

The Story of Immigration as Told Through Cookbooks

In the nineteenth century many of the people who immigrated to Wisconsin came from German-speaking regions in Europe, bringing with them their language, culture and ways of life, especially their foods, recipes and cooking traditions. It is no surprise that before long German cookbooks were printed in Wisconsin. These cookbooks provide a fascinating glimpse into the acculturation process that German immigrants went through as they adjusted their traditions to the different conditions they found in their new land.

In this regard it is very interesting to look both at the content of these German-American cookbooks and to compare several editions of cookbooks over time.

Probably the most prominent of the German cookbooks published in Wisconsin was Henriette Davidis' *Praktisches Kochbuch für die Deutschen in Amerika* [Georg Brumder, Milwaukee]. In its first edition of 1879, the cookbook is more or less a reprint of the best-selling version published in Germany. The text is entirely in German, the print in *Fraktur*. Recipes are traditionally German, with only minor changes in ingredients, even though some would be hard to come by in Wisconsin, such as "Steinbutt," a flat-fish commonly found in the North Sea. Only one small adjustment to American customs had been made: German units of weight had been changed to American ones.

The content of *Praktisches Kochbuch* reflects both the concerns of its time as well as specific German immigrant food traditions. Major chapters deal with the proper preparation and preservation of foods, especially meats: an important issue in pre-refrigerator times. As you would expect in a German-American cookbook there are extensive sections on how to make different types of sausage and various ways of smoking and curing meats. There are also major sections on bread making and baking, reflecting the importance of bread and cake in German food culture. In fact, the *Praktisches Kochbuch* includes a separate chapter on the German tradition of "Kaffee- und Teegesellschaften" (coffee and tea parties). [For more detail see Teacher Resource II.]

A special chapter on "Speisezettel für Kranke" (recipes for sick people) provides a most interesting look at life in the late nineteenth century. At a time when antibiotics were not known yet and medical treatment was limited, a special diet was often seen as the only hope for recovery. Thus, the *Praktisches Kochbuch* includes many recipes that are thought to help in case of fever, measles, smallpocks, anemia, etc., but also offers dietary suggestions for nursing mothers and the obese.

Eighteen years later, the second edition of Davidis' cookbook is already more Americanized than the first edition. It is written in German and the print is in *Fraktur*, but all headings and some ingredients are translated into English. Furthermore, the cookbook's content itself has been changed.

Most notably, a larger number of American dishes are added. In addition to "Springerle," you can now find "Tassenkuchen/cup cakes" and "Maisbrot/cornbread." Ingredients in traditional German recipes measured by weight (*Pfund*/pound and *Unzen*/ounces), are now measured mostly in volume, using units such as *Tasse*/cup, *Eßlöffel*/tablespoon, *Quart* and *Pint*. Often, different ingredients are used all together.

Nowhere is the process of acculturation more visible as in the changes in German bread traditions. For centuries, bread had been the most important staple of a German's diet. Even the *Praktisches Koch-Buch für die Deutschen in Amerika* still proclaims in 1897: "Among all foods of humankind, our dear bread holds the highest rank."* Back in the old country, immigrants used a number of different grains for bread making, such as rye, wheat, barley, millet, flax and buckwheat. In Wisconsin they were introduced to corn (Mais). Barley, millet, flax and buckwheat were not commonly used for bread making anymore.

Cooking and baking methods also changed. In Germany, in addition to a baker, most villages had a communal *Backofen*, where women would bring their breads to be baked. In Wisconsin, early immigrants were on their own and had to learn to bake bread individually in Dutch Ovens, a hardship commented on in the *Praktisches Koch-Buch für die Deutschen in Amerika* of 1897:

Old settlers remember the days when in many farmsteads there was no cast-iron oven. Bread had to be baked in cast-iron pots, which had cast-iron lids. Such a pot (Dutch Oven) had to be placed in an open fireplace onto glowing coal. Even the lid had to be covered with red-hot coal. Baking required a lot of care. Women suffered greatly from the embers of the open fire.

With time, the meal-time traditions themselves evolved. In nineteenth century Germany, as is still the tradition there today, people ate bread for breakfast (either sweet bread with butter and jam or dark bread with cold-cuts and cheese) and for supper (hearty breads with cold-cuts and cheese). A hot meal was cooked for lunch. Over time, German immigrants in America changed their meals to eating a hot meal for dinner and often replacing bread for breakfast with cereal. Cookbooks reflected this change by adding chapters such as "Sandwiches for a Cold Lunch" (*Aechte deutsche Kochkunst*, Milwaukee, 1909).

Over decades, a change in food preferences can be observed in the German-American community, marking the last stage of the acculturation process. Again, this is most visible with regard to bread. Older cookbooks are filled with recipes such as "Fine Sour Rye Bread" and "Cream of Black Bread." In 1915, however, the *Recept-Buch und Haus-Arzt*, published in German, has the following quote:

Two things are especially important for good bread: lightness and sweetness. Heavy bread, meaning bread that is neither light nor fluffy, or sour bread is only suitable for piglets.... A loaf of perfect bread, white, sweet, tender and elastic, with a golden brown crust, is evidence of a superior education and the basis of all good nourishment.

Thus German-American cookbooks mirror the evolution of an immigrant community. After more than four decades, the immigrants' native language was still spoken widely enough to justify the publication of a cookbook in German. The immigrants' food traditions and way of life, however, had already given way to the dominant American culture.

*All quotes are translations from the original German.

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