An Archive of Taste
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Published by University of Minnesota Press

Klein, Lauren F.
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In the early 1850s, at the age of nineteen, Malinda Russell, a free black woman whose grandparents had been enslaved, set off from eastern Tennessee, where she was born and raised, to seek a new life in Liberia. Russell’s decision to leave her home was by all accounts not undertaken lightly. In anticipation of her journey, she set aside substantial personal savings and obtained a certificate attesting to her character. The certificate, signed by several acquaintances—presumably white—attested to Russell’s “fine disposition and business-doing habits” and affirmed her “moral deportment” before concluding: “We have little doubt, should she reach Liberia, in Africa, to which place she is now bound, that she will make a valuable citizen” (qtd. in Russell, 3). However, Russell never even reached the East Coast. In or around Lynchburg, Virginia, she was robbed by a member of her traveling party, which required that she find immediate employment. It was in Lynchburg, Russell would later explain, “where I commenced cooking” (3).

It was cooking that would secure Russell’s livelihood, and eventually her historical legacy. Widowed after only four years of marriage and left the sole caretaker of a disabled son, Russell returned home to Tennessee, settling first in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains and then in more metropolitan Greenville, where she opened a well-regarded pastry shop. She recipes for “Puff Paste,” “Butter Pastry,” and various cakes and “jumbles” (cookies made with mace, clove, nutmeg, or “any spice you like”) came to constitute the core of A Domestic Cookbook: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen, which she self-published in 1866 (24). While there exist two earlier African American-authored kitchen manuals—Robert Roberts’s The House Servant’s Dictionary (1827) and Tunis Campbell’s Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide (1848), both of which contain recipes alongside an
abundance of other helpful information—Russell’s *Domestic Cookbook* was the first to focus exclusively on cooking. As a result, it has earned recent distinction, and coverage in the *New York Times*, as the earliest African American–authored cookbook presently known. That Russell was a woman is also significant, and points to how the cookbook, if not an exclusively female genre (although it would become increasingly so over the course of the nineteenth century), functions as a valuable record of the production of a range of alternatives to the dominant discourse of taste.

Indeed, if the first chapter of this book sought to amplify the cultural contributions of figures such as James Hemings and Paul Jennings, those who, through their culinary repertoire, directly contributed to the development of a distinctly republican sense of taste, and the second chapter sought to expose the fissures in the theory of the sense of taste through the bodies and bodies of work of Benjamin Franklin, Alexandre Balthazar Grimod de la Reynière, and Phillis Wheatley, this chapter aims to document an alternative to that theory: what I describe as the *speculative aesthetics* of the early United States. In doing so, I follow Fred Moten, Ivy Wilson, David Kazanjian, and others who, in drawing broadly from the concept of speculation, advocate for “reading apparently descriptive texts as theoretical texts that speculate upon their own conjectures” (Kazanjian, “Scenes of Speculation,” 79). In his analysis of the epistolary archive of colonial Liberia—not coincidentally, the site of Russell’s intended (but never actualized) home—Kazanjian demonstrates how certain key words, such as “free,” expand with theoretical significance when placed in the context of contemporaneous philosophical debates. In doing so, such words can “sound a kind of interrogative backbeat to the descriptive discourse against which they are set and by which they are often engulfed,” he explains (“Speculative Freedom,” 871). This approach, when applied to the genre of the cookbook, which like the letter is a primarily descriptive form, rewards us with views that diverge from the dominant philosophical model of taste of the time.

By proposing a speculative approach to ideas about eating, my aim is twofold: first, following Kazanjian and others, I invite readers to consider how the genre of the cookbook might be more fully recognized for the philosophical work that it performs. To this end, Russell’s *Domestic Cookbook* is particularly instructive, as it employs form as much as con-
tent in order to express its ideological agenda. But by positing *A Domestic Cookbook* as imbued with aesthetic significance in particular, my aim is also, importantly, to expand our vista of what aesthetic philosophy in the early United States more fully entailed. For if it is true, as Edward Cahill and Edward Larkin have recently claimed, that in the early United States and in the decades before, the idea of the aesthetic was “defined not only by privilege but also by difference, not only by the status of the subject but also the nature of its experience,” then it is incumbent upon us, as scholars of that era, to loosen the strictures of our own definition of what constituted aesthetic experience at that time, as well as of which subjects we tend to associate with its various forms (243). Doing so will enable us, in the present, to identify a wider range of aesthetic expression—indeed, of aesthetic philosophy—in the past.

I have previously discussed how the concept of aesthetic taste preceded the term “aesthetic” by many decades, and longer still if prehistories of taste are taken into account. But another way to understand the delayed emergence of the term “aesthetic” is to posit the concept of aesthetic taste as inherently speculative; in other words, as a concept that is fully theorized and, as a reflection of that theory, necessarily imprecise. Consider that philosophers and cultural critics concerned themselves with the broad scope and range of significance of the idea of aesthetic taste from their very first explorations of the “mental sense” of beauty and its relationship to virtue. In the early United States, as Cahill has documented, “ideas about pleasure, fancy, association, taste, genius, beauty, and sublimity permeated literary culture. Educated Americans read about, reflected upon, discussed and debated such ideas with remarkable frequency and intensity (2). And yet, a full century after the term “aesthetic” was introduced into English, those who sought to pin down its meaning—as did Elizabeth Palmer Peabody in her *Aesthetic Papers*, published in 1849, for example—continued to make recourse to “the real presence of an idea,” which the “user” of the term still “cannot himself fully grasp or account for” (1). Thus while most scholars of early American aesthetics, including Cahill, flag the term “aesthetic” as a “necessarily anachronistic” but nonetheless “useful placeholder” for a set of concepts that would later cohere, I propose that the idea of the aesthetic in that era should be understood as a coherent concept, one defined by its speculative core (3). An understanding of aesthetic taste as inherently
speculative serves to acknowledge any formulation of the concept as conjunctural, and therefore as a precise encapsulation of the indeterminate space between sensory experience and acculturated response in which judgments of taste take place.

This chapter thus seeks to distill the speculative theories of aesthetics that were developed in parallel with, and often in direct opposition to, the dominant theory of republican taste. Here, I look to *A Domestic Cookbook* for evidence of how the preparation and presentation of food constitutes an additional form of aesthetic expression, one that contests the exclusionary nature of the tasteful subject more directly than the writing about eating discussed in chapter 2. Employing a speculative approach to Russell’s text, I amplify the philosophical significance of her writing and, in particular, her emphasis on satisfaction, positing it as a provisional aesthetic theory that acknowledges the force of appetite as much as the influence of taste and that insists upon the equivalence of financial success and aesthetic pleasure. I show how Russell’s philosophy of satisfaction challenges the nature of both subjective judgment and civic virtue, offering a means of expressing national belonging that depends upon economic rather than political agency. Tracing the intertwined taste traditions that Russell documents in her volume, I connect her oppositional aesthetics to three key culinary antecedents: Amelia Simmons’s *American Cookery* (1796), the text often described as the first American cookbook; Mary Randolph’s *The Virginia House-Wife* (1824), the text often considered the first southern cookbook, and which Russell cites as the “plan” for her text; and the lived experience of Fannie Steward, the “colored cook, of Virginia” whom Russell credits with her culinary training and about whom little else is known (5). Placed among these antecedents, the aesthetic work of *A Domestic Cookbook* emerges as an extension of, and a challenge to, the dominant philosophical model of taste at the time. Replacing the cultivation of civic virtue with the satisfaction of financial need, Russell’s cookbook presents a method of expressing personal agency, and therefore national belonging, that does not depend on formal mechanisms of political expression. Her suggestions about how a person might value herself, independent of legal definitions of citizenship, illustrate how acts of cooking and eating—in both their material and aesthetic manifestations—open up new political and philosophical as well as culinary terrain.
The Philosophy of Satisfaction

By her own account, Malinda Russell possessed a culinary acumen of the highest degree. On the title page of *A Domestic Cookbook*, her byline reads “Mrs. Malinda Russell, an Experienced Cook,” and the evidence that she offers in the introduction underscores the depth of her experience and skill: “I have made cooking my employment for the last twenty years, in the first families of Tennessee, (my native place,) Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. I know my Receipts to be good, as they have always given satisfaction” (5). As indicated by this statement, cooking consistently enabled Russell to find employment, even as she was required to reestablish herself in new locales; and cooking consistently accorded her with a sense of self-worth, even as she encountered significant adversity—physical and psychological as much as financial. For the robbery that Russell experienced en route to Liberia was, unfortunately, only the first in a series of hardships she would encounter over the course of her adult life. After securing a degree of financial stability, not to mention professional fulfillment, as proprietor of her own pastry shop, Russell was robbed again. In the “Short History of the Author” that begins her cookbook, she explains: “I kept a pastry shop for about six years, and, by hard labor and economy, saved a considerable sum of money for the support of myself and my son, which was taken from me on the 16th of January, 1864, by a guerilla party, who threatened my life if I revealed who they were” (4). To avoid future harm, Russell “follow[ed] a flag of truce” out of the South, eventually making her way to the town of Paw Paw, Michigan (4). While she remained steadfast in her desire to return to Greenville to “recover [her] property,” she “resolved to make” Paw Paw her temporary “home” (4). There, in what she called “the Garden of the West,” her spirit of determination and her capacity for resilience—and, most explicitly, her sense of the “satisfaction” elicited by her food—enabled her to remake her life once again.

Whether or not Russell ever recovered her pastry shop remains unknown; the town of Paw Paw burned to the ground several months after the publication of *A Domestic Cookbook*, eliminating the possibility of tracing Russell through any local records there, as Jan Longone, the curator responsible for acquiring Russell’s cookbook for the University of Michigan Libraries, unfortunately discovered. But the strength of Russell’s
Figure 9. The cover of Malinda Russell’s A Domestic Cookbook: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen (1866). Russell’s cookbook is the first African American–authored cookbook presently known. Courtesy of HathiTrust/University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Research Center, Janice Bluestein Longone Culinary Archive).
desire to return to Greenville—and of her conviction that cooking would provide her with the means to do so—is clearly documented in the lines that close the “Short History”: “This is one reason why I publish my Cook Book, hoping to receive enough from the sale of it to enable me to return home. I know my book will sell well where I have cooked, and am sure those using my receipts will be well satisfied” (4).

The phrase Russell employs as the marker of her recipes’ quality and worth, “well satisfied,” echoes her previous account of the “satisfaction” exhibited by the families who experienced her capable cookery. The term is never used again in the cookbook, as the recipes that follow contain only short descriptions of how to prepare each dish, as was typical for the genre at the time. But I believe its meaning lingers. Of a sort with the philosophically charged terms that Kazanjian points to as evidence of speculative theory—those that we can set apart from the descriptive discourse that surrounds them in order to draw deeper significance from the text as a whole—“satisfaction” here signals the multiple lenses, philosophical as much as culinary or autobiographical, through which Russell’s cookbook can be read.

In this way, Russell’s theory of satisfaction offers a counterpoint to the discourse of taste that has been the focus of the preceding chapters, as it was for the dominant culture of the time. “All of the major Enlightenment philosophers of taste,” as Denise Gigante explains, referring to the Scottish moral sense philosophers such as Hutcheson and Hume, were concerned with “sublimating the tasteful essence of selfhood from its own matters and motions, appetites and aversions, passions and physical sensibilities” (Taste, 3). That concern carried over the Atlantic into the thoughts, if rarely the actions, of figures such as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin, as I have argued thus far. Russell, by contrast, as a professional cook, was required to enlist her culinary acumen in the service of the senses directly. Employed as a cook for the “first families” of several southern states—families much like, if not directly related to, the Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Madisons—Russell concerned herself with deposing her own good taste back into others’ gustatory pleasure (5). Indeed, Russell was required to speculate herself about the “matters and motions, appetites and aversions, passions and physical sensibilities” of the families for whom she cooked, as her ability to satisfy those desires, as much as her ability to satisfy their senses of taste, would determine whether they would be pleased with her food and therefore retain her
services. Russell’s emphasis on satisfaction thus reflects a necessary embrace of the physical gratification that results from eating, placing the pleasures of appetite and taste on an equal plane. Furthermore, Russell, like all those whose livelihoods were dependent upon the tastes of others, was required to sublimate her own desires in order to satisfy those she served. Another version of the “bracketing of republican selfhood” that Cahill describes with respect to Phillis Wheatley, as discussed in chapter 2, the satisfaction that Russell successfully elicits in others reflects the high degree of her own tasteful restraint, as much as it does her ability to produce pleasure in the palates and the minds of others.

Russell’s emphasis on the consistently pleasurable effects of her cooking helps to further announce the significance of satisfaction as an alternative to the philosophical concept of taste. Taste remains rooted in the individual, cultivated from within, even as it is eventually expressed to a like-minded public. Put another way: taste retains its internal locus even as the influences that shape its cultivation derive from broader cultural influences and find expression in larger social groups. Satisfaction, by contrast, does not need to originate in the individual; it can be elicited in others, as the example of Russell’s cooking makes clear. This externalizable, transmissible quality of satisfaction made it indispensable to professional cooks such as Russell, who were required to enlist their personal taste in the interests of those they served. Russell’s assertion that her recipes “have always given satisfaction” (emphasis added) additionally underscores the transmissible quality.

Teresa Brennan has theorized the transmission of affect as “a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (3). This process, originating in the social but experienced by and within the body, can also describe the transmission of taste. Also like the transmission of affect, the transmission of taste is sometimes bidirectional. In other words, the effects of satisfaction at times reflect back upon the original source. Robert Roberts surmises as much in his House Servant’s Directory (1827). Written with professional household workers in mind, Roberts’s text is explicit about its intention to “lay before the public those general rules and directions for servants to go by as shall give satisfaction to their employers, and gain a good reputation for themselves” (x). More clearly than Russell, Roberts explains how the ability to “give satisfaction” can result in personal “gain.” In this way, Roberts contests the dominant model of the sense of taste, as explored in previous chapters, in which
“good reputation” extends from shared participation in (and shared judgments about) experiences of eating, among other aestheticized acts. For domestic workers such as Roberts and cooks such as Russell, however, good reputation is established indirectly, a result of the degree of satisfaction that they are able to transmit to those who consume their tasteful food. This good reputation holds even as they cannot share it directly while seated around a common table.¹⁵

This indirect relation between the preparation of tasteful food and the experience of others’ satisfaction is, ultimately, what enables the oppositional qualities of Russell’s aesthetic theory to begin to cohere. We have previously seen how, in the early United States, the cultivation of personal taste was widely understood as corresponding to the cultivation of civic virtue, a quality that in turn prepared citizens to participate appropriately in their new democracy. By contrast, the experience of satisfaction carries no such assumption of political agency.¹⁶ For Russell in particular, this dissociation from formal mechanisms of enfranchisement is important. With the Fourteenth Amendment still two years from passage at the time that she authored her cookbook, Russell harbored no illusions about the partial nature of her rights as a citizen. The story of the loss of her pastry shop bears this out. Her primary reason for being “compelled” to abandon her shop is her decision to express her “Union principles” (5). In other words, rather than empower her or align with a larger coalition, her exercising one of the foundational rights of the republic—the right to political speech—results in the forced separation from her job and her community. Her rejection of the promise of republican taste in favor of a homegrown philosophy of satisfaction thus reflects an acute awareness of the legal limits placed on her political subjectivity, and the beginnings of an attempt to achieve agency, both personal and political, through other means.

Like many other black Americans denied basic legal rights, Russell identifies economic success as a more reliable method of asserting both her politics and her taste. This view is suggested in the vision of Russell becoming a “valuable citizen” of Liberia, as documented in one of the letters she quotes at the beginning of her cookbook; and it is confirmed throughout the volume’s prefatory pages, in which Russell makes clear how she pursues the satisfaction of her own financial needs in equal measure to the satisfaction of others’ pleasures and tastes. In her account of her departure from her pastry shop, for example, she emphasizes the
“considerable sum of money” that it enables her to earn, which in turn allows her to “support myself and son.” The pain that she experiences as a result of being forced to abandon her shop is thus financial as much as physical. For if Russell’s life was defined by its culinary achievements, it was also defined by her financial distress. At every juncture—from the robbery en route to Liberia that set her culinary career in motion to the economic burden of supporting herself and her son that led her to open her pastry shop to the loss of wages (a result of her “advanced” age) that prompted the publication of her cookbook—Russell’s culinary aspirations were consistently accompanied by (if not directly motivated by) instances of intense financial need. Taking these economic obligations into account, Russell’s emphasis on satisfaction acquires an additional conceptual valence, one that derives from the word’s frequent usage in the context of satisfying debts.

As a helpful point of contrast, one might consider the “little satisfaction” exhibited by the character of Hepzibah Pyncheon in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* upon the opening of her own little shop (52). Published in 1851, right around the time that Russell opened her pastry shop, Hawthorne’s novel documents the financial and political decline of one of the “first families” of New England, the northern equivalent of those for whom Russell cooked. In fact, Hawthorne invokes the “ghosts of departed cook-maids” when attempting to convey the extent of the Pyncheon family’s fall from power (99). Unlike Russell, however, Hepzibah exhibits little business acumen; she gives her first customer his purchase—significantly, a cookie shaped like Jim Crow—away for free. Even when her young cousin, Phoebe, joins her in the shop and enables it to achieve a modicum of success, Hepzibah takes little pleasure in her renewed ability to pay her family’s debts. By comparison, Russell’s embrace of a philosophy of satisfaction enables her to take pleasure in the act of satisfying her personal financial obligations as much as satisfying of others’ tastes.

At the same time, Russell understands her pursuit of her own financial satisfaction as an undertaking that, like the cultivation of personal taste, impacts a community beyond herself. Immediately following her pronouncement about her satisfying cookery, she takes another step to acknowledge the extended benefits of her decision to capitalize on her culinary expertise. She explains: “I have been advised to have my Receipts published, as they are valuable, and every family has use for them” (5). Positioned as the central clause in the sentence, the “value” of her recipes
functions as a conceptual as well as semantic hinge; it indicates the recipes’ economic utility for herself and their culinary utility for others. When she adds, in the final line of the same paragraph, “I have put out this book with the intention of benefiting the public as well as myself,” she clarifies her belief in how personal profit and public “benefit” can coincide (5). As an alternative to the republican model in which the cultivation of personal taste leads to the cultivation of civic virtue, Russell proposes a paradigm in which her own economic satisfaction contributes to the culinary satisfaction of others, which in turn contributes to the public good.

With this connection between personal satisfaction and the public good well established, Russell’s sense of satisfaction begins to resonate with the theories of liberal capitalism that were then beginning to find expression in national policy. Not only in the “hard labor and economy” that she exhibits in her pastry shop, but also in the letters she quotes early in the cookbook, which affirm her “fine disposition and business-doing habits,” as well as in the advertisement for her washhouse that she also cites, which touts her “proficiency in her business,” Russell takes pains to not only demonstrate but also document her entrepreneurial expertise. Consistent with the entrepreneurial ethos established by Franklin in his Autobiography, and taken up in many of the slave narratives that, as Rafia Zafar has demonstrated, would have been well-known reference points for nineteenth-century readers of A Domestic Cookbook, Russell positions her entrepreneurialism as evidence of her place in the nation. By replacing political with economic agency, Russell seems to offer a corrective to the concept of republican taste, which does not account for how nonvoting subjects can contribute to the public good. In a speculative reading, then, Russell’s oppositional aesthetics emerge through her insistence that her expressions of economic agency are equivalent to others’ expressions of personal taste. Her life philosophy is revealed as one that admits the role of pleasure as a productive contribution to both personal profit and public good. It expands the definition of civic virtue to include the pursuit of financial gain, and insists that economic agency as much as political agency impacts the good of the nation.

Orphaned Subjects and Scriptive Texts

Seventy years before Malinda Russell entered the office of the True Northerner newspaper, in Paw Paw, in order to inquire about the possibility of printing A Domestic Cookbook, another aspiring cookbook author, a
white woman by the name of Amelia Simmons, approached the offices of Hudson & Goodwin, in Hartford, Connecticut, with her own proposition: there had yet to be a cookbook that was “adapted to this country, and to all grades of life” (1). 21 Orphaned at a young age, and having been “reduced to the necessity” of finding employment as a cook, Simmons had amassed the requisite amount of culinary knowledge and life experience to be able to author such a book (3). Was it not true that the “rising generation of Females in America” were owed a culinary education as much as each “Lady of fashion and fortune”? (3). And should that education not include recipes that made use of “every article brought into market” (6)? None of the British texts that were then in circulation, such as Eliza Smith’s Compleat Houswife (1727), Hannah Glasse’s Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy (1747), and Susannah Carter’s Frugal Housewife; Or, Complete Woman Cook (1772), included recipes for “Tasty Indian Pudding,” “Pompkin” pie, or turkey with “cranberry-sauce [sic],” for example (31, 34, 13). By bringing together indigenous American ingredients with British cooking techniques, Simmons authored what culinary historian Mark McWilliams would later describe, in his book on the subject, as a “culinary declaration of independence” for the United States (308). 22

As hyperbolic as it may seem, McWilliams’s assertion is not far from the truth. Simmons’s cookbook was as important for American culinary history as its title is long to behold: American Cookery, or the Art of Dressing Viands, Fish, Poultry, and Vegetables, and the Best Modes of Making Pastes, Puffs, Pies, Tarts, Puddings, Custards, andPreserves, and All Kinds of Cakes, from the Imperial Plum to Plain Cake: Adapted to This Country, and All Grades of Life. Published in 1796, American Cookery, as it is known, was met with a “call . . . so great, and [a] sale so rapid” that the author found herself “not only encouraged, but under a necessity of publishing a second edition” (5). That edition, published later that year in Albany, New York, was followed by a third, in 1804, and many more through the first decades of the nineteenth century. 23 With this strong response, Simmons almost certainly secured her own status as a member of the “rising generation” of women to whom she addressed her own valuable recipes. But as the contrast to Russell makes clear, Simmons’s success, both social and financial, owes as much to her whiteness as it does to her culinary expertise. Unlike Russell, herself an orphan whose status as a black woman amplified her experience of social and economic
precarity, Simmons experienced her orphanhood as aligning her more closely with, not distancing her more fully from, the project of cultivating republican taste.

On the title page of her cookbook, Simmons describes herself as an “American orphan,” in what is at once a (presumed) reflection of her actual circumstances and a deliberate deployment of the trope, common at the time, to describe the severed relation between colony and king (2). In her analysis of the cookbook, Glynis Ridley reads this self-bestowed epithet as evidence of Simmons’s belief in the view, pervasive at the time, of a distinctly American capacity for “social mobility and [an] inclusiveness that sees all treated equally” (116). Simmons underscores her own adherence to an ideology of self-improvement with the clarity of her stated desire to help others who “by the loss of their parents, or other unfortunate circumstances, are reduced to the necessity of going into families in the line of domestics, or taking refuge with their friends or relations, and doing those things which are really essential to the perfecting them as good wives, and useful members of society” (3). Unsurprisingly for the late eighteenth century, Simmons does not acknowledge how black women such as Russell, whose own “unfortunate circumstances” would otherwise seem to place her among Simmons’s intended readers, faced many more obstacles to becoming “good wives, and useful members of society” than simply the lack of practical knowledge about how to cook. Another kind of “American orphan,” Russell’s diminished sense of national belonging was owed to the racism and sexism that denied her full participation in the U.S. government, and the resultant social and economic circumstances that required her to move away from her family, along with the death of her mother “when [she] was quite young” (3). Russell’s rejection of the fantasy of direct political agency becomes, from this vantage point, an equal-but-opposite response to the same national culture (and commensurate legal policy) that embraced Simmons as an emblem of the newly independent state.

Russell’s aesthetic philosophy thus emerges not only from within her text, but also in response to texts such as Simmons’s that, like the ideas expressed by Jefferson and Madison (and Washington to some degree), unreflectively bind the cultivation of taste to the cultivation of virtuous citizenship. For Simmons, as for the founders, the connection between good taste and good citizenship is simply assumed; it does not include a consideration of the human costs of producing good taste, nor of who is
AMERICAN COOKE

OR THE ART OF DRESSING

VIANDS, FISH, POULTRY and VEGETABLES.

AND THE BEST MODES OF MAKING

PASTES, PUFFS, PIES, TARTS, PUDDINGS,
CUSTARDS AND PRESERVES,

AND ALL KINDS OF

CAKES,

FROM THE IMPERIAL PLUMB TO PLAIN CAKE.

ADAPTED TO THIS COUNTRY,

AND ALL GRADES OF LIFE.

By Amelia Simmons,

AN AMERICAN ORPHAN.

PUBLISHED ACCORDING TO ACT OF CONGRESS.

HARTFORD;
Printed by Hudson & Goodwin,
For the Author.

1796.

Figure 10. The title page of Amelia Simmons’s American Cookery (1796). Simmons’s cookbook is commonly credited as the first “American” cookbook. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.
prevented from exhibiting either good taste or good citizenship. Along these lines, it is significant that Simmons follows her advice to her orphan readers about how to become “useful members of society” with a statement about the crucial need to cultivate a strong sense of personal taste: “The orphan, tho’ left to the care of virtuous guardians, will find it essentially necessary to have an opinion and determination of her own,” she intones (3). Here, Simmons sounds the refrain of the discourse of taste, underscoring the positive impact of exercising good taste—an “opinion and determination of [one’s] own”—on both family and nation. In this context, the orphan becomes a symbol of the independence of thought required to sustain the nation’s growth. She assumes that her orphan readers each possess an equal ability to participate in U.S. democracy, one that, as Erica Armstrong Dunbar has explained, did not accurately account for the “class barriers” that prevented “most women, black or white,” from participating in it (24). And Simmons certainly does not account for figures such as Russell, whose ability to express her personal taste was severely curtailed by her social standing, legal status, and financial needs. “The domestic sphere was simply different for black women,” Dunbar further explains: “free African American women found their status as free people challenged every day as millions of black men and women remained enslaved” (24–25).

In spite of her lack of acknowledgment of issues of race or of slavery, Simmons’s insistence on the importance of taste nevertheless helps to illuminate how her text, and Russell’s, both perform aesthetic work.  

Culinary scholars often observe how the cookbook is set apart from other literary genres by the fact that recipes it contains are intended not only to be read but also enacted. A cookbook’s recipes “demand a certain set of actions, performed in a certain sequence, to produce a certain product,” points out culinary historian Jessamyn Neuhaus (95). As any cook well knows, however, recipes also involve a degree of improvisation. This fact is also often noted by culinary scholars, but it is most helpfully theorized by cultural historian Robin Bernstein. She looks to domestic artifacts such as dolls, handkerchiefs, and pincushions in order to develop a notion of what she calls the “scriptive thing” (12). Such artifacts, Bernstein explains, function “like playscripts, broadly structuring a performance while allowing for agency and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable” (12). The recipe is not a physical object like those Bernstein treats. However, we might similarly consider
how the recipe “scripts” the behavior of its reader-turned-cook, establishing a broad framework within which the reader can improvise her own “variation,” or otherwise assert her own culinary expertise. Like the playscript Bernstein uses as her model, the recipe facilitates the “agency” of its reader/cook within any number of larger constraints, social and political as much as formal. The result has additional implications in terms of both taste and significance that, to borrow another phrase from Bernstein, both “include and exceed” the original dish (12).

As an example of how the recipe functions as a “scriptive” text, consider a typical recipe from American Cookery, such as “To make the best Bacon,” the first to appear in the book: “To each ham put one ounce of saltpeter, one pint bay salt, one pint molasses, shake together 6 or 8 weeks, or when a large quantity is together, bast [sic] them with the liquor every day; when taken out to dry, smoke three weeks with cobs or malt fumes. To every ham may be added a cheek, if you stow away a barrel and not alter the composition, some add a shoulder. For transportation or exportation, double the period of smoking [sic]” (5–6). This recipe, like so many others, is simultaneously evocative and nondescript. It conjures a strong enough sense of the completed dish such that the reader/cook will be compelled to follow it, and yet its plain instructions reflect the requirement that the reader/cook will be able to follow them with ease. With regard to the latter, “To make the best Bacon” exemplifies the demands on the reader/cook that characterize the recipe as a genre. But its details are also worthy of note. Here, the instructions to first cure the meat, then dry and smoke it include the additional space for improvisation that the notion of the “scriptive thing” helps to unfold—here, the choice of smoking with either “cobs or malt fumes” and the option of adding an additional pork cheek or shoulder to increase the yield, as well as the indication that the bacon may (or may not) be intended for travel or export. Suggesting multiple outcomes while not requiring any particular one, the recipe facilitates a form of culinary agency that is fundamentally bounded, yet remains open to individual acts of interpretation and expression.

Considered in the context of aesthetic theory, these dual notions of agency—the one constrained by the author, intended to be followed with precision and care, and the other improvisatory, open to individual interpretation and expression—can be understood as corresponding to the contrasting forces that make judgments of taste so complex. Indeed, the central philosophical “problem” of taste, as Carolyn Korsmeyer describes
it, resides in the necessary reconciliation of certain universal standards with a person’s internal sensory response (46). While it is impossible to know with any certainty whether, or to what degree, Simmons was aware of any of the more formal articulations of this problem in circulation at the time, her cookbook is at least engaged with one version of the issue. As she advocates for each of her orphan readers to cultivate “an opinion and determination of her own,” she makes sure to clarify that the reader must still adhere to certain standards: “By having an opinion and determination,” Simmons explains, “I would not be understood to mean an obstinate perseverance in trifles, which borders on obstinacy—by no means, but only an adherence to those rules and maxims which have stood the test of ages” (4). The recipes that follow, then, reinforce this model of exercising individual “opinion and determination,” but only within social and cultural constraints.

This model, of cultivating personal taste within predetermined social standards, is one that Russell also acknowledges, and then reconfigures through her writing. After all, her cookbook begins not with a treatise on taste, but with a detailed account of her own life story. Her recipes, similarly, are framed so as to foreground her own unique contributions to others’ tables. As a primary example of how she foregrounds her unique expertise, consider “To Make Lard Pastry,” the recipe that describes how to make the pastry dough for which she was renowned: “Two quarts flour, one and a half lb lard; divide the lard into four parts; rub one part into the flour with a knife, mix with cold water to a consistent dough, roll the dough into sheets, spreading the remainder of the lard over them, folding the sheets and rolling again; salt-spoon of salt. Nice and flaky” (22). In terms of style, “To Make Lard Pastry” retains the sparseness that characterizes the recipe as a genre in the nineteenth century. Russell relates the necessary ingredients with minimal elaboration, a reflection most likely of their familiarity to both herself and her readers. But in her account of how to assemble the dough, she provides a notable amount of detail. Russell relates no fewer than seven steps required to achieve her “nice and flaky” pastry. (Simmons, by contrast, includes only four steps in the recipe for lard pastry that she includes in her book.) By following these instructions with a qualitative assessment—unusual both for A Domestic Cookbook and for the genre as a whole—Russell conveys her belief that readers who successfully adhere to her instructions will be well satisfied by the result.
At the same time, the closing phrase reinforces Russell’s own experience and skill. After all, the pastry will only be “nice and flaky” if the reader follows the recipe correctly—a daunting task that, as David S. Shields observes in his study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century pastry cooks, requires nothing short of “mastery” (Provisions, 112). “To Make Lard Pastry” thus mirrors the more explicit assertions of expertise that Russell includes in her introduction, affirming the uniquely satisfying qualities of Russell’s own cooking. In contrast to Simmons, who frames her cookbook as an exercise in cultivating taste, Russell understands that her place in the nation is bound to the pleasure that she herself can produce in those who consume her food. Her status as a black woman, even two generations removed from the nation’s original sin, carries none of the benefits of citizenship automatically accorded to Simmons or to her white orphan readers. Russell’s orphanhood, instead, informs a philosophy in which the satisfaction of the nation is only possible by satisfying each and every one of its citizens, each and every time that Russell offers up a dish.

Recipes, Regulation, and Resistance

Despite the historical trajectory that links Amelia Simmons, the self-appointed “American orphan,” with Malinda Russell, the orphan that America made, Russell does not acknowledge Simmons’s influence, at least not explicitly. In A Domestic Cookbook, Russell cites two other sources for her culinary expertise. As she writes: “I learned my trade of Fanny Steward, a colored cook, of Virginia, and have since learned many new things in the art of Cooking. I cook after the plan of the ‘Virginia Housewife’” (n.p.). While presented as statements of fact, the coupling of these particular references—to Steward, the “colored cook, of Virginia” about whom little else is known, and to The Virginia House-Wife; or, Methodical Cook (1824) by Mary Randolph, a member of one of the “first families of Virginia” to which Russell traces her lineage—reflects an awareness, on the part of Russell, of the multiple sources that contribute to culinary knowledge (Russell, 3). It also reinforces her seeming attempt, throughout A Domestic Cookbook, to reconfigure the relation between personal taste and civic virtue. For if her acknowledgment of Steward as the source of her culinary knowledge affirms the primary role of experiential knowledge in the production of gustatory pleasure, her reference to the “plan” of the Virginia House-Wife points to a
related understanding of how cookbooks structure that knowledge in order to produce particular political subjects as well as educated cooks.

Randolph’s cookbook is notable for how it records her own attempt to employ techniques of regulation and management in order to distill the tasteful aspects of cooking from the labor and knowledge required to produce it. In the introduction she declares, “The prosperity and happiness of a family depend greatly on the order and regularity established in it,” and in the recipes that follow she indicates the processes by which this “order and regularity” can be achieved: a high degree of precision with respect to what and how much of each ingredient to include, an equally high degree of detail about the process by which to prepare the dish, and a heightened attention to strategies for saving both money and time (xii). Like the recipes of both Simmons and Russell, Randolph’s read not only as instructions for implementing a particular set of dishes, but also for implementing a particular political subjectivity: one with implications for the individuals whom Randolph herself employed in her kitchen, and for the women readers who would, following Randolph, become arbiters of national taste.

Randolph characterizes her system in terms of what she calls “method” (ix). In the opening lines of the preface, she explains how she developed this approach in response to her own lack of experience in the kitchen. Characterizing herself as a “Tyro” (from the Latin tiro, meaning “young soldier” or “new recruit”), she recalls: “The difficulties I encountered when I first entered on the duties of a House-keeping life, from the want of books sufficiently clear and concise to impart knowledge to a Tyro, compelled me to study the subject, and by actual experiment to reduce every thing in the culinary line, to proper weights and measures” (ix). Randolph contrasts her cookbook with the texts that she herself encountered as a young housewife, almost certainly including Simmons’s, which lacked “sufficiently clear and concise” instructions for novice cooks such as herself. She emphasizes the “proper weights and measures” that characterize her recipes—the result, she claims, of “actual experiment”—as the feature that most distinguishes her cookbook from others. The food that results is both “economical” and delicious for “when the ingredients employed were given in just proportions, the article made was always equally good” (ix).

Randolph views her “methodical” approach to cooking as one that can be easily adapted to apply to housekeeping in general. The title page of The Virginia House-Wife features the motto “Method is the soul of management,” and in the preface Randolph makes clear that her approach
extends from the management of the cooking process to the manage-
ment of the entire home. She counsels that “a regular system must be
introduced into each department [of the house], which may be modified
until matured, and should then pass into an inviolable law” (ix). More
explicitly than either Simmons or Russell, Randolph employs the lan-
guage of governance—here, the mention of “inviolable law”—in order to
advocate for the political impact of her methodical cookery. She asserts
that the “government of the family bears a Lilliputian relation to the gov-
ernment of a nation,” in a line that indicates the depth of her political as
well as literary engagement (ix). The daughter of a participant in the Vir-
ginia Convention of 1776, and a relation by marriage to Thomas Jeff-
erson, who complimented her “valuable little volume” upon its publication,
Randolph was intimately familiar with what the government of both
family and nation entailed (Jefferson, “Letter”). Amplifying the language
of regulation with references to the actual legislative process, Randolph’s
cookbook advances a vision of household management that connects it
to national politics in terms of both process and effect.

Of course, personal as well as national politics were already abundant in
Randolph’s kitchen, long before she began writing her cookbook. First as
the mistress of Presqu’ile Plantation, where she resided during the first
years of her married life between 1780 and 1798, and then as the owner of a
well-regarded boardinghouse, which she opened upon her return to the
city of Richmond in 1798, Randolph relied upon an enslaved staff of at least
nine persons in order to prepare the “fine food” for which she was known
(qtd. in Kierner, 210).30 The presence of these individuals—formally docu-
mented in the 1810 census but qualitatively registered in every meal that
Randolph served—suggests that, even as she promoted her “actual” kitchen
experience, Randolph herself likely never prepared the recipes printed in
her book. Culinary historians have long noted this fact, if obliquely. Karen
Hess, for one, acknowledges that Randolph “was a fine practitioner who
knew her way about the kitchen but the actual cooking and toil fell to black
women” (The Virginia House-Wife, xl). Marcie Cohen Ferris states the case
more strongly: “Slavery built the table of Mary Randolph” (88). The scrip-
tive power of Randolph’s recipes, then, is revealed for how it shifts the
source of good taste from the process of cooking to the regulation thereof.31
Not dissimilar from the attempt by James Madison (who when presented
with a copy of The Virginia House-Wife tellingly professed to be unable to
“decide on [its] merit” on account of his own lack of “practice on the table”)

Figure 11. The title page of Mary Randolph’s The Virginia House-Wife (1824). Malinda Russell cites Randolph’s cookbook as one of two sources of her own culinary knowledge; the other is “Fanny Steward, a colored cook of Virginia.” Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.
to separate the “art” of cultivation from the physical labor of farming, Randolph’s efforts to separate the managerial aspects of food preparation from the physical labor of cooking enable her—and her white readers—to take credit for any impact food and eating might have on the “prosperity and happiness” of both family and nation (xii).

Unlike Madison’s approach, however, which was premised on a distancing of the process of cultivation from the labor required to produce it, Randolph’s emphasis on management enables the mistress of the house, otherwise far removed from the actual work of cooking, to reinsert herself into the cooking process. In her advice to “Virginia ladies,” for instance, when Randolph declares, “Let all the articles intended for the dinner, pass in review before her: have the butter, sugar, flour, meal, lard, given out in proper quantities; the catsup, spice, wine, whatever may be wanted for each dish, measured to the cook,” she describes a method for asserting practical as much as symbolic control over the cooking process (xi–xii). While presented under the guise of ensuring consistency in the kitchen, the act of meting out the individual ingredients for each dish plainly illustrates the interrelation of measurement, management, and control. And this claim to improving consistency was indeed a guise: the enslaved women working in the kitchen knew far more about consistent cooking than any plantation mistress. The passive voice employed in Randolph’s phrasing underscores this point. These enslaved cooks should be credited for making food taste good in spite of any attempt on behalf of a mistress to control the process, as Psyche Williams-Forson’s discussion of the power dynamics involved in white-authored cookbooks helps to suggest. Indeed, the formal systems of measurement and accounting by which food was distributed to enslaved plantation laborers functioned to “regulate the dense cultural import of cooking and eating for the enslaved,” as Christopher Farrish has observed (194). Randolph’s method of household management performs a similarly regulatory function, one that serves to regulate power as much as process and that asserts social as much as culinary control.

The recipes of The Virginia House-Wife are revealing for how they procedurally enforce this method of culinary and social control. An undercurrent of each recipe included in the book, this enforcement is nowhere more evident than in the recipes that make use of ingredients and techniques introduced to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. As a primary example, consider Randolph’s recipe for “Ochra
Soup,” which is often celebrated in discussions of southern food for how it “introduces” the West African ingredient to American palates:

Get two double handfuls of young ochra, wash and slice thin, add two onions chopped fine, put into a gallon of water at a very early hour in an earthen pipkin, or very nice iron pot: it must be kept steadily simmering, but not boiling: put in pepper and salt. At 12 o’clock, put in a handful of Lima beans, at half past one o’clock, add three young cimlins cleaned and cut in small pieces, a fowl, or knuckle of veal, a bit of bacon or pork that has been boiled, and six tomatas, with the skin taken off when nearly done; thicken with a spoonful of butter, mixed with one of flour. Have rice boiled to eat with it. (34–35)

In keeping with Randolph’s stated aims, this recipe is characterized by the (relative) precision of its required ingredients (“two double handfuls of young ochra,” “three young cimlins,” “one [spoonful] of flour”), the detail of its methods of preparation (“wash and slice thin,” “steadily simmering, but not boiling”), the specificity of its cooking times (“at 12 o’clock,” “at half past one o’clock,” “when nearly done”), and even its inclusion of recommended cookware (“an earthen pipkin, or a very nice iron pot”). Ostensibly included as information for the inexperienced cook, these detailed instructions also enable the mistress of the house to easily implement Randolph’s method of (micro)management. Considered in terms of how it formalizes the embodied and experiential knowledge of the kitchen, Randolph’s recipe is also significant for how it enacts a forcible transfer of culinary knowledge from enslaved cook to household mistress.34

Less immediately evident, although equally operational, is how the precision of Randolph’s recipes facilitates the shift in cultural and political, and therefore aesthetic, value that she points toward in her introductory account. More specifically, her efforts to distill the managerial aspects of food preparation into recipe form allow her to invest the management of the cooking process with the aesthetic significance that other cookbook authors, including both Simmons and Russell, would associate with cooking itself. Randolph hints at this conceptual shift throughout The Virginia House-Wife, but it is most clearly articulated in a section that appears midway through the volume, titled, “Important Observations on Roasting,
Boiling, Frying, &c.” There, Randolph proclaims: “Profusion is not
elegance—a dinner justly calculated for the company, and consisting for
the great part of small articles, correctly prepared, and neatly served up,
will make a much more pleasing appearance to the sight, and give a far
greater gratification to the appetite, than a table loaded with food, and
from the multiplicity of dishes, unavoidably neglected in the preparation,
and served up cold” (27). In this statement, Randolph offers a vision of an
elegant dinner that elicits both a “pleasing appearance to the sight” and
“gratification to the appetite,” the signal attributes of the discourse of
taste. But she is quick to distinguish a “table loaded with food” from her
own ideal: “a dinner justly calculated for the company.” The former may
reflect the ability to cook a “multiplicity of dishes,” but only the latter can
convey the ability to manage the home. Organization and execution, the
aspects of cooking over which the mistress maintains control, are, for
Randolph, the most valid manifestations of virtue and taste.

Russell’s citation of the “plan” of *The Virginia House-Wife* thus
emerges as an acknowledgment of the role of method in shaping the
tastes of both family and nation. But her pairing of Randolph’s “plan”
with Steward’s “trade” points to an acknowledgment of a more potent
source of culinary knowledge: the “art of Cooking” itself (5). Russell’s
decision to preface her cookbook with neither a treatise on taste, follow-
ing Simmons, nor a polemic on management, following Randolph, but
with a detailed personal history does more than serve as an “authenticat-
ing document” for her own expertise, as Zafar has claimed (18). It also
works to secure the contributions of cooks such as Steward, who labored
in the kitchen without written recognition, to the development of a dis-
tinct regional cuisine. Indeed, Russell’s method, while modeled after
Randolph’s “plan,” extends beyond managerial virtue to include both the
experiential knowledge gained through kitchen work and the entrepre-
neurial skill cultivated through daily life. She employs her cookbook as a
platform for her personal philosophy of satisfaction, strategically rein-
forced through the lineage established by her reference to Randolph’s
text, and by her acknowledgment of Steward’s expertise. Even more so
than Russell’s, the details of Steward’s life story are difficult to recover.
But we can hold open a space of recognition by acknowledging the expe-
rience and improvisation required to transform a recipe—recorded either
on the page or in the mind—into a pleasurable, satisfying dish.
Satisfaction in the Wake of Slavery

Mary Randolph and her husband David Meade Randolph, then federal marshal for the state of Virginia, were safely ensconced in their Richmond mansion, Moldavia, on Saturday, August 30, 1800, when the city experienced the “most terrible thunder Storm, accompanied with an enormous rain” that some “ever witnessed” (qtd. in Egerton, 69). Unbeknownst to Richmond’s white inhabitants, including the Randolph family, the storm upended what might otherwise have become the largest slave revolt in U.S. history. Gabriel’s Rebellion, as the event came to be known, was envisioned by the eponymous twenty-four-year-old, a literate blacksmith who was born into slavery on a Henrico County tobacco plantation, as nothing short of revolution. Inspired by recent events in France and Haiti, Gabriel spent the summer of 1800 recruiting hundreds of men to his cause. He planned for an army of ten thousand, organized in three columns, that would march on Richmond with “cutlasses, knives, pikes, and muskets” (qtd. in Egerton, 50). James Monroe, then governor of Virginia, would be taken hostage as the rebels seized the munitions held in the magazine at Capitol Square.

The rain slowed down the plan, however, giving several would-be participants time to reconsider. One of these participants was an enslaved man named Pharoah, who mentioned his doubts to another man, Tom, enslaved in the same household, who in turn suggested that they tell their enslaver, Mosby Sheppard. From that moment, a response as rapid and as destructive as the lightning that accompanied the storm resulted in thirty-seven of the rebels being captured and sentenced to death. Forced to speak in the hours before they were hanged, the rebels’ testimony provides contemporary scholars with the primary (if at times conflicting) record of the rebellion’s never-realized goals. One of the captured rebels, an enslaved man named Ben Woolfolk, who offered one of the most extensive accounts of the intended events, testified that “none were to be spared of the Whites, except quakers, Methodists and French people” (“Testimony”). This line captured the imagination (and fears) of the white population of Richmond, and in the years that followed, it transformed into local legend. In her 1883 novelization of the events, Judith: A Chronicle of Old Virginia, for instance, Marion Harland (herself a cookbook author) reports that Gabriel planned to establish himself “King of Virginia,” killing all who resisted (22). In her 1923 pseudo-historical
account, *Richmond, Its People, and Its Story*, Mary Newton Stanard provides even more (embellished) detail: “All the people of Richmond were to be massacred save those who begged for quarter or agreed to join the movement. All blacks who refused to join were to be killed” as well (84). Interestingly, Stanard identifies one additional life to be spared: none other than Mary Randolph, whom Gabriel would make “his queen because she knew so much about cooking” (84).

This “odd item,” as historian Jonathan Daniels describes it in his popular biography of the Randolph family, is almost certainly apocryphal (186). But Randolph’s retroactive insertion into the events of August 1800 underscores the verifiable fact that food and eating played a key role in the rebellion. Many of the captured men referenced a series of barbecues that allowed them to “concert the plan of Insurrection” (“Testimony”). The organizing function of these barbecues seems consistent with scholarship on the sociality of the communal meals prepared and consumed by the enslaved during their time away from their labors. These meals usually took place on Sunday evenings, the one time each week when the enslaved laborers were permitted to rest, and sometimes worship and gather with others. That the meals mentioned in the testimony were barbecues, coupled with the stormy weather, additionally recalls the legend of Bois Caïman: the organizing meeting and ceremony that is often cited as the start of the Haitian Revolution. That event, similarly characterized by a mixture of fiction and fact, also took place “while the storm raged and lightning shot across the sky” and was called under the “pretext of a meal.” The multiple shared elements between these two events begin to suggest how satisfaction can shift from a protocapitalist to a revolutionary register.

The revolutionary potential of a theory of satisfaction is further reinforced by the insertion of “Queen Molly,” as she was known to her friends, into the account of the ascension of “King Gabriel,” as he would be known to history. In doing so, Stanard and her peers might have sought to insert an element of control, in the form of Randolph herself, into the narrative of a plot that threatened to overturn their own social and political order. Randolph’s tightly regulated kitchen would work symbolically, perhaps, to mitigate the psychological threat of what endured, in their minds, as an expression of unregulation of the highest degree. Here, then, in the retelling of the events, if not in the original “plan of Insurrection,” we see the desire for revolution—indeed for revenge—conceptually contained by Randolph’s peerless “method of management.”
But an additional bit of evidence that emerged at the trial, provided by another captured rebel named Ben, suggests a second reason for the retroactive insertion of Mary Randolph into the story of Gabriel’s Rebellion. Unlike Ben Woolfolk, “Prosser’s Ben,” as this man was described, offered an account that did not sentence the white inhabitants of Richmond to certain death. He reported, rather, “That if the White people agreed to their freedom they would then hoist a White flag, and [Gabriel] would dine and drink with the merchants of the City” (“Testimony”). Douglas Egerton, the author of the most comprehensive account of the events, reads this report as evidence that Gabriel “understood that simple liberation was not sufficient,” and that “he wanted the fully acknowledged position of equality with the master class—political, social, and economic—that was the antithesis of human bondage” (51). Certainly, the notion that Gabriel, the leader of a newly emancipated class of black citizens, would “dine and drink” with his white compatriots suggests a strong understanding of the “political, social, and economic” symbolism of a shared meal. But placed in the context of Mary Randolph, the ideology of household management to which she adhered, and the enslaved household staff upon whom she relied to enforce it, the dinner acquires additional significance. Forcing Randolph, the captive wife, to prepare a meal for the leader of the revolution and the “merchants of the City” turns the (literal) table on any philosophy that linked civic virtue to the exercise of enlightened restraint. After all, Gabriel did not represent moderation in the slightest; he planned for violent revolution. A far cry from Jefferson’s tasteful “little dinner,” which linked the cultivation and expression of taste to the cultivation and expression of civic virtue, Gabriel’s seemingly conciliatory dinner becomes, instead, an enactment of the total surrender of the tasteful master class. According to this account, Gabriel sought the satisfaction of seeing himself liberated from bondage, as well as his oppressors forced to confront, across the dining table, the new world order that his rebellion had, at long last, brought about.

Gabriel’s sense of satisfaction—the pleasure of knowing that an oppressive system had been toppled, and that a form of higher justice had been served—contrasts sharply with the satisfaction sought by Malinda Russell—the pleasure of achieving economic success within that same oppressive system, and that would result in the modest goal of “return[ing] home” (3). But their shared emphasis on satisfaction, over and above personal taste, points to how the precarity that characterized all black lives in the
early republic, both those enslaved and those free, shaped a range of personal philosophies and aesthetic expressions, from armed insurrection to “Almond Sponge Cake” (Russell, 9). Acknowledging how “slavery’s continual unfolding” has prompted a wide range of material and aesthetic response, Christina Sharpe has recently called for a “new analytic,” one that can better account for the experience that connects enslaved men like Gabriel, across time and circumstances, to free black women like Russell; and one that can also connect both Gabriel and Russell, across history and geography, to those “seeking a resolution to blackness’s ongoing and irreversible abjection” in the present (18, 14). In formulating this analytic, Sharpe contests the goal of resolution itself, instead calling upon scholars to “imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery” today (18).

To support this project, we might begin to imagine otherwise from our position in the present, further speculating about what we know about the archive of the early United States. In reimagining what we know about the subjects whose lives are documented in or, alternately, erased from the archive, we might also reimagine what we know about the theories that governed their lives. In this chapter, I have sought to model a method for imagining aesthetic theory otherwise. This is a method that accepts the interrelation of aesthetics and politics as a matter of course, but does not limit itself to formal definitions of either aesthetic theory or political expression. In addition to the standard sites in which such theories are developed and ideas are expressed, it looks to cooking and recipes for evidence of theories that are enacted at the table, and at times even served, in order to achieve their fullest form. This method rejects the notion that philosophy is defined by a single genre or style, in favor of a more capacious understanding of what constitutes aesthetic thought. And it insists that the actors involved in the production and presentation of food understood their own labor, in its own time, as performing aesthetic work. This method enhances our existing understanding of aesthetics by introducing additional theories developed from alternate conceptual models, and within alternate material conditions. These are theories identified in the present that can be used to speculate about how they might have been used to contest the dominant ideologies of their time.