

Food and Family: Cookbooks as Genre and Activity

Brianna Zangara

In this article, Brianna Zangara explores her family's Italian cooking traditions and how these have impacted her knowledge of cookbooks as a form of literature. Using a personal cookbook that is over 150 years old, she draws on the various components that make up her family cooking history and how her antecedent knowledge has influenced her learning as well. Lastly, Zangara provides her personal story to accomplish a genre analysis to discuss how P-CHAT relates to cookbook literature.

I'm (Mostly) Not Writing This because I'm Hungry

Dating back to my great-grandparents on my Dad's side of the family, who were born and raised in Italy, cooking was a huge part of their family tradition. Whenever there was an event, there were massive amounts of food produced from breakfast to dessert. As time went on, and more social events required more cooking, my Dad's family began forming recipes with the ingredients they enjoyed for a particular dish—and these were not necessarily the standard required ingredients. This blend of preferred ingredients and required ingredients within a recipe created authentic Italian meals. The collection, now a family cookbook, has been passed down generations to where my Dad is the owner. Did I mention this beautiful and fascinating cookbook is over 150 years old?

When I put on my scholar goggles and think deeply about how tradition has shaped my relationship with food, I realize my family history is also a part of this antecedent knowledge. According to the ISU Writing Program, **antecedent knowledge** is a term that describes all the things a person already knows when they enter any given situation. This is another



Figure 1: The author's Italian family in the middle of cooking.

Genre

The ISU Writing Program defines genre as “a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.”

way of saying “previous experience,” and this knowledge comes simply from being a person who interacts with the world and the people in it. My antecedent knowledge in food has helped me feel comfortable within the world of cooking. This knowledge allows me to demonstrate to others the power tradition holds when it comes to cooking food and enjoying it with loved ones. To enrich my previous knowledge, I informally interviewed my Dad, who has been a part of this long-going tradition of writing recipes with his siblings. Cookbooks are a **genre** and as such they have conventions that make them recognizable to the people using them. Additionally, cookbooks represent different ways of preserving our traditions. Likewise, family recipes express individuality among family members and highlight beloved pastimes.

When asking my Dad about our family cookbook, he told me who the recipes' authors were, and many of the recipes were composed by both my grandparents and my great-grandparents. My Dad's parents were immigrants who arrived in America through Ellis Island—a cool, added factor! As both his parents were born and raised in Italy, cooking was a shared talent. They took cooking to an extreme but made it enjoyable for everyone

around them. Anywhere they went, their aromas of cooking followed their path. Their joyous cooking lives on in our family cookbooks, full of love and laughter, and these cookbooks have become a vital genre for my family.

The Activity of Cooking

Anyone who's ever prepared a meal or watched someone cook knows it's a complex **activity system**. An activity system is made up of the cooperative interactions of people, tools, genre, and space to achieve a goal. So, no matter what someone's cooking purpose may be, the process to achieve that goal includes a lot of moving parts, rules, and interactions. Family tradition can significantly influence the activity system of cooking because tradition,

family, and cultural backgrounds can play a significant role in what we eat, what we like or dislike, and what we've had exposure to eating and preparing.

I know coming from an Italian family implies a large family that values and loves food immensely. With these values, my family has established these recipes over the decades, through opinions and through learning by watching. Some recipes are more intense than others, but each deserves patience and time to be true to my family's history and the flavors they desire. Following the recipe exactly how it is written is one of the most important components; missing one measurement can cause the recipe to be ruined. As strict as the recipes are, they are so easily enjoyed when completed precisely.

Additionally, activity systems are complex, and while systems are always changing and evolving, they can also be fragile. This can happen when a tool or component—part of the system—isn't present or doesn't work, and the goal fails. Think about the last meal you ate, and all the moving parts and steps needed to achieve the end goal. What if you didn't have the ingredients or money to pay for them? What about the utensils or the time to prepare the meal? Without all these components, you might be able to eat, but you might not eat the meal as it was intended. In this instance, the activity system of cooking a meal has failed. For example, if my grandmother's Italian seasonings aren't in the gravy, the whole dish falls apart.

Understanding an activity system's particulars helps us realize its interrelation to the specific genre working to achieve the distinct goal. All activity systems come with genres or texts people use to achieve their goals. Regarding cooking, cookbooks are one of the most significant genres when it comes to learning about different dishes.

Cookbooks as Genre

Even though we briefly touched on *genre* in the beginning of this article, now it's time to talk about cookbooks and their genre conventions. A genre is defined as a text that is produced and created to respond to a situation. For example, a cookbook or recipe is a type of genre because it is a text created to achieve the goal of making a meal, baking a dessert, or something else along those lines. A genre is also recognizable by its conventions or characteristics. Across most cookbooks, there are similarities, such as ingredient lists, photographs, cooking times, and measurements. Although cookbooks can be considered a cohesive genre, there are many different subgenres of cookbooks because there are so many goals within cooking for various occasions.

One of the many things I find fascinating about the genre of cookbooks is how they can change over time. Recipes are updated, reimagined, forgotten, and found again in my family. I must admit that I found this confusing and even annoying when I was younger. For me, spaghetti was spaghetti, no matter what. I had no idea why it would suddenly become crucial to add oregano or disregard the beef stock. I would ask an older family member food-related questions, and then another would cut in with their version of our family tradition.

Much like understanding antecedent knowledge, I see how cookbooks and recipes aren't stationary concepts that never change; they have trajectories. When I say **trajectory**, I'm referring to the path a text takes throughout time, like a text's "life span." Trajectory also refers to the type of people the text we might reach or encounter. I enjoy tracing a cookbook's trajectory. It's fascinating to discover the history recipes carry with them as well as the stories the food brings along the way. The family members who live on through their ingredients. Even the ingredients' quality says so much about the author's living situation. In our family's cookbook, I can tell that some of the entries were created in Italy, not the United States.

P-CHAT, A New Recipe

Another way we can examine cookbooks, how their genre works, and how cookbooks meet the end cooking goal, is with P-CHAT. **P-CHAT** or

P-CHAT:

The ISU Writing Program uses P-CHAT to "help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world." P-CHAT is a CHAT-based model for thinking about the complexities of literate activity and includes seven key-terms that help to describe different aspects of making and using writing in the world.

pedagogical cultural-historical activity Theory is used to help understand and analyze texts. This examination includes social interactions that happen while creating a text, motivations, rules, tools, distribution methods of the text, and interpretations.

The use of P-CHAT helps me to investigate cookbooks, as well as examine how they represent the focus of humans acting in a collective cooking society. We are learning through doing these specific activities, as well as learning through the ways in which we are communicating with our cooking actions. There are seven key terms within P-CHAT, though this article will focus mainly on representation, distribution, and production. These three P-CHAT elements will demonstrate how complex the activity system of cooking is and how enriched and diverse the cookbook genre can be.

The P-CHAT **representation** is how a text is portrayed or described in a specific way. This can be seen as how a cookbook is thought out. In my Mother's potato salad recipe, she wants everyone to taste the freshly mashed potatoes. She bolds the ingredient of boiling and mashing fresh potatoes yourself, as it gives it the taste she desires. **Distribution** is how a text is shared or spread throughout the public. More specifically, this would be the publication of the cookbooks through social media, local stores, potlucks, etc. My Father received his grandfather's personal cookbook in a will. Lastly, **production** is the process of manufacturing the text. For this article, it is the manufacturing of the cookbook itself. What's really cool about the recipes and cookbooks in my family are that some are written on scratch paper and pencil. It's so much more personal and inviting, and it makes me more invested in the recipe and trust the information. The one P-CHAT term that is most predominant when analyzing cookbooks as a text is representation. The representation for a cookbook involves how the author thought about the meal and its recipe. They talk about the food's taste, smell, look, and feel. In many recipes in my family's cookbook, the scent of the spices is one of the more urgent parts of the representation.

Understanding what cookbooks reflect and represent furthers our understanding of how impactful family cookbooks are. I previously mentioned how my family alters recipes to promote their uniqueness and value to our likings. This practice speaks to my joy for cooking because creating is not an exact measurement. There is no singular or right way to cook a dish, which makes cooking even more fun! Cooking off recipes keeps the traditions and helps make dishes distinctive to their audiences. Then, as the cookbook passes down, they continue to change but always hold their value and appreciation to the generations before them.

Little Italy in Dad's Kitchen

My Dad has been teaching me how to cook since I was about eight years old. Now I'm a twenty-year-old my Dad still teaches me new cooking secrets. Recording these recipes keeps my family alive and helps carry on our family traditions. I have seen practices from over 100 years ago still used in my family. They have been preserved over time, which is inspiring as I can see how far my family customs have come along. As much as these recipes and cookbooks are valuable and appreciated by my family, I want to carry this legacy on to my kids to have them pass along one day.

Old photo collections, cherished clothing, and collective items are lovely, but I want my family cookbooks to express those happy and warm feelings. I

want my recipes to hold power and value as they are centuries-old pieces of history. The article *Cookbooks Are So Much More Than Recipes and Photographs* by Joshua Raff contains a quote that defines this idea. They state, “If the author brings personal elements into the book in an elegant and entertaining way, the book can become memoir through food” (Raff). Family cookbooks are more than lists of ingredients to make meals. They contain past experiences, personality, and humor. Flipping through my family’s cookbook is like reading a story. I get to learn and laugh. I can say hello and meet relatives I never would be able to otherwise. Most importantly, I can open the book and feel connected to my family, no matter what.

My Cooking Journey

When my Dad teaches me, it is challenging to understand his terminology because I am new to the measurement abbreviations. My Dad can also easily picture all the tools needed when saying the name of a dish, but I do not typically use these objects. I am certainly not my great-grandparents despite my Italian heritage. As fun as learning traditional cooking methods, I struggle to get things right, be quick, and find the necessary items around the kitchen or grocery stores. However, after years of practicing and watching with my Dad, it is starting to become easier, especially as I learn more about the activity system of cooking. There are many different ways to prepare,

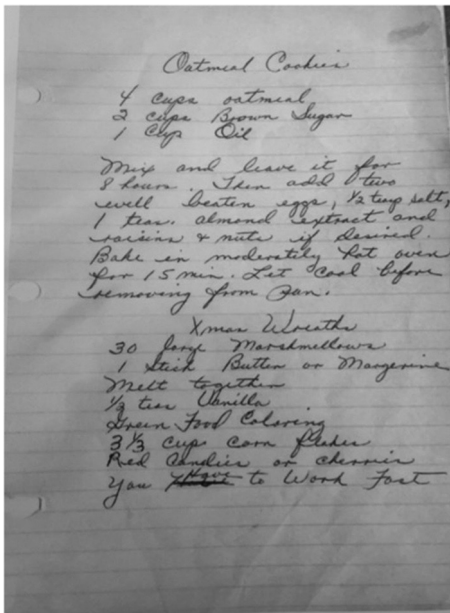


Figure 2: Writer’s original family recipe for oatmeal cookies.

cook, and serve food, even when utilizing traditional cookbooks and recipes. Perfecting these delicious formulas is fun, especially putting my twist on it. My grandmother’s oatmeal cookies recipe, shown below, is one I’m currently playing with.

Developing a love for cooking while in high school let me grow close to my family and gain an appreciation for our traditions. These traditions would soon be a significant part of my life as I found recipes from my Mom, who passed away when I was ten years old. Now, I cherish both my parents’ recipes and my grandmother’s, and I plan to incorporate those into my cookbook one day. Now at college, I cook in my apartment and often

find myself utilizing the recipes my Dad gave me that he obtained from his parents. When I use these recipes, I send an image to my Dad, and it brings joy to him knowing I will be carrying these family recipes into my future with my kids. This opportunity has enriched my knowledge of the cooking world and has allowed me to express myself within recipes. I have even formed my types of recipes with twists on them, too, so that I am contributing to my family's current recipe book, which will add to my cookbook one day for myself and then my kids. In addition, I have a set up in my current cookbook binder at school for organizational purposes.

I will be creating several sections in my cookbook binder to keep it organized. Since I have struggled reading older recipes within our family cookbook, I want to make it easier on myself and my kids so that they do not have the struggles I once had. So, one section of the cookbook will be dedicated to my Dad's recipes. Then, one will be entries from my ancestors, such as my great grandparents and grandparents. Another area will contain my recipes. And lastly, a section for my kids to be involved in this tradition.

After losing my Mom, I needed an appreciation and reminder of her. When I found that through cookbooks, I saw it as a memory that I knew could hold and feel as if she is still with us. These recipes help me express memories, traditions, culture, and love. I would not trade this tradition for anything else. It means the world to my family and me. Cookbooks are not just words. They are genres filled with everlasting memories and joy, one bite at a time.

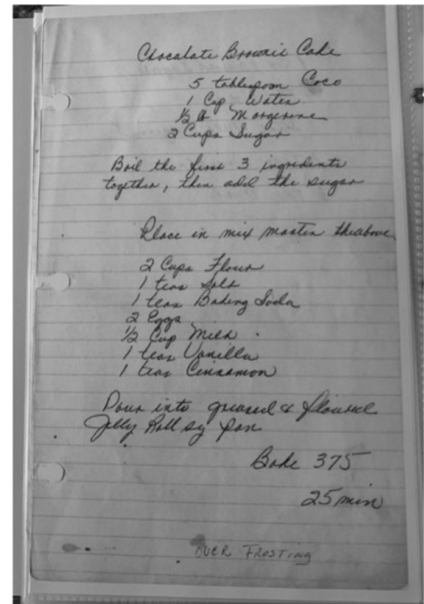


Figure 3: Writer's original family recipe of chocolate brownie cake.

Works Cited

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Brianna Zangara is a sophomore from Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin, studying English Education at Illinois State University. She is focusing on a degree teaching middle school and high school levels and hopes to become a principle eventually. In her free time, she loves to go shopping, spending time with her family, baking, and working out.