

“STRONG MEN AND WOMEN ARE NOT PRODUCTS OF IMPROPER FOOD”: DOMESTIC SCIENCE AND THE HISTORY OF EATING AND IDENTITY

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This paper presents preliminary thinking on food reform movements as a site for the continuous shaping and reshaping of the relationship between eating, identity, and citizenship in America. It examines the turn of the century domestic science movements and argues that its goals included not only bread baking, but citizen making, and that its effects included not only changes in eating habits, but changes in the significance of eating habits. The author contends that domestic scientists made eating available as a system of self making and in so doing naturalized class differences and normalized a middle class standard for “alimentary subjectivity.”

**Winner of the ASFS
2002 Alex McIntosh
Graduate Student Paper Award**

“. . . Improper food is closely related with mental and moral defects. Strong men and women are not the products of improper food.” Ellen Richards, 1910¹

“I believe our destiny as a nation depends on how we nourish ourselves. . . . The way we produce, prepare and eat food expresses the bedrock values on which our private lives are built.” Alice Waters, 1992²

What do Ellen Richards, the “mother of home economics,” and Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse and celebrated inspiration for a recent “revolution in American cuisine,” have in common? How might we understand the history that links Waters’ Berkeley based food reform movement, with its emphasis on the sensual pleasures of tasting and touching food, with the domestic scientists of the late nineteenth century, champions of scientific cookery best remembered for subordinating the appetite to efficiency and rationality?

This paper is part of a larger project that will examine these and other twentieth century food reform movements and the history of the relationship between eating, identity, and social order that is embedded within them. The project traces a century of food reform movements and suggests that somewhere in the tension between the similarities and the differences amongst them lies the story of both a steady growth in the significance of eating to identity and an ongoing struggle over the power to define that meaning and to shape the image of an ideal eating identity. This paper, more specifically, looks at the domestic science movement—a loose configuration of reform efforts by progressive era

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¹*Euthenics* 22

²O’Neill 29

Journal for the Study of Food and Society, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2002, Pp. 60-69

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