

**THE QUEENS OF GOOD TASTE:
PATRIOTS, GENTILITY, FEMININITY, AND FAME IN
VIRGINIA SOCIETY, 1780-1835**

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*For Eleanor Margery Wilson, for instilling in me an everlasting love and respect for food,
and for Geoffrey Fawcett Wilson, for inspiring me to learn as much and as often as possible.*

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INTRODUCTION

An article appeared in the *New York Times* op-ed section on Monday, November 26, 2012, entitled “Socializing as a Political Tool.” The author, John Meacham, exhorts Barack Obama to take a lesson from history and “...use the White House and the president’s personal company to attempt to weave attachments and increase a sense of common purpose in the capital.” Meacham takes Thomas Jefferson as his example, suggesting, “...at least one of our greatest presidents mastered the means of entertaining to political effect.” What Meacham seems not to notice, to his great misfortune, is that one of the most dedicated and subtle political hosts during Jefferson’s lifetime, and indeed in all of American history, was not a president, but instead the “first” First Lady: Dolley Madison.

I began this thesis as an examination of Madison’s masterwork: enacting political change through traditionally feminine means – food and entertaining. The legends around her are immense and varied: she was the first person to serve ice cream in the White House, no, in America; she was the first woman to abolish the position of “steward” at the White House, doing all the marketing herself; she saved Gilbert Stuart’s famous portrait of George Washington during the War of 1812, and it streamed out behind her like a banner as she tore down a muddy Washington thoroughfare, lit in the garish light of a burning White House and pursued by battalions of advancing British soldiers. Unfortunately, none of these delightfully colorful myths are true; the truth is, as always, more complex, more confusing, and more interesting.

Thomas Jefferson served ice cream before she did, her steward was a French servant who influenced her so much that she created an entirely new position for him, “Master of Ceremonies,” and the Stuart portrait was a copy that she had her slaves remove from the

wall, and trusted to the care of “two gentlemen from New York.”¹ She saved it not because it was precious, but because she understood its symbolic value all too well. The damage to the American cause would have been incalculable if it, or if she, had been paraded as a prize of war through the streets of London. Dolley Madison understood the fragility of her young nation’s sense of identity, and she did everything she could to preserve its mythic origins. Even the famous letter that she wrote to her sister on the night Washington was sacked has been shown to have been edited by Madison twenty years later, in order that posterity would record the story most protective and symbolic of America’s sovereignty and national identity.²

I first came in contact with Madison’s story nearly 200 years later, while poking around for an interesting thesis topic about the multi-ethnic origins of American foods. I wanted to react against the overwhelming notion that cultural diversity in American cuisine is a new phenomenon by investigating recipes that deviated from our modern-day ideas about the dull, British-derived recipes of the Founding Fathers. My writing partner came across a quote that she thought might interest me:

*Political wives' interactions among themselves served political purposes, too: when First Lady Dolley Madison visited congressmen's wives, she cultivated goodwill for her husband while collecting recipes that allowed her to serve regionally diverse cuisine at White House functions. Madison hoped her menus would help keep simmering sectional tensions from reaching a boiling point.*³

¹ Lucia Beverly Cutts, *Memoirs and Letters of Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison, President of the United States*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1886,) 108-111.

² Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Making of the American Nation*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006,) 5. See: David B. Mattern, “Dolley Madison Has the Last Word: The Famous Letter,” *White House History* 4 (Fall 1998): 38-41. David B. Mattern and Holly C. Shulman, *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2003), 3-5.

³ Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume 1, to 1877*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 2011,) 243.

Here, surely, was the jackpot! Dolley Madison, a savvy political player and guardian of American identity, was using the innate diversity of American food to craft the tumultuous political environment to her best advantage. Here was my idea of “regionally diverse cuisine” coming to political fruition at the hands of an American mythmaker par excellence!

Alas, as I was soon to discover, that tradition of American mythmaking had a stronger hold on this story than I had bargained for. The textbook did not account for this anecdote in its sources, and as I searched farther afield for its origins I began to worry about its provenance. It was nowhere to be found in the collections of her personal correspondence published by her grand-niece, Lucia Cutts, in the mid-nineteenth century. Lucia Cutts was the grand-niece for whom Madison polished the famous war letter quoted above—surely, if anyone were going to preserve Madison’s reputation as crafter of an American cuisine, she would. Sadly, I could find no mention of the story.

Finally, thanks to the guiding hand and generosity of Mary Kelley, I came across the seminal autobiography of Dolley Madison: *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* by Catherine Allgor. Ms. Allgor is the pre-eminent scholar of Madison’s life; perhaps she had discovered a source for this story?

And, indeed, Ms. Allgor addresses the story in her chapter on Madison’s reign as “Lady Presidentess” in the President’s Mansion, as the White House was called in those days:

In addition to luxurious and impressive meals, Dolley also served political messages. According to Washington legend, she actively sought out recipes from the female members of leading families across the country. This, too, was a typical Dolley transaction, one that left everyone feeling satisfied. Women from the hinterlands were honored and delighted to think of their dishes adorning “America’s table,” and Dolley could then evoke authentic “Americanness” for her guests. Moreover, to cement the connection, Dolley offered her own recipes in return, both equalizing and elevating the exchange. One of the recipes Dolley may

have proffered was the prized “receipt” for ice cream, possession of which afforded a hostess the social advantage of being the first in her area to serve the delicacy.⁴

This quote is deceptively difficult to parse, because it seems to provide proof for the story of recipe sharing, but none of the notes Ms. Allgor provided supported that story. I then realized that she had covered her bases by couching the story in the conditional, in “Washington legend”. In one sentence, we are reading about “legend”, and in the next all of the verbs are unqualified, definite: it “was a typical Dolley transaction”; it “left everyone feeling satisfied”; the women from the unspecified “hinterlands” “were honored and delighted.” They “were”, she “was”, it “left.” Finally, Allgor cements her own connection by suggesting that, “Dolley offered her own recipes in return, both equalizing and elevating the exchange.” It is certainly a lovely idea, and it strikes several comfortable chords with the modern reader: the essentially egalitarian nature of transactions between the Founding Fathers and their families and the everyday citizen, the familiar, intimate idea of recipe sharing between friends, the inherent superiority of a First Lady’s recipes, and therefore of her advice. Unfortunately, all of these ideas are unfounded, both by history and by the sources available to us today.

Indeed, the textbook version takes this assertion yet further, adding the detail that Madison traveled to these women’s homes in her quest to create an “American table.” The textbook, published after Allgor’s work, proves that an idea can take firm root in the minds of a readership, especially when it confirms so neatly the accepted beliefs about Madison, early America, and the importance of food to constructing a uniquely American identity. Allgor shifts from legend to reality without a break for the reader to catch her breath, or indeed realize the difference.

⁴ Allgor, *Perfect Union*, 184-185.

If Dolley Madison wasn't the architect of American food, then who was? Throughout the course of my research, I kept running into references to a Mrs. Mary Randolph as the author of the first "truly American" cookbook. But what does it mean for a cookbook to be "truly American", and who was the woman who attempted this feat?

On August 30, 1800, two slaves told their master that more than a thousand of their peers were planning to assemble, march to Richmond, and kill everyone living there except the Frenchmen. They then planned to crown Gabriel Prosser, a free Richmond black man, "King of Virginia." It was also reported that Gabriel Prosser planned to save "Mrs. David Randolph" and make her his Queen because she was such a good cook.⁵

This "Mrs. David Randolph" is our Mary Randolph, called Molly, the Queen of Richmond society for two decades and author of the first genuinely American cookbook. Mary Randolph was born on Tuckahoe plantation in 1762, eldest child of Thomas Mann Randolph and Anne Cary Randolph. The Randolphs were one branch of an extraordinarily interconnected Virginia elite: Molly was related to John Marshall, first chief justice of the Supreme Court as well as Thomas Jefferson, among many others.⁶ Molly's life would include economic ups and downs, at least two political scandals that shook the bedrock of her family, and one great tragedy. She could have written a novel or a memoir, but cooking was her lifelong passion and her one-time profession, so she wrote a cookbook to "embody her experience."⁷

She and her husband, David Meade Randolph, also her cousin, would move to Richmond, where they purchased a grand mansion that was named "Moldavia", a

⁵ Jonathan Daniels, *The Randolphs of Virginia*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972,) 186-187

⁶ Shirley Abbott, introduction to *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph, (Birmingham, Ala.: Oxmoor House, Inc., 1984,) 2.

⁷ Abbott, introduction, 1-2.

combination of their names. At the time, Richmond was a grubby little frontier capital with a population of no more than 5,000 people. Still, it had a concert hall and tearooms, and the Randolph's house was a center for high society there.⁸ The dinners they gave at Moldavia were lavish and lush, and representative of the luxury that Virginia had to offer. They would often start with ten or twelve dishes of vegetables, boiled beef, shellfish, and perhaps a ham and a roast chicken. The next course would bring puddings, pies, ices, and cakes, all washed down with cider, wine, and beer.⁹

David and Molly were staunch Federalists, in political opposition to their cousin Thomas Jefferson. When he won the presidency, he didn't hesitate to dismiss David from his post as U.S. Marshall. Mr. Randolph sold Moldavia as well as his family lands at Presqu'ile on the James River, but soon his debts grew so large that Randolph was forced to rent a house in Richmond that she could run as a boardinghouse¹⁰. Happily for the Randolphs, Mary's reputation as a hostess had preceded her, and the boardinghouse was a roaring success. Her cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical Cook*, represents the accumulated knowledge of a lifetime as a plantation mistress and later, as a sort of professional housewife and hostess.

Before *The Virginia Housewife* was published in 1824, most cookbooks used in America were English reprints. The first cookbook published in America was E. Smith's *The Compleat Housewife*, from 1742. Then, in Hartford, Connecticut in 1796, "the first known cookbook of American authorship appeared, Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery*." English reprints were still popular though. As Jan Longone, curator of the culinary archives at the William Clements Library and author of the introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Virginia*

⁸ Abbott, introduction, 16.

⁹ Abbott, introduction, 3-4

¹⁰ Abbott, introduction, 20

Housewife writes, “no important new cookbook of American authorship appeared until Randolph published her *The Virginia House-Wife* in 1824.” It was a massive success, running through at least nineteen editions before the Civil War. It was still in use and being reprinted in the late nineteenth century, and has been reprinted four times in the 20th.¹¹ By 1929, when her gravestone was rediscovered, she had been largely forgotten. An article was written about her in *The Washington Star*, and her descendents came forward with information about her and about her work.¹²

Although cooking and housekeeping has always been a predominantly female pursuit, especially among the upper-middle class, Randolph refined and curated her recipes in such a way as to comment both on the morality of refinement, and the potential for creating connections between disparate American foodways. By presenting creolized recipes from minority cultures in her wildly successful cookbook, Mary Randolph helped to create a narrativized vision of American cuisine as a process of inclusion, refinement, and national pride. By publishing this book, and thence from its incredible success, Mary Randolph made use of the new space reserved for women in civil discourse.

A note about terms: this thesis will include several reference-words whose definitions are important to make clear at the outset. I could not hope to encompass the experiences of all women across the nation, of all races, classes, and regions. When I talk about “women” in this thesis, I will be referring unless otherwise noted to elite, white women of the Mid-Atlantic and South, women of Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph’s milieu.

Similarly, when I discuss “food” and “foodways”, I am working off of a conceptual framework outlined by David Hackett Fischer in his seminal work, *Albion’s Seed*. In that

¹¹ Jan Longone, introduction to *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph, (New York: Dover Publications, 1993,) 3.

¹² Karen Hess, introduction to *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph, pages ii-iii.

work he uses the term “folkways”, coined by William Graham Sumner in his 1907 book *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals*. Sumner used the term to mean “usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals,” which he believed to be biologically derived, but which Fisher asserts and I agree are instead “a cultural *artifact*—the conscious instrument of human will and purpose.” Fischer divides folkways into various categories, one of which is “food ways.” by which he means “patterns of diet, nutrition, cooking, eating, feasting, and fasting.” When I talk about foodways, I will first of all reshape the word into a portmanteau for ease of use, and secondly will include in my usage not only what foodways are, but also what they do, and what they help to represent.¹³ That is to say, when we talk about food, we are talking not just about what is served, but where it came from, who is around the table, how those people are served and how they understand meal-taking as a cultural concept.

Finally, a note about names: during the period of interest, women were referred to formally, either under their family name (“Miss Payne”) or their married name (“Mrs. Todd”). Only family members and bosom friends used Christian or given names together. In the case of Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph, they each had an extra name to add: they were known, respectively, as Queen Dolley and Queen Molly. This thesis will explore the uncomfortable dialogue Americans were having between their republican ideals and genteel values, and it’s important to note that these regal monikers are not sarcastic, or accusatory, or critiquing these women’s elite status in any way. These nicknames come from an appreciation of their skills as hostesses and an aspiration to their apparently “natural” ease and aristocratic bearing. In Dolley Madison’s case the term ‘queen’ can be extrapolated

¹³ David Hackett Fischer. *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989,) 7.

further to describe her role in government – influential, but not participatory. Queens are, among other things, the living symbols of the governments of their countries, and at this point in time, when a woman was responsible for the expression of patriotic virtue in her own family, a public woman such as Dolley Madison, a queen, was uniquely responsible for the expression of patriotic virtue among the general populace. This responsibility led directly to her receiving credit for forging an “American table” and therefore a particularly American sense of identity. In Mary Randolph’s case, she was dubbed a queen because she, too, presented a refined table to her guests, and presided over her boardinghouse as though she were ruling her own country.¹⁴ The regal nature of this nickname detracted from the shame of an elite woman needing to take up a profession in order to feed her family.

Modern scholars often refer to historical actors of either gender by their last name, for example using “Madison” both for Dolley and for James. In an effort to evoke the society of the time, and how these women would have referred to themselves and to their peers, I had thought to refer to them as Mrs. Randolph and Mrs. Madison. I do not want this choice to connote ideas of subservience, marginalization, or lessened agency or responsibility for these women, for their ideas, or for their legacies. Still, their ambitions and successes may be read by modern scholars as proto-feminist, progressive, or in some ways ahead of their time. This is not a point I wish to make, because although they present historical role models for modern women, I do not believe Mary Randolph or Dolley Madison to have been working with our modern ideologies in mind, or indeed anything close to them. Instead, I am attempting to present their actions as evocative of the complexities of their particular time period. These were two very successful people living within the bonds of a restrictive society, and testing its limits, perhaps despite the names their society demanded they go by. I

¹⁴ See Chapter 1.

may use the “Mrs.” moniker at certain junctures, such as during a discussion of dinner parties or interpersonal exchanges. Discussions of their biographies and historical legacies will follow modern convention and eschew the “Mrs.”

To return to our historical narrative, Madison also served political messages through her food. By serving meals based heavily on traditional American (mostly English) recipes, she exemplified the patriotism that was the necessary glue for a nation undergoing its first real military test after revolution, against the superpower that nearly crushed it in the first place. And by bringing in French influences, Madison elevated White House cuisine in such a way that it became aspirational to the masses to an unprecedented extent. But this emulation was due less to the particular physical makeup and taste of the food, and more to the general trend towards refinement and luxury that the middle class craved and that European tastes facilitated for up-and-coming American households.

As she toed the line between her feminine obligations and her political goals, Madison exemplified the rule, not the exception, of how women had been living their lives up and down the Eastern Seaboard during the earliest days of America’s existence. The historian Mary Kelley, author of *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic*, points out that women’s participation in public life had been growing over the course of Madison’s lifetime, but as other prominent women’s historians such as Laurel Ulrich point out, women had been fulfilling assertive and sometimes contradictory roles as public and private actors for decades before, and indeed after, Madison’s tenure as the “first First Lady.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Legend has it that Zachary Taylor was the first person to refer to Madison in this way, while speaking at her funeral.

So is it fair to call Dolley Madison's legacy fraudulent, and to crown Mary Randolph in her place? It's true that they were both aristocratic white women whose lives were entwined in the political sphere of early Washington, therefore it might seem that their experiences could be interchangeable. But Dolley Madison was an enormously famous woman whose interests and goals did not at all align with those of Mary Randolph, a mostly-anonymous housewife and boardinghouse mistress whose crackling intellect was tempered by her concessions to dignity and womanly virtue as they were seen at the time. It's not important whether one was the rightful doer of good deeds, wronged by history's slavish attention to a woman with the world's eyes upon her. It is perhaps more important to question why Americans want to have a national figure that embodies the unification of American cuisine, a "nation's hostess", how Mary Randolph unwittingly brought the idea to fruition, and how Dolley Madison came to become its historical embodiment.

The question is not why one woman was given credit for something another did, because Mary Randolph didn't accomplish quite what Dolley Madison was said to. Dolley Madison had the savvy and power to enact political change through traditionally feminine activities, and while she used refinement and gentility to her advantage, she did not bring American cuisines together, as has been implied. On the other hand, Mary Randolph did bring those cuisines together, but she did not enact political change through cuisine or entertaining. Rather, she carved out a space for herself and supported her family in such a way and to an extent that would have been inconceivable for women of the previous century.

This thesis concerns primarily the years between 1780 and 1835. Not only is this the time period that encompasses the prime of both women's lives (Dolley Madison b.1768 d.1849, Mary Randolph b. 1762 d. 1828), it is also a slice of history during which America

was undergoing profound and remarkable change. It's a time period known as the "Early Republic" or "Early National" years, and it represents the decades where Revolutionary philosophical ideas about how government ought to be run got their first practical run: the first peaceful transfer of power was the so-called "Revolution of 1800" in which Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson beat Federalist John Adams; the War of 1812, or "Mr. Madison's War", was America's first true test as a united nation, against the empire at the height of its powers that, mere decades before, had nearly made the American experiment fizzle before it had the chance to spread.

During these tempestuous decades, Madison and Randolph reached the heights of their respective influences and successes – Madison helped her husband to win re-election, and carved out a space for the President's wife in the office of the First Lady. Randolph singlehandedly saved her family from financial ruin by running a respectable boardinghouse in the young capital city of Richmond, Virginia, and went on to publish the accumulated wisdom of her entire lifetime in one of the most influential and important cookbooks in American history, commonly called the first American cookbook.

This thesis examines the social backgrounds and frameworks that informed each woman's life. A careful examination of *The Virginia Housewife* and the letters of Dolley Madison shows how each woman's life embodied the striking social change that was shaping America in its first years as a viable nation. Because Madison had her descendants burn her most politically and personally sensitive letters after her death, the letters of hers that remain at the Library of Congress mostly concern events after the death of her husband in 1836. Consequently, a memoir written by her grand-niece Lucia Cutts after Madison's death has also been consulted, with allowances made for family solidarity and selective editing. As for

The Virginia Housewife, it is a more relevant source than Randolph's letters might be because it embodies not just the recipes and techniques she learned throughout her life, but also her philosophies, attitudes, and opinions, which are sprinkled liberally throughout the text. It is quite literally her life's work, and can tell us a great deal about her character, her values, and her aspirations.

The first chapter concerns the role of women in the years immediately preceding and following the Revolution. Those years saw the American public attempting to grapple with the fundamental contradiction inherent in a society based on equality before the law that continued to subjugate women. To be sure, that basis for equality was conditional on class and race status, and did not ensure equality, only the equal opportunity for success, for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Still, various attempts were made at reconciling the discomfort of maintaining women's inferiority in the face of a system of government friendlier to the concept of egalitarianism than any that had come before it in the modern era. From the concept of the "Republican Mother", a woman who fulfills her patriotic duty by rearing her sons to participate in public life, to the idea of the public and private spheres, a theoretical construct aimed at containing women's affairs to the domestic space, philosophers and intellectuals of the time made many attempts at codifying and describing how women ought to behave. The difference between ideology and reality is sharp, but complex. Women in the Early Republic were better educated than ever before, but their progress was constantly circumscribed by the fear of reprisals in case of gender transgression.

The second chapter continues the theme of social transgression in a discussion of the rise of gentility and refinement as a social force. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had seen society divided between the gentry and the rest of the populace, but this

division was shifting as the middle class of the mid- to late-eighteenth century began to appropriate “gentle” mannerisms and attitudes in order to ascend the social hierarchy. By the mid-nineteenth century, the entire middle class had access to refinement and its attendant reflections upon one’s moral bearing, and lack of refinement relegated one to the lowest classes of society. Refined life in the Early Republic as expressed through the acquisition of luxury goods and gentle manners became a site where Americans processed and debated about the political and economic changes going on around them. Gentility was another social construct, along with gender, that it did not do to transgress.

The latter part of the second chapter concerns the food culture of early America, and how food is constructed as a part of one’s personal sense of identity. This personal identity can be extrapolated on a larger scale to examine how a nation’s food culture expresses a sense of national identity. The demographics of Early America are examined, and the resulting food culture is analyzed not in terms of what we now know to be accurate population counts, but instead in terms of how the elite of the Early Republic conceived of “America” and “Americans.” The matter of national identity as expressed through food becomes not a reflection of demographics but an examination of cultural appropriation of an othered “outgroup” by a privileged “ingroup”. Both chapters map the complexity of this social background onto the lives of Madison and Randolph, explaining how the role of women, the rise of gentility, and the unsteady nature of American self-conception found their expression in the work of these two women.

I present the term “material patriotism” as a unifying concept for the societal pressures exerted by the trends introduced above. As the middle and upper classes became obsessed with refinement as an expression of inner virtue, material goods were becoming

intimately connected to morality, as outward expressions of the owner's innate goodness. Morality and virtue were also expressed on a national level in the form of patriotism. With regards to female duty, patriotism was analogous to the woman's duty to provide a moral center for her household. Women felt it was their duty to stand as moral examples to their families, and to imbue that morality with patriotism. If morality was expressed through the acquisition of material goods, then patriotism could also be expressed in the same way. It is this expression that "material patriotism" attempts to encompass, and which links women, morality, civil society, and the rise of gentility to foodways in the Early Republic.

Each woman made great strides in civil society, Madison as a savvy political player and Randolph as an example of practical economy. They each interpreted what it meant to be American, both in terms of class and in terms of nationality. And each of their legacies is coming back into prominence in modern society as we look to the past for answers about the "true" nature of American identity and culture. Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison are examples of this connection between seemingly disparate cultural and social and political tides, and they reveal the potent effect these tides had and still have on American tastes, history, and self-conception.

CHAPTER ONE: “THE FEMALE PART OF THE STATE”: WOMEN AS PATRIOTS AND IN PUBLIC LIFE

“You must know that there is a great scarcity of sugar and coffee, articles which the female part of the State is very loath to give up, especially whilst they consider the scarcity occasioned by the merchants’ having secreted a large quantity... It was rumored that an eminent, wealthy, stingy merchant (who is a bachelor) had a hogshead of coffee in his store, which he refused to sell to the committee under six shillings per pound. A number of females, some say a hundred, some say more, assembled with a cart and trucks, marched down to the warehouse, and demanded the keys, which he refused to deliver. Upon which one of them seized him by his neck, and tossed him into the cart. Upon his finding no quarter, he delivered the keys, when they tipped up the cart and discharged him; then opened the warehouse, hoisted out the coffee themselves, put into the trucks, and drove off. It was reported that he had personal chastisement among them; but this, I believe, was not true. A large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.”

–Abigail Adams, in a letter to her husband dated July 31, 1777¹

Between 1780 and 1835 American women wrought an incredible change in the way civil society functioned between and within the upper and middle classes. By consequence of several important shifts in economics and population densities along the East Coast, it became important for women to be educated and opinionated in order to bolster their prospects of succeeding in a more crowded, resource-scarce world. Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison both benefited from and exemplified the dynamics and effects of this changing society. Both Randolph and Madison exemplify the trajectory of women’s participation in the public sphere during the turn of the nineteenth century because they each participated in civil discourse as tastemakers and definers of a new and morally charged form of polite interaction. The influence of societal trends towards women’s engagement in civil society and each woman’s own influence on the social graces of that moment allowed them to gain historical attention and significance.

¹ Charles Francis Adams, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and his wife Abigail Adams during the Revolution, with a Memoir of Mrs. Adams*. (Boston: Hurd and Houghton, 1876,) 286.

The dominant historical narrative of women's history at this time involves the idea that women were progressing steadily from private life into the public sphere. In truth, women's roles were both expanding to include new experiences, and contracting around gender-specific activities. Each woman navigated the unstable social environment of the Early Republic in a deeply personal way, and most historical ideas about their responsibilities and goals do not take into account the complexities and contradictions of their lives.

The first section of this chapter explains the popular conception of the public and private sphere that begins during this time period that takes hold as a way of understanding the proper place of women, even to this day. But that framework is and has always been theoretical rather than describing the practical realities of day-to-day life. Women were not progressing in a straight line from repression to freedom, from private to public, rather they were negotiating a complex and contradictory identity in a dynamic social environment. The second section begins to describe the experience of the women of Madison and Randolph's social milieu and of their particular experiences as women of the Early Republic. The final section explores the convergence of women, virtue, and patriotism in the form of the Republican Mother, an analytical framework that attempted to explain women's place in society during the early national period.

THE HARMONY OF THE SPHERES?

The popular conception of the public and private sphere that began during the Early Republic has taken hold as a way of understanding the proper place of women, even to this day. But that framework is and has always been theoretical rather than describing the practical realities of day-to-day life. Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, no one

used the idea of the spheres as a practical explanation for how life worked; it was instead a goal for the organization of society that had yet to be achieved. The ideological misapprehension that women stayed at home, completely isolated from the economic, political, or productive life of the family expands into the idea that women have been consistently progressing from private life to public life, from subjugated to free. Woman's role in society has instead been a contradictory and complex process of negotiation and compromise that is inherently paradoxical, and often fraught.²

In the period during and directly after the American War of Independence, intellectuals and philosophers began to outline the concept of the two spheres, private and public: a woman's sphere and a man's sphere, one private and one public, one virtuous and one vicious, one domestic and one exposed, and, economically, one unproductive and one productive. That distinction took hold in the nineteenth century and has continued to shape discourse around the proper place of women and men in society. In Dolley Madison's case, her life has been seen as a triumph of "woman's work", relegated to the realm of "women's history", with the attendant assumptions that come with that designation. Indeed, a cursory examination of her life shows that she adhered to a traditionally feminine narrative. That does not mean we can relegate her accomplishments to a private sphere whose duties have no bearing on public life.

Dolley Payne Todd Madison was born Dolley Payne in Guilford County, North Carolina, in 1768. Previous generations of scholars, including her own grand-niece, Lucia Cutts, have tried to rename her "Dolly", short for "Dorothy" or "Dorothea", but her signature

² For further discussion of the economic value, acknowledged and otherwise, of women's work in the early national period, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. Oxford, 1993.

and her birth certificate show that she has always been simply “Dolley”.³ She was born into a strict Quaker family, who had moved to North Carolina to be part of a new Friends Meeting, but they moved back to Virginia in 1769 and Dolley always considered herself a born-and-bred Virginian. Her father pursued his business interests to Philadelphia in 1783, and it was there that Dolley married John Todd, a prominent Quaker lawyer. Dolley gave birth to two sons, John Payne Todd (called Payne) and William Temple Todd. Sadly, Dolley’s husband and youngest son both died in the yellow fever outbreak of 1793, and she was left a widow at the age of twenty-two.⁴

Nevertheless, she was a vivacious woman of some means and suitors were not long in calling. Stories abound as to how she and James Madison met, but it’s known that Aaron Burr introduced them. Edna Colman, a popular scholar of First Ladies who wrote in the 1920’s, described their meeting in breathlessly purple prose:

According to the tales that surrounded this romance, Madison’s first vision of Mistress Dolly Todd was one to remember. Never a strict Quaker, for she loved pretty clothes too well, she was always gowned in the most attractive style, and one windy, icy day she sallied forth to market with her trim little feet and pretty ankles daintily shod in white silk hose and shining new high-heeled slippers with glittering buckles. A loose bit of ice, an ankle turned on treacherous heel, a flash of lacy draperies and silk, and Dolly lay for a minute in the strong clasp of a strange man whose admiring glance was not wholly submerged by the sympathy he was expressing. The man was Madison, and after assisting the limping lady home, he made haste to be presented properly and thereupon lost interest of Mrs. Washington in his cause and defying Aaron Burr and all others to take her from him.⁵

This anecdote is clearly an embroidery of a chance meeting that most likely did not happen. Still, it’s amusing to note how renderings of history have changed our perceptions of the lives of the Founding generation, and because we cannot know the precise means of their

³ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 415.

⁴ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 23-25.

⁵ Edna M. Colman, *Seventy-Five Years of White House Gossip: From Washington to Lincoln*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925,) 99-100.

meeting, it does no harm to momentarily imagine them as hero and heroine of their own strange sort of romance novel.

Fortunately, the future Mrs. Madison was young, vivacious, sociable, and quick-witted. Although she was not a renowned intellectual, or even particularly academically inclined, Dolley understood how to move through society in such a way that she was popular but not scandalous, fashionable without being imprudent, and witty despite her lack of formal education. In this way, she attracted the attention of the small, reserved hero the Revolution, James Madison. The Madisons are perhaps a textbook example of the maxim “opposites attract”: she was large, vivacious, and boisterous, while he was quiet, retiring, and shy. Nevertheless, their letters together show a tenderness and affection that could only have grown out of a strong mutual respect and regard.⁶

More importantly still, their dynamism as a political couple cemented James Madison’s success as President, and the historical legacy of his presidency as well. Madison revolutionized the tradition of the presidential dinner, using the art of entertaining and sociability to her husband’s political advantage and creating a space of open political dialogue within the White House itself. As the historian William Seale notes in his book *The President’s House: A History*,

The Madisons seemed to represent a joint effort of husband and wife. Social functions brought political factions together, if not in friendship, certainly under circumstances of civility, which proved valuable to the president in the increasingly hostile atmosphere of an approaching war with Britain. Mrs. Madison assumed a role that a man could not likely have played. She became herself a public figure, seemingly innocent, freeing him to work without the appearance or dangers of presidential isolation.⁷

⁶ Cutts, *Memoirs*, various letters show Dolley’s use of the informal “thee”, James refers to her as “my beloved”, etc.

⁷ William Seale, *The President’s House: A History*, (Washington, D.C.: Printed by the National Geographic Society for the White House Historical Association, 1986,) 127.

Although this work was decidedly traditional, and Dolley Madison always worked firmly within the boundaries of a woman's traditional realm, her work in assisting her husband toward his presidential goals through entertaining and hosting could not have been done before the advent of women as individual actors within a public sphere of influence.

Modern historians have interpreted the ideology of separate public and private spheres as representing a restriction on women's movement and progress, essentially preserving the status quo from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century and preventing women from taking part in the opportunities for legal equality put forward by the Revolution. This analysis of the private and public spheres reinforces the idea that the spheres had relevance to peoples' lives before the Revolution, problematically reifying their validity. Other scholars have disagreed, arguing that the Revolution brought about real change that mapped Enlightenment thinking onto women's lives. They argued that women were able to carve out a special place for themselves in the previously male-dominated "public sphere," in essence the first charge towards an eventual emancipation. Still, this interpretation bolsters the theoretical basis for a societal emphasis on the differences between men's and women's work as defined by a public and a private sphere. The most recent interpretations of women's history of the Early Republic attempt to understand gender as it interfaced with other sites of social change, such as economics and politics, a more inclusive approach that recognizes women's complex duties within and outside of domestic life. What remains clear in all this is that women's roles were complicated, confusing, and dynamic at this juncture in history.⁸

⁸ C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002,) 105. For further discussion of the historiography of women's roles during the early national period, see Rosemary Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," and "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," by Ruth Bloch.

What we do know for certain is that Dolley Madison was famous to a degree that's hard to imagine in our modern-day world of ubiquitous celebrity culture. In a time when no respectable lady had her name printed in the papers, Dolley Madison appeared in stories both complimentary and denigrating with regularity. Even her critics could only use her carefully cultivated qualities against her; she was, according to scholar Catherine Allgor, "*too* charming, *too* regal, *too* popular."⁹ Allgor also argues that Dolley Madison was famous at a time when "the only 'public women' were prostitutes."¹⁰ It's unclear what she means by "public women", but if she considered women acting in the public sphere as "public women", that assertion is certainly not true. Still, Dolley Madison was a "public woman" in the sense that the general public felt protective of her, as though they had personal knowledge and ownership of her. If this is the criterion for being a public woman, Dolley Madison may indeed have been the first, as her predecessors in the President's mansion, while famous and eloquent, were not as beloved by the general populace.

Still, as Mary Kelley outlines in her book *Learning to Stand and Speak*, women had been participating in public life for years before Dolley Madison became a "public woman", and their participation only grew from then on. Allgor asserts that it was, paradoxically, Dolley's sex, the "bonds of womanhood", that allowed her to succeed politically. Instead of forceful arguments, Dolley promoted brokered cooperation. Instead of playing party politics, Dolley opened up the doors of the President's home to all comers. Indeed, John Adams, one of Madison's most formidable colleagues and political opponents, said that "notwithstand[ing] a thousand Faults and blunders," James Madison in his role as President "has acquired more glory and established more Union, than all his three Predecessors... put

⁹ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 5.

¹⁰ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 6.

together.”¹¹ Allgor argues that this commendation was due to James Madison’s political savvy, but also very much to Dolley Madison’s political machinations.¹²

Indeed, Madison used the public’s fascination with her to further her husband’s political goals – because they knew about her reputation as a hostess, her parties became the social events to which everyone wanted access. She extended the Washington social season from 6 weeks to 10 weeks, which stretched from the first Wednesday in December until mid-February. She also greatly increased the size of the White House staff, hiring slaves from nearby plantations and also benefiting from the expertise of Jean-Pierre “French John” Sioussat. Sioussat was a deserter from the French Navy whose skill in the dining room was so essential to Dolley’s household that she created an entirely new post for him, “master of ceremonies.” As Allgor points out, “Even more important, his language skills and his experience with French customs and points of procedure aided Dolley as she constructed a workable American form of precedence.”¹³

Madison issued invitations to dine at the White House to the whole of Washington Society by placing advertisements in the newspaper, thus granting that sought-after access to all who wanted it (and were dressed well enough to be admitted). The parlors and salons of the White House were so filled that Madison’s legendary dinner parties became known as “squeezes”.¹⁴ “Yesterday I was at the President’s levee. . . . Such a crowd I never was in. It took us ten minutes to push and shove ourselves through the dining-room; at the upper part of it stood the President and his lady, all standing—and a continual moving in and out. Two

¹¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 2 February 1817, cited in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), vol. 2, 508.

¹² Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 7

¹³ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 182-183. See John H. McCormick, “The First Master of Ceremonies of the White House,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 7 (1904): 175-77

¹⁴ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 189.

other small parlours open and all full-likewise the entry. In every room was a table with wine, punch, and cakes, and the servants squeezing through with waiters for those who could not get to the table.”¹⁵ Without the newfound freedom for women to act in the public sphere, Dolley Madison could not have enacted such powerful changes. James Madison would most likely not have implemented a similarly radical policy to White House protocol. Without the transition from private to public life, or perhaps the opportunity for a public aspect to enter into women’s private lives, Dolley Madison wouldn’t have been able to use her fame to bring people together, and she certainly wouldn’t have been credited with the political savvy she employed in doing so.

The political scene in Washington during James Madison’s presidency was as ugly as America had ever seen to that point. In a country that had just seen its first peaceful transfer of power not even a decade earlier, and which was chafing under the pressure from European governments, especially Britain’s, the internal party divisions that scored Washington’s social scene were incredibly harsh and incredibly dangerous. For example, Washington Irving, the famous author, visited Washington City in February 1811, and noted in a letter on the seventh of that month that he had never had such fun as he was having at that moment, bouncing between the social engagements of warring factions. He writes:

You would be amused, were you to arrive here just now, to see the odd and heterogeneous circle of acquaintances I have formed. One day I am dining with a knot of honest, furious Federalists, who are damning all their opponents as a set of consummate scoundrels, panders of Bonaparte, &c, &c. The next day I dine, perhaps, with some of the very best men I have heard thus anathematized, and find them equally honest, warm, and indignant; and if I take their word for it, I had been dining the day before with some of the greatest knaves in the nation, men absolutely paid and suborned by the British government.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mary Boardman Crowninshield, *Letters of Mary Boardman Crowninshield, 1815-1816* (ed.) Francis B. Crowninshield, (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1905,) 35.

¹⁶ Allen C. Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, (Washington, D.C.: W.F. Roberts Company, 1914,) 116.

Admittedly, Irving did not have a personal stake in politics at that time, so he could afford to enjoy the intensity of the rancor between the two parties. Others, such as Alexander Hamilton, killed in a duel by his Democratic-Republican antagonist, Aaron Burr, in the summer of 1804, were not so privileged. The political dangers were very real for many in the Madisons' acquaintance, and would also shape Mary Randolph's life when the blood ties between her family and Thomas Jefferson proved too weak to prevent her husband's dismissal from his government post. For Dolley, reputation mattered almost as much as fact. Indeed, most of her extant papers date from after her husband's death in 1836, and the collection of memoirs and letters curated by her grand-niece Lucia Cutts were assembled with Madison's instructions in mind.

Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph managed to combine feminine duty, economic production, and social action into their lives' works. Their methods remained essentially feminine, as both were working within the realm of food and entertaining. What they managed to do within that realm, and the skills it took to manipulate the world around them to their advantage, would not have been considered fitting within the "private sphere." Dolley Madison oversaw most of the social responsibilities of the presidency, both because of her husband's natural reticence and because of the dangerous political climate in which they both were working. She may have worked from a feminine standpoint, but the political savvy and understanding necessary for her success would not have been a skill associated with the feminine, private sphere. For Mary Randolph's part, the economic skills she would have needed as a plantation mistress and later as the owner of a business were instilled at an early age. Her life provides a model for understanding a different reality for the women of the Early Republic.

CONTAINING THE MULTITUDES

When she was young, Mary Randolph's father Thomas Mann Randolph would make her a lavish present every year on her birthday. Rather than presenting her with a packet of pretty fabric or ribbons, he would give her two hogsheads of his best tobacco. He left it to her to barter on her own for any dresses or ornaments she wanted to buy. This shows a remarkable amount of trust and faith in the scientific and economic mind of a young girl.¹⁷ Randolph would continue to use this economic savvy throughout her life, both in her role as a plantation mistress and as the owner of a boardinghouse.

Mary Randolph, called "Molly", was also a daughter of Virginia, born and bred, but unlike Dolley Madison she was born into a vast landholding dynasty that had been in Virginia since the seventeenth century and whose branches included the Washingtons, the Custises, the Lees, the Carys, and the Jeffersons. Growing up at Tuckahoe, a gracious estate just outside of Richmond, Mary Randolph took part in a grand style of plantation living that would define the Old South for decades to come. By publishing her masterwork, *The Virginia Housewife*, and thence from its incredible success, Mary Randolph made use of the new space reserved for women within civil society without transgressing strictly policed gender boundaries.

The work of a plantation mistress was gendered female, but these women oversaw masculine tasks within that role: farm management, overseeing the planting of crops, making goods for export, agricultural affairs, keeping books, accounting for supplies and slaves and

¹⁷ Abbott, introduction, 10, from the memoirs of a British officer who stayed with the Randolphs while a prisoner of war.

expenditures.¹⁸ This diversity of duties was not just relegated to the South of the nineteenth century. As Laurel Ulrich explains in her examination of women's roles in 17th-century New England, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, female life in the North, a century before Randolph's heyday, was also "a series of discrete duties" rather than an all-encompassing "sphere." She writes of New England goodwives that they acted as "deputy husbands" in one aspect of their lives, crossing gender boundaries without transgressing society's patriarchal organization: "Settling accounts, commanding field hands, negotiating with Indians, or filling orders for planks and staves, New England women demonstrated their ability to perform male work, but in doing so they also proclaimed their loyalty to their husbands. Deputy husbands acted within rather than against traditional definitions of female responsibility, proving that in the pre-modern world position was always more important than task."¹⁹

Although Ulrich examines women of a completely different time period, society and value system than Randolph and her contemporaries, the similarities in their duties reveal that although the idea of a private and public sphere was used to keep women in their place, women were also expected to fulfill arduous labor, both physical and intellectual. Men and women both worked hard to keep plantations running, and each might swap out for the other when situations arose, but their normative roles remained gendered. Men got rewarded for their work with social esteem, political recognition, and money, among other things, but women didn't. The best women could do was fulfill what was expected of them, there was no room for them to go above and beyond the expectations men had of them. It became

¹⁸ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*, (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1983,) 30-31.

¹⁹ Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982,) 238.

politically expedient into the 19th century to keep women controlled, and to remind them where they ought to be, so that even as they found a place for themselves in civil society, that place was codified and controlled by men.²⁰

Even though Southern women of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were confined to their homes for the most part, there was much work to be done there. They had to oversee most of their husband's property and feed his servants and slaves. The plantation mistress also had to take care of children, clean, and provide medical care. They managed the budget and oversaw purchases, haggling with local merchants and laborers. They also made candles and soap, and all the clothes for the entire household, including every slave. They salted pork, made medicines, stuffed pillows and coverlets, and did minor housework and repairs. Housework was all-encompassing and never ending.²¹

Plantation mistresses of Randolph's milieu were wealthy and privileged, but they continued to value thrift and economy. On a plantation, nothing was wasted, and planters often asked their wives how to reduce expenditures and ease their financial worries.

Plantation mistresses have traditionally been seen in the light of *Gone With the Wind*:

beautiful decoration for a gracious estate, never to be burdened with work or care. Instead, most plantation women were immensely productive and essential to the economic wellbeing of the plantation system.²² Mary Randolph learned this from personal experience both at her childhood home of Tuckahoe and in her role as mistress of Presqu'ile, her plantation with David Randolph. This practicality is reflected in *The Virginia Housewife*, and responsible for the book's success.

²⁰ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 7.

²¹ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 7, 20, 21, 24, 26.

²² Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 25.

Clearly Randolph made the most of her education, and her scientific mind can be seen at work in the preface to the 1828 edition of *The Virginia Housewife*. She includes references to Latin words and characters, “Arcanum” meaning “secret”, and Tyro meaning “learner.” She also refers to Lilliput, site of Gulliver’s Travels. She makes clear that her goal is “and by actual experiment to reduce every thing in the culinary line, to proper weights and measures.” Her references to the management of a family as being comparable to the government of a nation show her to be a keen political philosopher, as well.²³ In addition, she takes care to guide the reader not just on the preparation of vegetables, but when in the season and what time of day it is best to harvest them. She’s a gardener as well as a cook.²⁴

In this way, her cousin David Meade Randolph was a good match for her, as they both had scientific minds. Mr. Randolph was acknowledged the best farmer in the county, and it was recorded that “On his 750 acres, he made an annual profit of \$3500.”²⁵ La Rochefoucault-Liancourt was a “French nobleman and émigré who described Randolph as a person “who is fully entitled to the reputation of being the best farmer in the whole country.” He also acquired several patents, for a new method of cobbling shoes that represented a step towards the machine manufacture of shoes, and for “improving matters” in shipbuilding and the manufacture of candles.²⁶ Still, Presqu’île was swampy and both the Randolphs suffered from ill health there, so they moved to Moldavia, a “very commodious, finely situated, two-story Brick Dwelling House” in downtown Richmond. Along with the Wickhams, the

²³ Abbott, introduction, 7; Randolph, vii)

²⁴ Abbott, introduction, 9.

²⁵ Abbott, introduction, 12

²⁶ Abbott, introduction, 21, Anderson, “Queen Molly”, 34. Molly also invented several things, including a hot water bathtub and an early refrigerator. She chose not to patent them.

Marshalls, and the Chevallies, among others, the Randolphs made up the fashionable social scene in Richmond.²⁷

The Randolphs were also staunch Federalists. David Randolph continued to hold his government job, given him by John Adams, but when Jefferson was elected he removed his cousin immediately. In a letter, Jefferson wondered how “vacancies [are] to be obtained? Those by death are few,” he worried, “by resignation none.”²⁸

Sadly, this political antagonism gained them no rewards. David sold first Presqu’ile, then Moldavia in an attempt to stave off bankruptcy, to no avail. So it was that an advertisement appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* in March 1808, announcing: “Mrs. Randolph has established a BOARDING HOUSE in Cary Street. She has comfortable chambers, and a stable well-supplied for a few horses.”²⁹ Mary Randolph’s Richmond boardinghouse was a roaring success. As her friend Samuel Mordecai wrote, “. . .those who had, in her prosperity, partaken of her hospitality, would second her when in adversity.”³⁰ David’s business partner Henry Heth wrote him while he was on a business trip in England: “I see your good wife anytime I go to town—she enjoys most excellent health, and, if it be possible for one so . . . far separated from the most affectionate and indulgent of Husbands, to be happy, she is completely so—Her house stays full of the best sort of Profitable company, who treat her more like a Queen than the keeper of a Boarding House . . .”³¹

²⁷ Abbott, introduction, 30-31

²⁸ Sterling P. Anderson, Jr. “Queen Molly and *The Virginia Housewife*.” *Virginia Cavalcade* 20 (1971): 32. Anderson notes on page 33 that the breach was not healed by time. Harman Blennerhasset, the remarkably named Irish compatriot of Aaron Burr, had the pleasure of Randolph’s acquaintance six years later, where he recorded that she “uttered more treason than *my wife* ever dreamed of. . .” calling down “strictures on Jefferson’s head.”

²⁹ Daniels, *Randolphs*, 228.

³⁰ Daniels, *Randolphs*, 228.

³¹ Anderson, “Queen Molly”, 34.

What made Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* such a success was not just her inclusion of new and different recipes to the traditional Virginian's repertoire, but also how she used her skill and thriftiness to make all her recipes more practical, economical, and elegant.

After her death, her cookbook remained very successful and was copyrighted by her son Beverly in 1828.³² By publishing her book, Mary Randolph provided concrete evidence that women were asserting themselves into public discourse as arbiters of good taste and refinement, becoming the tastemakers on whose judgment rested the reputations of an aspirational public. Her thriftiness and practicality was representative of the experience of women of her cultural milieu, not a departure from it. Her entrance into civil society allowed those trends to crystallize in *The Virginia Housewife*, and thereby to form a part of American cultural consciousness for centuries to come.

The ideology of separate social spheres for men and women was a tool used to control and restrict women's experiences, and although it was never fully adopted into practice, it remains a concept with damaging implications for the validity of women's work to this day. While women were busy attending to matters at the plantation, their husbands often wrote them, exhorting them not to "exert themselves."³³ Despite their hard work as cultural and economic producers, Southern women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries held a symbolic role that men focused on to the exclusion of women's active work keeping plantations running.

³² Anderson, "Queen Molly", 35.

³³ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 32.

VIRTUE, VICE, AND THE REPUBLICAN MOTHER³⁴

As well as their practical roles on the plantation, Southern women were “guardians of virtue” for their families.³⁵ Because they were isolated from the outside world, women were “assigned the role of moral exemplar and counselor... Thus the patriarch imagined his family as a domestic haven sheltered from the pernicious influences of the world and guided by the saintly precepts of his untainted wife.”³⁶

Women were considered to be innately virtuous, but they were also, according to the Bible, the root of vice. This meant that women had to be “educated” in moral character and refined manners so that they could be elevated to their rightful state of virtuousness. They could not, however, be too educated or worldly for fear of seeming masculine, therefore women were wrangled back into place with the need to “throw charm” around themselves and the domestic circle. “Throwing charm” is a concept that requires women not to overstep their bounds by making the comfort of their guests and peers their most important task. Intellect was tempered by gentility to create the ideal woman.³⁷

Delicacy, sensibility, and taste were three virtues bound up in Christian morality and familial duty to which women aspired. Delicacy caused one to become embarrassed by anything rude, vulgar, or even indirectly erotic. More broadly, Delicacy meant the appreciation for refined, gentle, genteel things. Delicacy is the reason why the Princess felt the Pea through a hundred mattresses. Delicacy made its bearer very sensitive to judgment or blame, in herself or others, and she would always try to lift it. Being delicate was a part of

³⁴ The landmark work of women’s political participation in the early republic is Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. It is here that she defines the concept of the Republican Mother – a role for women designed to allow them marginal participation in politics by encouraging them to rear moral, patriotic sons who would serve their country.

³⁵ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 92.

³⁶ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 90.

³⁷ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 93.

putting people at ease, a responsibility for every young lady of refinement.³⁸ Sensibility was similar to delicacy, expressing the emotional reaction that being delicate aroused in a person: weeping easily, being overcome with emotion, fainting, etc. Delicacy caused sensible people to “react powerfully” to various situations, and that sensibility reinforced a woman’s innate moral virtue and refinement.

Taste was, and still is, harder to define, but it was essentially the aesthetic outgrowth of having delicacy and sensibility. It allowed one to discern between “good” and “bad” taste, and that ability was seen as the outward demarcation of an inner sensibility, delicacy, and therefore virtue.³⁹ These three aspects of gentility are all particularly feminine and expressing them created the “natural” basis for good taste and a person of refinement.

With her keen eye towards posterity and reputation, Dolley Madison used these virtues to engineer her hostessing in such a way that it, and by extension her husband’s rule of the country, seemed both elegant and natural. Catherine Allgor lays out how Madison’s reputation as a hostess *par excellence* was cultivated and maintained. At one dinner, the architect Elbridge Gerry attempted to relieve Madison of her duties “in doing the honor of the table.” He noted in a letter to his daughter that she replied, “O no... Mr. G see with how much ease I will do it.” Mr. Gerry then went on to note in the same letter “her ease... it was impossible for me to have equaled her in this instance... Indeed every thing she does is with such elegant ease as would delight you, [she is] as easy as if she had been born & educated at Versailles.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993,) 81.

³⁹ Bushman, *Refinement*, 81-83.

⁴⁰ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 183. See Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 2 June 1813, 29 May 1811, Massachusetts Historical Society, Cambridge, Mass.

Gerry uses “ease” and “easy” so many times for a reason: it’s because the highest class of Americans especially prized that quality. The perfect hostess would be considered polished yet accessible. Allgor uses the term “natural aristocrat”⁴¹ to describe Madison, a term rich with the paradoxical implications to be explored further in Chapter 2. Madison represented both the Democratic-Republican government, fiercely loyal to the ideals of small government, and the aristocratic virtues so highly prized by her peers. Although the American ideal revolted at the idea of an aristocracy, in reality Americans lived (and still live) in a society whose class lines are clearly delineated. Despite their republican leanings, the elites of America were still just that, elites, and they glossed this assumption of superiority through the idea of “ease” in order to make class distinctions seem a matter of innate character.⁴² As Richard Bushman explains in his seminal work, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses Cities*: “The ideal gentle mind was notable for vivacity, implying constant intellectual and emotional vitality. A vivacious mind, while composed and peaceful, also operated to a high pitch, displaying wit, repartee, knowledge, and lively emotional responses.”⁴³ This is the exact condition to which Madison aspired, and for which she was so celebrated.

Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the *Woman’s Record*, an examination of women’s history since “creation”, was an advocate for educational opportunities for women. She wrote in 1854 that women act based on “insight, or the wisdom that seizes intuitively on the true and the good; also the moral sense, which turns instinctively, so to speak, heavenward.” This insight was what differentiated women from men, and what allowed them a sort of moral superiority. This superiority was a way to express women’s roles in such a way as to exalt

⁴¹ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 184

⁴² Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 183-84; Bushman, *Refinement*, 58, 83, 89.

⁴³ Bushman *Refinement*, 84

and confine simultaneously. Because they were so virtuous, women needed to leave the “work of the world” to men, and instead devote themselves to putting in order the next generation of male statesmen, economists, philosophers, etc., “inspir[ing] them to...righteousness.”⁴⁴ This “inspiration” fits in neatly with the popular conception of Republican Motherhood discussed above, and maps onto Dolley Madison’s work and her conception of self. She didn’t enact political change directly, she merely created the space for political deals to be brokered and inspired those who came to dine at the White House to work in the spirit of American virtues. Although Hale was writing much later than Randolph or Madison, her views show just how accepted women’s roles as arbiters of virtue had become in the years since the Early Republic.

Women took it upon themselves to exert their moral influence on men outside their immediate social circle, polishing their manners through performances at salons and, in Washington, at balls, levees, pele-meles, and “squeezes”. Women began performing their delicacy of feeling as a sort of moral refinement, and in doing so acted out a new role as arbiters of good taste, and makers of public opinion.⁴⁵ Women’s duty to exhibit a virtuous patriotism was analogous to the woman’s duty to provide a moral center for her household.

Let it not be misconstrued that patriotism was merely a signal by which elite women signaled their innate morality. As First Lady Abigail Adams describes in this letter to her husband, John, women felt a strong connection to their country, and that loyalty manifested itself publicly, no matter what obstacles stood in its path:

⁴⁴ Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic*. (Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: 2006,) 214, quoting from Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman’s Record or, Sketches of all distinguished women, from “the Creation” till A.D. 1850*, xxxvii, xlv, xlvi, 17.

⁴⁵ Kelley, *Learning*, 25.

Patriotism in the female Sex is the most disinterested of all virtues... Even in freest countrys our property is subject to the controul and disposal of our partners, to whom the laws have given sovereign Authority. Deprived of a voice in Legislation, oblige to submit to those Laws which are imposed on us, it is not sufficient to make us indifferent to the publick Welfare? Yet all history and every age exhibit Instances of patriotic virtue in the female Sex; which considering our situation equals the most Heroick.⁴⁶

By choice, women asserted themselves as crucial to the survival of the Republic at a time when its future was certainly in jeopardy. Only a few decades out from the Revolution, both Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph lived through the War of 1812, which pitted the young nation against its original foe at the height of that foe's powers. Although women agreed that they had duties that lay outside public discourse, never fully relinquishing their duty to and hold on household life, women were now acting as subjects, actively criticizing and debating with men over their opinions on the role women should take in public life.⁴⁷ They agreed with the male perspective that they had duties outside the "public sphere", but they disagreed with those perspectives or used them for their own ends, which is evidence of their continuing subjectivity and assertion into civil discourse.

Although Hale removed herself from the idea of being self-seeking or selfish, in defiance of the idealized, self-sacrificing family woman, taking up the pen and becoming a woman was in itself a way to set oneself apart and present oneself as a valid, intellectual individual.⁴⁸ As Mary Kelley explains, "Hale's self-representation was shaped, indeed determined in large part, by the constraints any highly visible woman had to negotiate if she expected to exercise influence."⁴⁹ Both Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison navigated these

⁴⁶ Adams. *Familiar Letters*, 131.

⁴⁷ Kelley, *Learning*, 27.

⁴⁸ Kelley *Learning*, 216.

⁴⁹ Kelley *Learning*, 217.

constraints: Mary by authoring her book, and Dolley by taking the lead in the social affairs of Madison's presidency.

Elizabeth Ellet also ran into this problem. A historian writing in the 1850's, she was trying to understand the Republican Mother, and to argue that women had as much to do with the success of the revolution as men did. She found herself writing against "the inherent difficulty in delineating female character, which impresses itself on the memory of those who have known the individual by delicate traits, that may be felt but not described." It is this sort of personality description that makes writing the history of Dolley Madison so difficult. She is generally held to be responsible at least in part for most of her husband's political successes, yet there is no concrete historical evidence of the direct effect she had on politics. She had her descendants burn all letters that might be deemed "unseemly" for the historical record, including, most likely, most of her political correspondence with her husband and others. Ethel Stevens Arnett, a biographer of Dolley's who wrote her book, *The Incomparable Dolley: Mrs. James Madison* in 1972, felt this same frustration, writing that it was difficult to ascertain Dolley's political influence when there was no direct record of it for the historian. As Kelley explains, "Inadvertently, Ellet had described the very phenomenon that made the documentation of the role of women so challenging. Constituted in sensibility and deployed through deference, women's influence was designed to be *felt*."⁵⁰

The goal of this empathetic training had to do with theories about the nature of men and women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Women were encouraged to access their emotional power because they were thought to be purer and less corruptible in terms of their innate morality and virtue. Because of this innate morality, women were taught to act as the lodestone for virtuousness and righteousness within their families and also

⁵⁰ Kelley, *Learning*, 217.

within society at large. Indeed, a woman's right to an education was contingent upon her maintenance of this strict gender binary – if she did not uphold republican ideals through accessing her emotions, and consequently her virtuous morality, she was not fulfilling her obligation to society and the contract by which she had obtained her education in the first place would be broken.⁵¹ By embracing their moral authority and the responsibilities that came with it, women were able to enter public life in an influential way, and in a capacity that was unprecedented.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Women were excluded from political discourse except in their role as mothers. This exclusion rankled for the women of the Revolutionary era and the Early Republic. A Maria Campbell, wife of a Virginia politician, took an intensely personal view of this exclusion:

...I cannot avoid looking around me, and viewing from my inaccessible mountains the important struggle in which my native and beloved Country is engaged—Her destiny is connected with the life blood of my heart...I am willing to suffer more rather than see her savage and merciless foe triumph over her.⁵³

Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison were both intimately connected to American politics and the workings of government. They had more opportunity than most to comment on and influence the inner workings of Washington. But Madison worked indirectly, always in a supporting role, and Randolph's strong political views were never aired in a public institution. Madison has been called the architect of the first American table, and while it's unclear that she was any such thing, patriotic fervor during her lifetime was at such a pitch that it's unsurprising that her life's work has been connected to the founding myth of our country. As for Randolph, her "American" cuisine will be analyzed in greater detail in the

⁵¹ Kelley, *Learning*, 25.

⁵² Kelley, *Learning*, 244.

⁵³ Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 182, from a letter to Jefferson, her cousin.

next chapter. She was a patriotic woman operating in public life, using traditionally feminine means of expression. How these aspects of her life expressed themselves in her masterwork remains to be seen.

The dichotomy between private and public, men's work and women's work, the domestic and the economically productive, has always been false, even since its inception during the first years after the American Revolution. In 1801, one of its sharpest critics, an "aged matron" from Hartford, Connecticut who referred to herself as "The Female Advocate" had this to say about the gendered division of responsibilities and intellects:

[if by] the word "Masculine" be meant a person of reading and letters, a person of science and information, one who can properly answer a question, without fear and trembling, or one who is capable of doing business, with a suitable command over self, this I believe to be a glory to the one sex, equally with the other . . . custom, which is not infallible, has gradually introduced the habits of seeing an imaginary impropriety, that all science, all public utility, all superiority, all that is intellectually great and astonishing, should be engrossed exclusively by the male half of mankind.⁵⁴

This scholar cannot help but agree enthusiastically with The Female Advocate. Mary Randolph was a person of science, of method, of business. Dolley Madison was a person of reading, of letters, and of politics. It's not only a question of who can do things that are intellectually great and astonishing, but what intellectually great and astonishing things are. Running a plantation is incredibly difficult, and that work all too often went unrewarded and even unrecognized. It's not just women's work in the wider civil society that needs recognition, but also our work at home.

The social movements described in this chapter ensured the success of both Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison. Still, in negotiating these various demands on their energies, most women created complex and intricate strategies to navigate the unprecedented social

⁵⁴ Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective", *American Quarterly*, 28(1976), 200.

world in which they found themselves. Through their connections to patriotism, virtue, and public influence, both Randolph and Madison shaped a narrative about American identity through the lens of culinary refinement that continues to this day.

CHAPTER TWO: “SAV’RY SCENT AND HANDSOME SIGHT”: FOOD, POLITICS, AND THE RISE OF GENTILITY

“I am sure not ten minutes elapsed without refreshments being handed. 1st, coffee, tea, all kinds of toasts and warm cakes; 2nd, ice-creams; 3^d, lemonade, punch, burgundy, claret, curaçoa, champagne; 4th, bonbons, cakes of all sorts and sizes; 5th, apples, oranges; 6th, confectionery, denomination divers; 7th, nuts, almonds, raisins; 8th, set supper, composed of tempting solid dishes, meats, savory pasties garnished with lemon; 9th, drinkables of every species; 10th, boiling chocolate.”

– Sarah Gales Seaton, describing a ball given by Hannah Gallatin, wife of Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury under Thomas Jefferson and James Madison¹

Women used tools and frameworks they were familiar with in order to assert themselves into a rapidly changing world. Even as women were coming into prominence within the national consciousness, that prominence was being circumscribed and controlled by a patriarchal society, forcing women to express their ideas and agency through strictly delineated means. That is to say, the dichotomy of the public and private spheres, of women’s and men’s realms, was being codified and enforced as never before. Food and entertaining therefore became an important way by which women like Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison expressed their political motivations and senses of identity within a national context without transgressing the gender roles that described their lives. That said, it doesn’t do to deprive them of their agency; Madison and Randolph were two women who were exceptionally good at what they did, and enjoyed doing it.

The first section of this chapter gives a general background of the relevance of food and gentility to American society in the Early Republic. The second concerns matters of gentility and refinement: from a sociological discussion of the history of their rise, to their effect on national pride and national identity, to their relevance to Randolph and Madison’s lives and legacies. The third section lays out first the history of American food during the

¹ Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter J. Albert, *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*. Washington, D.C.: The United States Capitol Historical Society, 1994, 177-178.

Early Republic, then the ways in which food became a symbol of national identity, and finally an examination of what that identity has been, and a discussion of what it might be for the modern reader.

GENTILITY, REFINEMENT, AND FOOD

Margaret Bayard Smith, friend of Dolley Madison and wife of Samuel Harrison Smith, founder of the *National Intelligencer*, Washington City's premier newspaper at the time, was acutely aware of the symbolic power of food. The following anecdote comes from Smith's personal narrative of her time in Washington: *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*. Here, Smith attempts to find her way through the complex problem of presenting a proper table to her guests for the first time in several years:

The day previous to our little dinner party, I sent for Henry Orr, whom I had always employed when I had company and who is the most experienced and fashionable waiter in the city. He is almost white, his manners gentle, serious and respectful, to an uncommon degree and his whole appearance quite gentlemanly. "Henry," said I, when he came, "I am going to have a small dinner party, but though small, I wish it to be peculiarly nice, every thing of the best and most fashionable. I wish you to attend, and as it is many years since I have dined in company, you must tell me what dishes will be best. "Bouilli," I suppose, "is not out of fashion?" "No, indeed, Ma'am! A Bouilli at the foot of the table is indispensable, no dinner without it." "And at the head?" "After the soup, Ma'am, fish, boil'd fish, and after the Fish, canvas-backs, the Bouilli to be removed, and Pheasants." "Stop, stop Henry," cried I, "not so many removes if you please!" "Why, ma'am, you said your company was to be a dozen, and I am only telling you what is absolutely necessary. Yesterday at Mr. Woodbury's there were only 18 in company and there were 30 dishes of meat." "But Henry I am not a Secretary's lady. I want a small, genteel dinner." "Indeed, ma'am, that is all I am telling you, for side dishes you will have a very small ham, a small Turkey, on each side of them partridges, mutton chops, or sweetbreads, a macaroni pie, an oyster pie"---"That will do, that will do, Henry. Now for vegetables." "Well, ma'am, stew'd celery, spinage, salsify, cauliflower. "Indeed, Henry, you must substitute potatoes, beets, &c." "Why, ma'am, they will not be genteel, but to be sure if you say so, it must be so. Mrs. Forsyth the other day, *would* have a plum-pudding, she will keep to old fashions." "What, Henry, plum-pudding out of fashion?" "La, yes, Ma'am, all kinds of puddings and pies." "Why, what then must I have at the head and foot of the table?" "Forms of ice-cream at the head, and a pyramid of anything, grapes, oranges, or anything handsome at the foot." "And the other dishes?" "Jellies, custards, blanc-mange, cakes, sweet-meats, and sugar-plums." "No nuts, raisons, figs, &s., &c?" "Oh, no, no, ma'am, they are quite vulgar." "Well, well, Henry. My desert is, I find, all right, and your dinner I suppose with the exception of one or two things. You may order me the pies, partridges and pheasants from the French cook, and Priscilla can do the

rest.” “Indeed, ma’am, you had best”---“No more, Henry,” interrupted I. “I am not Mrs. Woodbury.”²

Here we see a woman attending as much to her reputation as to her budget, as much to her legitimacy as a woman of the upper crust as to the tastes of her guests. Henry Orr, her adviser, was one of a select subset of servants-for-hire who helped upper-class women with their kitchen work.³ Unlike other kitchen staff who could be hired for special occasions, these people, predominantly men, served as arbiters of the genteel, the refined, and the proper.

Starting at the midpoint of the eighteenth century, gentility and refinement became powerful social forces that regulated people’s behavior inside and outside the home. This trend was responsible for the regulation of dining, separating food from floor and fingers by insisting on clean, individual place settings and specially designated serving bowls. Even the body at table was subject to a new set of rules, as a refined host would have insisted on correct posture and the restriction of touching food directly on the part of all of his guests.⁴ Certainly this arbitration had to do with the fashion of the time, but it was even more concerned with the reification of the host’s identity as a person of class.

Consciously or not, the method and manner of dining in Washington City during the years of the Early Republic, 1780-1835, was intimately connected to social power and status.⁵ Included in this symbolic display, in fact, essential to it, was the food and recipes presented to one’s peers in an attempt to define and display one’s social standing to one’s advantage. But along with matters of social power and privilege, food has always been, and continues to be, a matter of personal identity and expression. It’s the confluence of these two

² Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society: portrayed by the family letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith (Margaret Bayard)*, ed. J. Henley Smith, (Washington, D.C.: C. Scribner’s Sons: 1906,) 359-360.

³ Carson, *Interests*, 100.

⁴ Bushman, *Refinement*, 76.

⁵ Carson, *Interests*, vi.

symbolic messages embedded in food that made and make it such a potent tool, and which draw the focus of the Dolley Madison legend toward the creation of an American table. Let's return for a moment to the original quotation that inspired this thesis:

*Political wives' interactions among themselves served political purposes, too: when First Lady Dolley Madison visited congressmen's wives, she cultivated goodwill for her husband while collecting recipes that allowed her to serve regionally diverse cuisine at White House functions. **Madison hoped her menus would help keep simmering sectional tensions from reaching a boiling point.***⁶

Why would a menu keep tensions from reaching a boiling point in the first place? What is it about food that allows us to use it symbolically? What power does it have over us such that it becomes a tool for social control? To “break bread” is to create relationships, to extend patronage, to offer and receive shelter, to share intimacies.⁷

In order to understand the full impact food had on the construction of social life, it's necessary to delve further into the particulars of that social life in this moment. Jefferson had presided over a small, dirty city, but as the Madisons took over Washington City was beginning to come into its own. The demographics were diversifying, at least religiously, with the first Catholic church, St. Patrick's, being consecrated in 1806. There were also Meetinghouses for Friends, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists. The life of a Congressman was not very taxing, especially not when compared to their previous occupations as lawyers, farmers, or merchants. Men brought their families to town and a vivid social life soon sprang up for want of anything else to do. There was a good deal of leisure time.⁸

⁶ Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume 1, to 1877*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 2011,) 243.

⁷ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 185.

⁸ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 175-176.

The proper expression of manners and refinement reflected on one's personal and public identity, indeed, as we will see, on the identity of the nation. In a country struggling to define itself at home and abroad against the entrenched establishment of Britain and Europe, manners would be an important battleground for the assertion of an American identity. Dolley Madison would find herself on the front lines of this conflict, and ultimately her renown stems from her masterful manipulation of those around her in a social setting. Before we can understand her strategy, we need to unpack the rise of gentility and refinement as a social force in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Women clearly had to toe a line in public life. Food and entertaining were the tools they used to assert themselves while refraining from transgressing any gender norms. They were powerful tools because they could describe what it meant to be a person of class and a citizen of America, and if used incorrectly would have strong repercussions. Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison were not the only women expressing their political and public aspirations through food. Katherine Harbury notes an astonishing number of "patriotic cakes", cooked by women who wanted to be involved in the Revolution and the political scene immediately following it, but could do so only subtly. Names for these cakes included "Election Cake", "Ratification Cake", "Federal Pan Cake", "Columbia Cake", and "Lafayette Cake". There were "Lady Baltimore", "Inauguration", and "Washington" cakes. "Dolley Madison's Layer Cake" was also popular, and Mary Randolph includes a recipe for her "Plebeian Ginger Bread" on page 14 of *The Virginia Housewife*.⁹ Food is a political object as related to regional and national identity, and food and manners came together at this point in

⁹ Katharine E. Harbury, *Colonial Virginia's Cooking Dynasty*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004,) 23; Mary Randolph, *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical cook*, (

time as an expression of a new American style of life that presented a legitimate alternative to the strict procedures of the Old World.

“HANDSOME SIGHT”: THE RISE OF GENTILITY AND MANNERS

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea of gentility and refinement as a social force came into prominence and soon dominated all interactions between people, regardless of class. Refinement was an ideal to which all aspired because it expressed one’s innate good taste in all facets of life: from the clubs a gentleman frequented to the particular type of chair in a woman’s parlor. These infinite choices together made up the performance of gentility that told a person’s peers everything about them -- from what they valued to how they saw themselves within the hierarchy of society, and, most importantly, the gentility of a person’s material goods reflected upon that person as an outward manifestation of their inner virtue. In short, gentility was a social movement that presented material goods as a way to prove one’s “inner grace”¹⁰ and to aspire to achieve a higher class status. In an increasingly diversifying city, with a large population of upper-middle class families taking their ease in each other’s company, manners, refinement, and gentility became an ever more important way to understand and perform social relationships. Food as a luxury good was inherent to this process of social definition and control.

Gentility was not just a tool for social mobility; it was also a barometer by which people measured each other’s merit, and, on a grander scale, by which the Old World measured America’s legitimacy as a civilization. Gentility heightened the idea of being self-conscious of one’s actions – it increased performativity. “People were instructed in a hundred

¹⁰ Bushman, *Refinement*, xii.

details of how to dress, hold their bodies, and converse, all for the purpose of becoming more pleasing.”¹¹

As life became a performance, that performance opened everyday people up to the judgment of their peers as never before. Every social occasion was an opportunity to critique the lighting, the dancers, the hosts, the food, the music, the servants, the furnishings. Even a stroll down the streets of a city, or the manner in which one responded to an invitation, became evidence in the social judgment of a person’s character by his or her peers. “One’s house, its yard, one’s carriage, dress, and posture were perpetually on display.”¹² An important part of this display was one’s comportment, or manners. Manners were innately connected to the quest for refinement because while material goods could serve as markers of one’s “good taste”, manners were the proof that one was truly refined. Refinement became a personal virtue, like courage or honesty, and manners helped to express that.

In a strictly sociological sense, manners are a social construct that help us to understand our status with regards to those around us, and reinforce the feelings that status demands from us as members of society. C. Dallett Hemphill, author of *Bowing to Necessities: a History of Manners in America, 1620-1860* defines manners as “the rule-bound and symbolic behaviors that we perform in the presence of others.” Manners are necessary to social interactions, both now and in the past, but looking at manners as a historical problem is a relatively new idea. Still, sociologists and anthropologists have been

¹¹ Bushman, *Refinement*, xiv. In the 1800s, the lower classes gain access to refinement and gentility, blurring class lines. This made the middle class feel as though it was moving upward in the social ranks, but had the effect of shifting the lowest class from merely being excluded from the highest ranks of society to being pushed out onto the margins, “denied a claim to simple respectability.”(Bushman, *Refinement*, xv)

¹² Bushman, *Refinement*, xiv. On page 62 Bushman tells the story of a Scottish doctor visiting Delaware who records in his journal that he saw a man being fed an inferior breakfast (“scraps of cold veal”) simply because of his dress: “a greasy jacket and breeches and a dirty worsted cap.” The innkeeper’s adherence to the tenets of gentility denied a man a decent breakfast, and a good deal of social legitimacy.

investigating the phenomenon for decades, and provide a useful structure for understanding manners.¹³

There are three effects that manners have on the participants in a social interaction. Firstly, manners act as a subtle system of social regulation/control underlying all interactions and giving us a structure by which to understand them. Secondly, manners “generate the feelings that help people assume their social roles.” This is to say that by enacting the physicality and diction of particular manners, the enactor of those manners finds it easier to adopt the social role that is expected of them in the situation. Thirdly, manners help us communicate by telling us about each other and our relative places in the social order. Hemphill gives bowing as an example: bowing helps one to feel deferent in a situation where society dictates that one ought to feel deferent. Manners not only help people to understand their roles in social hierarchy, but they also help people to feel that those roles are real, to adopt the feelings that the manners they enact suggest they ought to. Manners are the mediators between the idealized society we think we inhabit and the real interactions we undergo every day. The rules we obey in face-to-face interaction come from more abstract, moralized ideas about how our society ought to function.¹⁴

Manners were also a personal expression of the inherent nobility that refinement was supposed to bestow on people. Manners (i.e. *civility*) were very much an urban concern, but it was a concern to which everyone aspired, urban and rural, over the course of decades. Urban Americans on the Eastern Seaboard and their rural cousins on the frontier further west were both concerned with attempting to increase their social value through the use of refined

¹³ Hemphill, *Bowing*, 3.

¹⁴ Hemphill, *Bowing* 3-5.

manners. One prominent citizen of Cincinnati chose a conduct manual as one of only two books to take with him on the journey West. The other was the Bible.¹⁵

Manners as a Matter of National Pride

Lack of manners or gentility was a way in which foreigners discredited the entire young nation; therefore everyone aspired to better manners in order to increase America's legitimacy on an international stage.¹⁶ Manners reflected on the personal and national merit of each person, as Thomas Jefferson was to learn to his dismay in the social scandal that Washington wits called "The Merry Affair"¹⁷ that may have been the most important factor in preparing Dolley Madison for her masterful control of Washington society in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Margaret Bayard Smith recalls that, a few weeks after the "Affair", Mrs. Merry was a guest of the Madisons, and criticized their hospitality, saying, "that it was more like a harvest-home supper, than the entertainment of a Secretary of State."¹⁸ This remark must have stung, as at that time, the Madisons' house provided one of the only venues for high-class social life in the capital. The resources available to Washington high society in order to attempt to civilize the wilderness would not have been up to European standards, or at least, they would not have been identical. Therefore, Dolley Madison's squeezes were the sites not just of fierce political debate but also of the validation or deflation of national pride.

In nineteenth century America, this new focus on the relative refinement of one's peers created a social arena where aristocratic life and republican values met. This created a

¹⁵ Hemphill, *Bowing* 5.

¹⁶ Hemphill, *Bowing* 6.

¹⁷ Mr. Madison writes to Mr. Monroe Feb 16 1804 about the Merry Affair, Clark, *Life*, 61

¹⁸ Clark, *Life*, 64-65

very discomfiting paradox in the American mind: how to reconcile egalitarian, republican values with the social power bestowed by “aristocratic gentility”? People could no more rid themselves of their aspirations toward bettering themselves through refinement than they could the republican ideals they had fought for not even a generation previously. How could the American project survive as a legitimate challenge to European powers while staying true to the philosophical tenets that gave it birth?¹⁹

The dilemma of American refinement came to a head in the arena of elite table service. The project of the American elite in New York, Philadelphia, and, most crucially, Washington City was to compete with the legitimacy of the governments of visiting European dignitaries while at the same time remaining true to the republican ideals on which the country was founded. This was a particular problem for the Founding generation because not only were they responsible for maintaining the egalitarian philosophical ideals of the country they’d fought to create, but also it was due to them that a country had been founded on those ideals in the first place. The dual responsibility of presenting a respectable, refined government to the rest of the world while staying true to that government’s founding philosophy laid heaviest on the shoulders of the first Presidents. This led to several unique attempts at bridging the aristocratic-republican gap, and those attempts induced a cracking whiplash in the highest social circles in Washington as power was transferred between presidents with wildly differing ideas about what was proper and what was a betrayal of American values.²⁰

¹⁹ Bushman, *Refinement*, xix, xvi, xviii, 409. “Gentility was worldly not godly, it was hierarchical not egalitarian, and it favored leisure and consumption over work and thrift.”(xviii)

²⁰ It is for this reason – the bridging of the aristocratic and the democratic – that the presidents were always addressed simply as ‘Mr. President’, but their wives were always “the presidents’ ladies”: Lady Washington, Lady Adams, and Lady Madison.

A particularly awkward exercise in misunderstood manners during President Jefferson's administration was a result of this confusion, and it must certainly have impressed upon Dolley Madison the importance of correct deportment in awkward political situations. During Washington and Adams' tenures, entertainment at the president's mansion had consisted of heavily formalized levees in the European style, during which the president would stand at the fireplace with a semicircle of visitors arranged before him. He would go up to each in turn and shake their hand, exchanging a pleasantry. After this, he would return to his station at the fireside until the signal was given for the visitors to leave.²¹ Jefferson abhorred this strict, almost monarchical manner of entertaining guests. Washington and Adams had felt the need to proceed in this manner because they needed the new nation to legitimize itself in the eyes of visiting dignitaries, and of its citizens. Jefferson would have no truck with it, and instead instituted the system of "pêle-mêle", an aggressively informal system in which every man was literally for himself.

Mr. Anthony and Mrs. Elizabeth Merry were, respectively, the chief diplomat from England and his wife during the Jefferson administration. They would have expected the formal protocol established before the "Revolution of 1800", when Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans took over from the Federalists. Because the Federalists believed in a strong central government, they were accused by their political enemies of being monarchists. This accusation was not helped by the fact that Washington and Adams felt that they needed to present a very formal style of entertaining in order to validate the United States in the eyes of visiting diplomats.

²¹ Barry H. Landau, *The President's Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007,) 3-4.

Jefferson, being a Democratic-Republican, wanted to refashion White House protocol from the stiff formalities of the Federalists. Instead of formal, European-style protocol in which husbands and wives were seated apart, and it was the duty of the host to take the arm of his most distinguished guest's wife as the guests went into dinner, Jefferson decided that "pêle-mêle" was the truest expression of American ideals. Everyone would sit with whom they wished and talk with whom they wished, take the arm of whomever they wished on the way in to dinner. It most likely did not help that Jefferson dined with ladies, or in "mixed company" very rarely, and was said not to have very much patience for decorum of conduct required when in their presence.²²

It was into this radical new way of doing things that the Merrys were thrust without warning. When Jefferson took Dolley's arm instead of Mrs. Merry's to go into dinner, Mrs. Merry was so offended that she and her husband merely picked at their food, and then left early, pleading illness.²³ Washington City was soon alight with gossip about the President's scandalous behavior and Dolley Madison's (who was at that time the Secretary of State's wife) complicity in it. In fact, Mrs. Madison had attempted to keep Jefferson in line, reportedly saying, "Take Mrs. Merry." Jefferson is said to have replied, "Not so." Madison was embarrassed by the whole "Merry Affair," and attempted to make the President apologize, to no avail.²⁴ Instead, Jefferson passive-aggressively wrote a list of fourteen rules for conduct in the president's house that all were to follow. He may have even written this

²² Cutts, *Memoirs*, 28-29, 49-50.

²³ Luckily enough, this dinner is one of the few for which we have a historical record. The Merrys' and Madisons' friend, Congressman Manasseh Cutler, recorded what they had to eat that night, February 21, 1804: "An excellent dinner. The round of Beef of which the Soup is made is called *Bouilli*. It had in the dish spices and something of the sweet herb and Garlic kind, and a rich gravy. It is very much boiled, and is still very good. We had a dish with what appeared to be Cabbage, much boiled, then cut in long strings and somewhat mashed; in the middle a large Ham, with the Cabbage around. It looked like our country dishes of Bacon and Cabbage, with the Cabbage mashed up, after being boiled till sodden and turned dark."

²⁴ Ethel Stephens Arnett, *Mrs. James Madison: The Incomparable Dolley*. (Greensboro, North Carolina: Piedmont Press, 1972.) 152.

list before the whole affair, showing that although he wanted republican freedoms to rule every aspect of American life, he realized that rules of polite engagement had to be codified and delineated.²⁵

Mrs. Merry never forgave Madison for the slight, as evidenced by the “harvest-home” slight. Clearly, gentility and manners were a matter of national identity, and national pride. Foreigners published criticisms of the way ordinary Americans ate, leading to rebuttals from American tastemakers.²⁶ George Washington and John Adams, Federalists, had held formal levees in the European style in order to make sure America’s legitimacy could not go ignored by foreign powers. Jefferson, head of the Democratic-Republican party, established the tradition of “pêle-mêle”, his radical departure from old traditions, which backfired when it transgressed the social frameworks that kept Washington society running. He attempted to go too far, too fast, and sharply rebuked by society. Republican ideals could not be the only things to sustain a society. Aristocratic gentility was a necessary addition, greasing the wheels of interaction with politeness. The Madisons, then, attempted a mixture of the two. They held “squeezes”, packed dinner parties, at which the President was always present, a tradition inspired by the levees, since Jefferson’s dinners were invitation-only, and he did not hold parties. Dolley Madison and her husband were trying to navigate the tricky distinctions between the political values embodied by entertaining and the presentation of meals.

The rise of refinement caused social judgment to soar. Each person was observing her peers and being observed at all times in polite society, which was expanding to include a

²⁵ Cutts, *Memoirs*, 30.

²⁶ Carson, *Interests*, 161: “In 1838 Eliza Farrar, the wife of a Harvard professor, avoided the class issue and tried to turn knife-eating into a matter of national identity: “If you wish to imitate the French or English, you will put every mouthful into your mouth with your fork; but if you think, as I do that Americans have as good a right to their own fashions as the inhabitants of any other countries, you may choose the convenience of feeding yourself with your right hand, armed with a steel blade; and provided you do it neatly, and do not put in large mouthfuls, or close your lips tightly over the blade, you ought not to be considered as eating ungentlely.”

greater proportion of the population than ever before. There could be no greater humiliation than not knowing where to put one's hat, or having trouble coming up with a proper topic of conversation. Trying to avoid public humiliation, or the "withering blast of public scorn", was a constant preoccupation, and led to the rise of a new goal in refined society: the achievement of "ease." As Cary Carson explains so well,

Ease meant the free flow of good spirits in talk, laughter, and dance, without the emotional turbulence of offense being given or taken...Ease implied a measure of friendly intimacy and openness within the framework of proper manners. Ease did not grow out of uninhibited informality, but depended on the discipline of all members of the company, their strict regard for the feelings of others, and their careful observance of proprieties.²⁷

The importance of ease recalls the discussion of delicacy, sensibility, and taste from Chapter 1. The most important thing for a host or hostess to do was put everyone "entirely at his ease". "To perform faultlessly the honours of the table is one of the most difficult things in society,"²⁸ the key word being "faultlessly." Of course one must try her best to put her guests at ease, but it did not do to be showy about it. In order to accomplish the correct deployment of "ease", it was necessary to make every guest comfortable and happy while making it appear as though you forgot you were doing it at all. Much of Dolley Madison's fame came from her mastery of this contradictory, fiendishly difficult skill.

The accomplishment of ease was also a matter of national pride. A Mrs. Margaret Hall said of Louisa Adams' attempts at ease, "no American ever understands doing those things really well." As she said this during Louisa Adams' tenure (wife of John Quincy Adams, 6th president, daughter-in-law of John Adams, 2nd), which came after the reign of

²⁷ Carson, *Interests*, 57.

²⁸ *The laws of etiquette; or, Short rules and reflections for conduct in society. By a gentleman.* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1839), p.139.

Queen Dolley, it's clear that she had not had the benefit of seeing ease done to perfection at the White House.²⁹

Refined manners allowed one to measure oneself against others and gain a social advantage. Mary Randolph's close association with the cream of elite society gave her book an important boost by validating her status as a lady of refinement. When used strategically, gentility could bolster or detract from the legitimacy of a person or a nation. Margaret Bayard Smith realized this, which is why she hired Henry Orr for her dinner party, and why fashion factors so heavily into her deliberation about dinner. But, dinner is still primarily a meal. Food clearly had a lot to say about a person's identity as well.

“The Queens” and Refinement

Both Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison “knew full well . . . that food and entertainment made up the secret foundation of [their] family's income and power.”³⁰ But, they had different ideas about what made a practical and elegant table, which is evidence of their different financial and status situations. Mary Randolph believed that,

Profusion is not elegance—a dinner justly calculated for the company, and consisting for the greater part of small articles, correctly prepared, and neatly served up, will make a much more pleasing appearance to the sight, and give a far greater gratification to the appetite, than a table loaded with food, and from the multiplicity of dishes, unavoidably neglected in the preparation, and served up cold.³¹

By contrast, when Dolley Madison was challenged by a miffed Mrs. Merry about the relative simplicity of her table, according to Margaret Bayard Smith's recollection, she replied,

that she thought abundance was preferable to elegance; that circumstances formed customs, and customs formed taste; and as profusion so repugnant to foreign customs arose from the

²⁹ Carson, *Interests*, 117.

³⁰ Harbury, *Dynasty*, 51.

³¹ Randolph, *Virginia Housewife*, 12.

happy circumstance of the abundance and prosperity of our country, she did not hesitate to sacrifice the delicacy of European taste, for the less elegant, but more liberal fashion of Virginia.³²

Clearly, their philosophies about dining were not coherent or complementary. This emphasizes that they had different goals, different antagonists, and different challenges to hurdle. They both used food to their political advantage, and defended it in terms of political strategy. In her anecdotal response to Mrs. Merry, Madison shows that she understands the symbolic power food holds, and defends her choices as specifically American.

Sarah Gales Seaton, wife of William Seaton, who ran Washington City's premier newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, was another observer of the Madisons' social scene, and Dolley Madison's control of it. Mrs. Seaton's first drawing room experience came on November 12, 1812:

On Tuesday, William and I repaired to the palace between four and five o'clock, our carriage setting us down *after* the first comers and *before* the last. It is customary, on whatever occasion, to advance to the upper end of the room, pay your obeisance to Mrs. Madison, courtesy to his Highness, and take a seat; after this ceremony being at liberty to speak to acquaintances, or amuse yourself as at another party... Mrs. Madison very handsomely came to me and led me nearest the fire, introduced Mrs. Magruder, and sat down between us politely conversing on familiar subjects, and by her own ease of manner, making her guests feel at home. Mr. King came to our side *sans cérémonie*, and gayly chatted with us until dinner was announced... The dinner was certainly very fine; but still I was rather surprised, as it did not surpass some I have eaten in Carolina. There were many French dishes, and exquisite wines, I presume, by the praises bestowed on them; but I have been so little accustomed to drink, that I could not discern the difference between Sherry and rare old Burgundy Madeira. Comment on the quality of the wine seems to form the chief topic after the removal of the cloth, and during the dessert, at which by the way, no pastry is countenanced. Ice-creams, macaroons, preserves and various cakes are placed on the table, which are removed for almonds, raisins, pecan-nuts, apples, pears, etc.³³

Seaton's reminiscence shows genteel trends at work: she makes sure to note that she and her husband arrived fashionably late, but not *too* late. She remarks on the aristocratic nature of meeting the President and the First Lady, referring to making "obeseiance" to

³² Margaret Bayard Smith, "Mrs. Madison" in *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, James B. Longacre and James Herring, eds., (New York: Herman Bancroft, 1836.)

³³ Clark, *Life*, 137-139.

Queen Dolley, and referring to James Madison as “his Highness”. Next, Seaton recalls how Mrs. Madison put her at ease immediately, due to Madison’s own “ease of manner.” It’s clear that the Madisons were influenced by French culture not just because of the “rare old Burgundy Madeira” that so perplexed Seaton, but also because of Mr. King’s approach “*sans cérémonie*”, linking the relative informality of his action, in tune with a Republican administration, to the fashionable trends of the time, denoted by the French phrase used to describe his actions. Madison was right at the forefront of luxurious dining and entertaining, as she should have been, presiding over the most elite household in America.³⁴ Her choice of menu alienated some of her guests, but Mrs. Seaton’s remark is self-deprecating rather than accusatory. The implication is that Mrs. Seaton is in the wrong for not knowing her wines, rather than Madison being improper in serving them. Madison was unafraid of imposing these new cuisines on her guests, not because she was radically changing the face of American cuisine, but because she was at the very forefront of fashion. If we want to find the true creation of an American table, we must look further afield .

It was in the keeping of that boarding house that Mary Randolph came into her own as a methodical, practical, refined hostess *par excellence*. In her writings she toes the line between practicality and refinement, giving basic advice on how best to boil a potato and when to make catsup, and also including an impressively detailed treatise on the proper making of turtle soup. A good cook, it is implied, thinks not just of the coming week but of

³⁴ Some say she was also trained by Jefferson’s love of French cuisine. Jefferson spent four years, from the death of his wife in 1785 until 1789, as Minister to France, living in Paris. When he returned and was elected President, Dolley occasionally helped fulfill hostess obligations at the President’s mansion, because his daughters were both married and lived in the country. Contrary to popular belief, these occasions were few and far between, as Mr. Jefferson endured mixed company with difficulty. Still, she would have become familiar with his preference for French wines and foods. “May 27 1801. Thomas Jefferson begs that either Madison or Miss Payne [her sister] will be so good as to dine with him today, to take care of his female friends expected.”(Cutts, *Memoirs*, 28) This is one of three extant notes sent from Thomas Jefferson to Dolley and her sister asking them to act as hostesses. For further discussion of the misapprehensions around this practice, see Merry Ellen Scofield, “The Fatigues of His Table” in *Journal of the Early Republic* 26(2006).

the coming year, and plans her household around the rhythms of the seasons in order to show off her produce to best effect. Randolph asserts that her method will also produce responsible husbands, moral sons, and daughters worth treasuring, showing that this is not so much a cookbook as a treatise on how to arrange a life. “A perfect society, in short, and all from the soul and the intelligence of the woman at the hearth.”³⁵

Refinement was one of the chief reasons for Mary Randolph’s success. At the end of the eighteenth century, gentility and refinement were spreading ever further into the middle class.³⁶ Although they could not afford the same quality of goods as their elite neighbors, Randolph’s book showed middle-class housewives how to achieve sophistication for lower prices without sacrificing economy, practicality, or taste. Because Randolph had been born to an elite family, her opinion on refinement was paramount, and her association to the genteel class touched *The Virginia Housewife* with an innate gentility that those who bought it hoped would transfer to them.³⁷ Randolph had bread recipes that used wheat, but she also used sago, arrowroot, cornmeal, oats, buckwheat, hominy, cassava, and rice. Even though her recipes were more democratic, she still put utmost emphasis on quality and presentation.³⁸ She is also the only author of her time who includes recipes for corn, cornmeal mush, bread, and polenta. She wrote for everyday cooks, not exclusively for those producing grand dinner parties. Her goal was to be comprehensive and thorough.³⁹

Randolph did bring together disparate strands of American food, but for different reasons and with different goals than Madison might have. Her impact on a unified American cuisine is incalculable, and was only possible at the particular moment she was in. She only

³⁵ Abbott, introduction, 26

³⁶ Bushman *Refinement*, xii-xiii.

³⁷ Bushman, *Refinement*, 62.

³⁸ Harbury, *Dynasty*, 99.

³⁹ Harbury, *Dynasty*, 97.

included diverse recipes because of the fashions of the time, but that exclusion reveals to the modern scholar the different sorts of cuisines and ingredients that were available to elite women of the time, and how they interpreted them. Mary Randolph synthesized several anxieties and concerns of her contemporary society into a manual for cooking, entertaining, and general womanhood that resonated, and still resonates deeply with American cooks.

“SAV’RY SCENT”: AMERICAN FOOD TRADITIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF FOOD AS A POLITICAL TOOL

In order to understand food as a symbolic tool, it’s necessary first to understand the state of American food during the early years of the nineteenth century. The food to which most upper middle class Americans had access during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was shaped primarily by English tradition, but essentially different in many respects: the mixture and various combinations of African, Native American, Spanish, French, and Creole tastes and experiences; and the ways that non-English cooks, ingredients, and fashions interfaced with traditional recipes.

Additionally, food had, and still has, much to tell us about the various allegiances to which people subscribe, and the facets of their identities that they choose to adopt or reject. Food is intimately connected to identity – it locates us geographically, socially, ethnically, within the wider social fabric. Choosing to use or discard various aspects of the food traditions to which we belong, voluntarily or not, is one way by which we construct an identity. Within the larger narrative of the nation, America has and continues to have a strong fascination with food’s role in expressing and shaping a sense of who we are as a country.

During the period in consequence, 1780-1835, American identities were changing and reshaping themselves at an unprecedented rate, and elite food traditions reflect that fluidity.

The study of food is the study of the particular alchemy of individual taste, natural resources, and cultural movements. The Early Republic embodied one of the most powerful crucibles of this phenomenon, and forged a cuisine both diverse and intimately syncretic. It remains a popular misapprehension that the food of this era, and before, from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century, was bland, harsh, and crude, and, even more insultingly, that the people who ate it were of the opinion that dull and unappetizing food was a moral good both for the individual and for society.⁴⁰ Fortunately for the modern scholar, the legacy of culinary traditions remains accessible through recipes, manuscripts, letters, and cookbooks, allowing the possibility of experiencing food history through the reenactment of bygone recipes.⁴¹

Before delving into the world of the Southern cook in the Early Republic, it's important to note that it was mostly slaves and servants who did the labor in the kitchen. It would be irresponsible to forget about them and instead to attribute all the success and impetus behind the cooking to the women at the top of the food chain. Unfortunately, it's impossible to pinpoint what exactly they were responsible for above and beyond the technical skill it took to cook for an entire plantation, or for the president's house. Still, it doesn't do to forget their necessity to the project of creating the proper table. The mistress of the house knew what the dinners ought to look like, and could instruct her daughters, but slaves and servants did the real labor of the kitchen.⁴²

For a representative look at what the elite of Virginia were eating, or trying to eat, at this time, let's turn to *The Virginia House-wife*. The mother cuisine in America was

⁴⁰ Mark Zanger, *The American History Cookbook*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003,) xix.

⁴¹ Mark Zanger, *The American History Cookbook*. xv.

⁴² Harbury, *Dynasty*, 42.

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English, and there are English recipes aplenty in the *Virginia Housewife*, including: *Macaroone*, *Slip*, *Jumbals*, *Curd Pudding*, *Curds and Cream*, *Barley Cream*, *Sippet Pudding*, *Shrewsbury Cakes*, *To Pickle Oysters*, *Tansey Pudding*, *To Collar a Flank of Beef*, and *Almond Pudding*. *Fricando of Beef* uses a seventeenth-century garnish of meatballs and spinach.⁴³

The first colonists to come to the New World brought their best-loved cookbooks and manuscripts with them, including the immensely popular *The Art of Cookery* by Hannah Glasse (London, 1747), still in publication when Mary Randolph wrote *The Virginia Housewife*.⁴⁴ The first cookbook published by an American was *American Cookery*, by Amelia Simmons (“An American Orphan”), printed in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1796. It substitutes “Indian meal”, or corn, for other grains in several English recipes, but does not have the personality, nor the attention to detail that characterize *The Virginia Housewife*.⁴⁵

Virginians also owed much to Indian cookery and ingredients, but there are fewer Indian influences in Randolph’s kitchen than one might expect because American products had been familiar to English cooks since the early days of trade with the New World.⁴⁶ Perhaps most importantly, African American slaves did most of the kitchen labor in the south, and where an African woman interpreted an Anglo-American recipe, the finished product became tinged with her knowledge of cooking and was fundamentally changed. “It’s a question of the temperature of cooking fats, of generosity in measuring, of “nose,” not to mention palate, of timing, of patience, of scores of nearly indefinable qualities that go into

⁴³ (Karen Hess, introduction to *The Virginia Housewife, or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph, pages xxiv-xxv) Find out the page numbers for the recipes.

⁴⁴ Hess, introduction, xiv. For further discussion of popular English cookbooks brought to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Jane Carson *Colonial Virginia Cookery*. (Colonial Williamsburg: 1968).

⁴⁵ Hess, introduction, xvi, xxi.

⁴⁶ Hess, introduction, xxvi.

creating a dish, all of which are formed by years of working with food.”⁴⁷ Even strictly English recipes cooked in Virginia would not be the same as those cooked in New England, setting aside the differences in produce.⁴⁸

Most “French” recipes in *The Virginia Housewife* are creole or English adaptations (*blanc manger*, *French rolls*, *a-la-daube*). There are real French recipes though too, including one for fries (*To Fry Sliced Potatoes*), as well as *Fondus*, *Bell Fritters*, and *Matelote*. The sources for the purely French recipes could have come from any number of sources, but Randolph includes several strikingly accurate Spanish recipes that come not from America but from her sister’s time living in Cadiz. These Spanish recipes *include Gaspacho—Spanish; Spanish Method of Dressing GIBLETS, Eggs and Tomatoes, Olla*, and *Ropa Veija [sic]*.⁴⁹ Randolph also includes an East Indian curry, and Italian recipes for polenta, vermicelli and macaroni.⁵⁰

Underlying it all was the bounty of the lush Virginia tidelands. William Byrd, founder of Richmond and fellow of the Royal Society at a time when it was headed by Sir Isaac Newton, reports in *The Natural History of Virginia, or the Newly Discovered Eden* (1737) that the beef, veal, mutton, and pork were “always as good as the best European can be, since the pastures in this country are very fine.”⁵¹

Mary Randolph offered recipes for a vast array of vegetables, from artichokes to asparagus, brocolli to beetroot, kale, sorrel, eggplant, spinach, tomatoes, and cabbage.⁵²

Hannah Glasse had been doing the same thing for decades: “All things that are green should

⁴⁷ Hess, introduction, xxx-xxxii.

⁴⁸ Hess, introduction, xxix – xxxi.

⁴⁹ Hess, introduction, xxxii.

⁵⁰ Hess, introduction, xxxiii.

⁵¹ Hess, introduction, xxi-xxi. For further discussion of the history of American produce see John Hess and Karen Hess, *The Taste of America*, (New York, N.Y.: Grossman Publishers, 1977.)

⁵² Longone, introduction, 4.

have a little crispness, for if they are over-boiled, they neither have any sweetness or beauty.”⁵³ She also used many herbs and flavorings, including lavender, vanilla, tarragon, savory, rue, fennel, and ginger. Randolph also enjoyed richer fare: she was not shy about the use of wine, and she had over twenty two recipes for ice cream, whose flavors included black walnut, pineapple, almond, chocolate, and pear.⁵⁴

“Randolph left her own imprint on these Virginia recipes, to be sure; her perceptiveness and culinary curiosity added new dimensions to Virginia cookery. But she was working within an already sophisticated cuisine, a harmonious interweaving of colorful Indian, African black, and Creole strands on the warp of the fine cookery of seventeenth-and eighteenth-century England, all of which had been transformed in various ways in response to local produce and talents. In sort, an authentic American cuisine.”⁵⁵

National Cuisines, National Identities

Mary Randolph’s inclusion of cuisines apart from the traditional English is not only a matter of cultural mixing, but also a symptom of the strategy involved in planning a genteel table. Cooks and hostesses were not consciously trying to amalgamate French cuisine or Spanish cuisine or Creole cuisine into American cuisine, or appropriate them as American. Instead, the national labels held symbolic power, as we can see by the fact that Mary Randolph made sure to delineate which recipes were “Spanish”, from the “West Indies” or “East Indies”. The knowledge of exotic cuisines was, and remains, a marker of class status.

⁵³ Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, (London: J. Rivington and sons, 1784,) 18.

⁵⁴ Longone, introduction, 5; Hess, introduction, xxxviii-xxxix; RANDOLPH RECIPES.

⁵⁵ Hess, introduction, xxxi.

French cuisine in particular was associated with luxury and refinement.⁵⁶ This national difference was so ubiquitous as to be satirized in popular culture.

In 1820 an “epistolary novel in verse” called *The Fudge Family in Washington* was published as a gentle critique of the social differences encoded in fashionable forms of eating. The novel contrasts these different forms of national cooking through the character of Paul Fudge and his daughter Dolly. Dolly has just returned from boarding school and longs for the rarified cuisine in Philadelphia:

Ah! When shall I see ‘stead of ham, always ham
As it always is here too, dress’d *en epigramme*---...
Ah when shall I see *tete de veau en surprise*
And *crèmes de la glace* which will make one’s breath freeze, . . .
And *soufflés* and *pates*, both *gros* and *petits*
 With *gateau* and *gelees*, and *citrons confits*,
And “*temple de Solomon*,” built up “*en flummery*”
And all the *et cet’ras* of eatable mummery?

Her father responds that he eats more than enough French food in their home in Washington, and although they were a prosperous family, he saw nothing wrong with his preference for the familiar:

The table also little pleas’d me,
The names of dishes they so teaz’d me, . . .
I did not see a dish I knew,---
Though those I know are not a few:---
There were *fricassees*, *ragouts*,
Serv’d up in all shades and hues,
Of sav’ry scent and handsome sight,
Though somewhat in their substance light.⁵⁷

Ham was, and still is, one of the primary identifying markers of Virginia cuisine, so Dolly’s rejection of it is quite radical. Her preference for ice creams, soufflés, and candied

⁵⁶ Carson, *Interests*, 111. See Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, pp.95-97

⁵⁷ Carson, *Interests*, 112-113. See Harry Nimrod, ed., *The Fudge Family in Washington*, (Baltimore: Joseph Robinson, 1820), pp.16 and 41-42.

citrus reflects the height of fashion that Dolley Madison and Margaret Bayard Smith had been enjoying ten years before, and that was by 1820 accessible to some of the middle classes, and familiar enough that it could be poked fun at in a popular novel. Dolly's father, Mr. Fudge, prefers traditional foods, and criticizes the "new" tastes as "somewhat in their substance light." Their disagreement illuminates popular attitudes towards the incorporation of different national styles of entertaining in Washington.

We've seen, then, how an amalgamation of "American" recipes is formed out of several different layers of ethnic food traditions. Americans of this time period, and even earlier, recognized these mixtures and layerings as political as well, and they used them in that way. In fact, in his comprehensive look at historical American cuisine, *The American History Cookbook*, Mark Zanger makes a point to include a particularly political recipe for succotash from 1769. This recipe was served at a high-class gentlemen's club in Massachusetts, which shows how widespread a traditionally Southern dish had become. This dinner was one of the first self-consciously historical dinners eaten in America. These New Englanders used traditionally Southern succotash as a symbol of American solidarity, much as we would symbolize our own preparation of Thanksgiving dinner.⁵⁸ Food was a clear patriotic symbol, even in those early years. In the America of the time, there were significant regional differences in what was available, but people wanted, and still want, to eat the food of their neighbors as a way to, consciously or unconsciously, bind the country together.

Indeed, national identity was very much caught up in not only the foodstuffs themselves but also the style of presenting food at this time in Washington City. Catherine Allgor, leading scholar of Dolley Madison's life, quotes "one gourmand" in *A Perfect Union* as saying that the food in Virginia was better stocked than what one could get in Paris, and

⁵⁸ Mark Zanger, *The American History Cookbook*. 113.

that America only lacked the cooks necessary to bring it up to speed with Europe.⁵⁹ This quote is a sort of backhanded compliment, and it's not the first of its kind that Americans had absorbed and responded to. The style, and not just the substance, of food, was a way to promote not just individual identity but also national pride.

For example, in 1765, the year in which the Stamp Act⁶⁰ was passed, an anonymous letter was sent to the London Gazetteer ridiculing the idea that the Americans could ever endure a long-term ban on tea. It said, "...the Americans, should they resolve to drink no more tea, can by no means keep that Resolution, their Indian corn not affording an agreeable or easy digestible breakfast." An irate Benjamin Franklin, who was in London at the time, replied heartily and thoroughly to this unfounded misapprehension:

Pray, let me, an American, inform the gentleman, who seems ignorant of the matter, that Indian corn, take it for all in all, is one of the most agreeable and wholesome grains in the world; that its green leaves [*read: ears*] roasted are a delicacy beyond expression; that samp, hominy, succotash, and nokehock, made of it, are so many pleasing varieties; and that hominy or hoecake, hot from the fire, is better than a Yorkshire muffin – But if Indian corn were so disagreeable as the Stamp Act, does he imagine we can get nothing else for breakfast? –Did he never hear that we have oatmeal in plenty, for water gruel or burgoo; as good wheat, rye and barley as the world affords, to make frumenty; or toast and ale; that there is every where plenty of milk, butter and cheese; that rice is one of our staple commodities; that for tea, we have sage and bawm in our gardens, the young leaves of the sweet hickery or walnut, and above all, the buds of our pine, infinitely preferable to any tea from the Indies; while the islands yield us plenty of coffee and chocolate? –Let the gentleman do us the honour of a visit in America, and I will engage to breakfast him every day in the month with a fresh variety, without offering him either tea or Indian corn.⁶¹

Here, Franklin passionately and vociferously defends his home by pointing out the great richness and variety of foods available to the average American.⁶² He was not alone in his pride for American food; Thomas Jefferson was another Founding Father who, as we saw in

⁵⁹ Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 185.

⁶⁰ The Stamp Act of 1765 was the legislation that would inspire the Tea Act of 1773, and therefore the Boston Tea Party.

⁶¹ John Hess and Karen Hess, *The Taste of America*. (New York, N.Y.: Grossman Publishers, 1977.) 29. See: Benjamin Franklin on the Art of Eating (American Philosophical Society, 1958.)

⁶² Hess, *The Taste of America*, 29.

the Introduction, set a lot of store by the symbolic power of food. Not only was he interested in the symbolic power of genteel manners, but he also made a point to record all of the different kinds of foods, especially vegetables, that were available in Washington City, in his famous *Farm and Garden* books.

Food was, and is, an expression of American identity, but who was considered “American” during the Early Republic? The discussion of nationality in early America does not concern which ethnicities were represented demographically, but how Americans defined their national identities for themselves and for others, and what that tells us about their, and about our own, self-conception as a nation.

The “Americans” of the Early Republic

During the Early Republic, Americans of all kinds, whether “ingroup” or “outgroup”, would have been under a great deal of stress in terms of the validity of America as a nation. Not only was it the first country of its kind, made up by voluntary and involuntary immigrants who subscribed, or were excluded from, Classical and Enlightenment ideas about proper government. Cultural diversity was yet another stress on the concept of American nationhood in a time when the national experiment was only decades old, and, by 1812, in a major war for its survival against the very power that had nearly crushed it not half a century before. The cultural diversity of America at this time been elided for centuries, but as we saw in examples from Mary Randolph’s cookbook, it’s reflected in the recipes of the time. The American self-conception is, was, and most likely always will be complicated, and that complication is reflected in the recipes of the time. Food is used as a political symbol and tool, and as a marker of identity. Even the title of the book *The Virginia House-wife* describes

an identity first and foremost, which implies a method and a style of cooking. In fact most American cookbooks of the time had titles about the person who wrote them, or for whom they were intended, such as Amelia Simmons' *"American Cookery"*. English cookbooks which were reprinted in America, such as Hannah Glasse's excellent *"The New Art of Cookery"*, did not contain this allusion to identity, rather they described the craft of cooking and only the ethnicity of the author implied a particular identity.

What this section has tried to make clear is that the problem of diverse cuisines and styles of entertainment is not merely a matter of who was present in the Early Republic. It's a matter of self-conception, of who was considered to be "American", and who was not. This definition would have colored Randolph's and Madison's ideas about what a particularly American cuisine would include. Still, it's important to remember that they were not curating food in order to purposefully create an American cuisine, they were marshalling their culinary resources in such a way that marked them as part of the culinary elite. The ingroup of Americanness was, for them, a given, and it informs how they made sense of what it meant to be an American, a patriot, and a woman of the time.

The American project has always been to define who is "really an American," because we are a country based not explicitly on ethnicity, but on philosophical ideals. (Those ideals may come from a place of privilege and Western-centric thought, but they have been recreated to include, theoretically, everyone who lives here.) In the Early Republic that definition was expanding from including only Anglo-Americans to include other northern Europeans, like the Dutch, Germans, and Irish. This revision of American nationality came from a "nativist reaction" to a wave of new immigration around the turn of the nineteenth century which encouraged the assimilation of ethnic groups that had previously been

considered to be on the outside of American nationality.⁶³ This “nativist reaction” explains how conceptualization of what it means to be “American” depends less on one’s ethnicity than one’s status as a member of the “ingroup” or the “outgroup”. Ethnic groups can cross these boundaries with time, or with sharp social change, but inclusion or exclusion defines what it means in the minds of most Americans what it means to be an “American.”

Nationalism and patriotism in this sense are not the ideological progeny of the nineteenth-century revolutionary movements of Europe, based on Gallic or Magyar or Italian ethnicity. Instead, I want to define nationalism and patriotism for the purposes of this thesis as the cultural, social, and political expressions that attempt to define what it means to be an American, and the attempt to defend that definition, no matter how misguided it might have been, or indeed may be.

For example, it is implicit in the legend of Dolley Madison as architect of American cuisine that in order to create an American cuisine, it is necessary to seek out diverse recipes from different geographical regions. Modern scholars map our ideas about what it means to be American onto Madison’s time period. Therefore it is unwise to conceive of the projects of Madison or Randolph as having anything to do with the intentional inclusion of diverse members of outgroup cuisines in order to make them part of the ingroup. Neither woman would have had any vested interest in creating a vision of America that fits our modern ideal of diversity rather than their contemporary one. For them, diversity consisted in the many different iterations of Northern European ethnicity that made up the American ingroup at the time, and any other nationalities they may have included, whether in styles of dining or recipes, would have had much more to do with their connotations of luxury, refinement, and

⁶³ Vincent N. Parillo “Diversity in America: A Sociohistorical Analysis” *Sociological Forum*, (9)1994, 538.

social status, than they would of any sort of intentional ushering in of new blood into the ingroup of white America at the time.

It is much more a reflection of our modern day society and our expectations of ourselves and hopes for our ancestors that we would have wanted Dolley Madison or Mary Randolph to have been as concerned with an inclusive, culturally diverse form of American cuisine as we are. We know now that early America was much more genuinely culturally diverse than many people give it credit for, and we search the past for evidence that our forefathers recognized and respected the “true” nature of America and Americanness by which we define ourselves today. Madison and Randolph may indeed have included diverse recipes from different nationalities and cultures, but it was in order to present themselves as people of the upper crust, rather than for any altruistic attempt at presenting a cohesive, comprehensive idea of American cuisine or American identity.

Neither woman was shy about using recipes from other nationalities, especially Mary Randolph, who with her East India curries and Spanish gaspachos, sought farther afield than Dolley Madison, who only used French and English recipes. To be fair, Dolley Madison had more to lose by being adventurous with her food, because all of her actions had symbolic power for the public that adored her, and any transgression of the ingroup/outgroup dynamic would have been a disaster for her and for her husband’s political career.

Paradoxically, each woman’s use of diverse recipes cemented her place firmly in the “American” ingroup, and in a particularly well-off, elite part of that group. The diverse recipes signaled not their commitment to cultural diversity and a true representation of what an American table might have been at that time had it taken into account all of the people living in America at that time. The diverse recipes signaled their commitment to the concept

of luxury and refinement as viewed through the lens of food as a luxury good. Food was political not just because of the straight line linking national identity and national food, but because different kinds of foods representing different nationalities could be used to reinforce one's social standing and one's status as a true "American". Food was symbolically used to represent one's Americanness from Patriotic cakes, to Massachusetts succotash, to the amalgamation of refined table manners that marked out particularly American entertaining, rather than French or English.

The political ramifications of diverse recipes are a symptom of what Mary Randolph was trying to do, but they still have much to tell us about how Americans saw themselves, and what they considered to be "American": Americans saw themselves as forging a new cuisine out of the traditions of the Old World. Mary Randolph took and used what was expedient for her, including traditional English recipes shifted slightly by African and Native American hands. Dolley Madison used tradition and expediency more explicitly, as her strong role in deciding the food and manner of entertainment for the President's mansion shows.

The historiography of her life and of Dolley Madison's also reflects the political symptoms of this fashionable trend – we want a historical tradition of American cuisine, so we find it in what they did. To some extent, a historical tradition of American cuisine is really there, in a subtle way: in the seasoning choices of Mary Randolph's dishes, and in both women's willingness to include culturally diverse recipes as a sign of their "Americanness." It may not have been done consciously, but the traces of what American food might really have been like, or at least included, are legible in the historical record.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Bayard Smith, a harried woman on the eve of her first dinner party in years. Her stress over whether to include puddings or ices begins to come clear for us as we reflect on the symbolic power that both the form and function of a dinner party had over polite society in Washington City during the early national years. Fashions expressed through cooking reflected on the personal merit of the housewife, on her social status, and her political allegiances. Since the Federalists were supporters of the British Monarchy and the Democratic-Republicans supported the French, the nationalities of food and service one chose to include had significant political ramifications for the hostess and her guests

Apart from the matter of national politics, a misstep in service could result in searing social derision, critique, and blame. Although Mrs. Seaton and Rev. Cutler were impressed with Secretary of State Madison's table, a Scottish barrister named Lord Francis Jeffrey recorded that,

The dinner was bad . . . a meager soup and a whole array of fowls and little dishes. . . . The second course consisted of an infinite number of little plates ranged in two long rows down the table with a couple of apples in one and a handfull of raisins in another, six or seven walnuts in a third and so on, like a feast in a nursery.⁶⁴

By choosing food and entertaining as their media for social and economic advancement, Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison were determining the direction they thought their society and nation would take, albeit indirectly. Food was a tool symbolically embodying social status in two ways: through refinement and through national pride. It turns out that those two concepts informed and shaped each other in intimate and inextricable ways.

⁶⁴ Carson, *Interests*, 115. See: Lord Francis Jeffrey, typescript excerpts from a journal of a trip to the United States in 1813, courtesy of the Office of the Curator of the White House.

Material goods were becoming intimately connected to morality and virtue from the mid-eighteenth century on into the nineteenth, as outward expressions of the owner's innate morality and virtue. Morality and virtue were also expressed on a national level in the form of patriotism, especially by women in the public sphere. Food was the crucible in which all of these cultural ideas found their expression: it was a luxury good and therefore an object of moral scrutiny, as a representation of morality it contained the potential to elevate its owner in society, and as it was intimately connected to the inherent characteristics of the nation, it was a tool women used to practice patriotism.

That patriotism was informed not by ethnic obsession, but by a whitewashed understanding of what it meant to be "American". Ingroup status could be achieved not just by changing demographics and the passing of time, but also by the adopting of luxurious and refined habits as they related to food. One of these habits was the inclusion of recipes from other nationalities, especially French, that marked one out as cultured and refined. Material Patriotism is a concept that begins to explain this combination of nationalistic, gendered, class-informed ideals as they were expressed in the real world. The idea of Material Patriotism combines the trend towards assigning morality to the acquisition of luxury goods with the nationalistic pride growing out of the post-Revolutionary years and into the War of 1812. Therefore, both patriotism and the materiality of morality became intimately concerned with a woman's duty to her household and to the civil sphere into which she was attempting to enter in a more meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

To this point, we've been covering the background of the society that Mary Randolph and Dolley Madison inhabited and eventually shaped. In the first chapter, we examined how women were emerging as public actors in unprecedented ways. Still, even as their role changed for the better in some respects, that role was still strictly described by patriarchal rules that could not be transgressed. Additionally, one's class status and geographical location created significant differences between the experiences of individual women.

In the second chapter, we covered the social trend of gentility and refinement and how it created a new social value system that rewarded aristocratic behaviors that everyone could aspire to. The eventual result of this aspiration was a fundamental shift in the class structure that confused ideas about a 'natural' American genteel class, and relegated the working class to the outskirts of society. It also created a fundamental paradox in American society as people tried to reconcile their genteel yearnings with the republican ideals on which America was founded. In that chapter we also covered how Americans viewed their food, and, through it, themselves. Chapter Two also described the complex nature of American identity both as a material reality and as a misguided conception that resulted in a "truly American" ingroup and an othered "outgroup." Refinement and the inclusion of diverse foodways created a uniquely American experience whose side effects reflect the political power latent in both phenomena. In their circumscribed roles as women of privilege, Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph used food and food's status as an expression of refined taste to maintain their positions in the social hierarchy. Because of the symbolic power of the tools they used – food and

entertaining – they were seen to be constructing a particularly American program of dining that has been historically embellished and made a part of their legacies, especially Dolly Madison's.

It's important to tread carefully around ideas of intention and misunderstood actions. At the beginning of the writing of this thesis, I thought that because Dolley Madison hadn't travelled to congressmen's country houses to meet with their wives about food, she hadn't constructed an American cuisine and therefore couldn't have anything to say about the construction of American foodways. Similarly, because Mary Randolph did include diverse foodways in her cookbook, I attributed to her the foresight that would have driven her to curate the truly culturally diverse beginnings of America, setting the record straight by acting as a true representation of a misunderstood time period. Instead, what I now understand to be the reasoning for their actions is much more practical and much more interesting.

These women came from extremely similar backgrounds, and were closely connected within the family frameworks of an insular Virginia elite class. They had similar opportunities, but their lives took them in different directions. By comparing their legacies, we can see the effect that their choices had on the outcome of their lives and historical interpretations of those lives. Dolley Madison created an unprecedented political opportunity through her use of social space, and it was due to this opportunity that her husband had such success as President. Mary Randolph used her connection to elite life and the difficulties of her financial situation to create a cookbook that perfectly encapsulated the ambitions and values of a majority of women entering the antebellum period. In both cases, these women used traditionally feminine means of power and

expression to assert themselves and achieve their goals, a symptom of which has been a historical understanding of them as architects of American cuisine, and, therefore, American identity.

Why was it important that Dolley Madison and Mary Randolph exemplified the social trends of the Early Republic? Together, these two women show us that our impulse towards creating an “American” table is not only understandable, but correct. It’s absolutely accurate for us to assume that food was a large part of the building of America during its first decades, and it’s natural for us to attempt to use it as a tool to understand our own national identity now. It’s more complicated and subtle than we might wish, but the fact remains that as women were coming into their own as arbiters of taste, political actors, and an economic force in their own right, food was one of the many ways by which they asserted their power. As a result of that assertion, food has taken on deep patriotic symbolism.

The problem of defining an “American” ingroup against a marginalized outgroup explains the difficulty of crowning a cohesive American cuisine. At the outset of this thesis, I wanted to be able to explain how American cuisine always accurately reflects our demographics. I wanted to vindicate early American cuisine and remove it from being labeled “bland” and “boring.” I wanted to reveal both the culturally diverse nature of early American society, and early Americans’ acceptance of that diversity as represented in the food they chose to eat.

Today, the fashion is to understand American cuisine as diverse and impossible to define at its very core, and now, just as then, knowledge of exotic foods is a marker of status. We still look to the past for clues, though. Just last year, from July 4, 2011 until

July 4, 2012, José Andrés, the celebrated chef, opened a pop-up restaurant in Washington, D.C. called “America Eats!”¹³⁴ as a celebration of the history of American food. Included on his menu was a tasting menu inspired by Mary Randolph. I contacted their research department to get the details of this menu, and in honor of Randolph they served:

Hush Puppies with American Black Sturgeon Caviar served with house made Sorghum Butter
Shrimp in Grapefruit Cocktail
Fried Chicken with Remoulade
Shrimp and Grits
BBQ Short Ribs
Key Lime Pie

These are all delicious dishes, but it’s hard to see where they intersect with *The Virginia Housewife*. That book contains no recipes for shrimp, nor for Key Lime Pie. Still, the Mary Randolph tasting menu was one of three menus used to exemplify American foods of various historical periods, so perhaps it is more in honor of the Early Republic than of *The Virginia Housewife* itself. Much of culinary culture at the moment seems to think that refined American food starts at the turn of the twentieth century, rather than recognizing its true roots a hundred years before.

Karen Hess, one of the main scholars of Mary Randolph’s culinary legacy, laments the fact that Mary Randolph did not become the patron saint of American cooking. Flour and sugar increased and genuine spices and vegetables decreased through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries to such an extent, “that when Americans were gradually reintroduced to the wonders of using wine, herbs, garlic and shallots, and olive oil in cookery around mid-twentieth century, it seemed wildly exotic.” All of these products were available in the first decades of our republic, and Mary Randolph showed

¹³⁴ www.americaeatstavern.com

American women how to use them simply, clearly, in a book full of her uniquely perceptive annotations.¹³⁵

As for Dolley Madison, as Allgor herself explains on page 55 of an article on Dolley,

The story of Dolley...possesses several elements common to most legends...It borders on melodrama (one wonders if Dolley really referred to her husband and friends as "Founding Fathers"). **And like many legends, this one, if not literally true, conveys a deeper, fundamental truth. It reflects Dolley Madison's position as a leading citizen, her influence on the development of the capital and her subsequent role in keeping the federal government in Washington.** From her first years in the new city, Dolley had created connections and spaces in order to facilitate politics, legitimate her husband's regime, and establish Washington city as a focus for burgeoning American nationalism. In the dark days following the British invasion, the web of social and political relations that she woe would hold the infant capital and governmental structures in place. Without her efforts, the capital would probably not have remained in Washington after 1814.¹³⁶

We have to give credit where it's due, though, and while Dolley appreciated the political power of food and used it for her own gain, she didn't piece together an American table out of diverse foodways for the express purpose of knitting distinct ethnicities together. Rather, she used exotic cuisines because they were fashionable, and through using them she was able to synthesize a comfortable American alternative to European tastes. Similarly, Mary Randolph was not thinking politically when she brought diversity into her all-American, really all-Virginian cookbook. Food's innate political power is what gives the cookbook its political force. Randolph was not trying to put forth a message about cultural diversity, rather she was using that cultural diversity to add to her status as a refined, genteel lady and making that gentility available to a wide audience. The political nature of her inclusion of these foods is a side effect, not the

¹³⁵ Hess, introduction, xiv, xlii, xliv.

¹³⁶ Allgor, "Queen Dolley", p.55.

purpose of the book. It is an interesting and useful side effect, though, and it tells us a lot about how Americans of that day saw themselves and their identities as Americans.

So where does that leave us? Dolley Madison set an example of the place women could occupy in the public sphere by creating a public office for women that was unique in its goals and has persisted in a related form to this day. She did this through her natural talent at making people feel at ease, but one of her most important tools was refinement, manners, and luxury as they centered around dining and entertaining. Mary Randolph also carved out a new space in the public sphere for women as arbiters of good taste as well as practicality. Household manuals maintained their emphasis on practicality and economy as guiding lights of good housekeeping primarily because of the success of Mary Randolph's "economical method", which she developed through painful personal experience.

Both of these women encouraged their nineteenth-century successors by toeing the line between a traditionally male sphere of influence, public life, and the feminized tools they used to invade it, housekeeping and entertaining. Still, it's important not to forget that when we talk about these women and their influence, we're talking about a very particular subset both of women and of influence. These are white women of the upper and upper-middle class, whose families were entrenched in American life since before the Revolution, and both of whom considered themselves Virginians, born and bred. They therefore cannot speak for all women, nor even most. Even so, their influence transcended class and race as their fame grew, inspiring any women who came in contact with their legacy, no matter their background.

This legacy has been the impetus and the continuance of the idea of a cohesive American cuisine. Because of the tenuous nature of America's long-term viability at the time, enactments and reinforcements of American identity, through any possible means, were the project of tastemakers and politicians alike during the volatile years just after Independence. The impulse was, and still is, there, to try to knit together this idea of an "American" food culture. Mary Randolph attempted it, Dolley Madison had it ascribed to her, and the very first attempt at this thesis tried to prove it. A cohesive American food culture is impossible to codify, and at the end perhaps the lesson is that we shouldn't try.

Perhaps instead our project is not to exclude, but to include. Perhaps instead of attempting to understand what American food is and isn't, it's more important to understand how we use it and what it does. No other country can boast Mexican-born cooks who know only Spanish and Korean because of their time working in the kitchens of L.A.'s Koreatown. No other country has dozens of distinct strains of barbeque, each correct, orthodox and "authentic" in its own way. We spend our time attempting to define ourselves through what we eat, when perhaps it is better to let the cooking we do speak for itself.

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