

the gazpacho that I learned from a burly Irishman during my Fulbright year in Algeria. I recalled his merrily chopping up vegetables, then assaulting them with a strange electric mixer that protruded from his hand like a sword or a chainsaw as he nonchalantly tossed in ice cubes, finally producing the perfect relief from the North African sun. I put it on the menu and continued reading.

Defensiveness aside, it seemed silly to be “irritatingly insistent” about the male “exceptions” in the generally feminine tradition, and I found Leonardi’s disavowal of her attempt to imply such a tradition puzzling. It was downright discomfiting, then, to find support of the same implication introduced by an innuendo marker like “It is interesting, however, that . . .” (343). The long digression on E. F. Benson’s “gender-diffused background” (343) seems similarly unnecessary at best, sounding like the connection we used to hear drawn between a black person’s achievements and his or her familiarity with white people and their culture. Leonardi then confirms that resemblance by complimenting Benson on his lack of masculinity in the notoriously mean “spirit of the male critics who” compliment women writers on their possession of it (343). This witticism, like the labored digression on “Freudian-Lacanian theory,” seems designed simply to exclude males from the central construct, a project that seems—given their exclusion from the concrete reality—superfluous.

The expression “feminine readers,” then, moved me to look again at the abstract, which says that “masculine” readers can be male or female, as long as they are “unaware of the recipe’s social significance” (276). Having enjoyed the analysis of *Heartburn* (I was glad finally to be able to make sense of the pie-in-the-face scene in the film), I was reasonably confident of my awareness of the recipe’s social significance, but I still could not see why I should therefore call myself “feminine.” So I gave the article up and, grateful to have been given the awareness, returned to my menu.

Specifically, I deferred the decision on the entrée and proceeded to check the ingredient list for my widely admired cheesecake. (The secret is to be unafraid to give the batter a good macho beating and stir up the cheese that settles to the bottom of the bowl.) As I read the straightforward, businesslike, unembedded recipe written out for me by my wife before our marriage, during my years as a single parent, I remembered Leonardi’s examination of *Joy of Cooking*. Still grumpy, I suppose, about being a “feminine reader” (or not), I took another look at the comparison between the Rombauer and Becker editions: “I am suggesting,” says Leonardi, after a comparison of their acknowledgments, “that the intrusion of masculine figures into the heretofore women’s world has significantly altered the context of the recipes,” a clearly *post hoc ergo propter hoc* suggestion (343). And the reference to “male chefs,” as well as the irresistible pun about male entrance into the woman’s bed (343), seems to belie the

abstract’s distinction between sex and gender. Yet I found that the 1975 edition (the one I use at home) acknowledges mostly females.

More important, when Leonardi says earlier that Becker had “already asked for a straightforward exposition or definition of conventions” for the 1951 edition (341), she leaves doubtful both the date and the significance of the masculine intrusion into Becker’s world. The evolution of Becker’s world becomes moot, finally, when Leonardi points out that Rombauer’s style was “characteristic of nearly all early cookbooks” (345) and thus indicates that influences other than masculine intrusions into Becker’s life might be at work in the differences between the Rombauer and Becker editions.

It occurred to me that there is more than one social context that a reader—masculine or feminine—might be aware of and that might account for what might be called the machofication of many cookbooks in the last quarter century. There has been enormous growth in the numbers of people—both male and female—who, like myself, spend almost all their adult lives as single parents or in families where both partners work outside the home and who cannot afford, as Rombauer could, a “household cook.” Like George Bradshaw’s, our “presence in the kitchen signifies less a passion for the art than a determination to eat regularly” (*Cook until Done*, New York: Ace, 1970, pref.). We need meals, not literary texts. Such changes in social context produce a change in the market for cookbooks, a change of which cookbook writers and editors—male and female—are equally aware.

At this point, I felt that I understood my mixed feelings about “Recipes for Reading,” a fascinating example of how sensitivity to women’s experience can help illuminate literary texts, but I also felt burdened by an antimale subtext that distracts me, at least, from the main thrust of the analysis.

Perhaps my response is indeed all just defensiveness, for I certainly put an inordinate amount of time and energy into it. I became so weary, in fact, that I decided to let my wife take care of the entrée. Being the man in the house does not make me, after all, responsible for everything.

JOEL ROACHE

*University of Maryland, Eastern Shore*

To the Editor:

Susan J. Leonardi’s “Recipes for Reading” whetted my appetite. Her point is well taken that recipes are traditionally embedded in a context of feminine conversation and that authors who are conscious of this tradition can use it in their writing (although in her zeal to share this point with her readers she has perhaps offered them too much pasta and dessert). In response to Leonardi’s concluding request for “stories . . . about recipe sharing,” I would

like to share an example to show that the reading of recipes from a literary perspective is by no means exclusively modern or feminine.

My entrée is a humorous essay by William Makepeace Thackeray entitled “Barmecide Banquets with Joseph Bregon and Anne Miller,” published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in November 1845. (This essay appears in volume 6 of *The Oxford Thackeray*, ed. George Saintsbury, London: Oxford UP, [1908], 521–37, from which I quote.) The piece is a review of a contemporary cookbook, *The Practical Cook, English and Foreign*, by Joseph Bregon and Anne Miller (London: Chapman, 1845). Thackeray’s interest in eating is well known, both from his life and from his work. (One of his early noms de plume was The Fat Contributor.) In this review essay, as in several of his other pre-*Vanity Fair* writings, he adopts the persona of George Savage Fitz-Boodle, a bachelor man-about-town. True to the tradition of recipe sharing, Fitz-Boodle phrases his remarks about the cookbook in the form of a chatty letter to a personal friend, “the Rev. Lionel Gaster, Fellow and Tutor of St. Boniface College, Oxon.” The Barmecide banquets of the title allude to an imaginary feast in one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*. Reading the recipe book excites Fitz-Boodle into imagining dinners that might be cooked with its aid, and he hastens to share this gustatory excitement with Gaster.

Fitz-Boodle’s joy of cookbook reading is evident throughout the essay. Mindful of his friend’s academic occupation (“I never saw men who relished a dinner better than the learned fellows of St. Boniface”), he suggests that Gaster will surely “relish this book.” As Fitz-Boodle puts it, “though your mornings are passed in the study of the heathen classics, or over your favourite tomes of patristic lore—though of forenoons you astonish lecture-rooms with your learning, and choose to awe delighted undergraduates—yet I know that an hour comes daily when the sage feels that he is a man.” In his enthusiasm, Fitz-Boodle envisions an edible literary tradition: “What a fine, manly, wholesome sense of roast and boiled, so to speak, there is in the *Iliad*! . . . What appetites Ariosto’s heroes have, and the reader with them! . . . In Sir Walter Scott, again, there reigns a genuine and noble feeling for victuals.” Fitz-Boodle speculates about the possible supernatural origin of this “gormandizing encyclopaedia”: “it is my firm opinion that the occult editor of the *Practical Cook* has tasted and tested every one of the two hundred and twenty-three thousand edible and potable formulae contained in the volume.” He also poignantly points out that *The Practical Cook* is an unsafe book to read in bed: “For some time I had the book by my bedside, and used to read it of nights; but this is most dangerous. Twice I was obliged to get up and dress myself at two o’clock in the morning, and go out to hunt for some supper.”

To be sure, while Leonardi discusses recipes as a route to cooking, Thackeray deals with them as a road to eating. The parts of the cookbook on which Thackeray

concentrates deal with table layout and sample menus. The point of view of his persona—the bachelor Fitz-Boodle—is also chauvinistically masculine: women cook; men eat. Illustrating this point of view, Fitz-Boodle offers an embedded story concerning a woman who callously serves her husband cold mutton and scorns his humble plea for hash. The husband flees to a club, where he falls into evil ways, and the marriage fails—a doleful result that could have been prevented, according to Fitz-Boodle, had the wife been able to read, and profit from, the suggestions for using leftovers in *The Practical Cook*.

Nonetheless, like Leonardi, Thackeray suggests that the line between recipe sharing and narrative writing is a thin one. He also offers a reply of sorts to her question, “What importance, after all, can recipes have to the reading, writing mind?” Fitz-Boodle’s counterquestion is, “Where is the fool or the man of genius that is insensible to the charms of a good dinner?”

DEBORAH A. THOMAS  
*Villanova University*

To the Editor:

The final course of Susan J. Leonardi’s “Recipes for Reading” refrains from bringing her essay full circle, for though the opening offers a tasty appetizer, the conclusion skips dessert: a Key lime pie is discussed but never presented. Significantly, the essay deals extensively with the activities of recipe sharing and recipe withholding. But is the omission of the pie recipe mere coyness or an invitation to follow in Leonardi’s direction? Are there not modes when hesitation invites response, when silences invoke assertions and openings call for answers? With a little effort, the Forum section of *PMLA* might even achieve the interactive, empathetic collegiality of the readers’ comments columns in *Women’s Circle*.

The Key lime pie that Leonardi mentions, the one that Rachel Samstat brings to the climatic scene of *Heartburn*, is a metaphor for the disintegration of Rachel’s marriage amid the rootlessness of her social class. Rachel’s pie is carelessly pitched together; it is a yuppified confection, a fast-food lime pie. No tradition grounds it; only a weak, flaky pastry crust supports it. Pasteurized shortcuts are described as acceptable, even recommended: “Even bottled lime juice will do,” Rachel announces in listing the ingredients. The poor pie goes directly from its maker to the freezer; no wonder it is fit for nothing in the end but to serve as a prop for low comedy.

To understand the significance of that circular metaphor in Ephron’s novel, one needs to know how to make a proper Key lime pie, a substantive pie—the kind that good cooks have created for generations in clapboard cottages along the quiet, hibiscus-lined streets of old Key West. Here is the way to do it:

First, catch your limes. This may not be as easy as it sounds. The true Key or Caribbean lime, *Citrus aurant-*