



Messiah College
Mosaic

Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

4-2012

The Can-Opener Gourmet: Poppy Cannon and American Culture in the 1950s

Natalie Burack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Permanent URL: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/299>

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

www.Messiah.edu

One College Avenue | Mechanicsburg PA 17055

MESSIAH COLLEGE

The Can-Opener Gourmet:

Poppy Cannon and American Culture in the 1950s

Natalie Burack
History Departmental Honors Thesis
April 2012

MESSIAH COLLEGE LIBRARY

“The Can-Opener Gourmet: Poppy Cannon and American Culture in the 1950s”

The 1950s bring to mind a series of icons or symbols of post-war optimism fueled by the era’s expanding consumer economy and the monumental growth of the middle class. History textbooks often include images of bright-colored rocket-inspired cars, ranch-style suburban houses, and space-age television sets playing “Leave it to Beaver” to illustrate the consumer mentality of post-war America. However, the culinary symbols of this decade, such as the ubiquitous casserole, are more apt to be regarded with disgust or comical dismissal than with nostalgia. The 1950s has been considered a low point in American cuisine—an era that many chefs tend to dismiss or ignore entirely. The hit movie *Julie and Julia* on the life of chef Julia Child who rose to celebrity status in the early 1960s repeats this now-familiar story. The movie tells Julia Child’s life story through the experiences of her present-day fan, Julie Powell, who quips that her heroine “changed everything. Before her it was frozen food and can openers and marshmallows.”¹ The dismissive and slightly amused tone in Julie’s voice typifies the view of 1950s middle American cuisine as bland and tacky.

There may well be another side to this story, however. Those looking at 1950s cuisine might benefit from the work of revisionist historians who have examined other aspects of 1950s American culture, and concluded that the dismissive attitudes shown towards the books or trends popular among the middle-class are simplistic and overdrawn.² So, too, the conventional twentieth century American culinary timeline that jumps from the “scientific” cooking of Fannie Farmer to the convenience food nightmares cooked in the kitchen of suburban housewives to Julia Child coming to the rescue with her French cuisine in the 1960s misses some key developments. In particular, this framework bypasses the

¹ Amy Adams, Scene 4, *Julie and Julia*, directed by Nora Ephron (New York: Columbia Pictures, 2009), DVD.

² See John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960*, (New York: Norton & Co, 1988) 177-179; Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 54-57; and Mary Beth Norton, *et al.*, *A People, A Nation, Volume II: Since 1865*. 9th ed. (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012), 819.

growing appreciation for gourmet food in middle-class America which was evident even before Julia Child rose to fame.³ This appreciation can even be seen during the 1950s in ladies magazines, publications often derided by cultural critics for peddling a bland mass culture with no understanding of the elements of high culture such as gourmet eating.⁴ At the forefront of this movement which brought gourmet cooking to the middle class was a colorful and dynamic woman named Poppy Cannon, whose cooking style reconciled the delicious elements of haute-cuisine with the realities and technologies of domestic life in the 1950s.

Poppy Cannon, an advertising consultant turned food writer, enjoyed a varied and prolific career. She wrote for several women's magazines such as *House Beautiful* and *Ladies Home Journal* from the 1930s through the 1960s, authored or coauthored eleven cookbooks, appeared on several television and radio shows, and worked in the food industry. Her controversial affair and later marriage to NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White brought her into the political spotlight. Although she had the resources and connections to pursue almost any calling she wished, Cannon chose to devote her life and career to the one area that many other women in her situation seemed to want to escape or avoid—the kitchen. Cannon spent the majority of her life researching and writing about the benefits of cooking and domestic life, but this was not because she was oblivious to the problems and issues that many women had with this lifestyle. On the contrary, Cannon recognized both the tedium as well as the exciting potential of domestic life, and it was this latter aspect that she introduced to her many readers.

But somehow, Poppy Cannon has been all but forgotten by historians, scholars, and foodies who have instead focused on her later contemporary Julia Child.⁵ This is surprising,

³ David Strauss' *Setting the Table for Julia Child Gourmet Dining in America, 1934-1961*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011) recognizes a budding gourmet movement before the 1960s, yet even his account gives short shrift to the presence of gourmet influence in women's magazines.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-42.

⁵ Julia Child has seen a recent resurgence in popularity, perhaps due to the debut of the movie *Julie and Julia* (2009). Other studies on Julia Child include Laura Shapiro, *Julia Child: a Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2007);

considering the vast audiences Cannon reached through her articles, programs, and books, many of which went through several reprints.⁶ The answer to this mystery seems to lie in Cannon's own paradoxical approach to both life and cooking. She did not fit neatly into any category, whether the issue was food or feminism. Unlike Child, she was not a "pure" gourmet; rather, she targeted an audience of working women who also wanted to enjoy good food and culture, but in practical ways. Cannon also failed to represent the conformist women's magazine stereotype of the 1950s. She was not the poster child of consumerist domesticity, despite the efforts of other authors to present her in that light by focusing solely on her early writings such as *The Can-Opener Cookbook* (1952)⁷—yet neither did she condemn the industry and the culture of domesticity as did another contemporary, Betty Freidan.⁸ Cannon's middle-ground position makes her a difficult subject of study, yet at the same time a completely intriguing and worthwhile one. Her life, and specifically her style of cooking, reveals some of the cultural tensions present in the 1950s—tensions which Cannon not only understood, but also attempted to resolve, thereby creating a unique approach to cooking which spoke to the needs of middle-class America.

This potential audience was certainly significant. The American middle class reached unprecedented numbers and influence in the 1950s as post-war prosperity launched millions of individuals into comfortable affluence. Families benefiting from new jobs and an education courtesy of the GI Bill wanted to partake in the convenience and marvel of the

Noel Riley Fitch, *Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child*, (New York: Random House, 1999); and Nancy Verde Barr, *Backstage with Julia: My Years with Julia Child* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008). Julia's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* became a *New York Times* #1 bestseller in 2009, over 50 years after its first appearance.

⁶ Cannon wrote for several magazines throughout her life, including *Mademoiselle*, *House Beautiful*, *Park East*, *Haiti Today*, and *Ladies Homes Journal*. She worked on three television shows: "Poppy Cannon Presents What's New," "Cook-n-Win," and "The Home Show" on NBC. Her books include a biography on Walter White, *A Gentle Knight*, books of poetry, and 11 cookbooks.

⁷ See Friedan's landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, (1963; repr., New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

⁸ Poppy Cannon, *The Can-Opener Cookbook*, (New York: Crowell Co., 1952). Subsequent references from this cookbook will be made from the 3rd edition, *The New New Can Opener Cookbook*, which was published by the same company in 1968.

appliances, gadgets, and products created to make their new homes more comfortable and “modern.” Some cultural critics lamented this shared affluence and mass culture, saying it cheapened true culture and beauty. They criticized the books and music of the new middle class as “middlebrow culture” or “midcult” for short.⁹ These high-brow critics saw mass culture as impersonal, bland, and homogenized. The objects of their scorn included the food industry after World War II when canned and frozen food companies were looking for new commercial outlets for their products. Food critics criticized mass-produced convenience, or ready-foods as bland, badly-seasoned, and the opposite of good home-cooking. But in Cannon’s mind, these misunderstood foods represented opportunities galore. She looked at convenience foods optimistically, writing:

“These unparalleled riches, thus lavish, enticing, luxurious, incredible treasure trove of edibles adds up to one thing: creative freedom. Freedom from monotony. Freedom to roam the world of delight. Freedom from tedium, space, work, and your own inexperience.”¹⁰

Instead of confirming the impersonal and prefab nature of convenience foods, Cannon cast them as tools through which women could gain autonomy and control over their lives and creative impulses. In an article in *House Beautiful* Cannon encouraged, “If you want to be one, you’re already well on the way toward becoming a gourmet, a modern epicure. There’s only one essential—a state of mind.”¹¹ Her aim was to increase the appreciation for gourmet

⁹ The term “midcult” was coined by Dwight MacDonald who compared the spread of middlebrow culture to destructive “spreading ooze.” Quoted in T.J. Jackson Lears, “Mass Culture and Its Critics,” in *The Encyclopedia of American Social History*, Vol. 3, ed. By Mary Cayton, Elliott Gorn, and Peter W. Williams (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1993), 1598. See MacDonald, *Against the American Grain*, (1952; repr., New York: Random House, 1962).

Joan Shelley Rubin defines “middlebrow culture” as “Describing the body of literature, art, and humanistic discourse positioned between avant-garde or leaned expression (‘high’ or ‘highbrow’ culture) and popular amusement (‘lowbrow’ culture), the phrase encompasses as well the book clubs, publishing projects, radio shows, and similar undertakings that, especially between 1917 and 1950, aimed to make elements of high culture available to a broad public.” In Rubin, “Middlebrow Culture,” in *A Companion to American Thought*, Ed. By Richard Wightman Fox & James T. Kloppenberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 451.

¹⁰ Poppy Cannon, “You are Richer and Freer- than you Think,” *House Beautiful*, June 1953, 115.

¹¹ Poppy Cannon, “How to Be a Pace Setting Gourmet,” *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 264.

cuisine and cultivate the epicurean mindset, yet at the same time not overlook the need for modern efficiency.

The reality of domesticity for the mid-twentieth century American middle class differs widely from the simple picture of the charming, pearl-wearing, child-doting housewife lounging about happily waiting for a roast to come out of the oven. For many women, life was much more complex. Either they were overrun with housework and childrearing or they were among the millions of women (married and unmarried) working outside of the home. The drop in female employment after World War II had leveled off by 1950 when the number of women in the workforce again began to rise; two out of five married women with school-aged children in 1950 had jobs outside of their homes.¹² This social transformation helps to explain the popularity of new culinary trends such as the “TV dinner,” which made its debut in 1954. Judging from the 13 million frozen dinners sold that first year, many busy Americans welcomed the convenience offered by these simple meals.¹³ Yet for many other women, these standardized meals represented a tasteless conformity to mass culture or a failure of their domestic responsibilities.

Enter Poppy Cannon. She knew that she had to reach an audience that yearned for high-class quality food without the off-putting and intimidating complexity of gourmet cooking. Thus she presented her methods in a simple and relevant manner that appealed to and motivated a middle-class audience that was already feeling overwhelmed, or at least unenthused. She wrote to young women in her *Bride's Cookbook* first published in 1954,

“At one time a badge of shame, hallmark of the lazy lady and the careless wife, today the can-opener is fast becoming a magic wand, especially in the hands of those brave

¹² "Women's Roles in the 1950s," *American Decades*, Vol. 6 Ed. Vincent Tompkins, Gale Cengage, 2000. [eNotes.com](http://www.enotes.com/1950-lifestyles-social-trends-american-decades/). 15 Apr, 2012 <<http://www.enotes.com/1950-lifestyles-social-trends-american-decades/>>

¹³ Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, (New York: Penguin 2004), 17-18.

young women, nine million of them (give or take a few thousand here and there) who are engaged in frying as well as bringing home the bacon.”¹⁴

With knowledge, artistic savvy, and a trusty can opener, Poppy Cannon saw no delicacy as out of reach for the modern home cook. By translating complex recipes to a canned and frozen food-friendly format, Cannon spanned the gap between the elite, cult-like American gourmards such as James Beard, M.F.K. Fisher, and André Simon, and the increasingly frowned upon standardized products dished out by the expanding food industry.¹⁵ She offered an attainable alternative that was anything but “standard.” She told women that it was ok, and even admirable, to bend the rules here and there and to take shortcuts, because with her tips and tricks they could still achieve culinary success. Cannon wrote to her *Mademoiselle* readers, “Granted, you haven’t the time or the space or even the mood to dream up an angel food cake. Nevertheless, you can serve food—good food, too. . . It’s all out of tins—but with verve, my dear, with dash.”¹⁶ Indeed, this was how Cannon lived her own life—with confidence, smarts, and “dash,” which set her apart in an industry aimed at pleasing the faceless masses.

As an extremely busy woman herself, Cannon respected the time constraints that often prevented preparation of a truly fine meal. However, she also understood the importance of careful attention to the needs of her audience and did not just offer pre-packaged advice for anyone to consume. She gave the following diagnosis: “Helping hands are not, by any means, our only lack. What we need even more is personalized advice. . . all of it is geared for everyone. None of it is personal. The impersonal supermarket can give no thought to an individual dilemma.”¹⁷ But Cannon turned these same impersonal

¹⁴ Poppy Cannon, *Poppy Cannon’s Brides Cookbook*, (1954; repr., New York: Paperback Library, 1970), 11.

¹⁵ Poppy Cannon, “Open a Can and Make Yourself Famous for Good Texas Food,” *House Beautiful*, October 1953, 223.

¹⁶ Quoted in Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 96.

¹⁷ Poppy Cannon, “Introduction” In Toklas, Alice B. *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), xi.

supermarkets, industry recipes, and standard mixes and suggested ways to give them new life and creativity with a gourmet twist, allowing women the freedom and ease to experiment in their own kitchens. She addressed brides with no confidence in their cooking skills, working singles with limited time, avid travelers and epicures who loved to try new wines, as well as suburban housewives who only had access to the local grocery store. Dispensing advice, stories, and excitement, Cannon mixed up a strategy for high class cooking in a new age.¹⁸ This blend of new, short-cut cooking, and classic, gourmet tastes became her trademark, and ultimately won her a place in the culinary spotlight during the mid-twentieth century.

Although some critics might have turned up their noses at some of the concoctions in Cannon's cookbooks, she definitely knew the difference between good and bad cuisine. She vehemently distinguished her type of shortcut cooking from the unpalatable concoctions associated with 1950s food. She recognized that meals-on-the-run, divorced from any classical cooking knowledge, often ended badly, and even wrote in her *Can-Opener Cookbook*—her magnum opus of quick cuisine: “Gone are the days when anything quick was considered a triumph and concoction of tuna fish, cream of mushroom soup, and potato chips flourished among the hurry-up menus. Now we are becoming classicists, and are analyzing the complicated, work-consuming recipes of olden days.”¹⁹ Obviously, not any old corner-cutting recipe would do for Cannon the connoisseur, nor for the aspiring epicures under her tutelage.

Instead, she gave direction by telling women where to buy the best ingredients, looking to prestigious chefs and restaurants for inspiration, and recommending a list of the “Our Fifty Favorite Books About Food.”²⁰ In Cannon's mind, the home cook could exist anywhere in the nation—not just the cultural hubs of New York or Boston, but also in Texas,

¹⁸ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, xxiii.

¹⁹ Poppy Cannon, *New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 2.

²⁰ Poppy Cannon, “How, Where and Why to Read a Cookbook,” *House Beautiful*, February, 1957, 147.

Kentucky, or suburbia. In her *House Beautiful* articles she addressed these women, encouraging them to look no further than their own backyards and communities for fine, local flavors that could enhance their cooking experiences.²¹ She correctly identified a national movement in the making:

“In the food field, we have brought mass production, mass distribution and mass consumption to the highest level in the history of man. . . For what is most dazzling is the way in which *mass* has taken on *class*. We are rapidly becoming a nation of food connoisseurs, for as more people try more things they are developing discrimination, perception. Since more and more of the mindless work of cooking is done industrially, leaving the interesting and creative part for the cook in the home, it is developing a new kind of cook—the talented amateur.”²²

The transitions in the cooking world from “mass” to “class” paralleled the “cultured” choices of middle class American made elsewhere in the fields of art and literature in a backlash to the mass-produced standards. These choices, or “discrimination,” as she puts it, came as a result of the guidance given to the public by individuals, such as herself, who sought to show others the “enlightened” path. Although “the talented amateur” really blossomed under the instruction of Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in the 1960s, some of the first steps toward gourmet living were Cannon’s.²³ The difference lied in the fact that her steps didn’t bypass the frozen food aisle. Her melding of the elements of high culture and the culinary symbols of modern consumerism created a unique balance of “glamour” and convenience in food.

Poppy Cannon’s unique blending of high-brow and mid-cult emerged from experiences in twenties and thirties. After graduating in 1927 from Vassar, which she attended on a scholarship, Cannon aspired to be a writer. She married a fellow librarian

²¹ Poppy Cannon, “What’s American about American Cooking? So much, so good—with so little time and work!” *House Beautiful*, November 1956, 267-268, 329, 338-342.

²² Poppy Cannon, “What’s American about American Cooking? So much, so good—with so little time and work!” *House Beautiful*, November 1956, 267.

²³ Julia Child, Loiusette Bertholle, Simone Beck, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

named Carl Cannon, and combined with her longtime nickname “Poppy,” the surname Cannon became her moniker for the rest of her life.²⁴ In the late 1920s and early 1930s Cannon did freelance writing jobs for periodicals until she started her first job at the advertising firm, Maxon, Inc., in 1934.²⁵ For the next sixteen years Cannon worked closely with the food industry to develop slogans and advertising campaigns for companies such as Heinz and General Foods.²⁶ Her lighthearted tone and general quirkiness shines through her advertisements, such as “When up a tree for a quick dessert, you can rattle a lemon pie in a jiff. Haven’t you heard of the new wonderstuff called Clovernook . . . ?”²⁷ Although this was somewhat of a departure from the writing career she seemed to have envisioned in earlier, headier times, Cannon needed to support her daughter Cynthia, and her son Alf, whom she had in 1938 with her second husband, Alf Askland.

In this capacity, Cannon learned many aspects of both the advertising world and the food industry, ideas and lessons she would eventually use in her cooking. While working for Maxon and later as Vice President of Peter Hilton, Inc., which specialized in new products, she managed accounts, worked with labeling and packaging of products such as Seabrook Farms Quick-Frozen Food, authored radio commercials, and attempted to introduce a “gourmet point of view” for the foods she was helping to sell.²⁸ According to her 1950 résumé, Cannon “was one of the first to use the romantic, nostalgic, hunger-rousing approach to food copy as contrasted with the nutritional theme formerly in vogue among advertisers.”²⁹ Already, Cannon understood both the wide range of approaches in twentieth-century cuisine

²⁴ Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 92.

²⁵ Resumé, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 38, folder 382, p. 2, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Poppy Cannon, “Eat and Run,” *Mademoiselle*, October 1944, 42.

²⁸ Resumé, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 382, p. 3, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Astoria Hotel, one of the leading venues for the French gourmet movement in America. Cannon was now included in his culinary circle and had access to some of the best fine dining available. Using her firsthand knowledge from high-class dining, her career, and her personal life as a mother, Poppy Cannon created a synthesis of commercialism, convenience food, and a “gourmet” outlook. She celebrated the “imaginative uses of ready-foods,” as the food editor of *Mademoiselle* during the 1930s and 1940s.³³ She knew well the barriers to cooking, for she was a busy career woman herself, but she also saw an exciting solution in the promise of the food industry. The key to the successful use of industrial food was discrimination—being able to distinguish among the vast range of industrial food products. With her experience and knowledge gained from prior jobs, Cannon excelled at this. She boasted that her food department at *Mademoiselle* was one of the first to use brand names as part of the story—a task to which she was perfectly situated to do because of her position between the food industry and the media.³⁴ By suggesting brands that she had tested and approved of, Cannon enabled consumers to make informed buying decisions and also promoted higher standards quality within in the food industry.

Cannon’s career and status also introduced her to the people and cultural circles which heavily informed her work in the 1950s and 1960s. In New York she became acquainted with people of literary, political, and culinary fame, including figures of the Harlem Renaissance, such as James Weldon Johnson. By ‘rubbing elbows’ with these artists and intellectuals, Cannon developed a high ‘cultural IQ.’ At lavish parties and during vacations abroad to Europe and the Caribbean, Cannon developed a love for gourmet food, for fine French cuisine, wine, and exotic dishes from the islands. In personal letters Cannon describes her traveling experiences and especially the food she ate in vivid detail. She

³³ Resumé, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 382, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

as well as the distinct and interesting position she was in the process of carving out within this.

She indeed was a trailblazer, for in the early twentieth century, food experts and writers sat in two distant and opposing camps. On the one side were the food columnists in women's magazines who appealed to developing nutritional science in championing nutrient-enriched processed convenience foods over fresh or calorie-laded foods. They were food scientists more than foodies, who emphasized calories and nutrients over taste and dining experience when it came to meal planning. On the other side, gourmets such as food writer and enthusiast M.F.K. Fisher, delighted in hearty appetites, advocated a sensual experience of food, and lamented the harm that Prohibition did to fine dining in America.³⁰ Many food historians have suggested that this gourmet approach only broadened its popularity under Julia Child. However, focusing solely on Child's contributions overlooks Cannon's similar, if somewhat altered position, which also celebrated food for food's sake. Cannon was referring to some of her domestic science peers when she wrote in her early career, "It takes more--and sometimes less-- than a knowledge of dietetics to make a cook. That food faddism is a blight to gastronomy."³¹ She saw what the industry and the domestic advice columnists had to offer in terms of food, and she correctly identified its shortcomings and faddish identity. Yet Cannon did not totally leave behind her magazine predecessors' focus on canned and prepackaged foods, making her a true go-between or "midwife" transitioning between one culinary era and the next.³²

The events of her life also helped to shape her pseudo-gourmet approach, for after her husband Alf died, she married Charles Claudius Phillipe, a chef at New York's Waldorf-

³⁰ For more information on this culinary debate see David Strauss, "Food Fights in Twentieth Century America: The Healthy Life versus the Good Life," In *Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934-1961*, 11-42, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

³¹ *Black Magic Cookbook* draft, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 323, p. 11, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³² David Strauss, "Food Fights," 45.

mentioned one “elegant brunch” in Jamaica of curried lobster, fried rice, and “a delicious tossed cabbage salad” with “a delicious French dressing. . . and a fine West Indian mango chutney and for dessert... a soufflé the likes of which I have never eaten—and sliced mangoes with lime juice.”³⁵ And on a 1954 trip to Rome she wrote to her husband, Walter White, about another memorable meal, gushing, “I can't even begin to tell you the wonders of Shannon as viewed from the kitchen. You remember the porridge and the pear smoked bacon and the Darjeeling tea.”³⁶ Clearly, her moments at the dinner table helped her to experience a location on a different level and contributed to her appreciation of food.

These culinary voyages found mention in her books and articles. She taught women how to make foreign specialties but always added a unique twist to account for the limitations of skill, time, and place of her audience. For example, she gave a recipe for making *roodekool*, a popular dish in Holland, the “quick New World” way incorporating red cabbage and apple sauce from jars.³⁷ Her travels also inspired her to incorporate exotic ingredients and flavors into her repertoire, and she used foods to induce tourism and revamp the economy of places such as Haiti, where she served as a Public Relations Consultant.³⁸ The “high culture” that she soaked up during these years in the 1930s and beyond gave her the background and worldview that made her believe she could translate the world of the gourmet to a middle-class audience, and much of her culinary experiences and lessons appeared in her later cookbooks and articles, albeit in an altered form.

Of all the figures she met in New York, the most influential on Cannon's life was Executive Secretary of the NAACP, Walter White. The two met at a party in the 1930s and

³⁵ Poppy Cannon to Walter White, July 18, 1952, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 8, folder 232, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³⁶ Poppy Cannon to Walter White, April 3, 1954, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 8, folder 233, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³⁷ Poppy Cannon, *New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, (1951; repr., New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1968), 163.

³⁸ Resumé, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 37, Folder 382, p. 2, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

soon began working on a cookbook project together about African-American cuisine.³⁹ Walter received an advance for this project from the publisher Alfred A. Knopf (the same one who later published Julia Child's cookbook) and Cannon traveled throughout the South, collecting recipes and interviewing African Americans about their heritage and soul food.⁴⁰ Unfortunately the book never came to full fruition, unlike their relationship. The relationship progressed from professional to romantic, and the couple began an affair while Cannon was married to Alf. After a few years the relationship fizzled due to the complexities of their careers, spouses, and the tensions surrounding an interracial relationship between a Negro man and a white woman. However, White and Cannon did not stay apart for long, and their affair was rekindled during Cannon's marriage to Phillippe. In letters they addressed each other affectionately and took interest in each other's work.⁴¹ White sent Cannon clippings from newspapers featuring the ads she worked on, such as one for Nesselrode pie, and gave reports of how she appeared on her short stint on television.⁴² By 1949, the two could not postpone their love any longer, and Cannon divorced Phillippe and married White, who had also left his wife by this time.

With the added support and happiness that resulted from her marriage to White, Cannon really began making a name for herself in the publication and food world in the 1950s. Her style of "gourmet in a hurry" found a ready audience during the 1950s when American prosperity and domesticity peaked.⁴³ Cannon combined an interest in modern appliances and products with a concern for quality food. To Cannon, food had serious implications. Addressing her readers at *House Beautiful* in 1953, Cannon wrote, "The new

³⁹ Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 94.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Throughout their years of correspondence, Cannon and White frequently addressed each other as "darling" or "beloved." Poppy Cannon to Walter White, March 18, 1948, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 7, folder 228, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁴² Walter White to Poppy Cannon, February 5, 1949, Box 12, F. 113 and 114

⁴³ Resumé, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 37, Folder 382, p. 2, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

foods basically change not only *how we cook*, but *how we shop, how we plan and decorate our kitchens, how we manage our time, and how we order the other parts of our lives.*"⁴⁴ For many middle class women, these were not insignificant issues, and they listened to the expert, Poppy Cannon, who addressed them with unrelenting confidence and simplicity. In her approach to cooking, Poppy Cannon attempted to resolve the problems and tensions encountered by many middle-class Americans in the 1950s. With her unique synthesis of modern convenience and gourmet creativity, she offered an answer to critics of the mass consumer culture as well as the busy woman who needed a simple alternative to the classic cuisine, yet didn't want to sacrifice quality and artistry. According to Cannon, the words "can-opener" and "gourmet" were perfectly compatible, as were "domesticity" and "intellect," ideas that seemed antithetical to some of her contemporaries.⁴⁵ Cannon gave her friend and cookbook author Alice B. Toklas high words of praise for achieving the very balance that she promoted in her own cookbooks and articles: "At the same time an intellectual, an epicure and a practical cook, she can cook at the same high level of perfection as she talks and writes about food."⁴⁶ With her consistently optimistic spirit, Cannon believed that the modern could meld with the past, that the quotidian could be elevated to the high-brow, and the epicure translated for the everyday cook.

Cannon saw her cooking as relevant and even necessitated by the times in which she lived. She wrote, "Through a curious juxtaposition of influences—through wars, social upheavals, the disappearance of servants—the twentieth century has produced an epicure who is creator as well as critic. It has also produced a yearning and a need for a more intellectual approach to cooking."⁴⁷ This "intellectual approach" was key to Cannon and something she stressed in her cookbooks and articles. In her *Bride's Cookbook* (1954), Cannon instructed,

⁴⁴ Poppy Cannon, "The Modern Epicure," *House Beautiful*, May 1953, 167.

⁴⁵ Poppy Cannon, *The New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 1.

⁴⁶ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, vii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“Don’t check your brains at the kitchen door. The kind of thinking that gets you a raise or an A in English or Economics will stand you in very good stead when you cook. Taste your food analytically.”⁴⁸ At the time Cannon wrote, an unprecedented number of young women were getting married and learning how to cook for the first time. Also for the first time, many of them had at least a partial college education, making the transition from academic to domestic life a big adjustment. Cannon knew the situation of these housewives, and was able to articulate a message that was later taken up by Betty Friedan, albeit in a different tone. In her introduction to *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present* (1958), Cannon wrote:

“These women in America who are being forced willy-nilly into what might be the arid isolation of housework and child-raising . . . For it is not true that our modern mechanical appliances free women from domestic responsibilities. They help to make her more efficient but at the same time they load upon her more responsibilities, rather than fewer. They make it possible for her to do more and more. But more and more is being required of her.”⁴⁹

Cannon’s insight disproves the notion that the women writing domestic advice in the 1950s were somehow disconnected or dismissive of the real struggles of their female readers.

Friedan’s soapbox stand against modern domesticity was not an original epiphany, but rather an issue that women like Cannon had been grappling with for years. But instead of casting aside all facets of housewifery, Cannon chose to breathe new life and understanding into the art of cooking. Cannon reassured young brides that even with modern appliances and box mixes that required little preparation, their intelligence could be utilized even in the kitchen, making cooking a more rewarding experience without the stress.

Cannon’s insistence on knowing not only how to cook, but also about the food products themselves, was an integral part of her method. She recognized the impact of

⁴⁸ Poppy Cannon, *Bride’s Cookbook*, 165.

⁴⁹ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, ix.

cooking and eating on one's quality of life and insisted upon "connoisseurship" as opposed to "mindlessness" in the kitchen.⁵⁰ She wrote, "At this moment of history this is a matter of considerable significance, since millions of well educated persons, men and women, are faced especially in the United States with the need to do chores that could be dull and depressing or tremendously stimulating--depending on the point of view."⁵¹ Instead of rejecting domesticity and the accompanying activities such as cooking, Cannon told women and men to dig even deeper into the subject. She wanted them to develop a taste for food not only on a physical level, but also on an intellectual and emotional level. By using prepackaged goods as a convenient base for complex recipes, Cannon was then free to experiment and use her mind to look at food from other angles. What differentiated Cannon from other quick-cooking chefs was her promotion of knowledge of the industry but also food history and fine cuisine, which she insisted were perfectly compatible.

According to Cannon, being knowledgeable and taking an analytical approach to food was important for two reasons. First, it made for a well-informed consumer who truly knew what is and is not acceptable for a gourmet meal.

"It is no longer considered chic, charming, or 'intellectual' to be ignorant in the kitchen, but always there is the problem of time, the crowding of many varied interests. To the rescue comes the manufacturer of so-called ready-to-serve foods. Actually, at least in gourmet terms, they are not *quite* ready to serve, but they do provide the basis for any number of prideful, even complicated, specialties."⁵²

Knowing how to use ready-foods as a basis, as well as *which* brands and products possessed the necessary quality were important components of modern cooking that required "time, thought, and a vivid interest" in Cannon's mind.⁵³ To inform her readers Cannon made many

⁵⁰ Poppy Cannon, "Cooking is Culture, Too," *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 96.

⁵¹ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, ix.

⁵² Poppy Cannon, *New New Can Opener Cookbook*, 1

⁵³ Poppy Cannon, "How to be a Pace-setting Gourmet," *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 301.

suggestions. She compiled an exhaustive list entitled “Poppy Cannon’s Guide to the Bride on Buying Food” which consisted of specific products and brands for certain ingredients that she had tested while preparing her *Bride’s Cookbook*. Her goal was to inform her readers about every frozen, packaged, canned, or dried ingredient they might use. But she also insisted that there were “no commercial tie-ups” behind the generation of this list, despite her links to the industry.⁵⁴ To exercise the intellect in selecting quality food, Cannon encouraged readers to investigate and research grocery stores, markets, and farms in their own regions, and even to go abroad to find the perfect ingredients, the best coffee, the finest young vegetables, and the most flavorful chocolate. Hunting for quality food also applied to commercial food: “We believe that fine cooking requires fine ingredients. But when you investigate, you discover that the best industrial food products are made from materials as high as, or higher in quality than, the ‘fresh.’”⁵⁵ Cannon was not deluded or lacking a palette when she made this remark. Rather, she understood her audience—middle-class Americans who could not always obtain *foie gras*, truffles, or other fresh or specialty ingredients utilized in gourmet cuisine. Through her research, Cannon realized that successful substitutions could be found in industrial food.

However, Cannon was not some blind devotee to the industry, and often encouraged her readers to use a critical eye in cooking. She claimed to be truly selective in the ingredients she used and admitted when a packaged food could not be substituted for a fresh ingredient: “the modern epicure lets the quality of the food itself dictate the recipe and how it is to be used in the recipe.”⁵⁶ Using the example of strawberries, Cannon drew a distinction between juicy, fresh berries that should be served whole to showcase their superb flavor, and berries that were not at their peak and were better served sliced and stewed in a sugary sauce,

⁵⁴ “Guide to the Bride on Buying Food”, draft, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 325, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵⁵ Poppy Cannon, “The New Language of Garnishes,” *House Beautiful*, June 1954, 201.

⁵⁶ Poppy Cannon, “The Modern Epicure,” *House Beautiful*, May 1953, 163.

or baked in a pie.⁵⁷ Testing products, just as Cannon did when compiling her many cookbooks, was vital to a chef wanting to use worthy industrial foods in recipes.

Cannon recognized a potential problem in the consumer field despite its potential for good: the public's lack of trust in advertising and general ignorance of quality food products. In the mid-1950s, Cannon wrote the editors of *Reader's Digest*, suggesting that they maintain a team of experts to inform buyers about new, unfamiliar food products and to assign them ratings and critiques. Cannon saw *Reader's Digest* as a trustworthy platform that could provide "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" regarding not only books and plays, but food products as well, resulting in more confidence in the American commercial system.⁵⁸

Indeed, *Reader's Digest* seemed to have had significant influence on Cannon. Like the magazine's popular "condensed classics" series for middlebrow readers, Cannon served a cultural "translator" in cooking who "condensed" elements of high culture for middlebrow cooks. Cannon's cultural significance was great, if still largely unknown or underappreciated. Her culinary work bears comparison to the Book-of-the-Month Club or Book Reviews, where experts in the literature delivered advice and suggestions to the masses on worthy works of art. Cannon gave aspiring middle-class Americans the knowledge to eat and enjoy food like a modern gourmet as others were showing people what to read and watch in order to become cultured.

Cannon's 1957 article containing "Our List of Fifty Favorite Books About Food" provides perhaps the best illustration of her unique position in the world of food—both her similarities to other cultural advisors as well as her focus and accessible and attainable good

⁵⁷ Poppy Cannon, "Cooking is Culture, Too," *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 174.

⁵⁸ Poppy Cannon to Walter White, nd., Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 11, folder 86, p. 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

food.⁵⁹ In a world before Julia Child, the Food Network, or local cooking classes, cookbooks were the main and sole authorities on how to cook for those who couldn't afford to jet off to Paris. Cannon wrote, "For we are a generation of self-taught, consequently book-taught, cooks . . . Few have had instruction in gourmet cooking."⁶⁰ She knew the audience she was working with, and tailored her message to them. Instead of falling squarely within one culinary camp or the other, Cannon felt comfortable and confident providing a range of resources for her readers to draw upon.

This wide selection corresponded with her conviction about the importance of food, that it encompasses the entire range of human experiences. Her list of recommended cookbooks included classic French texts such as Brillat Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*, and *Larousse Gastronomique* (available only in French). Both were both highly esteemed in the minds of culinary giants such as M.F.K. Fisher. But she also showed her more down-to-earth side by including *The Home Book of French Cookery*, describing it as "Traditional French cooking of a simple and practical nature—delightful relief after so many books on high cuisine."⁶¹ Cannon did not try to condescendingly mold her readers into stuffy food critics, but she did want them to be able to appreciate food on a deeper level. In one of her earliest *House Beautiful* articles from 1953 she wrote about the importance of food "appreciation, shorn of snobbism."⁶² Always encouraging, Cannon never spoke down to her readers or presented gourmet goals as out of reach for the average person. Without Cannon's intermediary efforts aimed at a society in transition, the culinary revolution that occurred under Julia Child's instruction may not have happened on such a wide level, for people first needed to have the gourmet mindset and appreciation that individuals like Poppy Cannon were promoting already in the 1950s.

⁵⁹ Poppy Cannon, "How, Where and Why To Read a Cookbook," *House Beautiful*, February 1957, 90-92, 146-149.

⁶⁰ Poppy Cannon, "How, Where and Why To Read a Cookbook," *House Beautiful*, February 1957, 92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶² Poppy Cannon, "How to Be a Pace-Setting Gourmet," *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 267.

Like the literary critics who were instructing middle-class Americans on how to become well-read in the postwar era, Cannon wanted to make sure her readers understood the “canon” of culinary writing in order to be able to converse knowledgeably about the topic of food. In a 1957 article Cannon wrote, “No longer considered merely utilitarian or confined to the kitchen, cookbooks, new and old, can add much to the daily arts and joys of living.”⁶³ Again, Cannon called attention to the cultural implications of food. Yet this statement also symbolized her whole domestic approach and views on women living in a new, modern era. Just as she was comfortable incorporating industrial foods into classic gourmet recipes, so too she had no qualms about bringing domesticity into the “public sphere” and vice versa. She recognized that women were becoming a growing presence in the professional world outside of the home, yet she also wanted women to be justified in referencing topics such as cooking that were previously considered purely domestic or anti-intellectual. In her list of “Our Favorite Fifty Books About Food” she divided the cookbooks according to use or purpose, designating those to be read in bed, before travel, for discussion, in everyday use, or to simply keep in the living room. As her list shows, cookbooks, and by extension, the culture of food and domesticity rightly belonged in all areas of life and the home.

Other instructional writings on the selection of food were less restricted to her beloved convenience foods. In a 1955 *House Beautiful* piece entitled “Gourmet in the Garden,” Cannon advised, “If you want the best of eating, you must grow some vegetables.”⁶⁴ Throughout her long and influential career, Cannon worked for a balance on many fronts, including balancing the advantages of fresh ingredients when available with the convenience of canned and frozen food products used judiciously. In the same magazine, Cannon started a series of articles on wine and different types of alcoholic drinks, explaining not only how to select a good wine, but all of the history and the process of making a fine

⁶³ Poppy Cannon, “How, Where and Why To Read a Cookbook,” *House Beautiful*, February 1957, 90.

⁶⁴ Poppy Cannon, “Gourmet in the Garden,” *House Beautiful*, March 1955, 112.

wine or liquor. On the subject of selecting a wine, Cannon instructed readers to “sip in judgment.”⁶⁵ Just as she wanted aspiring cooks to be picky when choosing a brand of canned soup, Cannon wanted them to apply this same analysis and taste when enjoying the finer ingredients.

In a 1954 article, “Are Gourmets Born or Made?” Cannon offered “A Test for Tasters” so readers could judge how refined their palate was.⁶⁶ Fortunately for those who scored low, Cannon ensured them that through more intentional tasting and training they could also become “classic epicureans.”⁶⁷ It was imperative for Cannon that her “modern epicure” readers analyze their food and contribute the extra steps needed to set their food apart from the inelegant or tasteless food of the uninformed cook. She wrote, “No matter what it says on the package about ‘heat and serve,’ from the gourmet’s point of view, it may not be ready to serve. So taste, ponder, and perhaps then add the *little* connoisseur touches that make the *big* difference.”⁶⁸ Cannon left it up to the cook to “ponder” how she could employ all of her knowledge and skills to elevate the basic foods that were available. In this way, Cannon communicated to her audience of mostly white, middle-class women that they too could join the esteemed circle of gustatory critics who not only knew what good food consisted of, but where to buy and how to make it. And they could do all this without moving to Paris or New York. All they needed were some food columns found in popular women’s magazines, a few cookbooks available at bookstores everywhere, and the right state of mind in the kitchen—the willingness to experiment and to add a dash of flavor to otherwise bland convenience food products.

The second major reason that Poppy Cannon stressed intellect as a major component of her approach to cooking was because she found it essential to executing and enjoying not

⁶⁵ Poppy Cannon, “You are Drinking Stars,” *House Beautiful*, October 1955, 235.

⁶⁶ Poppy Cannon, “Are Gourmets Born or Made?” *House Beautiful*, August 1954, 77.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁸ Poppy Cannon, “What it Means to be a Modern Epicure,” *House Beautiful*, May 1953, 201.

only a pleasing meal, but a pleasing life. In *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*, a cookbook which she co-authored with Alice B. Toklas, Cannon wrote, “Unfortunately or perhaps fortunately not many women in the modern world are permitted the luxury of merely contemplating or enjoying good food without knowledge of how it is done. . . . Not only in eating but also in cooking the mind plays an important role.”⁶⁹ By understanding where a recipe or ingredient came from, its different uses and forms, or even how to properly select and use the many available electric appliances that were being produced abundantly in the 50s, women would produce better food—and even enjoy the process! One of Cannon’s fellow writers at *House Beautiful*, Mary Elizabeth Wiley, claimed in 1956, “The more you know, the more fascinating it becomes. It’s the minutiae, the subtleties, the fine points, that make fields like cooking so fascinating.”⁷⁰ By casting food preparation as a multi-faceted undertaking that involved knowledge and imagination, Cannon appealed both to the bored, desperate housewife and those who were seeking high culture.

One way Cannon accomplished the goal of using food as an outlet to the mind was through highlighting the historical and cultural connotations of food. In a 1956 article titled “Cooking is Culture, Too,” Cannon urged her readers to observe the stories that food tells—“how food expresses national and racial differences, how it reflect economic conditions.”⁷¹ The collaborative cookbook project on African-American recipes that Cannon and White worked on for years is an example of Canon’s interest in this subject. In a draft of the cookbook, tentatively titled *The Black Magic Cook Book*, Cannon described the project as “a study of American gusto and gestation and a record of the culinary achievements of colored cooks, both past and present.”⁷² In it Cannon looked at the different cultural influences of

⁶⁹ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, ix.

⁷⁰ Mary Elizabeth Wiley, “The Dilemma of Modern Woman is of her Own Making,” *House Beautiful*, August 1956, 94.

⁷¹ Poppy Cannon, “Cooking is Culture, Too,” *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 97.

⁷² *Black Magic Cookbook*, draft, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 323, p. 11, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

English, French and Spanish cuisine on popular Negro dishes, and also told the stories of the cooks and their dishes which were derived from the experiences and realities of slavery. This literary style of culinary research allowed her to exercise her deepest interests in writing as she employed food as a vehicle for understanding culture more deeply.

Another early example of Cannon's interest in the cultural connotations of food is found in a 1949 letter to her husband Walter White. In the letter Cannon discussed a project about the effects of war, famine and the Marshall Plan on international cuisine, citing her observations of Heinz ketchup and Spam being eaten alongside rice in Java as an example of changing tastes.⁷³ Her extensive travel abroad allowed her to see the variety of cuisine in other lands, and she encouraged others to "taste" their way across the globe.⁷⁴ She wrote, "You have not really experienced Barbados just because you have swum on its beaches. You should also have tasted its flying fish and dolphin steaks and dove peas too."⁷⁵ But she was also quick to encourage breaking free from the typical "continental" food travelers usually received from the eateries abroad and instead to explore the markets and bakeries and shops for the fresh, local cuisine that gives one a true sense of the area and its people.⁷⁶ This type of culinary and cultural expression filled a desire, especially of educated middle-class women who were exposed to an increasingly global community, to be knowledgeable about the diversity of culture around them. Being presented with new types and styles of cuisine allowed American women cooks to avoid what Cannon called cooking "clichés" and to cook and eat informatively and imaginatively. The notion that food initiated contact with new viewpoints and ideas mirrored others' attempts to provide cultural exposure via the Book of the Month Club or art exhibits. Ultimately, Cannon painted a convincing and desirable

⁷³ Poppy Cannon to Walter White, June 6, 1949, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 8, folder 229, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁷⁴ Poppy Cannon, "Cooking is Culture, Too," *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 97.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

picture of the “cultured cook” whose mind and food were both to be admired for breaking away from the typical, “mass” approach to cooking.

Poppy Cannon also approached food from a historical standpoint—what she dubbed as the “Taste-View of History.”⁷⁷ To Cannon, food was an “artifact,” a gustatory gateway to the past and all of its traditions that allows for bygone eras to be recreated in the present.⁷⁸ When viewed from this angle, Cannon saw food as “the most permanent of the arts” for the same food that “belonged on the tables of Colonial Williamsburg . . . belongs to us, too.”⁷⁹ In *House Beautiful* she shared the results of her research on topics such as pasta. Although some Americans knew only the soggy pasta that emerged from cans, Cannon told her readers that this grain had first come to America through the Columbian exchange between the Old World and the New World, and furthermore instructed them about how to prepare pasta correctly.⁸⁰ “[Pasta] is also food for the hungry mind and a spur to the active imagination,” she wrote confidently.⁸¹ Food, Cannon claimed, allowed one to experience culture and in effect, to ‘travel’ to other exotic, or past, locations without actually leaving the kitchen. Ultimately Cannon wanted readers to be able to use culinary knowledge to spark intellectual conversation on par with those who had knowledge of politics or the economy, a factor which would attract women who craved high-brow culture or felt stifled by their domestic lives.

Cannon repeatedly addressed American housewives, encouraging them to take an intellectual approach to cooking that would also cure their domestic boredom. In *Aromas and Flavors* she wrote, “Through the exercise of intellect—by paying more rather than less attention to domesticity we can make it more interesting and rewarding. . . . Exquisite and thoughtful cooking in the Alice B. Toklas tradition will not only exercise but also appeal to

⁷⁷ Poppy Cannon, “In These Always-Summer Islands—Always Find New Delights for your Table,” *House Beautiful*, July 1955, 167.

⁷⁸ Poppy Cannon, “Cooking is Culture, Too,” *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 97.

⁷⁹ Poppy Cannon, “You Can Eat Your Past and Have It Too,” *House Beautiful*, May 1957, 140.

⁸⁰ Poppy Cannon, “Pastas,” *House Beautiful* February 1954, 164.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

the mind. What is more, it lifts the heart and stimulates the spirit.”⁸² Some might have characterized cooking in the 1950s as an increasingly monotonous, thoughtless task in the age of the blender, the can, and the box mix. But by presenting it as a rewarding exercise and an element of high taste, Cannon offered women an opportunity to regain a sense of autonomy—even within the suburban kitchen.⁸³ Cannon saw gourmet cooking as providing an “instinctual release” and used it to present domesticity as a positive force in a woman’s life—one that could bring excitement, curiosity, and fulfillment if approached in the correct way.⁸⁴ One reader, a former philosophy professor turned mother and housewife, told Cannon that cooking “is my refuge . . . my link to the world of the mind . . .”⁸⁵ This is exactly the response Cannon was aiming for when, instead of focusing on the duties associated with cooking, she promoted “an element of joy,” telling women to turn their chores into art by cooking “what gives you pleasure . . . and leave undone, or get someone else to do, the tasks that bore you.”⁸⁶ Rather than insisting that women must be the sole caretakers of the home, Cannon told them to pursue what made them happy, just as she had done with her own life.

Cannon also appealed to the middlebrow sector by presenting food as an art form, an approach that she uniquely advanced and promoted in new ways with her focus on convenience food. Similar to the intellectual element, Cannon presented the creative element of cooking in a number of forms and for more than one reason. Again, she presented creativity as a way to spark interest and enjoyment in cooking. She wrote, “In many ways, making a menu is like writing a sonnet,” and compared a “pace-setting gourmet” to a fashion leader.⁸⁷ If women could see cooking as a creative enterprise, then it lost some of its banality. Recognizing the need for personality in cooking, Cannon wrote, “No matter how

⁸² Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, x.

⁸³ See T.J. Jackson Lears, “Mass Culture and Its Critics,” 1595.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Poppy Cannon, “What’s American about American Cooking? So much, so good—with so little time and work!” *House Beautiful*, November 1956, 329.

⁸⁶ Poppy Cannon, “The Art of the Table is the First Art,” *House Beautiful*, October 1954, 201.

⁸⁷ Poppy Cannon, “How to Be A Pace-Setting Gourmet,” *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 304; 505

carefully ingredients are measured, they must be combined with magic, imagination and inspiration in order to achieve the perfect blend of flavor.”⁸⁸ Downplaying the more arduous aspects of cooking, Cannon emphasized the need for an extra spark of creativity and individuality that would differentiate her food from the basic, bland processed foods.

To accomplish the extra pizzazz in cooking, Cannon advocated two things: drama and glamour. The easiest and most effective way to accomplish both of these things, in her mind, was through lighting something on fire or by adding a tasteful garnish. In the *Bride's Cookbook*, Cannon claimed that food tastes better if it looks pretty.⁸⁹ She especially thought that garnishes served an important role in the modern era of cooking with “standardized canned and frozen prepared foods, many of which are basically fine, but not too distinguished.”⁹⁰ Presentation was as important the food itself: “Much of the difference between just cooking and epicurean cooking is the *difference in the way the food is served*.”⁹¹ Instead of seeing food in terms of pure nutrition, Cannon saw mealtime as an experience that transcended mere calories and included the whole range of sensory experiences, a viewpoint that was more in line with French gastronomists than her American predecessors.

Cannon had many opinions on the presentation of food. In her *New New Can-Opener Cookbook* (1968), Cannon included a section after each recipe labeled “At Serving Time” which suggested how the cook should present the meal. Her tips included the temperature at which the food should be served, the types of dishes the hostess should use, and what garnishes should accompany the meal, such as a garland of green leaves to hide the edge of a Baked Alaska.⁹² The most exciting presentations, in Cannon’s mind, were when the hostess

⁸⁸ *Black Magic Cookbook*, draft, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 32, folder 323, p. 10, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁸⁹ Poppy Cannon, *Brides*, 149.

⁹⁰ Poppy Cannon, “The New Language of Garnishes,” *House Beautiful*, May 1954, 159.

⁹¹ Poppy Cannon, *The New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 228.

brought a beautiful dessert to the table, only to light it ablaze to the awe of her guests.⁹³ But above all, Cannon wanted her readers to be thoughtful and imaginative when incorporating “drama at the table.” In the same cookbook, Cannon wrote, “Do not be bound to tradition . . . Have the courage to use a pink plate perhaps on that deep green or red cloth.”⁹⁴ Cannon wanted her modern, gourmet cooking style to be seen as an artistic, explorative enterprise that wasn’t restricted by any of the traditional boundaries associated with cooking and entertaining. She portrayed herself as a pioneer who could help American middle-class women break the rules of tradition in order to find something that was more satisfying and fitting with their lifestyles.

Many times Cannon explicitly evoked artistic imagery when giving directions for cooking. Often she talked about the use of a variety of colors and contrasts and textures in food.⁹⁵ She called the commercial ready-foods “raw materials to be used by you in the creation of dishes of which the original manufacturer probably never dreamed, or does not talk about.”⁹⁶ Garnishes, spices, special ingredients, and a beautiful dish could all be used to add flavor and zest, and thus elevate the dish from mediocrity to a piece of art. Cannon spoke of the new “American epicurean renaissance” that married the best of the past with the modern convenience of the present.⁹⁷ She would take something as simple and easy as frozen orange juice and attempt to show her readers how to add “the gourmet touch” by adding fresh berries to the juice to “add a note of color and flavor and texture and contrast.”⁹⁸ Like an architect who remains true to his materials, Cannon warned that a chef must always remain true to his or her ingredients.⁹⁹ Bringing to mind the image of a blank canvas, Cannon again

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹⁴ Poppy Cannon, *The New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Poppy Cannon, “What it Means to be a Modern Epicure,” *House Beautiful*, May 1953, 201.

⁹⁷ Poppy Cannon, “A Meal that Waits on You,” *House Beautiful*, March 1954, 131.

⁹⁸ Poppy Cannon, “How to be a Pace-Setting Gourmet,” *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 301.

⁹⁹ Poppy Cannon, “How to be a Pace-Setting Gourmet,” *House Beautiful*, November 1953, 301.

used the language of art and culture and applied it to the most seemingly unworthy candidates—convenience foods.

Indeed, the simplicity and freedom offered by convenience foods provided the necessary conditions for women to become artists in the kitchen. She wrote:

“No longer plagued by kitchen-maid chores, which have been taken over by the food manufacturer, she soon becomes an artist at her stove, adept in the realms of cookless cookery, where a dash of herbs, a splash of wine, an unusual garnish, may lift the ready soup...”¹⁰⁰

Cannon saw modern cooking techniques as helps on the pathway to gourmet status for the modern woman now freed from the time-consuming chores of old-style culinary practices. She referred to the can-opener as the “*open sesame* to wealth and freedom,” again associating a commercial object to the very things that many middle class women wanted—inclusion in high society and freedom from an average, bland existence.¹⁰¹ In no other place did Cannon more clearly show her indebtedness to the food industry as in her 1955 column with the arresting title, “Dear Food Industry—I Love You.” Here, Cannon addressed the industry and thanked it for making her feel like a “queen” and for “collecting European recipes for me, made them so easy and tucked them into my flour bags.”¹⁰² But at the same time, she blamed the industry for its mediocrity, and provided specific ways to improve its products. Much of her critique focused on the flavorings of premade goods. She wrote, “All those herb blends for instance... I tire of the sameness.” And she asked pointedly, “Could you be more sparing with the salt?”¹⁰³ Here as elsewhere she expressed her thanks for the food industry’s doing the drudge work of cutting, washing, and simmering. This allowed her to season and garnish,

¹⁰⁰ Poppy Cannon, *Brides*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Poppy Cannon, “You are Richer and Freer- than you Think,” *House Beautiful*, June 1953, 115.

¹⁰² Poppy Cannon, “Dear Food Industry—I Love You,” *House Beautiful*, January 1955, 75-76, 102.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 102.

to throw herself into “the fun of creation” and the adding of gourmet touches.¹⁰⁴ In this “love letter,” Cannon critiqued some of the masscult features of the food industry—that which appealed “to the *average palate* (that much-maligned and underestimated unknown quantity which haunts and hog-ties the average manufacturer),” and by doing so she elevated her own cooking in the minds of her readers.¹⁰⁵ Any person with the ability to follow simple directions could make an average meal from cans, but Cannon inspired her readers to do more, to go beyond the ordinary with a few simple steps in order to enter the realm of the gourmet.

Cannon constantly defended her tactic of synthesizing gourmet and shortcut methods from more traditionalist and haute cuisine critics. She remembered her first meeting with Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein’s roommate and a notable cook in her own right who meticulously followed the classic French cooking techniques. She later recounted, “Between speed and ease and excellence there could be, [Alice] felt, no possible connection. All processed or prepared foods, canned, packaged or (horror of horrors!) frozen, were to be regarded not only with suspicion but disdain.”¹⁰⁶ Toklas’ reaction (certainly shared by Gertrude Stein) represented those who saw any convenience foods whatsoever as a damning indictment of an unrefined, lower-class palate with no knowledge or respect of classic cuisine. Even now, it’s easy to demean the type of cooking Cannon did if one does not understand the context in which she was cooking and her well-qualified approach. However, even Toklas later admitted to her love of some of Cannon’s modern methods. She wrote a note thanking Poppy for the blender she sent, calling it “a third untiring arm” that had “revolutionized kitchen work.”¹⁰⁷ Remarkably, the high culture devotee, Alice Toklas, even said that Poppy Cannon’s blender had made a marvelous centerpiece for her table! No

¹⁰⁴ Poppy Cannon, “Dear Food Industry—I Love You,” *House Beautiful*, January 1955, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Poppy Cannon, *New New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Alice B. Toklas to Poppy Cannon, October 13, 1954, Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Box 11, f. 98, p. 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

greater accomplishment in marrying haute cuisine with convenience and technology can even be imagined.

Despite her love of Poppy Cannon's blender, Alice Toklas did not always approve of Cannon's additions to the *Aromas and Flavors* cookbook, such as the suggestions to substitute canned soups as bases for delicate French sauces. In one of Toklas' recipes for Vegetable Cornets, Cannon added, "Despite her lightly veiled disdain of deep-freeze vegetables, I have a feeling that Miss Toklas would approve of frozen artichoke hearts. They are very convenient to use in this recipe."¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, Cannon wrote in a joking conspiratorial tone next to a recipe for Onion Soup, "Consider that this is said in a whisper: You can use Miss Toklas' ideas even though you resort to canned or packaged dehydrated onion soup."¹⁰⁹ Cannon apparently saw no contradiction or distinction between these "translations" from old, classic methods, to new, modernized "gourmet" techniques. She compared her interpretations of recipes to the "transposing" from one language to another or the musician's transposing from one key to another.¹¹⁰ To be sure, Cannon's cooking mentality was more nuanced than a simple carte blanche substitution for all difficult or exotic methods. In keeping with her commitment to the artistry of cooking, she insisted that shortcuts that "compromise quality" of the food are never acceptable to a true "artist."¹¹¹ If given the choice between a high quality fresh item and its canned counterpart, Cannon surely would have preferred the fresh, but in a pinch, or when pressed for time, as she usually was, she found ways to imitate the classic recipes with what she had available to her, and instructed her readers how to do the same. Through her culinary stance Cannon demonstrated that women could find fulfillment in the home without having to sacrifice their lives outside of the home in order to perform acts of domesticity.

¹⁰⁸ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Poppy Cannon, *Aromas*, 75.

¹¹⁰ Poppy Cannon, "Cooking is Culture, Too," *House Beautiful*, September 1956, 97.

¹¹¹ Poppy Cannon, "The Art of the Table is the First Art," *House Beautiful*, October 1954, 265.

It is difficult to analyze Poppy Cannon in her own right and to evaluate her legacy. The two subjects on which she wrote the most, gourmet cuisine and the role of domesticity in a woman's life, were later taken up by two mega-stars of the 1960s: Julia Child and Betty Friedan. Although they took their own distinct approaches to these subjects, it's evident that they at least partly built on a foundation laid by Poppy Cannon. But this has been largely forgotten today when Poppy Cannon is either ignored or lumped together with the rest of the ladies magazine crowd of the 1950s. In one of the few accounts of Cannon, Laura Shapiro condescendingly writes, "Like the '50s themselves, Poppy Cannon left the wrong legacy."¹¹² However, the time has come to question the truth of this statement. Cannon's skill, ambition, and creativity—even in the terms set by cuisine and feminism—reveal a different and intriguing side of both Poppy Cannon individually and of the thousands of women who read her during the 1950s. Poppy Cannon showed women, aspiring cooks, and the rising middle class how to appreciate and create gourmet food that would fit their lifestyles. She brought dignity and excitement to the kitchen and inspired her many readers to do more than dump a can of soup into the bowl.

Poppy Cannon always stuck by her "can-opener gourmet" motto, but she qualified her approach by introducing intellect and creativity into the mix. Far from being snobbish, Cannon's sometimes snarky and sarcastic critiques of her high society gourmet peers spoke volumes of her own humility and ability to adapt. In 1956 she spoke of her unique, blended kitchen philosophy, writing, "In this amalgamation, something new has been created. We have inherited the whole world—and we have made of our inheritance a new, lively and astonishingly wise cuisine."¹¹³ Confidently combining do-ability with a flair for the gourmet, Cannon opened a new chapter in American culinary history—a chapter of cultural transition

¹¹² Laura Shapiro, *Something From the Oven*, 127.

¹¹³ Poppy Cannon, "What's American about American Cooking? So much, so good—with so little time and work!" *House Beautiful*, November 1956, 342.

which eventually led to the culinary and social reforms of Julia Child and Betty Friedan in the 1960s. So despite the observation of Julie Powell's character in *Julie and Julia*, the historical and cultural contributions of Poppy Cannon, and indeed, the 1950s in general, range far beyond mere "frozen food and can openers and marshmallows."

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Cannon, Poppy. *A Gentle Knight: My Husband, Walter White*. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1956.
- "A Meal that Waits on You." *House Beautiful*. March 1954, 130-131, 143-45.
- "Are Gourmets Born or Made?" *House Beautiful*. August 1954, 76-77, 100-101.
- "Cooking is Culture, Too." *House Beautiful*. September 1956, 96-97, 174-175.
- "Dear Food Industry—I Love You." *House Beautiful*. January 1955, 75-76, 102.
- "Eat and Run." *Mademoiselle*. October 1944, 42.
- "Gourmet in the Garden." *House Beautiful*. March 1955, 112-113, 157-159.
- "How to Be a Pace Setting Gourmet." *House Beautiful*. November 1953, 264-267, 301-306, 309.
- "How, Where and Why to Read a Cookbook." *House Beautiful*. February, 1957, 90-92, 146-149.
- "In These Always-Summer Islands—Always Find New Delights for your Table." *House Beautiful*. July 1955, 116-117, 167-168.
- "Open a Can and Make Yourself Famous for Good Texas Food." *House Beautiful*. October 1953, 223-225, 241.
- "Pastas." *House Beautiful*. February 1954, 164-166.
- *Poppy Cannon's Brides Cookbook*. 1954; repr., New York: Paperback Library, 1970.
- "The Art of the Table is the First Art." *House Beautiful*. October 1954, 201, 265-266, 269-270.
- *The New New Can-Opener Cookbook*. 3rd ed. 1951; reprint, New York: Crowell Co., 1968.
- "The Modern Epicure." *House Beautiful*. May 1953, 161.
- "The New Language of Garnishes." *House Beautiful*. May 1954, 158-161, 228-229.
- "You are Drinking Stars." *House Beautiful*. October 1955, 214, 231-235.
- "What it Means to be a Modern Epicure." *House Beautiful*. May 1953, 162-167, 201-203.
- "What's American about American Cooking? So much, so good—with so little time and work!" *House Beautiful*. November 1956, 266-268, 329, 338-342.
- "You are Richer and Freer- than you Think." *House Beautiful*. June 1953, 115-117, 165.
- "You Can Eat Your Past and Have It Too." *House Beautiful*. May 1957, 140-141.
- Toklas, Alice B. *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*. With Introduction and Comments by Poppy Cannon. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958.
- Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- Wiley, Mary Elizabeth. "The Dilemma of Modern Woman is of her Own Making." *House Beautiful*. August 1956.

Secondary Sources

- Adams, Amy. Scene 4. *Julie and Julia*. Directed by Nora Ephron. New York: Columbia Pictures, 2009. DVD.
- Barr, Nancy Verde. *Backstage with Julia: My Years with Julia Child*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008.
- Child, Julia, Louissette Bertholle, and Simone Beck. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961.
- Diggins, John Patrick. *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960*. New York: Norton & Co, 1988.
- Fitch, Noel Riley. *Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child*. New York: Random House, 1999.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963; Reprint. New York: W.W. Norton 1997.
- Halliwell, Martin. *American Culture in the 1950s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Hansen, Peter. "Mass Culture." In *A Companion to American Thought*. Edited by Richard Wightman Fox & James T. Kloppenberg. 435- 436. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Lears, T..J. Jackson. "Mass Culture and Its Critics." In *Encyclopedia of American Social History*. Vol. 3. Edited by Mary Cayton, Elliott Gorn, and Peter W. Williams. 1595-1599. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1993.
- MacDonald, Dwight. *Against the American Grain*. 1952; reprint, New York: Random House. 1962.
- Norton, Mary Beth, Carol Sheriff, David W. Blight, Howard P. Chudacoff, Frederik Logevall, and Beth Bailey. *A People, A Nation, Volume II: Since 1865*. 9th ed. Stamford, CT: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012.
- Rubin, Joan Shelley. "Middlebrow Culture." In *A Companion to American Thought*. Edited by Richard Wightman Fox & James T. Kloppenberg. 435- 436. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- . *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 1992.
- Shapiro, Laura. *Julia Child: a Life*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007.
- . *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Strauss, David. *Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934-1961*.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.