

Folk 267: Food and Culture

**MARCH 17: DIANE TYE'S  
CH. 2 "FEEDING OUR  
FAMILY WELL"**

Top o' the friggin' morning to  
ye!

“Feeding Our Family Well”

**What did *you* think of it?**

# Taste of home

- ◎ Specific tastes and textures integrate one into a family's past and present, signaling belonging to a particular family
  - “Like our family itself, the shelves and its contents were reassuringly familiar yet never completely predictable.”
- ◎ Everyday baking reified in memory, less so “special occasion” baking
- ◎ The provision of “good food”

# Biscuits

- ◎ Staple: local term for ‘scone’
- ◎ Laurene’s recipes adapted over time
  - “They read like souvenirs of her childhood home in rural Pictou County and of her journey through Nova Scotia [...]. At the same time, they indicate the centrality of biscuits [...]. [They] remained a core item, but their evolution reflects a shift in preference toward lighter, sweeter baking.”

# Biscuits (cont.)

- ⦿ Biscuits (scones) embody Scottish heritage
- ⦿ Women were judged on the quality of the biscuits they made
- ⦿ Production of biscuits and their daily consumption tied Laurene to the village she grew up in and her Scottish roots
  - Grandmother Bell prepared “cake bread” (biscuit variation), which was out of Laurene’s repertoire by the time of Diane’s childhood
- ⦿ Diane’s memory has lighter and fluffier biscuits, more shortening, baking powder, egg
  - Representing in part a shift in the understanding of the biscuit as part of a meal

# Oatcakes

- Part of Laurene's childhood
- The food most associated with Scottish roots in Pictou County
- Like biscuits, oatcakes "lie at the intersection of cake and bread"
- Henry: considers oatcake "food" not "sweet" or "treat"
  - One ate them to fill up and give energy, not to be enjoyed

# Oatcakes (cont.)

- ⦿ Entered Laurene's active repertoire in Cape Breton
  - “Your mother tried to produce those because simply people might expect to have them when they came into our house, it was normal.”
- ⦿ Perhaps, Laurene's daily oatmeal porridge as a child in the 1930s had inured her to the charms of oatcakes
- ⦿ Solution: “Crunky Cookies”
  - Transform heavy oatcake into light, sweet cookie
  - Reconfigure oatcake from “filler” to “treat”



# Filler vs. Treat

- Comprised foods one ate out of necessity
- Most economically made foods
- Primarily for the family
- Comprised foods one ate for pleasure or with some symbolic attachment
- Required fancier ingredients
- What was more likely to be offered to guests

**Filler**

**Treat**

# Molasses-based baking

- “Molasses provides, perhaps more than any other food, a culinary entry-point to cultural dynamics in Atlantic Canada.”
- Consequence of Maritimes – West Indies trade
  - Salt fish, salt beef, lumber in exchange for rum, sugar, molasses
- In early days, molasses incorporated into nearly every meal

# Molasses (cont.)

- ◎ By late 19<sup>th</sup> C., advances in sugar refinement made brown sugar and molasses a “less sophisticated” – i.e. rural and/or working class – food
  - Denigration was intentional move by sugar industry
- ◎ Became more associated with working class households until, even there replaced with refined products
- ◎ Now, has taken on symbolic, nostalgic resonance
  - (In addition to health concerns, influence of counter-cuisines, etc.)

# Conservatism vs. Dynamism

- Laurene adapted recipes to reflect tastes of her family and shifts in general foodscape
- But the function of the foods themselves remained “traditional”
- Their presence in the repertoire was required, expected (by others if not by family), while also being reconceived

# New foods

- ◎ Chocolate-chip cookies
  - Not from her mother, but fit into the tradition of cookies (both in type – the basic dough – and in function – “treat”)
- ◎ Even with new additions, foods rooted the family with rural background and working class food traditions
- ◎ “Domestic activities connected her diachronically and synchronically to other Maritime women.”

# Go away now

- Next class, Chapter 3: “Church Lunches and Ladies’ Teas”