

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

The Food Section: Newspaper Women and the Culinary Community

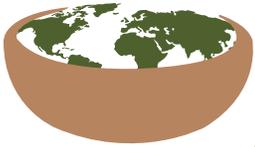
Kimberly Wilmot Voss. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Pp. 252, bibliography, index.

By: Cynthia Boyd

The Food Section: Newspaper Women and the Culinary Community, by Kimberly Wilmot Voss, is an in-depth analysis of women's experiences as food writers and editors of mid-20th century American newspapers. This book documents the impact these women writers had on the domestic lives of women readers and their families through the suggested tips and recipes found within food section pages of newspapers. Food enthusiasts, cookbook specialists, and researchers will find *The Food Section* a terrific compilation and invaluable resource.

Author Kimberly Wilmot Voss, an associate professor and area coordinator of Journalism in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, has searched through hundreds of newspapers, investigating the life and work of over 60 women journalists who wrote countless articles and columns devoted to food between 1945 and 1975. These relatively unknown women were the "blog writers" of their day, whose tireless devotion to their craft—writing about food and inventing recipes that often educated women and their families on how to eat nutritious meals with cost-saving measures built in—was accomplished without access to the internet. Voss recognizes just how thorough these women were in writing and researching food and recipes, leaving readers to ask: how did they do it?

Voss divides her book into seven sections: "The Origins of Food Journalism in US Newspapers," "Food and Food Journalism during and after World War II," "Food Journalism and the Rise of Consumer Activism," "Cookbooks,

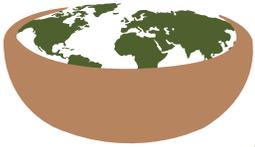


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Exchanging Recipes, and Competitive Cookery,” “Home Economics: The Study and Practice of Domestic Science in Food Journalism,” “Restaurant Reviewer as Journalist,” and “The Death of the Women’s Pages: A Changing Industry and the Legacy of the Great Food Editors.” Voss has produced a lively and intricate history of women’s writing influences on food journalism, but some sections in the book overlap and occasionally repeat—not surprising with such an extensive overview of so many women food journalists and their work. According to Voss, the mid-20th century in American newspaper history saw budding women journalists find their voice in “the food section,” in what has often been referred to as “soft news.” Here, women writers were given free rein to recommend and suggest the kinds of meals, dinner menus, and themed food parties that a predominantly female audience would be keen to emulate in their own homes or those of friends and family. As Voss indicates, “the food sections of newspapers reflected gender roles, health standards, and governmental policies about food in a community” (13). Notably, women writing about food, whether in local or national newspapers, reflected changing demographics in many cities in the United States. One case in particular was food editor Jeanne Voltz of the *Los Angeles Times* who introduced readers to Chinese cooking, a novel idea in the late 1960s (13-14). As Voss notes, Voltz recognized the impact of immigrants on the “new” communities in which they brought, and inevitably shared, their rich and varied food traditions.

For many food researchers, historians, and folklorists, Voss’s chapter dedicated to “cookbooks, exchanging recipes, and competitive cooking” is a treasure trove of information particularly involving the early history of regional food cookbooks, celebrity chefs and their cookbooks, and food journalists’ own cooking publications. Especially interesting is Voss’s brilliant discovery of individual journalists who became well-known cookbook writers because they began editing and/or writing for local newspapers. One such writer, Peg Bracken, became a household name in the 1960s because she wrote a cookbook addressing the needs of working women who complained of balancing their professional lives with their lives at home. Bracken was working as an advertising copywriter when her witty and eminently useful, *The I Hate to Cook Book*, helped land her a job as a newspaper food columnist (not to mention contracts for additional cookbooks following the success of her first) (93-94). This copywriter, turned cookbook author, turned newspaper food journalist, is



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just one of many food writers whom Voss examines with an investigative eye.

Voss includes a useful biographical addendum in *The Food Section* that provides information on each of the women newspaper writers she discusses. The book also contains extensive notes for individual chapters, an exhaustive bibliography, and a detailed index. I warmly recommend *The Food Section: Newspaper Women and the Culinary Community* to historians, folklorists, gender studies scholars, and especially to academic and public librarians who might like to add the volume to their cookbook collections.