

HAVE YOU BEEN SERVED?

Notes on Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens and The Help

by Audrey Petty



"The kitchen was often a contested space shared by white employer and black cook, one in which the lines of dependence, while constantly imbalanced, cut in many directions." San Augustine, Texas. Photograph by John Vachon, 1943. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

OWNED BY QUAKER OATS FOODS since 1926, Aunt Jemima received her most recent corporate makeover in 1989. Slimmed-down, younger, and relieved of her bandana, she now sports a sleek hairdo and pearl earrings. As always, she flashes a warm, inviting smile.

Aunt Jemima made her debut at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, played by Nancy Green. A cook and former slave, Green recited plantation stories and gave pancake-cooking demonstrations for the crowds. But in the public imagination, Aunt Jemima needed no introduction, because her image had circulated for a century or more.

Mammy is dead. Mammy endures. And Mammy never was.

A FUNDAMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT of Rebecca Sharpless's *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865–1960* (UNC Press, 2010) is how forthrightly it confronts centuries-old mythology about female African-American domestic workers, particularly those who served as cooks. Sharpless explains, "Cooks were made, not born, contrary to white southern stereotype. . . . A woman or a girl sometimes decided for herself to cook rather than do field work or other types of domestic labor; at other times, her family made the choice for her."

Tapping letters, autobiographies, and Depression-era Federal Writers' Project interviews, the author privileges the subjectivity of black women and crafts a historical narrative that is at once intimate and sweeping in its scope. Sharpless illustrates clearly that cooks were a vulnerable, exploited workforce, underpaid and subject to "crazily shifting hours" and unregulated expectations. Many domestic workers pinned hopes for improved workplace conditions on union representation or New Deal legislation. Sharpless illustrates one example:

In 1938, Roxanna Hupes of Galveston, Texas, wrote to President Roosevelt, feeling as many of her peers did that the president was likely to read her entreaties and make needed changes in American society. Detailing her workday, which began at 6:30 in the morning with a mile's walk to her place of employment, Hupes efficiently summarized the situation for most domestic workers in the American South: "The wages that we get, so small and the hours is so long."

Cooking in Other Women's Kitchen focuses on the black women who cooked and the families they supported, both white and black. The study reveals how domestic workers toiled to carve out a life beyond work. From Emancipation to federal desegregation, Sharpless describes the impacts of various advances on the lives and livelihoods of African-American cooks. Beginning in the early 1930s, canned soups and other ready-made goods became available at supermarkets, transforming the routines of many cooks. Likewise, the trend among domestic workers (starting at the turn of the twentieth century) to "live out" rather than under the roof of their employers created a significant demarcation between on-call and what little private time domestic employees were able to claim in their own homes.

Sharpless creates an engrossing story, making palpable the human dynamics at play in many of these work arrangements. The kitchen was often a contested space for white employer and black cook, one in which the lines of dependence, while constantly imbalanced, cut in many directions.

With the support of diaries, merchant ledgers, and cookbooks, Sharpless introduces the reader to a range of dishes that reveal countless decisions made and techniques employed by black cooks. She cites the African influence on American cooking in such foods as black-eyed peas, okra, peanuts, and millet. "But cooks in the most well-to-do households learned other gradations as well.... Whether by choice or necessity, many cooks expanded their repertoires far beyond their ancestral roots." Success in work, such as it was, required adaptability, Sharpless argues. To remain in the good graces of an employer required navigating tools and technologies, personalities, schedules, and boundaries.

COOKING IN OTHER WOMEN'S KITCHENS arrived on the heels of the remarkable commercial success of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Stockett's book debuted in early 2009, rose to the top of the New York Times bestseller list, and has been adapted for the screen, with a Hollywood feature film that will be playing by the time you read these words. Set in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s, the novel is narrated by three female characters: Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, both African-American domestic workers, and Eugenia "Skeeter"

Phelan, a white daughter of the Old South with a budding sense of professional ambition and social justice. Over time, old friends Aibileen and Minny make common cause with Skeeter to advance their stories of domestic work—anonously—in an anthology that Skeeter plans to edit and send to a New York publishing house.

The Help concerns itself with telling the untold story of African-American domestic workers. As Skeeter remarks to an inquiring Northerner (who happens to be a book editor), "Everyone knows how we white people feel, the glorified Mammy figure who dedicates her whole life to a white family. Margaret Mitchell covered that. But no one ever asked Mammy how she felt about it." This is, arguably, the hook of *The Help*—the premise that generated its stupendous buzz. But Stockett's work falls short, remixing Mammy—merely making her over—instead of retiring her. Rather than serving up something fresh and substantive, the best it can offer is reheated leftovers.

While Aibileen and Minny are distinct in temperament and background, they are both, at the core, clichés. Aibileen is the older, sexually neutered, devoted helpmate who has raised over a dozen white children. And Minny is the sassy, misbehaving sister-girlfriend, whose supreme talents as a cook have kept her regularly employed, despite her impertinence. The novel's characterizations of some of its white characters, such as Hilly, the book's racist socialite-villain, are rather flat as well.

As a novel about race relations in the Jim Crow South, *The Help* risks very little. Some may find it unfair to compare a novel to a work of history, but there are essential truths about historical eras that can be found in the most inspired works of fiction (Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a prime example). Unlike *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, *The Help* embraces the assumption that "Mammy," a mythic grande dame of the antebellum South, existed, and proceeds to imbue her with a soul. Rebecca Sharpless truly gives us the inside story. 🍲

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