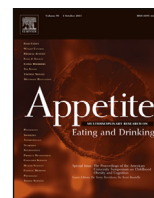




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Research report

The ideology of convenience. Canned foods in women's magazines (Flanders, 1945–1960) ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 November 2014

Received in revised form 16 March 2015

Accepted 17 March 2015

Available online 20 March 2015

Keywords:

Convenience food

Food preservation

Women's magazines

Communication

Ideology

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the communication of canned foods in Flanders between 1945 and 1960. It forwards the antinomy between convenience and care as theoretical framework, it uses three women's magazines as source material, and it subjects this material to the technique of close reading. The results show that the discursive construction of canned foods differs according to the ideology of the magazines. Whereas the agrarian periodical discarded canned foods as careless convenience that menaced the idea of the good housewife, the socialist and the commercial publications undeniably accepted them as caring convenience that could facilitate the household chores of working women. The analysis, thus, deals with the ideological aspect of convenience food, an aspect that has only rarely been examined.

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Introduction

Food studies have only sporadically formulated research questions dealing with aspects of food preservation, whereas the few accounts on the theme have mainly developed around two recurring approaches. On the one hand, the lion's share of publications pertains to historical overviews of preservation technologies within broader analyses of the industrialization of the food chain. They result in teleological interpretations of food preservation history in general and in chronological descriptions of industrial canning and mechanical cold storage during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular (e.g., Bruegel, 1998; Capatti, 2001; de Knecht-van Eekelen & van Otterloo, 1998; Hietala & Lepistö-Kirsalä, 1998; Pedrocco, 2001; Teuteberg, 1995). On the other hand, a scattering of publications consists of socio-historical accounts on food preservation within the framework of research on meaning-making and identity. They predominantly focus on the visual and linguistic representations of the mid-twentieth-century refrigerator in relation to gender, domesticity and home-making (e.g., Grahame, 1994; Scheire, 2012; Wildt, 2001). This review shows that many aspects of food preservation still await scholarly scrutiny. Production and consumption have caught some attention, but dissemination in terms

of either retail or communication remains relatively unexplored. Besides, while the refrigerator often forms the focal point of both historical overviews and socio-historical accounts, canning or canned foods – i.e. the industrial preservation of foodstuffs in tin cans – seldom are the bedrock of the surveys. This paper wants to tackle both lacunae by investigating the communication of canned foods as a particular form of convenience food in Flanders between 1945 and 1960 (the chronological demarcation is justified below). It will do so by exploring the discursive construction of canned foods by means of a comparative close reading of women's magazines.

Materials and methods

Within food studies, the use of women's magazines proves rewarding for research questions dealing with “food as a cultural expression” (Pilcher, 2012, p. 41). The magazines provide insights into food mentalities, while their publication frequency enables long-term analyses of these mentalities. Empirical research has shown that women's magazines offer a translation into food – i.e. gastro-linguistics (Lakoff, 2006) – of a broader societal context of (inter)national political, economic and social actuality on the one hand and the interpretation of this context in terms of the own ideological and socio-economic framework on the other (Holmes, 2007; Roessler, 2007; Stephenson, 2007). Consequently, the medium constitutes a dynamic source that reveals a “diverse potpourri of [...] lifestyle[s]” (Roessler, 2007, p. 573; Verdon, 2010, p. 91).

Based on a comparative analysis of British women's magazines published in 1968 and 1992, Warde concludes that, regarding food, the periodicals' dynamism can be structured along the lines of four antinomies of taste: economy and extravagance, health and

* I'm indebted to Peter Scholliers and my colleagues from the Social & Cultural Food Studies Research Group (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) for the many stimulating and thought-provoking conversations and discussions, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and ideas. All translations from Dutch to English are mine.

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indulgence, tradition and innovation, and convenience and care (Warde, 1997). In light of my research question, the latter antinomy needs to be elaborated upon. Warde finds that British women's magazines interpret convenience in terms of time- and labor-saving food preparations on the one hand and practical preservation on the other. In contrast, the magazines describe care as skillful cooking and homemade family meals. Canned foods, then, surface in accordance with the concept of convenience and in opposition to the notion of care, as they are believed to simultaneously contribute to effortless food preparation and deskilled household work.

Building on Warde's theory and approach, this paper investigates the discursive construction of canned foods in three women's magazines. First, I use the agrarian monthly *De Boerin/Bij de Haard/Eigen Aard*, published by the Belgian Farmer Women's Association. The Association initially wrote for an agrarian-only audience of farmer women, but gradually changed focus when agricultural activities in Flanders decreased in favor of the industrial and service sectors. Besides, it strongly upheld the idea of the good housewife who was in charge of household work and family happiness. Second, I use the socialist monthly *De Stem der Vrouw*, published by the Socialist Women's Organization. This periodical advocated women's emancipation and labor market participation, even though it also supported the idea of the good housewife. It accordingly combined politically engaging essays with home economics articles for an implied audience of socialist working-class (and wage-earning) women. Third, I use the commercial weekly *Het Rijk der Vrouw* issued by the eponymous publisher. The magazine found inspiration in fashion and beauty, and thus encouraged its implied audience of urban, middle-class women to always look their best. Furthermore, the perfect appearance needed to be matched with the graceful manners of a wife and mother who kept house and cooked heartily (Geysen, 2013a, 2013b).

Going beyond Warde's approach of taking two isolated snapshots, this paper analyzes the communication of canned foods over a longer period of time and investigates whether or not the discursive construction and thus the meaning of canned foods was subjected to change. On that account, the above-mentioned women's magazines were initially subjected to thematic coding (Flick, 1999; Richards, 2009) with the purpose of singling out pieces that dealt with food preservation in general and canned foods in particular. This coding first enabled me to identify a chronological sequence whereby home bottling mainly surfaced in the 1940s and 1950s and, again, from the 1980s onwards, canned foods appeared almost solely between 1945 and the beginning of the 1960s – hence the chronological focus of this paper – and refrigerated storage dominated the magazines from the end of the 1950s onwards. Second, the coding allowed for the quantification of articles dealing with canned foods: *De Boerin/Bij de Haard/Eigen Aard* only sideways approached canned foods in articles on home bottling (6 articles out of 51 articles on food preservation between 1945 and 1960), *De Stem der Vrouw* explored tinned foods in essays that considered the industrialization of the food chain (7 articles out of 14 articles on industrial food production between 1945 and 1960), and *Het Rijk der Vrouw* straightforwardly discussed the use of canned foods in its recipe pages on the one hand and tins' industrial production in elaborate reports on the other (8 articles in total out of 63 articles on food preservation between 1945 and 1960). I finally subjected this selection of articles to a comparative close reading in order to investigate the discursive construction of canned foods. Close reading is a layered reading technique that first examines concepts and transformations in a text and that then analyzes their meaning in relation to the text, the medium wherein the text appears and the societal context of the magazine. It thus not only enabled me to scrutinize the concepts that construct the discourses on canned foods and the meanings they convey, but also to analyze these meanings in relation to societal context.

Results

Context

The societal context that characterized Flanders between 1945 and 1960 pertained to a layered yet entwined constellation of international and socio-economic dimensions. First, American domination in Western Europe increased after the Second World War and resulted in the Americanization of economy and market. Flanders did not escape this evolution and witnessed the United States of America's growing influence. Particularly the Flemish food processing and canning industries, that had experienced significant growth during the inter-war years, suffered from the arrival of American companies (Coupain, 2005; Niesten & Segers, 2007; Scholliers, 1993). Second, Flanders' employment structure changed substantially between 1945 and 1960. Whereas the primary sector's employment rate reached 20% of total employment before the Second World War, it dropped to 8% by 1960. The tertiary sector's employment rate, in contrast, built up to 46% by 1960 (Vandebroek, 2002). This shift, in turn, accelerated the wave of urbanization that had surfaced in the beginning of the twentieth century. The relapse of agricultural employment in the countryside pushed wage earners away, whereas the potential of services-related employment in the city pulled them in (Dumoulin, 2006; Floré, 2006; Kesteloot & Boudry, 2003; Scholliers, 2008). Third, the Americanization of economy and market, and Flanders' changing employment structure triggered an increase in productivity and a consequential need for labor. Besides guest laborers, women progressively participated in the labor market: the 1947 census revealed a female labor market participation rate of 15.3% (married women), whereas the 1961 census attested to a rate of 20.5% (married women) (Scholliers, 1993; Vandebroek & Van Molle, 2010). These figures show that even though women already participated in the labor market before World War II, their wage-earning activities took up a growing share in the economy after 1945. Finally, Flanders witnessed the modernization of domestic life, a development that generally occurred in Western Europe and North America after World War II. This modernization resulted in the mechanization of household work and introduced new kitchen appliances such as the refrigerator (Scholliers, 1993, 2008). It thus enabled the rationalization of the home kitchen and it additionally held the housewife accountable for the efficient management of this rationalization. The modernization of domestic life fitted well within the context of increasing female labor market participation and was even considered as a prerequisite for it (Simonton, 2002). Due to the time- and labor-saving rationalization, women could simultaneously take up a wage-earning job and control their role as housewife who managed domestic life.

This paper thus explores how canned foods were communicated to the consumer within a context of market expansion, supply diversification, tertiary employment, urbanization, increasing female labor market participation, and modernization.

The agrarian magazine

In *De Boerin/Bij de Haard/Eigen Aard*, canned foods' market expansion and supply diversification did not result in a promotional discourse. The Belgian Farmer Women's Association advised against the use of tins in the (agrarian) kitchen and fervently encouraged home bottling instead.¹ During the 1940s and 1950s, the agrarian magazine occasionally referred to the vices of canned foods within the reoccurring discourse on the virtues of home bottling. In opposition to homemade preserves that were constructed as agrarian,

¹ Home bottling refers to the preservation of foodstuffs in glass jars within the realm of the home.

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