



# The Tools of the Dietetics Trade

**“THE DIETITIAN AND HER Equipment”** was the subject of a roundtable discussion at the very first annual meeting of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in October 1917.\* At that time, there were not many dietitians, and those in practice were working in hospital kitchens scattered across the United States, with no uniform standards or guidelines as the basis for menus, processes, and the tools used to carry out the day-to-day.<sup>1</sup>

The roots of the dietetics profession itself lie in military hospital kitchens and cooking schools of the 1800s, where work with minimal tools was the norm. During the 1854 Crimean War, for example, part of Florence Nightingale's work on revolutionizing the diet kitchen included obtaining more sufficient supplies. And as the “dietist” graduates of later-1800s cooking schools and their extensions in the form of diet kitchens (developed after physicians had begun requesting that the cooking schools provide specialized diet prescriptions) began accepting positions in hospitals, they discovered a work environment where large-scale food preparation was limited to little more than a range and a basket-type dishwasher. The debut of enhanced tools like compartment steamers, jacketed kettles, and food

choppers not coming until a decade into the 1900s.<sup>1</sup> Preparation areas in foodservice kitchens were generally dark, poorly arranged rooms, designed without maximizing productivity as a primary goal.

**Though commercial kitchen and institutional foodservice equipment took root centuries ago and have always served the same goal, an increasing demand for greater efficiency—from workers, from equipment, in energy conservation—has fueled the quest for evolving technologies that enhance the tools available or add to the existing repertoire.**

In 1917, the year of the Academy's founding, there was a high demand for dietitians to serve in venues where knowing what tools were available was important to success—hospital, hotel, and community kitchens, as well as industrial and commercial lunchrooms. But even still, knowing what tools were available didn't mean they were, themselves, necessarily available. Because the dietetics profession grew during unprecedented demand for practitioners during the world wars, some dietitians became known for creativity with equipment in the workplace. Fashioning rolling pins out of broomsticks, mashing potatoes using fence posts, and transporting food to troops using unused metal garbage cans were just a few of the workarounds employed to overcome a lack of useful equipment to perform the duties required.

Papers presented at some earlier meetings mused on what extent new,

mechanical equipment could replace the work of staff. The Academy had even considered establishing a functional division within the organization that was dedicated to issuing standards for equipment of supplies; toward this effort, a questionnaire was distributed to investigate members' experience with factors such as cost and installation of equipment, utensils, and operating and repair costs associated with specific brands.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, by the early 1940s, this charge had been put to the Food Administration section, which embarked on projects to study what kind of kitchen equipment was being used in foodservice and how best to maintain it. Joint committees in foodservice equipment—collaborations with other national associations—were convened in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

As the profession has evolved, so too has cookery and institutional foodservice and the tools used in the process. Design of food preparation stations to accommodate space for the various cooking methods, durability of equipment for mass food production, and adherence to health codes are among the developments since the modernization of the food kitchen in the early 20th century.<sup>2</sup> Programmable tools with higher speeds, vessels that offer faster cook times, and new innovations have altered the labor intensiveness of many tasks in the kitchen.

Displaying these tools so that practitioners could learn about and familiarize themselves with them has been a tradition at the Exhibition Hall of the Academy's annual meetings, ever since the first conference in 1917 when the Academy was founded. Alongside some foods and baking products was a relatively new company displaying cookware.<sup>1</sup> A look at photographs from some of these exhibits as well as other photographs and documents is to reflect on a sampling of bygone practices as well as the roots of more modern developments.

*\*In 2012, the American Dietetic Association changed its name to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Throughout this article, it will be referred to as “the Academy.”*

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This undated photograph depicts food preparation areas of earlier foodservice kitchens.



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