

ANN ARBOR

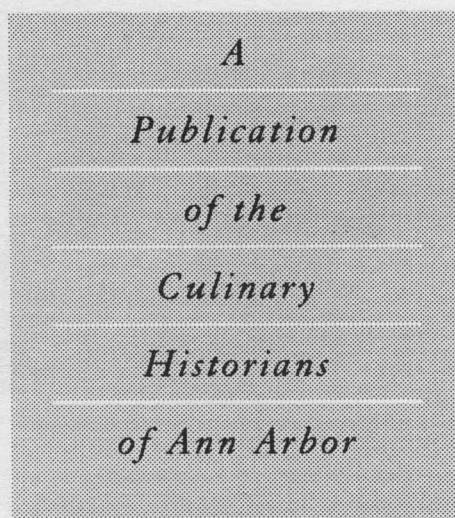
CULINARY HISTORIANS

Stand Facing the Stove *A Review*

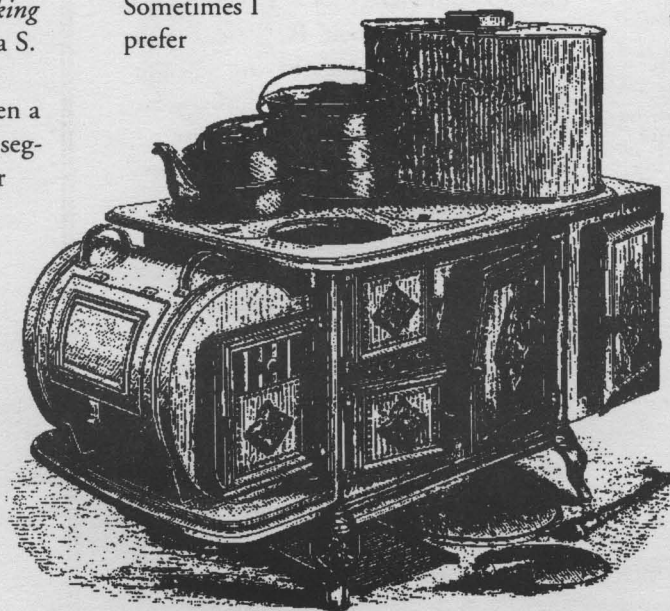
(1996: Henry Holt and Company,
New York)



The convergence of four highly intelligent trained minds over a nearly seventy-year period has produced two extraordinary books, one, *The Joy of Cooking*, a nationally-known cookbook of long standing, in its several versions, and the other *Stand Facing the Stove*, a triple biography of *The Joy of Cooking* and its two principal authors, Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker. *The Joy of Cooking* has been a household word known to a large segment of American women for over sixty years. I have two versions in my kitchen now. One was a wedding present which I welcomed as basic to the household I would be setting up since I could not longer rely on my mother's or my apartment mates' copies. It is dog-eared, stained, written upon, lacking the spine cover and strengthened with heavy plastic tape. It has been to Africa and the Middle



East with me as I set up house while doing field research. The other I bought when I saw it as it seemed to be a really new version with Mrs. Rombauer and her daughter as co-authors, not just a new edition. To this day, I use them together. Sometimes I prefer



Mrs. Rombauer solo and sometimes I find Rombauer and Becker more useful for my culinary ambitions.

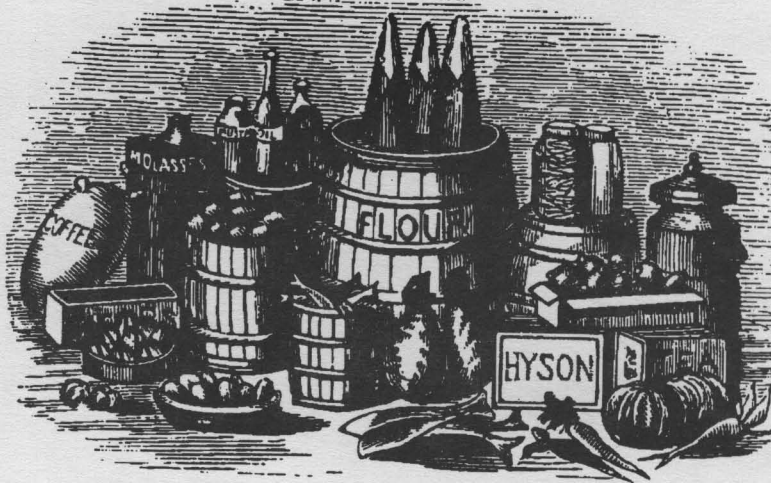
Stand Facing the Stove by Ann Mendelson has two subtitles on the dust cover: *The Story of the Women Who Gave America The Joy of Cooking* and *The Lives of Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker*. Ann Mendelson's book is more than this: it is also a history of the book itself and as lagniappe, a contextualized history of American cookbook publishing fashion and trends to which *The Joy of Cooking* contributed. The book itself is composed of five sections, which though differing in purpose and style, work well together in non-linear fashion, to present a historical chronicle which is painstakingly reconstructed from masses of primary documents and secondary sources. Such a reconstruction would have been impossible without Ann Mendelson's wide-ranging knowledge of the history of American cookery, especially of the fast-changing food industry and its reflections in the kitchen manuals which facilitated housewives' use of its products for home-cooked meals.

The first section consists of the Preface, Acknowledgements, and Introduction together with the Notes, Selected Bibliography, Suggested Reading, and Index. I know these parts are rarely emphasized in a review. They seem to me, however, to be essential to notice because of what they affirm about the seriousness of the scholarship, the long process of bringing this story to a coherent whole, a testi-

mony to great skill on the author's part, and the innovativeness of the historical treatment which weaves together biography and cultural and social history. Ann Mendelson scrupulously presents the facts she has painstakingly gathered, leaving interpretation and conclusions to the reader.

Second, there is a detailed account of Irma Rombauer's growing up in the *Deutschtum*, the "genteel South Saint Louis German circles" (p.86), and of the families from which Irma Rombauer came and in which she happily participated. She lived in Saint Louis, Missouri, all her life except for a few teen-age years in Bremen, Germany, when her father was Consul there, 1889-1894. In the late nineteenth century, these families, civic-minded, free-thinking, cultivated in literature, politics, and the arts, were proudly German in America. Ann Mendelson's account is readable, informed, and effortlessly weaves Irma's personal story, her families' histories, and the history of the *Deutschtum*'s participation in larger Saint Louis political, civic, and social circles into an appealing narrative. The *Deutschtum*'s love of living well, which included setting a good table, I believe helped to form the sensibility that Irma Rombauer brought to cookbook writing.

Third is the narrative of Irma Rombauer's creation and successful publication of *The Joy of Cooking* as an innovative cookbook published by Bobbs-Merrill in Indianapolis. It not only presented recipes in a new form conveying the sequential acts of preparation of dishes appealing to eat but it embedded the recipes in a context which recognized that many housewives were concerned with creating meals for everyday eating and for "having company", not



with isolated dishes however spectacular. Mrs. Rombauer addressed the needs of women who, because of the Great Depression and subsequently World War II, had to manage to maintain the setting of a "company table" where a certain level of presentation was expected despite their inability to hire the help to which they had been accustomed and to buy the expensive foods with which they had welcomed guests. Also, I think that the 1936 (and later) *Joy of Cooking* served as a "wish book" for women who could entertain - if only having relatives or a few friends to lunch or dinner - on a restricted scale or not at all but yet hoped that the time would come when they could again.

Given the fragmentary nature of the available documents, fuller on the Rombauer side than on the Bobbs-Merrill side, Ann Mendelson has convincingly reconstructed the difficult, often acrimonious business relationship between Mrs. Rombauer, her daughter, Marion Rombauer Becker, and Laurence Chambers, the vice-president of Bobbs-Merrill Co. in Indianapolis, and his successors. In doing this, she treats the

conflicts arising when women moved beyond their accepted social role to address the needs of a multitude of

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women confined alone in their kitchens through no fault of their own.

Version after version was produced by conflict with the peak reached when Bobbs-Merrill produced an edition without a contract from the authors just as Irma Rombauer died after increasingly horrible years of illness. These are not enjoyable sections to read but they are very instructive because Ann Mendelson has been rigorously factual in recounting the many ways in which the process of publishing *The Joy of Cooking* went awry. The decades-long contention over copyright and royalties is clearly recounted and the implications for Rombauer mother and daughter laid out fairly while the conflicting demands of book publishing and marketing with authors' creative goals are detailed with an accuracy that may daunt would-be book writers. Marion Becker's relations with Bobbs-Merrill improved with the coming of a new president and a new contact person to the point that Bobbs-Merrill published two books of her own creation, *Little Acorn*, a commemorative account of *Joy's* first thirty years, and *Wild Wealth*, a handsomely illustrated book on wild plants, chiefly those of the upper Ohio Valley.

Marion Rombauer Becker's transformation of *The Joy of Cooking* after her mother's death into a

serious and original contribution to American food writing. . . something well beyond the existing limits of the cook book genre . . . a novel and challenging way to interweave concrete teaching through recipe formulas— at all levels from scrambled eggs to croquem-bouche— with enlightenment through painstaking descriptive forays into kinds of knowledge seldom found outside specialized manuals for food professionals (pp.342-3)

comprise the subject of the fourth section.

This story is also the biography of Marion and her family, especially her husband, John Becker, the fourth mind to which I referred at the start of this review. John Becker was drawn more and more into the production of the two significant versions Marion did, the corrected edition of 1963 and the 1975 version. He became a mainstay of the endeavor and the editorial mastermind.

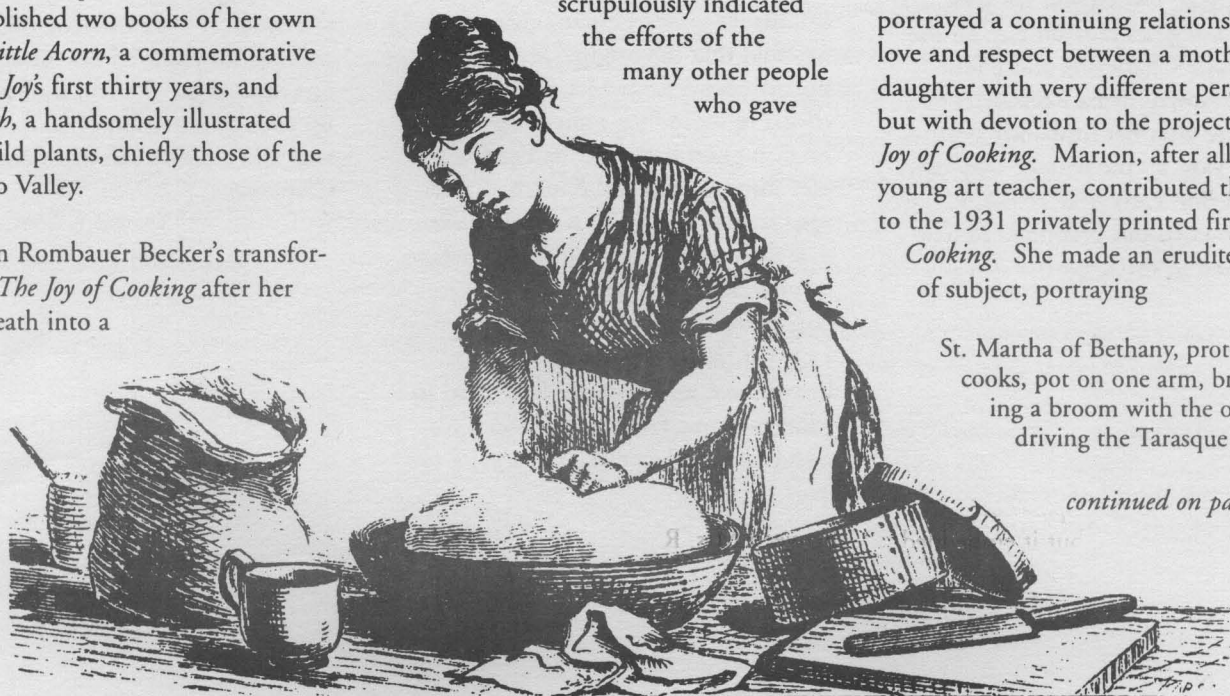
Ann Mendelson has also scrupulously indicated the efforts of the many other people who gave

varying periods of intense effort to the production of *The Joy of Cooking* from Irma Rombauer's devoted assistant and coworker, Maizie Whyte, to the changing cast of assistants who worked with the Beckers on the later versions, especially Jane Brueggeman, Marion Becker's secretary. The Beckers' continuing relationships with their sons and their families are tactfully treated as necessary to the story of *Joy* because Marion Becker's goal was to continue the family management of *The Joy of Cooking* into her sons' generation. She succeeded: the new version, published in 1997, was written under the editorship of Maria D. Guarnaschelli in cooperation with Ethan Becker, Marion and John's second son, "with contributions by a large assemblage of well-known food writers" (p.415).

Contrary to the dust-jacket's judgment that Irma and Marion had "a loving but difficult relationship", I find that Ann Mendelson has convincingly portrayed a continuing relationship of love and respect between a mother and daughter with very different personalities but with devotion to the project of *The Joy of Cooking*. Marion, after all, as a young art teacher, contributed the cover to the 1931 privately printed first *Joy of Cooking*. She made an erudite choice of subject, portraying

St. Martha of Bethany, protector of cooks, pot on one arm, brandishing a broom with the other and driving the Tarasque (a bull-

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Ties Between Irma Rombauer and Northern Michigan



Edith Gilbert is a longtime resident of Charlevoix and writes a bi-monthly column in the local paper. She is the author of several books about parties, wedding planning, etiquette, and resort life, and she has written for national newspapers and magazines. Her article in the Charlevoix Courier, December 17 of last year, is about the recent discovery of a letter from the author of the original *Joy of Cooking* to Mrs. Kathryn Dilworth, who owned and ran the Dilworth Lodge in Horton Bay on the shore of Lake Charlevoix and a few miles from town. Irma Rombauer had stayed there after her husband's death, when she gave up the cottage they used to lease in Bay View near Petoskey. The letter is undated but presumed to have been written in the late

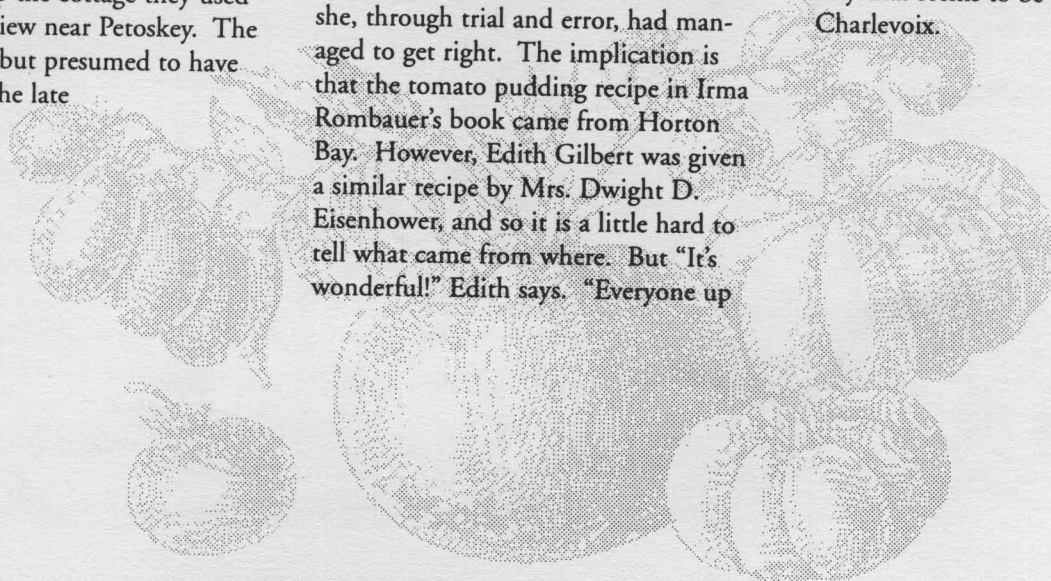
1930's. Mrs. Dilworth had a reputation as a cook and the gist of the letter, aside from cordialities and reminiscences, is to ask for recipes for the book Mrs. Rombauer is writing. According to Dee Dilworth, who is a daughter-in-law, several of the recipes in the *Joy* are slightly altered versions of ones from a cookbook that Kathryn Dilworth wrote.

I called Mrs. Gilbert to ask permission to use her material as the source for an article for this newsletter, and I asked her about a recipe she mentions that she especially likes. It is called, in my 1953 book, "Tomato Pudding" and she says it is a famous favorite in her area. I had never heard of such a dish but I tried it that very night and thought it remarkable.

Then she sent me a copy of a more extensive account she had done for the Petoskey News-Review in which she included her own recipe for tomato pudding, which differs from the one Irma Rombauer gives. Chasing that down, I was told that the original local version of the dish came from Mrs. Dilworth's efforts to reproduce something an English guest had described and which she, through trial and error, had managed to get right. The implication is that the tomato pudding recipe in Irma Rombauer's book came from Horton Bay. However, Edith Gilbert was given a similar recipe by Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and so it is a little hard to tell what came from where. But "It's wonderful!" Edith says. "Everyone up

here makes it and we all have our own little variations."

A word about the recipe: Mrs. Dilworth's cookbook, published in 1937 and still available in the area today (from the Boyne City Book Store for \$10), is called *My Tomato Pudding and Other Favorite Recipes*, thus indicating the fame of her invention. It is almost identical to that of Edith Gilbert and differs from the one in the two older editions of the *Joy* in the amounts of sugar and butter and in leaving out the dried basil. The recipe is not in the 1997 *Joy of Cooking*. The proportions that I will give come from the 1964 edition of that book, because it gives the amount of tomato puree as "one and a quarter cups" instead of "ten-ounce can", which I have not been able to find anywhere. (The usual size can is fifteen ounces.) I must say, also, that I have used very hard dry French bread and baked the dish uncovered, which allows the bread to brown on the edges, and was very pleased with the result. I start with the melted butter and bread, which allows me to use only one saucepan. You will probably make up your own version of all this, in the way that seems to be traditional in Charlevoix.



Dear Mrs. Dilworth:

You have not heard from me for many years and now I am writing with a practical, not a social purpose— but it is nice to be in touch with you again.

As I remember you were very kind to a very new and very much shattered widow (1930). I have never forgotten it. Many belated thanks.

How are you all, I wonder? I remember your family well and of course, one does not forget such efficiency and competency as you showed in all you did. It would be fun to get together for an exchange of recipes. I have endless new ones, some of them very good.

This struggle to make good dishes with scant means is difficult. So many cooks continue to demand the good food of twenty years ago without the money to meet the higher prices— I am so tired of suggesting compromise meals and hearing, "Why, my family wouldn't eat that!" I eat "that" and enjoy it. How about your girls?

My love to all of you. I am sincerely sorry to trouble you with a request. Scribble anything helpful on a sheet and stick it in this envelope, please.

Many thanks. Kindly return the letter. Thanks.

*Most Cordially Yours,
Irma S. Rombauer*

Here is Edith Gilbert's version (from her book *All About Parties*):

- 1 10-oz. can tomato purée
- 1 cup dark brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup fresh white bread cut into 1-inch squares
- ½ cup melted butter

To purée, add sugar and salt; heat to boil and reduce to simmer for 5 minutes. Place bread squares in casserole and pour melted butter over bread. Add hot tomato mixture and bake covered for 30 minutes in moderate oven at 375 degrees. Be sure to stir well when dish is removed from the oven. Makes 8 servings.

And from *The Joy of Cooking*:

- Put in a saucepan:
- 1 and 1/4 cups tomato purée
- ¼ cup boiling water
- Heat these ingredients to the boiling point and add:
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 6 tablespoons brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- Place in a baking dish:
- 1 cup fresh white bread crumbs
- Pour over them ¼ cup melted butter.

Bake covered in a moderate oven 375 degrees for 30 minutes. Do not lift the lid until ready to serve.

There are also directions for making the pudding with fresh tomatoes, which I will not include.

I have to say that the first time I made this recipe, I used tomato *sauce*, unorthodox but good. I thought the basil was very important in the dish.

AW

From *Social Research*, an International Quarterly of the Social Sciences, comes notice of a conference at the New School in New York on November 5-7, 1998.

"The aim of the conference is to bring together the remarkably diverse cultural aspects of food with the pressing social issues of world famine and sustainable agriculture in order to reveal the deep and inseparable connection between them." There will be public programs, exhibits and performances on the themes addressed at the conference. For more information, call (212) 229-2488 or e-mail kodeshn@newschool.edu

1998 Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery:

This will take place on Sept. 5-6 at St. Antony's College, Oxford. The subject will be Food in the Arts. Several of our members have attended and participated in these symposia and recommend the experience highly. For those who might like to submit a paper or get further information, contact: Jane Levi, 101, Millenium Tower, 65 Hopton St., London SE1 9JH England. Jan Longone has more information.

The First Book About the Role of Community Cookbooks in American Life:

The University of Massachusetts Press has just issued *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, edited by Anne Bower of Ohio State University. This is the first scholarly investigation of the role of community (fundraising, charity) cookbooks in America. CHAA founder Jan Longone has written the introductory chapter on the history of these ephemeral but valuable culinary aspects of American life. Fellow culinary historians have contributed other chapters: Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett on the earliest Jewish community cookbook (Denver 1988) and Alice Ross on an unfinished Long Island community cookbook and its author. The book makes fascinating reading and is available in hardcover for \$45 and in softcover for \$15.95. The editor, Anne Bower, was responsible for the fine exhibition of Ohio community cookbooks held at the Ohio Historical Center in Columbus in 1996.

More About Freeling's *The Kitchen*:

Subscriber Robert W. Lucky of Seattle, editor of *The Asian Foodbookery*, writes that Nicolas Freeling's *The Kitchen and Cookbook* were published in one volume in 1991 by David R. Godine (Boston) and may still be in print. A call to Border's confirms that this is true and I have ordered a copy.

Jello Again:

During a visit to the National Archives in Washington, D. C. I came across the fascinating but trivial information that David Greenglass, who was a spy, used a Jello box cut in half as a recognition sign with his Soviet contact, Harry Gold. The box shown in the display case is imitation raspberry flavor (but is surely not the original box).



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like monster) into the sea. [She later said] I who designed the jacket was charmed to discover and exploit this rather neglected conqueror of kitchen chores and the author welcomed her with: "The Middle Ages dignified the art of cooking by giving it a patroness" (*Little Acorn*, reissued 1981, no page number).

Marion also contributed spritely silhouettes with culinary themes for the chapter headings of several versions before becoming seriously involved beginning with the 1951 edition and continuing it after her mother's death in 1962. Ann Mendelson has honestly recounted family difficulties and triumphs, disagreements and hurtful situations, within the greater story of family devotion to Irma Rombauer's culinary project, the center of her life.

The fifth section is, to me, the most lasting contribution of this book. In two long chapters, titled "Chronicles of Cookery" I and II, Ann Mendelson has provided a cultural history of shifting American domestic cooking preferences, fashions, and trends, from the late nineteenth century to the 1951 version of *The Joy of Cooking* as they were manifested in the many cookbooks which vied for places in American housewives' kitchens. These two distinctly different chapters are inserted as nuggets in the biographical narratives and contrast with them in expository style, level of treatment, and historical approach. To a general reader like myself, these nuggets are gold as they put the Rombauer project in the larger context of culinary history, enlarging *Stand Facing the Stove's* importance beyond that of a joint biography about two writers significant to American foodways. In these chapters, Ann Mendelson assesses the significance

itself. In "Chronicles of Cookery I", she summarizes the great changes which took place in American culinary fashions, food availability, and housewives' needs. She assesses Irma Rombauer's place by saying

her eventual success was not accident. She, the self-deprecating amateur, had more to say to American cooks than whole platoons of cookbook authors who had spent their professional lives at the task. . . .

In the makeup of her own culinary preferences, Irma would . . . turn out to possess a great advantage. She would never presume to lead American taste; the existing state of taste was fine with her. She genuinely liked the American culinary Zeitgeist as it had developed in the course of her lifetime. . . . Her idea . . . was to tell other people not how they should cook but how she cooked and what a bang she got out of it. It happened that American women in their new centralized, unexpectedly isolated kitchens, facing the solitary task of meal making with no more of the old communal knowledge than Irma had possessed on her wedding day, wanted nothing more than just such a radiant presence at their sides. (pp.145-6)

"Chronicles of Cookery II" assesses the sequential versions of *The Joy of Cooking* by comparison with its various competitors and companions in the field, *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*, *The Settlement Cook Book*, *The Good Housekeeping Cook Book*, and later, *The Gourmet Cookbook*, and others. Here, it seems to me, Ann Mendelson has done an admirable job of sorting out the positions each of these books has occupied in our complex many stranded American culinary culture. Her assessment of *The Joy of Cooking's* place as "the kitchen bible that had recognized an audience of frustrated cooks bored or intimidated by cut-and-dried, lecturelike cooking instruction, and that had tempted them

to form a literate companionship of free spirits" (p.281) recognizes and respects Irma Rombauer's (and I think, Marion Becker's after her) "instinctive rapport with all sorts of readers" (p. 283). It is also convincingly buttressed by Ann Mendelson's authoritative handling of the historical overview of American culinary changes.

Ann Mendelson's excellent writing style is popular rather than literary and fits the subject well. It is scrupulously factual and detailed, which popular writing often is not. A timeline of important events and more insertion of year dates would have made the narrative portions easier to follow. The most puzzling feature of the book is, however, the title which comes from a quotation used in Marion Becker's 1975 version: "We are told that a hard-boiled professional cook, when asked what she regarded as primary briefing for a beginner, tersely replied, 'Stand facing the stove' (p. 1). This anecdote embodies everything that, according to this book, Irma Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker were not: not professional cooks, not hard-boiled, and not condescending. Its use as the title is incomprehensible to me, except just possibly as irony. What story of publisher and author relationship lies behind this unfortunate choice? That Ann Mendelson chose such a title after more than ten years of indefatigable research and writing I can hardly believe, as it misrepresents the message of a truly remarkable book.

Ann Evans Larimore, a cultural geographer, is a professor of geography and women's studies at the University of Michigan.

September 20 - People's Kitchens and People Food in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam

Speaker: Harlan Gilmore

October 18 - Historical Background of World Food Patterns

Speaker: Richard Ford

November 17 - Cypriot Dinner at Mediterraneo Restaurant, Ann Arbor

December - Dining with Shakespeare – participatory holiday meal

Unitarian Church, 1917 Washtenaw Ave, Ann Arbor, Michigan Time 7:00 - 9:00 pm (unless otherwise noted)



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