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Cookbooks are Our Texts: Reading An Immigrant Community Through their Cookbooks

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Abstract

Cookbooks are more than mere devices for presenting recipes. They inform the practice of cooking and much more. They contain information about ethnic identity, treasured folklore, gender patterns, and religious performances. They are chronicles of public and personal record. Importantly, food cultures not only strengthen a community's group patterns, they also sustain those configurations longer than most other customs. But food is ephemeral; it is filled with meaning and then disappears. Cookbooks endure displaying social patterns and cultural meaning. In this essay, the examination of a succession of Iraqi Jewish cookbooks exposes patterns of adjustment and conservation as the community flees its homeland and settles in Montreal, Canada.

Keywords

cookbooks, foodways, identity, Iraqi Jews, Kosher, gender, religon, immigrant community, receiptes, cultural memory

Introduction

Scholars of religion use scripture for textual evidence with which to generate complex pictures of the religions they study. These canonical texts formed the authentication of religious praxis, belief and communal interactions. Initially, religion was represented through these sacred texts as fixed and common for the entire collective addressed. However that picture was incomplete and even inaccurate, as it did not represent the dynamic flow of praxis and belief. Significantly, scripture was a poor reflection of the social environment, daily life and, pointedly, women's lives.

Currently, modern scholarship displays a keen awareness of the richly textured lives of people within religious institutions and frameworks. But the search for appropriate and accurate evidence has been challenging. Recently, food patterns, commensal and culinary, have emerged as a rich source in the study of social patterns and cultural meaning. In food studies, cookbooks are the important sources that reveal a great deal about communal history, gen-

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der constructions and the human interface with religion. Thus, engaging recent developments in food studies enables us to view cookbooks as "our texts," sources of public and personal history. Importantly, food cultures not only strengthen a community's group patterns, they also sustain those configurations longer than most other customs:

> Dishes are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, a symbol of continuity. They are that part of an immigrant culture, which survives the longest, kept up even when clothing, music, language, and religious observance have been abandoned. (Roden 1996, 11)

In this brief essay, I intend to survey a series of Iraqi Jewish cookbooks in order to illuminate some contours of immigration and integration as experienced and expressed by this small *émigré* community living in Montreal.

Cookbooks

Cookbooks stand as impressive indicators of both modernity and literacy. They are indicative of a formal learned activity. But they also give evidence of a loss of tradition. Cooks, usually women, can read and write. But they no longer learn the kitchen arts in a domestic context from their female relatives, usually mothers. Read carefully, they become evidence of a rupture in tradition. Thus, many early cookbooks (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) assume audience ignorance of all things domestic and opt for a complete housekeeping guide approach, sometimes even including financial advice. In the Jewish context of North America, many of these early sources such as Esther Levy (1871) explain and direct the proper use of food in a Jewish home such as: the kosher[1] rules and regulations, and specific food rituals for holiday celebrations. The audience is seen as inexperienced and in need of direction. But cookbooks are more than "how to" manuals. They contain stories and tales of a cultural vibrancy.

Probing cookbooks as texts highlights social alignments and acculturation. They further our understanding of religious praxis and its transmission. Notably, they illuminate the reality of social diversity and variance in religious rituals. For example, Jewish cookbooks enable the cook to feed her family in ways that determine "How to be Jewish." They become streamlined versions of practical guidelines on Jewish praxis and offer us a window into the way of life of that community. Significantly, cookbooks expose the day, month and yearly structures of that way of life, outlining a biography of communal existence.

Interest in food is at an all time high as diverse populations share their cuisine, and ethnic communities are exoticized. People partake of their own heritage in culinary patterns but also engage eagerly in eating other ethnic foods thereby feeding their own conception of living in a sophisticated and globalized world. Food itself is ephemeral, passing away as ingested, leaving resilient memories. Cookbooks on the other hand, are concrete and lasting. They become permanent displays of an indigenous heritage while also demonstrat-

1. Kosher—or *kashrut*—is the Hebrew word for that which is fitting, appropriate according to the law. It has mostly been associated with Jewish food rituals.

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ing an inclusive and tolerant approach to modification or diversity. Cookbooks, large and glossy, are frequently bought and displayed. We can see them as both educational and entertaining—contributing to the transmission of a culture.

Most importantly these structured and organized books direct a planned approach to eating and celebration. They assume knowledge (or need thereof) of tradition and prepare the groundwork for the cook, often the mother, to be a ritual expert (Stolow 2006, 25). While representing an ideal configuration, they are without a doubt a link to a cherished past that is evocative for the insider population:

> Recipes are a very important part of culture, especially when they come from worlds that have vanished. They are a *link with the past*, a symbol of continuity and a celebration of roots. You see it well when you cook and the dish and the smells and flavours summon up ancestral memories. (Levy 1996, viii, emphasis added)

Cookbooks can be very personal evoking memoirs and autobiographical information. They can represent a gendered structure of family as well as the breakdown of intergenerational patterns. Some are commercial others communally produced. Many focus on preservation and become a record of immigration and population transfers. Others stress integration and are windows to acculturation or assimilation. Frequently, these texts contain all of the above highlighting a process of cultural innovation and reproduction.

Iraqi Jews in Montreal

Jews lived in Iraq, formerly known as Babylon, for over twenty-five hundred years. They were exiled to “the land between two rivers” when the ancient Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed (586 BCE). Persevering over centuries, they experienced both prosperous and challenging times. But all that changed in the middle of the twentieth century. As competing nationalisms developed and the unique form of Nazi anti-Semitism spread, the entire community suffered a series of restrictions and traumas and eventually was forced to leave.

Once a population of about 160,000 in the 1940s, today there are no more than five Jews in Iraq. Although some Jews did see the writing on the wall after the 1941 *Farhoud* (pogrom) and started the migration to new lands, the major exodus occurred in 1951, when the Iraqi government allowed all Jews to leave. Of course, they were required to leave with almost nothing as their assets were frozen and their citizenship revoked. Those few who remained would eventually escape over the Kurdish mountains into Iran and/or Jordan.

While most went immediately to Israel, for a variety of reasons and via several different paths, a small group of Iraqi Jews settled in Montreal after 1950. They organized themselves as the Community of Babylonian Jews and almost all 400 families joined this network. This *émigré* community is proudly Jewish, deeply traditional and extraordinarily socially cohesive. But they are not necessarily ritually or religiously observant. Nonetheless, they all joined an Orthodox synagogue together establishing many social outlets through that vehicle.

From a culinary perspective, it is significant that they do not all keep the food rituals of *kashrut*. As with many American Jews, some maintain a kosher

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kitchen but eat out in non-kosher establishments. Some are not observant of the culinary rituals even in their own homes. Some are ignorant of the laws and rituals. Much of this can be explained in the context of their abrupt departure from Iraq leaving the women especially without "proper" domestic training. Their collective pattern and approach to ritual differs critically from the large and established community in Israel.

Many of the women I interviewed explained to me that when they arrived in Montreal, they did not know how to cook. They had almost no experience in the kitchens of their mothers. But one thing is clear the majority of these immigrants wanted to keep eating the familiar foods of home. In fact, their food traditions remain a strong element of their personal identity today and substantiate the strength of their communal perseverance. Food maintains much of their "Iraqi-ness."[2]

Learning how to cook their favourite dishes, where to find the right spices ad when to serve the dishes posed a serious problem. Women often complained to me that their mothers never prepared them for life outside of Iraq. Men also came to an understanding that they wanted to keep alive the culinary traditions of their mothers and aunts. Thus, new patterns were developed in Montreal and England as cooks began relying on cookbooks!

Jewish cookbooks

Jewish cookbooks appear on the scene in Germany in 1815. There are a number of publications in Europe some of which are in Yiddish. The first English language cookbook was published in London in 1846. These texts illuminate the passage of cultural traditions as women turned to books for their recipes. Many were targeted for the young Jewish bride. Some were geared to the gourmet world of food in European fashion. Interestingly, many were not strictly kosher.

The first book published in the United States was Esther Levy's *Jewish Cookery Book on Principles of Economy Adapted for Jewish Housekeepers with Medicinal Recipes and Other Valuable Information Relative to Housekeeping and Domestic Management (1871).* The title is telling. Levy tries to cover all the bases for a Jewish homemaker and has advice for the butler too. Her purpose is to promote a kosher and proper Jewish home. Eventually, books are published in Yiddish too. Perhaps the most famous of the early period was *Aunt Babette's Cook Book* published by Bloch in 1889. These recipes were not necessarily kosher, again indicating the evidence of early Jewish patterns in non-traditional milieus and configurations. Before the influx of the East European immigrants, most Jews in the US were Reform and not necessarily interested in kosher traditions (Ross 2016). However, soon cookbook production was augmented with new books encouraging the preservation of Jewish religious traditions.[3]

2. See my article: Baumel Joseph, N. "*T'beet*: Situating Iraqi Jewish Identity through Food." In *Religious Lives and Landscapes in Quebec,* edited by H. Kaell, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.
3. Exemplars include *The Jewish Home Beautiful* (1941) in America and in Canada, *A Treasure for my Daughter* (1950), now in its 14th printing.

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By the end of the twentieth century two trends are present in cookbook publishing. First, kosher and gourmet approaches combine to become big sellers. More and more Jewish cooks are interested in kosher cooking while maintaining a standard of haute cuisine (Stolow 2010). Gourmet is in but so is keeping the tradition of kosher. The second development is the emphasis on diversity that facilitates a focus on Middle Eastern Jewish cuisine.

In all of these developments, food is seen as a major indicator of Jewish life and identity. Jewish foods display patterns of adaptation, preservation and commitment. There is great diversity and polarity in "kitchen Judaism," suggesting a vibrant and evolving Jewish practice. Furthermore, the study of foodways and the attendant cookbooks have yielded an important understanding of religion and gender. Thus, in multiple essays about food there is a repeated refrain that Jewish food rituals transform the kitchen into a sanctuary. This impression echoes the talmudic reference to the table as replacing the altar in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. People within and without the community see the dining room as a miniature sanctuary, festival meals as opportunities for communal amalgamation and the female cook as a high priestess.[4] Gillian Feely-Harnik contends that: "food, articulated in terms of who eats what with whom under which circumstances, had long been one of the most important languages in which Jews conceived and conduct social relations among human beings and between human beings and God" (Feely-Harnik 1981, 72).

Iraqi Jewish cookbooks

Women in the local community claim that there were no Jewish cookbooks in Iraq.[5] Only a few recalled the hand written recipes of their mothers. Without written recipes or books, when the families finally settled in Montreal, cooking information was hard to come by. None of the younger generation, married and beginning their families, had been taught cooking in Baghdad. Only a few of the respected elders actually cooked. As was the custom for this older generation, their experience was related to managing the cooks in their homes. They did share their information with the new cooks, but much was missing and there were very few representatives of this cohort. And the young marrieds could not call home to Baghdad. Eventually one or two women became known as the experts. One of these doyens told me that she had to experiment for quite awhile in order to recapture the tastes of her youth. And even then, it never tasted quiet as good as in Baghdad. Her friends and their children then explained that she was the expert they relied on. Her reputation spread and today she is still known as an authority—even though she openly claims to dislike cooking. But food was important and so the women of the community learned to cook in this

4. See the work of Claudia Roden (1996) and Joelle Bahloul (1989).

5. In interviews and email communications as recently as September 19, 2016, many echoed the comments of this one writer: "There were no books that I was aware of when I was growing up […] My Mom had a hand written recipe book like many of the ladies then. Since then there has (*sic*) been many who put their mother's or aunt's recipes on the Internet or even YouTube."

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strange land. They all wanted their families to keep eating the traditional foods that were so good and healthy—the foods that maintained the links to their noble heritage:

> Our Sephardic table has always been a sanctuary and a link to our past; it encompasses an entire way of life that has provided nurture, support and continuity for centuries. It is my hope that these recipes will enable you to experience and enjoy the same nourishment of body and soul as my family has (Cohen 2012, 19).

Considering some of these dedicated books will inform our understanding of community food patterns as they alter, reflect and redirect ethnic distinctiveness and identification.

In 1976 the first cookbook was published. *The Best of Baghdad Cooking, With Treats from Teheran* by Daisy Iny was quickly absorbed and became a staple in many kitchens in Montreal. It would take another decade before other Iraqi cookbooks were available. When I first began interviewing people in the community (1990), I was consistently referred to Daisy Iny. This book was the main textual resource for all who arrived from Baghdad or Israel. The inclusion of "Treats from Teheran" reflects the common pattern wherein Iraqi Jews had connections with and spent time in Teheran and learned to love their distinctive Persian foods.

Iny begins her introduction by describing where she has lived, in particular, stressing the unique cultural- history of Baghdad as a place where multiple types of people (Jews, Christians, Muslims) all lived together and ate the same food. The similarities and differences between the foodways are significantly unlike those of European Jews and enlighten our understanding of cultural diversity even within the Jewish world:

> Baghdad, as a world in microcosm—where Moslems, Christians and Jews lived together—was a place whose inhabitants ate much the same kind of food, though each group followed its own traditions and prescribed ways of preparing certain dishes. (Iny 1976, n.p.)

Common to this generation, Iny stresses that she was not able to learn how to cook when she lived in Baghdad or Tehran, but rather had to experiment in America in order to recreate the food of her homelands: "We had loved the delicious food in the past and nostalgia made me persevere in trying to re-create it" (1976, n.p.).

In adapting the Iraqi foodways for the North American cook, Iny uses categories of American foods but inserts the original setting, adding folkloric stories and songs all of which enhance the book and promotes an educational focus. There are added notes to locate ritual customs, Persian variations, and personal memories. As with some of the general early cookbooks, she includes a section on health qualities of the ancient recipes. Finally, indicative of the foreign nature of the ingredients (and unlike many other cookbooks), Iny incorporates a shopping guide (1976, 170–175). The foods and spices were indeed hard to locate and not available in Jewish stores.

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This modest cookbook, plainly designed with no pictures but over 250 recipes displays the changing patterns of an immigrant community. It furthers an understanding of how unprepared and uninformed many were upon their arrival. Gaining the skills to manage their new habitats while promoting their Iraqi ways proved difficult and time consuming, convincing Iny to promise that the recipes in her book will be easy, convenient, enjoyable and even exotic. The introduction as well as the flyleaf promotes the ancient element, declaring the foods resonate with the tales of Aladdin. Despite these claims, it endorses a new practice that does not replicate Baghdad. It is clearly an American/Canadian edition.

As with some of the earlier Jewish cookbooks, *The Best of Baghdad* does not comply with the laws of kashrut. While there are few recipes that violate the rituals, some do include the forbidden mixture of meat and dairy; lamb cooked in butter and cream (Iny 1976, 61, 83), yogurt is mixed into a meat dish and catfish is suggested (Iny 1976, 41). Significantly, there is no section identifying or explaining kosher food customs. However, there are no recipes using any part of a pig, nor are seafood recipes presented. These items of course, reflect the nature of foods used and available in Iraq. But they also indicate that for this immigrant community, keeping kosher was not necessarily an issue. In fact, some Iraqi Jews did not fully know the applicable laws and categories. But they were not searching for that or for religious ritual. They wanted the old ways combined with the new. And Iny's[6] book fulfilled at a basic level that need. Hence, when this cookbook emerged, it was greeted with great relief. It continues to have unquestioned standing as a resource for all things good to eat and good to identify with from the world of Jewish Iraq.

Over the years, new books were published. Most were geared to a general group of Middle Eastern cooks, including Iraqi recipes amongst a host of other Sephardic[7] ones. Few were specific to the Iraqi Jewish table.[8] Amongst the latter group, two exemplify a genre of memoir or family cookbooks in which the family's history is interwoven with the communal recipes: Rivka Goldman's *Mama Nazima's Jewish-Iraqi Cuisine: Cuisine, History, Cultural References, and Survival Stories of the Jewish-Iraqi* (2006) and Pearl Sofaer's *Baghdad to Bombay: In the Kitchens of My Cousins* (2008). They locate Iraqi emigrant communities in both Israel and England, but the books were available across the continents. In both cases, family history is presented as the focus and purpose of the book. But food is seen as the mechanism of unification and preservation of history. There are few pictures of food, but many of family. The linkage between eating and remembering, between family and community, and between ritual and continuity is ever-present and convincing. Neither of these two was well known in Montreal.

The most popular recent cookbook in the Montreal community is the 2011 edition of *Flavours of Babylon: A family cookbook* by Linda Dangoor. As with the

6. I discuss an interesting relevant event in my article on *T'beet*.
7. This term, in general terms, refers to Jews of Spanish decent or those of Middle Eastern background whose ritual customs follow similar patterns.
8. A chronology of relevant cookbooks is appended to this article.

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previous books, this one contains family memories and reflections. But this one is clearly a professional cookbook, with careful instructions, pictures, culinary information, accurate measurements, as well as personal reminiscences.

Linda Dangoor begins her book with an introduction to the history of Mesopotamia/Iraq. In this section she indicates that this is to be a presentation of the regional cuisine, describing the importance in the region of ingredients and spicing. She also provides a family history contextualizing her personal interests and experiences. The personal anecdotes not only enliven the text but they illuminate the fluctuations and changed communal patterns:

> Although we left Iraq when I was only ten years old, the link to my roots has always been very strong, having retained a sensual connection to the lands of my ancestors through food and family gatherings, through language and music. (Dangoor 2011, 17)

In describing her experiences with her mother in the kitchen, we see a generational interaction that duplicates the cooking experience of the Montreal cohort. In Baghdad, the extended family lived together and had a cook. Grandmother managed it all and only sometimes would one of the women cook a special dish themselves. That pattern was repeated in Beirut. Only when they moved to London, did her mother begin serious cooking. At that point, Linda herself joins in the culinary tasks:

> From the beginning she involved me in the kitchen. Leafing through recipes, neatly handwritten by her in an old exercise book, she would choose our Sunday lunch menu and we would start preparing. I washed vegetables [...] rolled out pastry to make *sambouseks*; learned how to kosher the meat by salting it—salt draws out the blood and impurities from the meat, she once told me—and watched carefully as she cooked [...] I have to confess though, not all our dishes were a great success at first. For one thing we couldn't buy Middle Eastern ingredients in those days. Only a handful of Indian and Greek Cypriot shops stocked those so-called exotic products. But we soon got the hang of it and this learning process quickly involved my brothers too. As a result the whole family cooks today. (Dangoor 2011, 16)

In this brief introduction we learn of her strong ties to her family heritage. But we also see how things changed. First from having a cook to learning to cook, the text illustrates a flow of time and of generational arrangements. It also informs a gender perspective. Men in the Middle East did the marketing. Many still do so today. But men in Baghdad did not cook unless they were paid professionals. In the new locations, London and Montreal, for example, men learned to cook. But the author goes further in her analysis.[9] She explores the food factor as a memory trip:

> All of us have experienced a '*déjà vu,*' or should I say a '*déjà tasted*' experience at some time in our lives. How often have we eaten something, which was pleasantly familiar, transporting us instantaneously to another place far away and long forgotten? I find myself experiencing just that when I eat ice cream, which has

9. Few cookbook authors are as analytical or culturally aware.

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> been made with rosewater and a type of resin called Saaleb. When the opportunity of eating it comes my way, the experience of '*déjà* tasted' renews itself, time and time again, taking me back to our house in Baghdad and to my time in Beirut [...] As with babies, so I think, with a people or a nation; the food eaten over centuries becomes part of the DNA so to speak, part of a language which lies at the heart of that particular community. Not only does the food we eat define us, it also tells us about our climate, our soil, what grows in our land and what does not grow. In short, it recounts our history as well as our influences and our interaction with the world around us. Food is more than just nourishment and recipes. It is also a language and an identity. (Dangoor 2011, 20)

The book contains basic details about spicing and context. Like many of this genre, family or personal notes accompany many recipes. Significantly, it maintains its Iraqi allegiance with Arabic names below the English ones for each item. The text is full of reminiscences that would resonate with Iraqi Jews as well as introduce non members to the life lived and the sensual flavours of "home." In describing a sweet desert, she notes that: it is not the sweetness I taste first, but the flavour of belonging (Dangoor 2011, 167). Fascinating and insightful, this comment of belonging comes from a woman who left Baghdad at the age of ten. Her belonging sense is attached to a community and a heritage that she was exiled from but somehow managed to simulate and resuscitate. And she wishes to pass it on to the next generation. Hence, she tells us, she has produced this cookbook. The commitment to a communal legacy and the desire to preserve it through food is indicative of the power of the culinary and commensal.

Indeed this cookbook is set to preserve a combined Iraqi heritage within a Jewish framework not necessarily found in the earlier cookbook versions. This book assumes kashrut as the only way to cook. It revives a ritual commitment. While the book is useful for the non-Iraqi, it is clearly intended for the insiders. The basic explanations of rituals and holidays show an awareness of the lack of knowledge and/or praxis on the part of many in the community. This cookbook, while redolent of reminiscences, is intended to teach those who do not know. And while new recipes or ingredients are present, its goal is conservation and continuity. The popularity of this cookbook indicates that these purposes and memories resonate within the expatriate population.[10]

Conclusion

In all the cookbooks examined, the sense that food instils and recalls memories of a privileged past worthy of safeguarding is remarkable and ubiquitous. Many authors echo Estelle Levy's comment noting the strong connection between recipes and a community's past. Cooking and eating a particular dish can elicit a sense of continuity and nostalgia for a lost world. The famous food author, Claudia Roden, perceptively adds:

> Every cuisine tells a story. Jewish food tells the story of an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds. It lives in people's minds and has been

10. One can see similar patterns and intentions in other cookbooks such as Poopa Dweck's 2007 *Aromas of Aleppo*.

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> kept alive because of what it evokes and represents (3). Part of the appeal for me of working on this book is that there is more to Jewish food than cooking and eating. Behind every recipe is a story of local traditions and daily life in far-off towns and villages. It is a romantic and nostalgic subject, which has to do with recalling a world that has vanished. It is about ancestral memories and looking back and holding on to old cultures, and it is about identity. (8)

Food historian Susan Kalcik describes how ethnic communities in America use foods to link with their past, keep it "alive" and somehow "ease the shock of entering a new culture" (1984, 37). Yet the pattern of preservation seen in these texts is always marked by a blending of the old with the new. They cannot maintain pristine recipes, or for that matter cultural ways, without incorporating the different patterns of a new environment. "But despite these compromises food remains one viable aspect of the folkways of American ethnic groups and a significant way of celebrating ethnicity and group identity" (Kalcik 1984, 38).

Additionally, generational patterns emerge. Thus the Iraqis of first immigration were unconcerned with general Jewish traditions. Kashrut did not permeate their food patterns. But the next two generations revisit Jewish identity and heritage and want to be better informed while not necessarily practising. As Kalcik notes: "The struggles of the immigrant generation to keep, adapt, and shed their traditional foodways affect the repertoire of foodways that succeeding generations can call upon to use in symbolic displays of ethnic identity" (Kalcik 1984, 41).

Significantly, the foodways and cookbooks explored in this article indicate that previous claims about acculturation are not applicable to all ethnic communities. Some like Kalcik claim that the first generation holds on to their past staunchly. But in the cookbooks cited here, we can see that the second and third generation books present a reinvestment in the older traditions of Baghdad. Kosher food rules are assumed as essential for maintenance and continuity. Thus, in *The Book of Jewish Food*, Claudia Roden, notes that succeeding generations find diverse ways to nurture and re-attain their unique cultural identities:

> Though American Jewry has become one entity—integrated and acculturated in American life—and though most Jews know little about the legacies they have inherited, there have been stirrings of interest—a kind of Jewish cultural renaissance. It has to do with the new generation's nostalgia and yearning for roots, a need for identification to fill a cultural vacuum. Whereas some look for anchorage in religious orthodoxy, others rediscover the cultural heritage in the kitchen. (Roden 1996, 81)

This fittingly describes the process seen in the cookbooks and commensal patterns of the Iraqi Jewish community of Montreal. Unmistakably, food studies enable us to explore a vibrant world of roots, continuity, memory, family and personal identity. It is certain that food rituals mark existing social boundaries and group interaction. Eating specific foods provides a community with both performance of and attachment to a system of symbolic identification. Cultural memory survives rooted in recipes. For all of this knowledge and insight, cookbooks and recipes are the evidentiary documents, the texts.

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