editors met annually, often in Chicago, for meetings in the 1950s and 1960s where new products and recipes were introduced. In

1956, baby food company presenter Daniel Gerber said that while births had increased eleven percent in the past decade, the consumption of baby food had increased by forty-three percent. He believed the reason was the babies were developing increased appetites. Church disagreed in her dispatches from the event and instead attributed the increase to the use of baby food in daily cooking. “They are beginning to be used a great deal in quick cookery for the average household,” she wrote of the practice used by her Chicago home cooks. A reader wrote to tell her that she commonly used banana baby food when baking cakes, cookies, and bread. Church also included information from a speech about the state of the industry delivered by a grocery store executive.²¹

In 1964, the conference featured a lecture by Frederick Stare, the head of the nutrition department at Harvard University. According to Church, Stare advised the food editors to get active, eat less, and cut back on their salt intake. “Tennis need not be Davis Cup to give you a brisk 30 minutes of fun,” Stare remarked.²² In 1965, food editors in Chicago learned about Green Giant’s eight new sauced frozen vegetables including peas with pearl onions and white corn in a butter sauce. It was announced that foil would be available in new packaging—on a tube. In Church’s food section, there were recipes for pecan caramel rolls and lemon tarragon chicken breasts.²³

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the conference took place in 1967. One hundred and sixty food editors attended the event. They heard from Rep. Catherine May from the state of Washington who was a member of the President’s Commission on Food Marketing. The week included forty-five eating meetings. “The settings are glamorous, the food and entertainment luxurious,” Church wrote, “but underneath all the fluff, there’s a serious message in each gathering: new products, short cuts to better eating, easier ways for homemakers to work in their kitchen.”²⁴

Creating Cookbooks

Church wrote at least twelve cookbooks and five books about wine—some connected to her newspaper and some written on her own. One of her most well known cookbooks was *Mary Meade’s Magic Recipes for the Electronic Blender*. Originally published in 1952, it sold 209,000 copies. Newspaper food columnist Morrison Wood wrote a glowing review of *Mary Meade’s Blender Cookbook*: “In my opinion, it is worth many times the modest price

of \$3. Anyone who doesn't own it is not only missing a lot of grand food, but a lot of fun."²⁵ Church dedicated a later edition of the book to Morrison, "whose enthusiastic review of this book thirteen years ago launched its successful career."²⁶

The book needed to be updated in 1956 because blenders were then manufactured with a second speed. She wrote in a press release for the book that some home cooks were having a difficult time adjusting to the faster speed. For example, cooks had to be warned about using the blender to whip cream that quickly became butter.

There was one dish that never went out of style—pancakes, along with its cousins: waffles, crepes, and omelets. In 1962 Church shared the story of Shrove Tuesday, which took place the day before the beginning of Lent. It is also known as Pancake Day, and on that day in Liberal, Kansas, women ran a race while holding a skillet in which they had to flip a pancake three times. She wrote the cookbook because pancakes were becoming increasingly popular as a food choice, and she cited a survey that found the favorites were buttermilk, blueberry, buckwheat, and crepes. The recipes and stories came from her newspaper column.²⁷ She is considered the first American author to write an entire cookbook devoted to pancakes.²⁸

Her husband, Freeman Church, designed the covers of several of her cookbooks. The blender cookbook was republished for a third time in 1965. Among her other cookbooks were *Mary Meade's Kitchen Companion: The Indispensable Guide for the Modern Cook* (1955), *The Burger Cookbook* (1967), and *Entertaining with Wine* (1970). Not all of her cookbook projects were successful, however. At one point she was in talks to edit new editions of *The Joy of Cooking*.²⁹ In 1959, she lost a lawsuit and the appeal to publish a cookbook with Bibbs-Merrill.³⁰ According to Tribune colleagues, despite her busy career, her first love was entertaining. She often brought friends and family up to the Wisconsin farm she and her husband purchased in 1959. "My favorite kind of cooking is home cooking," Church once said. "Lots of food for lots of people—fast." For years, Tribune staff members would gather at her Wisconsin farm on Labor Day.³¹

Church retired from the newspaper in 1974. During her career, Church won six Vesta awards for excellence in food journalism from the American Meat Institute and was named a Woman of Distinction by the Chicago Women's Advertising Club in 1959. "She was a conversational kind of writer," remembered Joanne Will, who succeeded Church as food editor

in 1974. “She would practically say to the reader, ‘Come into my kitchen and cook with me.’”³² In 1984, Church received the James W. Schwartz Award from Iowa State University for her career at the *Chicago Tribune*. The Midwest International Wine Exposition furnishes the Ruth Ellen Church Award to recognize outstanding contributions to food and wine journalism. Tragically, Church was murdered in her home by a stranger in 1991 at the age of eighty-one. An arrest was made based on a fingerprint match, and the suspect pled guilty to Church’s murder. He was sentenced to eighty years in prison.

A few recent books about food make passing reference to Church, but overall relatively little attention has been paid to her long career in food journalism. This biographical account builds on previous scholarship about newspaper food editors Cecily Brownstone, Peggy Daum, Jane Nickerson, Clementine Paddleford, and Jeanne Voltz.³³ Too often, these female food journalists are ignored in history. Their stories did not make the front pages of their newspapers, but they served an important role for their communities, reaching consumers and cooks. They documented problems, such as food safety, and promoted change in nutritional expectations. They covered the intersection of food and governmental regulation. These journalists did all of this, never forgetting that while food was important, it was also fun.

In spite of the ways in which scholars have drawn on food journalism for their studies, food journalists themselves have been either marginalized or mocked. For example, in *United States of Arugula*, author David Kamp largely dismisses food writers of the women’s pages. In one reference, he describes them as the “Jell-O abusing women’s-page ladies.”³⁴ In 2004, the industry publication *American Journalism Review* covered the increased interest in food journalism, arguing that it had gone upscale after decades of simply serving as a filler section in the paper. “Food journalism has long been an oxymoron with newspaper food pages,” the author wrote. “Little more than wire service recipe dumps and magazine articles barely scraping deeper than ‘what’s hot and what’s not.’”³⁵ Characterizations such as those discounted the work found in many women’s pages prior to the demise of the sections in the early 1970s, despite the evidence that it was these women’s page journalists who set the foundation for food journalism. Just as Church explained food to her Chicago readers, regional histories are important methods not for “simply add[ing]

women to the pictures we already have of the past,” but for “repainting the earlier pictures” altogether.³⁶

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NOTES

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