

NEW COOKBOOKS FOR THE NEW COUNTRY: LATVIAN NATIONAL CUISINE IN THE MAKING

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Abstract

The concept of national cuisine is inextricably linked to national consciousness and the formation of national states. While there are many ways in which national cuisine can be represented in culture, the written depiction in cookbooks will be studied in this article. A specific period in Latvian history has been chosen for this purpose: the interwar period following the establishment of the Latvian State. The example of Latvia demonstrates that national cuisine is a set of defined and standardized principles that reflect distinct socioeconomic circumstances as well as State's views and interests.

Keywords: *national cuisine, Latvian cuisine, history of cookbooks.*

“We need to view cookbooks in the contemporary world as revealing artifacts of culture in the making.” states Arjun Appadurai in his remarkable article “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India” [Appadurai 1988: 22]. Cookbooks explain the social and cultural history, document and even encourage changes in ideas and values since their authors want to persuade readers to do appropriate actions, and readers want to know what is expected of them. Cookbooks as instruction manuals are a component of the culture-making process, which should not be seen as haphazard or free-standing, but rather as purposeful and representative of social groups' interests. National cuisine is a prominent example of cookbooks' potential to impact contemporary thought since it is an intentional process of developing new culinary culture rather than just textual documentation of always-existing local recipes.

In this paper, I examine Latvian cookbooks from independence in 1918 to the Second World War, when national cuisine is most likely to emerge. I suggest that new types of cookbooks were created during this time to build written cuisine rooted in local conditions and ideas, distinguishing it from previous colonial contexts.

Introduction

Latvian cookbooks have their origins in printed recipe compilations aimed at the Baltic German ruling class. In the 18th century, Baltic nobility enjoyed European cuisine, and German cookbooks printed in Europe were used in many households to set the table according to their social status and ambitions [Dumpe 1999]. The necessity to translate cookbooks into Latvian arose since most cooks in Baltic German manors were Latvians who could read but not in German. It improved cooks' education because, at the time, cuisine had gotten increasingly intricate, making memorizing recipes and cooking processes difficult [Proveja 2012]. In 1795, the first Latvian cookbook was printed. This cookbook and subsequent Latvian cookbooks published during the 19th century mostly consisted of Western European recipes since the social elite was not interested in local traditions [Daija 2018]. The Latvian upper and middle class was more interested in imitating the elite. As a result, local cuisine was rarely documented in Latvian cookbooks until the turn of the twentieth century.

Traditional Latvian cuisine was first chronicled in 1893 in the periodical "Dienas Lapa" and afterward in ethnographic works. During the 1920s and 1930s, traditional customs and practices were extensively chronicled and published. However, when ethnographic recipes are compared to recipes in cookbooks from the same time, it becomes apparent that peasant and manor cuisines exist separately. Furthermore, upper-class Latvians wanted to replicate the Baltic German elite's practices to gain social respect and abandon peasant customs.

However, the social power relations changed after the First World War when an independent state of Latvia was established in 1918. The Baltic Germans were not the ruling elite anymore, although they kept some economic power still. National ideology, particularly after introducing the authoritative regime in 1934, gained approval in the newly established country. Consequently, in many areas of everyday life, such as clothing, interior, and housing, national motifs were highlighted, and cuisine was no exception. As shown in several studies [see Cusack 2000; Appadurai 1988], the making of national cuisine is integrated with nation-building and the construction of national identity. Latvian national awareness was present in public discourse already before the idea of the national State. The use of myths and symbols in cultural and everyday contexts reinforced the national idea [Zelče 2020]. National symbols were used in everyday situations – advertising, media, handicraft, decorating, and art – in the 1920s and 1930s, influencing aesthetic philosophy [Bīne 1938]. Consequently, it is worth investigating whether the national concept also appeared in cookbooks and what features were obvious in the creation of national cuisine.

National cuisine in the making

The formation of national cuisine in various countries of the world is linked to nationalism and the struggle for national independence. Many vivid examples of national cuisines are found in the imperialist Europe of the 19th century, when powerful nations such as British, French [Trubek 2000], Italians, Spanish [Anderson 2009], and Danish [Gold 2007], formulated their national cuisines to separate themselves from rivals and strengthen the people's sense of belonging to the nation. Elsewhere in the world, in the context of post-colonialism, the process took place later. For example, Indian regional cuisines were merged into a single national cuisine and recorded in cookbooks only in the 1980s [Appadurai 1988], whereas various African cuisines were represented as national and were fixed in writing in the 1990s [Cusack 2000]. An interesting case study in Belize is documented by Wilk, where he demonstrates how national cuisine relates to national consciousness, strengthens the sense of belonging, and fulfils with content the nation's political framework [Wilk 1999].

From political science, Ichijo and Ranta [2015] conclude that the national cuisine is construed not only on the unofficial/bottom-up level, but also on official/top-down level. In particular, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes tend to form a controlled national cuisine and distinguish it from others by using opposition 'our' and 'non-our', especially in economic and political interests, which manifests as propaganda for local products and producers. Based on case analysis carried out in different countries covering different periods, Ichijo and Ranta claim that "what is often referred to and considered as national cuisine is more often than not a top-down construction based on the needs of the state" [Ichijo, Ranta 2015: 106]. The formation of national cuisine is not always explicit; more often, the transformations are reasoned with science or modernization. The State has institutions and instruments that enable principles of national cuisine to be successfully implemented, such as the army or schools, and the media – cookbooks, and magazines addressed to women, which promote and disseminate ideas on people's diet. Therefore, creating a national cuisine does not mean recording the existing dietary habits but selecting recipes from an existing set to pursue the interests of the group in power.

Traditional cuisines are based in a certain location and, as a result, contain items grown there. On the other hand, modern cuisines are by definition modern, and they are open to culinary imports [see Ferguson 2010]. It indicates that, while local goods are an important aspect of national cuisine, they are not required. The inclusion of local items in cookbooks serves a purpose. Local items are frequently considered when nationalism is expressed in European cookbooks in the 1920s and 1930s. Governments encouraged citizens to use less imported goods and more domestic products during this global economic crisis. The health and nutritional aspects of national food are also highlighted as being beneficial to residents.

Culinary nationalization is, by nature, a textual phenomenon. In contrast to traditional cuisines, whose recipes were passed from generation to generation, for cuisine to become a symbol of a nation, it had to become widely known, provided by written records, and disseminating these texts. Therefore, through the publications of recipes and cookbooks, it was possible to form a nation as a community whose representatives shared culinary values and tastes.

It should be noted that the role of cookbooks in forming a national cuisine is twofold. First, as a compilation of printed texts, they formalize the national cuisine by recording a certain repertoire of recipes. Second, cookbooks also have a didactic and inspiring function [Ferguson 2010]. They show the lifestyle of upper social classes and encourage readers to imitate them to create an idea of higher social status. Therefore, cookbooks can be used to disseminate ideas: what they describe gives rise to a desire to adopt this as a good example, which might have a direct impact on the life of the reader. Thus, cookbooks have become an indispensable tool in creating national cuisine because they record certain standards and motivate people to live by them.

Cookbooks have consolidating power; they dissolve social boundaries, promote social mobility, and integrate regional cuisines to create a united national cuisine [Appadurai 1988]. Appadurai uses contemporary Indian cuisine as an example to examine the mechanism of constructing national identity with the help of cookbooks. Firstly, the historical culinary tradition is chosen as a metonym for all national cuisine, for example, spices as the building block of Indian cuisine. The use of the metonym helps to bound together regional recipes and present them as different sides of common culinary tradition. Secondly, to ensure the viability of the traditional recipes in the contemporary context, they are modernized by integrating new technologies and nutritional information. Finally, a standardized repertoire is developed through repeating recipes in cookbooks, and regional and even social disparities are merged in one common concept of local food. Inner differences are levelled in this way, and the food is presented as distinct from other cuisines [Appadurai 1988: 18–21].

Cookbook authors represent a specific social group, and as a result, the cookbook's content is shaped to reflect the group's interests. Notaker looked at cookbooks from many countries in the 19th century. He noticed that the recipes were frequently from the dominant culture of earlier rulers or modern industrialized countries in Western Europe, because the authors represented the elite and were unconcerned about the plain, public diet [Notaker 2017]. For example, in the 19th century, when Mexico gained independence from Spanish rule, the political elite saw European culture as grounds on which Native Americans and the former Spanish ruling class could form a united Mexican identity. Therefore, in cookbooks, continental dishes were

emphasized while indigenous – ignored. Only 20th-century cookbooks recognized indigenous dishes as part of the national cuisine, and the authenticity of local food was more and more discussed. Despite the simplicity of indigenous dishes, they “demonstrate a nation’s cultural autonomy, and this distinctiveness, in turn, justifies its claims to political sovereignty” [Pilcher 1996: 2016].

To examine whether in comparable conditions – when an independent state is founded, and national concepts are common – in Latvian cookbooks, the making of national cuisine might be observed, in this paper, three aims are addressed: 1) to analyse the joint characterization of the cookbooks of the period; 2) to examine interwar cookbooks to identify how they relate to the cookbooks of the previous periods, whether there are any similarities or salient differences; 3) to study whether any features of national cuisine are included.

Materials and methods

Thirty cookbooks issued between 1795 and 1940 were reviewed¹ and three distinct periods with common characteristics established: cookbooks for the Baltic German manors, cookbooks for aspiring Latvian upper middle class, and cookbooks of national cuisine (see Table 1). According to the aims of this article, I will not delve into previous periods and use the information only for context.

Additionally, it became noticeable that the cookbooks of the 1930s were different from the cookbooks published in the 1920s, when most of the cookbooks were reprints of pre-war issues or booklets reflecting post-war shortages.

Table 1

| Period | 1795–1914 | 1918–1929 | 1930–1940 |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Cookbooks published | 23 | 18 | 60 |

Therefore, only cookbooks from the 1930s were chosen for further analysis as they focused on the interwar period’s current reality. For further study, nine cookbooks from the 1930s were chosen (see Sources). From the selection the cookbooks devoted to specific topics were excluded and several editions of the title or multiple books by the same author were considered important factors for the selection. To analyse the material, I chose to combine methodology. The purpose of content analysis was to give more focus to the ingredients and dish names. The approach to the book illustrations was based on visual semiotics. A close reading of introductions of the cookbooks helped to understand the author’s views, intentions, and attitude towards the audience.

¹ I assessed the corpus of published cookbooks using the digital database of the Latvian National Library’s collection.

Characteristics of the cookbooks of the 1930s

The selected cookbooks share similar characteristics. The most defining aspects of the cookbooks have been studied, with special attention paid to the titles and authors of the publications, the illustrations and overall content, and the included recipes in particular.

The adjectives *new*, *modern*, and *reformed* appear in the titles of the cookbooks. Such titles reveal the authors' ambition to create a new type of cuisine while also invalidate prior gourmet traditions. This claim is backed up by cookbook introductions, such as this one: "*The immediate responsibility of every housewife is to audit and reform the basics of their current culinary art and ways of action in the kitchen as soon as possible, keeping only recipes that are appropriate for the new dietetics requirements*" [Āriņa 1935]. It is also worth noting how the titles all refer to local cuisine in a certain respect. While the term *national* is not used, other terms such as *Latvian*, *local*, and *folk* are used to emphasize the cuisine of indigenous people rather than Baltic German or Western European cuisines.

The cookbooks contain basic information on the writers. The major facts could be gathered from the author-written introductions in all of the books studied. Data from other published sources were added to this. Most of the authors have one commonality: they were all home economics educators by diploma or practice. Marija Feldmane, for example, has run a home economics school since 1929 and self-published the majority of her books. She wrote eight cookbooks in the 1930s, some of which were reissued, devoted to vegetarian food, celebratory meals, desserts, and preserves. Her cookbooks were used as teaching aids for her students as well as promotional materials for the institution.

A substantial percentage of cookbook authors of the time were graduates of the Kaucminde Home Economics Seminary (1923–1943), which was the only school in Latvia where the highest level of home economics education could be obtained, and which qualified graduates to teach home economics, with nearly 40 percent choosing this profession [Ozoliņa-Ķeņģe, Auziņa-Smith 1989]. They founded the Alumni Association, and their work was meticulously documented, including a bibliography. Standardized Latvian cuisine emerged as a result of their efforts, particularly individually and collaboratively published cookbooks.

The writing style, structural concepts, consistent vocabulary, and precisely structured and accurate recipes were all comparable in their cookbooks. Also, the recipe selection was comparable; the same dishes are frequently found in multiple volumes. Standardization, as well as a common understanding of contemporary gastronomy, are crucial components of national cuisine. The ideological component of home economics education in the 1930s is also worth emphasizing. Since the government funded it, Kaucminde Home Economics Seminary, like many other home economic institutions, was under contract with the government. After the

authoritarian regime was formed in 1934, classes on national ideology and patriotic education were added to the curriculum. In addition, more lessons were devoted to folk art and culture. At the same time, culinary classes focused on traditional Latvian cuisine and the use of local products [see Vilcāne 2016; Ozoliņa-Keņģe, Auziņa-Smith 1989]. As a result, the importance of the Kaucminde Home Economics Seminary in the development of Latvian national cuisine should not be underestimated.

Other aspects of the cuisine-making process could be derived from the author's educational background. To begin with, the instructional tone, which differed from prior cookbooks' collegial tone, was intended for fellow cooks. Second, the content was organized methodically, making it easier to find recipes in the book. Third, recipes were written in a more precise language. The words *make it till it is ready* were commonly used in the previous period, but in the 1930s cookbooks, descriptions of cooking temperature and time are given, ingredients are listed separately from cooking processes, and explanations are presented in a step-by-step method. Therefore, because the authors were home economics educators, the cookbooks of the 1930s were accessible to a wider audience, and they were useful not just for professional cooks but also for beginners.

In the 1930s, cookbooks became increasingly encyclopaedic, and their content expanded to include nutrition, kitchen design, tableware suggestions, and hygiene and safety instructions. At the time, nutritional data was also used as a justification for revising the cuisine. Basic explanations of the direct impact of food consumption on human health and work performance were provided. More thorough information on metabolic processes, tables of complex calculations for balanced dietary planning, and even detailed food chemistry data with charts. The term *healthy diet* was coined as people became more aware of the importance of vitamins.

The new cookbooks demonstrate that the former spirit of gourmet food and its consumption has disappeared, and rational considerations, such as how food affects the body have taken priority. As cited in one cookbook of the 1930s:

The nation begins to pay more attention to good nutrition preparation as it strives to become more cultured. By proper nutrition preparation, the vast majority understands simply the preparation methods that make the nourishment seem appealing and taste delicious. These are unquestionably good needs, but others are more significant, such as the number of nutrients and their benefits, the method of food preparation and how much time it requires, and the benefits of plant and animal nutrients [Suta 1930].

While more emphasis is given to cuisine's rational and practical aspects, attitudes toward food presentation and decoration shifted. As a result, the authors of cookbooks question the customs of prior eras, urging them to be reconsidered:

When it comes to plate decoration, keep in mind that the goal is to increase the spectators' appetites, so only edible items should be used. We are presenting bad evidence about the level of civilization of our guests by putting fried bird feathers stuck into the bread crust and adding the stuffed head of the bird because we believe that the sight of a live bird, as in the Middle Ages, could stimulate appetite and encourage the desire to taste such an arrangement. We have long since gotten away from such a rudimentary understanding of nutrition because we are not persuaded to eat a chicken or a hen as soon as they cross the yard [Kņeģe, Viksne 1930].

In the modern period, it was generally recommended only to decorate food with edible materials. The goal of the decoration was not only aesthetic but rational: to stimulate appetite and thus ensure better food digestion. However, some authors were adamantly opposed to the aesthetic standards of the past. Overall, compared to earlier cookbooks, these new cookbooks highlighted a more economical, simple, and everyday cuisine, as they were directed at women who prepared without the assistance of skilled employees. The content also demonstrates a shift in attitude: exotic ingredients were replaced with more widely accessible local alternatives, and cooking processes became less time-consuming because of simplified technologies. This impacted the recipe repertoire, as many dishes from the previous cookbooks were no longer appropriate, and new recipes were created, many of which included remnants of Latvian peasant food.

Simple indigenous food recipes have been passed down through the generations in oral form, and cookbooks did not appear until the early twentieth century. Because the recipes were documented in ethnographic materials in regional variations with regional names, often in dialect, some of the peasant dishes may not be identified at first glance by checking merely the titles of recipes. As a result, these dishes were given descriptive names in cookbooks, and the regional distinctiveness was lost.

Furthermore, traditional peasant recipes were frequently given their section in cookbooks. The fact that they were not grouped in the cookbook structure, which represented the menu sequence, could indicate both the special representative function of these dishes and the authors' uncertainty about whether these simple dishes could be incorporated into modern menus. It is advised that peasant dishes be served on special occasions, and it is encouraged to offer them specially – in traditional Latvian pottery or wicker baskets, with a linen tablecloth. Such a distinctively framed reference addresses the nation's shared past to peasant life. Furthermore, because rituals are common for festive celebrations and these actions are repeated year after year, the table of special occasions has a unique role in strengthening particular culinary traditions.

Propaganda cookbooks also contribute to the establishment of Latvian cuisine's repertory. They are frequently devoted to specific products, such as milk, sugar,

and sea fish. In contrast to previous more sophisticated cookbooks, they primarily comprised simple, local recipes such as soups, stews, porridges, and simple bakes. The widespread promotion of local beet sugar prompted an increase in the number of dessert recipes, with special dessert cookbooks being developed as a consequence.

To summarize, the period's new products and, consequently, new dishes represented a simpler and more accessible cuisine, with attempts to use indigenous foods as inspiration for local cuisine or to include peasant dishes in festive menus. Overall, these cookbooks were not aimed at the wealthy elite but rather at the general public, with easy to prepare recipes.

By explaining of borrowed culinary terms for culinary procedures and dishes, cookbooks from the 1930s played a key contribution in developing standardized Latvian culinary vocabulary. However, the tendency to localize cuisine does not stop with explanations; many dish names have been changed and localized. Prior to WWI, the titles of recipes implied a wide range of international influences, and French culinary language and dish names became widely used. The proportion of names in foreign languages reduces noticeably in the 1930s cookbooks. Many well-known dish names have been changed: they have been directly translated or described, for example, *Béchamel Sauce* became *White Sauce* (*baltā mērce*), and *Crème brûlée* – *Cream with Caramelized Sugar* (*Dedzināta cukura krēms*).

In comparison to prior times, the 1930s cookbooks have many illustrations. Pictures in cookbooks used to be mostly decorative, depicting elaborately arranged tables and richly decorated plates with food. With time, pictures became more practical, demonstrating culinary procedures and displaying objects and goods that readers might not be familiar with, such as new kitchen gadgets or lesser-known vegetables. In the 1930s, cookbooks still featured beautiful dishes that were ready to serve, but about the same number of photos illustrated the cooking process and demystified complicated culinary operations. Illustrations showing examples of table settings for various occasions were a novelty at the time.

Cookbooks established the aesthetic standard of the time and taught the developing Latvian urban middle class not only to imitate the practices of the Baltic German elite, but also and build their own standards. Cookbooks' illustrations contributed to a unified narrative of local and national patriotism. The dishes' decorations are distinctive: many images include a geometric decorating, in contrast to earlier three-dimensional, sculptural decorations and Latvian folk symbols incorporated into the decorations. The pictures that explain how to set the table in Latvian style, resembling peasant cuisine, are the most eloquent. This table setting is advisable for festive occasions, such as holiday feasts (Figure 1). These images elevate the status of traditional Latvian dishes and confirm their place in Latvian cuisine.



Figure 1. Table set for a traditional Christmas meal [Birziņa 1936].

To summarize, a new type of cookbook appeared in the 1930s that criticized the culinary nature of the previous era and demonstrated that the culinary culture of the Baltic German elite appeared outdated in light of new technological and nutritional science discoveries. They encouraged the development of active new habits and a shift in culinary culture, with the new cuisine recognizing Latvian peasant foods and emphasizing the use of local ingredients. Because many cookbook authors had a background in home economics, it contributed to the evolution of a clear and succinct content, standardized structure of recipes, and unified culinary terminology in Latvian. These new cooking manuals emphasized more affordable, simple, and everyday cooking.

Conclusion

The notion of national cuisine first appeared in cookbooks in Latvia in the 1930s, when nationalism was the prevailing ideology, and the use of local products was promoted as a patriotic duty. The number of cookbooks published in this decade demonstrates a strong desire to establish and consolidate a new culinary culture. The writing and illustration styles and the overall content, recipe selection, and understanding of food and diet are all shared by the majority of these cookbooks.

The concept of national cuisine is established with the active participation of the State, particularly in terms of dissemination through propaganda campaigns and education. National cuisine serves as an aid in nation-building. The nation is composed of different groups of society, and it is necessary to find common symbols, traditions, and rituals to demonstrate the belonging, including the high and the low

cuisines, urban and rural foods, modern and traditional, local and borrowed dishes. It will then be able to serve as a catalyst for consolidating a nation and the formation of a shared identity. The choice of food also represents the acknowledgment of patriotism. On the one hand, traditional foods have taken on a symbolic significance in cookbooks as celebratory and thus ritual. The usage of local products, on the other hand, was rationally reasoned with the strengthening of the national economy.

National cuisine is a collection of formalized and standardized principles that represent specific socioeconomic realities and the beliefs and interests of a particular community, as the example of Latvia demonstrates. Therefore, national cuisine is not a closed historical process that can only be appraised as a past phenomenon, but rather an active process in the making, with each passing period has an impact and requires further exploration.

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