



Research report

Popular discourse on nutrition, health and indulgence in Flanders, 1945–1960^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Belgian scientists started to investigate the working classes' diet at the beginning of the twentieth century, popular media has shown traces of researchers' scientific findings in one way or another. This article investigates whether or not nutritional knowledge was translated into comprehensible food practices on a household level in postwar Flanders. The culinary pages of *De Boerin/Bij de Haard*, a widespread monthly magazine published by the Belgian Farmer Women's Association, was subjected to a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The analysis showed that even though *De Boerin/Bij de Haard* revealed several traces of a certain nutritional knowledge, scientific discourse was not translated into ready-to-use recipes or cooking techniques during the immediate postwar years. It was only in the 1950s that women were educated on the function and importance of various nutrients and that nutritional knowledge was actually converted into rather specific daily menus and new ways of preparation. Interestingly, the references to health were countered by references to indulgence as well, especially during festive occasions. The article finishes by exploring whether or not both types of references could be combined in one way or another.

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Introduction

Contemporary health concerns are not only influenced by up-to-the-minute scientific nutritional knowledge, but are also shaped by sturdy food behaviour and culinary culture from times past. This article argues that present-day nutritional knowledge has undeniably been modelled by the way dietary recommendations were represented in popular media during the period 1945–1960. Indeed, plenty of dietary guidelines that came into being during this period (e.g. moderate salt and sugar consumption) still determine the way scientists and nutritionists deal with healthy food today and how they communicate their findings to the public (Anderson, Black, & Harris, 2003). Thus, the historical dimension of this article leads to more thorough and comprehensive insights on contemporary health concerns, like (the lack of) weight and body control or diseases of affluence.

Scientific knowledge reaches people through various kinds of media: governmental brochures, advertisements, home economics

textbooks, cookbooks, women's magazines, etc. The latter example proves to be an interesting source to investigate whether or not scientific discourse referring to nutritional knowledge was/is translated into sensible food practices the housewife could easily use in order to prepare a daily menu and appetising dishes. In view of this matter, this article will analyse how a widespread Flemish women's magazine, *De Boerin/Bij de Haard*, represented food recommendations in Flanders between 1945 and 1960. First, it will situate the topic briefly within historiography and, consequently, this overview will demonstrate that the postwar period is in desperate need of academic attention. The second part will focus on Alan Warde's antinomies of taste in general and the antinomy of health and indulgence in particular as theoretical framework of the analysis (Warde, 1997). An overview of source material and methodology will conclude this second part. Third, the selected monthly magazine, *De Boerin/Bij de Haard*, will be analysed based on Warde's antinomy and, finally, the conclusion will answer questions that surface during the analysis and will present some points for further discussion.

Shifting discourse: from meat to vegetables

At the beginning of the twentieth century, several Belgian scientists who investigated the working classes' diet commented on labourers' insufficient caloric intake in relation to their heavy workload. They stated that labour productivity would benefit from increased meat consumption and, correspondingly, they expressed the need for more meat. By the late 1920s, the composition of the

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average worker's diet had altered and saw a remarkable rise in meat consumption: economic growth, increased wages and purchasing power enabled workers to buy more meat while, at the same time, the variety of meat widely expanded due to the availability of more fresh and cured meats. However, by then, the scientific discovery of vitamins at the beginning of the decade had induced a 'newer knowledge of nutrition' that undermined scientists' emphasis on the energy content of a diet. Scientific discourse changed significantly and shifted from guidelines for a plentiful meaty menu considered unhealthy to recommendations for increased vitamin-rich vegetable and fruit consumption (De Vooght, Scholliers, Teughels, & Van Den Berghe, 2009; Kamminga & Cunningham, 1995, chap. 1; Scholliers, 2008, 2010). Historical research has shown that the change in both discourse and practice was not limited to Belgium, but that a fairly analogous development emerged in the whole of North-Western Europe (Barona, 2010; Perdiguero-Gil & Castejón-Bolea, 2010; Teich, 1995, chap. 8). Research also focused on the question whether or not scientific knowledge was translated into comprehensible food practices on a household level and whether or not the mentioning of nutritional information in (popular) media equalled a certain concern for health issues (Mitchell, 2001, 2008).

In Belgium, prior to 1940, the new scientific discourse did find its way into the housewife's kitchen, but its translation into sensible food practices did not always occur. Around 1900, textbooks for home economics classes written by home economics teachers, like Louisa Mathieu, taught schoolgirls how to cook a varied, healthy and tasty, yet low-cost meal; moderate meat consumption was advocated and the use of vegetables and fruits was heavily promoted. However, the housewife was never informed of precise quantities, nor was she introduced to healthy preparation techniques (e.g. the use of fats or adequate cooking time) (Scholliers, 2010). Cookbooks also linked up with the new recommendations for a healthy diet, but in contrast to the home economics textbooks, they only vaguely mentioned the existence of vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates. An analysis of the 1941 edition of *Ons Kookboek*, a quite influential cookbook published by the Belgian Farmer Women's Association and 'a household necessity in Flanders' (Segers, 2005, p. 4), illustrates this perfectly. Whereas the introduction listed several nutrients including vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates, the cookbook lacked a thorough explanation of the importance of these nutrients for human health. Neither did the recipe section touch upon the nutritional value of the dishes it presented, nor did the number of meat recipes decrease after the introduction of the 'newer knowledge of nutrition'. Moreover, the larger part of the meat recipes contained greasy pork covered with heavy gravy or were recipes for so-called typical/traditional meat dishes known for their high caloric value (e.g. beef stew and rabbit stew). Finally, Belgian women's magazines published before World War II exhibited a growing concern with health and food as well. In the 1930s, for example, monthlies and weeklies issued several articles on the negative effects of a meaty diet on one's health and they prescribed a reduction in the consumption of meat in order to obtain/retain a slim figure, which had been an emergent concern of middle-class women prior to 1914. However, these women's magazines also paid increasing attention to festive and opulent meals (Niessen, Raymaekers, & Segers, 2002a; Scholliers, 2008, 2010; Segers, 2005).

Did the postwar period bring forth the emergence of translations of scientific discourse into sensible food practices? Historical research on these subjects has been devoted to the groundbreaking period of 1890–1940, but so far – apart from some researchers who focused on a later period (de Knecht-Van Eekelen & Van Otterloo, 2000; den Hartog, 2005; Mitchell, 2001, 2008) – the postwar history of nutrition and its conversion into daily meal patterns, menus and ready-to-use recipes has not been investigated

thoroughly (Kamminga & Cunningham, 1995, chap. 1). These historiographical lacunae undeniably lead to several intriguing questions that are worth investigating: Did scientific discourse change significantly after World War II? Did the dietary recommendations change and did they become more explicit after 1945? How were housewives 'educated' on postwar nutritional knowledge and did a translation into sensible food practices finally take place? In short, how did discourse on healthy food develop after 1945?

Health and indulgence

In his book *Consumption, food and taste. Culinary antinomies and commodity culture*, sociologist Alan Warde conducted a comparative study of the culinary discourses of recipe columns in British women's magazines at two different moments in time, namely 1968 and 1992. He concluded that the recipe promotion devices – i.e. short or longer texts that recommend certain recipes or series of recipes to the magazines' readers – in these columns were based on four antinomies of taste: novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, convenience and care, and economy and extravagance. Even though Warde did not solely focus on scientific discourse related to a healthy diet (or at least what was considered to be a healthy diet in the 1960s and the 1990s), the identification of the antinomy of health and indulgence did lead to revealing insights on this particular subject in popular media since the 1960s. On the one hand, the author stated that allusions to health increased during the period under investigation, due to increasing knowledge and a growing concern with weight and body control.

'In 1968 health was rarely alluded to in the cookery columns. In 1967–8 only 4 per cent of recipes were coded as having recommended food explicitly because it was healthy. [...] Even then, the references were scanty and tangential: honey was a healthy ingredient [...], bacon 'a protein food' [...]. Some time thereafter, concern for health escalated. The language of health came to permeate routine cookery articles and the recipe promotion devices. In the 1991–2 sample, 16 per cent of all recipes made explicit reference to health features in the food columns. The concern for health was partly instanced by the emergence of articles whose central identity was nutrition.' (Warde, 1997, pp. 79–80).

On the other hand, Warde discovered that the women's magazines progressively referred to indulgence as well: allusions to intemperance increased from 2 per cent in 1968 to 7 per cent in 1992. Moreover, the culinary section distinguished between several occasions when people overthrew a healthy diet and satisfied their cravings for tempting treats. Eating out and moments of emotional discomfort were identified as opportunities for indulgent eating behaviour and, interestingly, grandmother's dishes were often labelled as (emotional) comfort food. Did increasing appeals for indulgence correspond to a growing resistance to healthy eating or were both recommendations combined in one way or another?

Warde's antinomy of health and indulgence is an intriguing point of departure for an analysis of postwar scientific discourse on healthy diet and its translation into food recommendations and practices. How did the nutritional narratives develop after 1945 and were they converted into daily meal patterns and menus that could easily be understood and applied by housewives in their own kitchen? The answer to this question will be based on an investigation of the culinary pages published in the Belgian Farmer Women's Association's monthly magazine.

The Belgian Farmer Women's Association (BFWA) was founded in 1907 as the female counterpart to the Belgian Farmers'

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