"What is in a Recipe?"
Tacit Knowledge in Early Modern Recipes

ANNABELLE BABINEAU

University of New Brunswick

I am a MA student studying English literature, specializing in contemporary texts. During this past year I have been working on the *Early Modern Maritime Recipes* (EMMR) research project, for which I have read hundreds of early modern recipes written by women, men, and anonymous authors in manuscripts and newspapers. One thing I am struck by is that in most of these recipes the details are few. There seems to be more confidence in the tacit knowledge of the readers than in recipes published today. Most recipes are a list of ingredients with sparse instructions, unlike today's recipes which provide comprehensive step-by-step instructions.

Before starting my undergraduate degree, I attended culinary college where I learned basic traditional French recipes and different standard methods for cooking. Soon after learning these basics, we were taught how to move beyond using recipes: to trust our smell, taste, and sight – to cook without seeking the help of a written recipe. When someone asks me for a recipe, they often become annoyed because I am not giving them enough details; unless they have also worked in the food industry, the amount of detail I give is insufficient.

The two early modern recipes I will use for this conference paper are for making Hessian soup and for preserving beef. The recipe for Hessian soup was found in *Nova Scotia Gazette*, published 4 February 1768, while the pickled beef recipe was found in a letter to Mary Bliss from Jonathan Bliss dated the 5th of June 1798, in Saint John,

New Brunswick -- both recipes were found at the Nova Scotia Archives (NSA). While each recipe is intended for a different audience – one for a wide readership, the other for a single person – they are both sparsely detailed but their phrasing demonstrate confidence in readers' understanding.

Including the original spellings and capitalizations, the recipe for Hessian Soup reads:

> TAKE seven Pints of Water, one Pint of split Pease, one pound of lean Beef cut into small pieces, three quarters of a pound of potatoes, three ounces of ground rice, two heads of cellery, three leeks; season it to your taste with pepper, salt, and dried mint; let them all boil together till reduced to five pints: Then strain it through a cullender. This will dine six people, and the expence is very small, and it is extremely nourishing
>
> — A friend to the poor.

These are all the details provided for this recipe – essentially, a list of ingredients. So, using my tacit cooking knowledge developed during my culinary school days, I made this recipe with the assistance of Edie Snook.

The first things I did were cut the recipe in half, since it seemed like large amount of soup, and make an ingredient list. Once I had all of the ingredients, I started preparing them, measuring and cutting the meat and vegetables. In a large pot I added oil – you will notice that there is no oil listed in the ingredients but I added some because I did not want to beef to stick. I imagine in early modern times they would not have had access to olive oil, so they may have added suet or another fat, or just thrown everything in a pot at once with water (which would result in losing a lot of flavour). I placed the chopped beef in the hot oil, and let it cook until it developed some colour to add flavour, which I was worried this soup would be lacking. After the beef had a nice colour, meaning that I let it cook until the

beef turned a nice brown caramel, I added the leeks, let them cook for a little bit, then threw in the celery and potato.

The portion of potato compared to celery and leek is a little strange – only one potato, yet a whole head of celery and one and a half leeks seems like an odd proportion to me.

I added the water and the ground rice. These ingredients prompted further questions. Why water, rather than stock? Stock is easy to make with vegetable peelings and bones, and it adds more nutrients and flavour when compared with using water. In culinary school we kept all of our scraps of carrot peelings, ends of celery, onion skins, etc. to throw into the stock. Why

ground rice, rather than whole grains? I have never come across a recipe where I needed to grind rice; however, it ended up creating a milky look to the soup while also thickening the liquid, making a sort of cloudy stew.

I added the split peas, which I should have soaked first but I completely forgot; we had to adjust and improvise to make it work, cooking the soup for longer to allow the peas to cook properly, but not so long that the vegetables would turn into mush. I cooked it until the peas were al-dente and the vegetables were not too overcooked then I covered the pot and let the soup simmer.

I added the salt, pepper, and dried mint to taste after the soup was done cooking. The soup tasted ok, but was a little bland for my taste. I would have probably added garlic, oregano, or thyme, or found something else I had in my pantry to give it more flavour. I thought that mint was a strange choice for an herb in soup, but mint is technically a weed that grows really easily (it grows in the wild here in New Brunswick) so it might have been a choice of convenience rather than taste.

This leads me to the signature: why was it signed “as a friend to the poor” instead of with the author’s name? This

recipe makes a hearty soup, and it explicitly states that it costs very little to make, especially when one has their own garden. Furthermore, this recipe was printed in a newspaper, giving it a wide readership. Perhaps the answer can be found in the recipe's name – Hessian Soup. I was not familiar with the term Hessian so I looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I found a few different definitions that could clarify this question. The first definition reads, "Jacobians and Hessians belong to that class of functions known as covariants" ("Hessian"); covariants is a mathematical term meaning "changing in such a way that interrelations with another simultaneously changing quantity or set of quantities remain unchanged." We could read this recipe as intended for people whose social class has changed, perhaps during the War of Independence given the year, who now need to make recipes that are a little less expensive. Another definition for Hessian is a soldier from the region of Hesse in Germany; therefore, this recipe could be intended for soldiers, which makes sense because it is a hearty soup that is filling, nutritious, and inexpensive to make ("Hessian").

The other recipe I will be looking at was written in a letter from Jonathan Bliss to his wife Mary. After the war, Jonathan Bliss was a successful politician in Fredericton, New Brunswick and he also worked as a lawyer. This recipe is particularly interesting because Bliss lists the origin of the recipe, attributing it to Lady Eleanora Dundas. Lady Dundas's recipe book has survived the years and is at the Wellcome Library in London (MS 2242). This recipe is the first in the book and Lady Dundas signs it, "Carron Hall, Falkirk." Another recipe 18 pages later is dated 1785, so although this pickled beef recipe is not dated we can assume that it was written around the same time. Jonathan Bliss also writes this recipe in a letter to his sister at least 13 years later, using almost the exact same wording. In Jonathan Bliss's letter to his wife, he writes,

> You forgot to take Lady [Eleanora Dundas's] Recipe. it is —
> 4 Gallons of Water, 6 Pounds of Salt dried, 2 Pounds of Coarse Sugar, 2 Ounces of Salt Peter. boil all together and skim it; when no scum rises and it is perfectly clear, then take it off; and when cold pour it over your Beef__Your Friend Col. [Elligoud] says, Pack the Beef 2 Days in Salt / to take out the Blood—This may be more necessary in a warm Climate.

Again, I have included the original spellings, punctuation, and capitalizations. As you can tell, much like the soup recipe, it is more a list of ingredients than a recipe with instructions. To begin I had to research saltpetre – is it actually edible, where can I find some, is it necessary to the recipe? I discovered that saltpetre is still used in some corn beef recipes, even one I found on the *Food Network* website. It is used as a preservative, to keep the meat red instead of turning grey during preservation. I was not able to find any saltpetre in my town so I had to make the recipe without it, but since I have easy access to refrigeration I was not too worried.

The measurements in this recipe also provided a challenge. I had to figure out if we needed to use American or Imperial (read – British) gallon units because they would significantly change the recipe's proportions. Since the recipe originated from Lady Dundas, who was Scottish, I used Imperial gallons instead of American gallons. In addition, there was no unit of measurement provided in the recipe for the beef, so I just used the beef that was left over from the soup since we had bought a small, lean roast cut of beef.

I put everything in a pot and let it boil. I cut the recipe in half and we still needed a full box of salt and quite a lot of sugar. We let everything in the pot come up to temperature together and then I had to start skimming the top every few minutes. By the time the liquid became clear and I did not need to skim anymore, the meat was still

undercooked at about medium rare. As this recipe is for preserving beef for long periods of time, I figured that the beef should be fully cooked so we continued cooking it for about 30 minutes. Because we would be refrigerating the beef and it was already quite salty, I did not pack it in salt for an additional two days as Colonel Elligood suggested.

The beef was salty, especially around the edges, and quite tough. I had never preserved beef in this manner before so for this recipe I had no tacit knowledge, unlike when making the soup. In culinary school we spent a week on soups, learning the bases, the different types, and techniques, but I never had the need to preserve beef. I have pickled vegetables of different types – usually you just throw everything in a pot with the right measurements and, once completed, bottle it, but this beef recipe does not call for bottling so my experience is not as applicable. Neither Lady Dundas nor Bliss seemed to think it necessary to add further instructions, which leads me to believe that early modern people generally knew more about preserving than we do today, probably out of necessity.

These recipes, and the hundreds of others I have read, help demonstrate that there was a wider base of tacit knowledge when it comes to cooking than is present today. These two recipes were intended for vastly different audiences: the soup was meant for the public, as it was published in a newspaper, while Bliss's recipe was shared in a private letter meant for the recipient only. The soup recipe was written for the poor, as the signature demonstrates, while the Blisses were quite well-off: Bliss was a successful politician in Fredericton, and clearly the Blisses had enough beef to preserve large amounts. Despite the different audiences, both of these recipes leave out detailed instructions, so it seems that differences in class and economic status do not necessarily mean differences in the level of detail in recipes, and, therefore, differences in the level of tacit cooking knowledge, and, therefore, differences in effect in the details in recipes.

As I mentioned earlier, most of the hundreds of recipes I have found and read for the EMMR project are not very detailed; they tend to include a list of ingredients, sometimes with small details, but not robust sets of instructions like the recipes we are familiar with today. Another thing I learned that I had not thought about prior

to making the recipes, but that became evident while writing about the experience, is that making these early modern recipes requires an additional skill: improvisation. We had to use this skill for both recipes: with the soup, we had to improvise with the split peas because the recipe did not say to soak them (something that I should have known but forgot to do) and we had to improvise on the cooking time; with the beef, we had to improvise the amount of beef, and add more cooking time to ensure the beef was fully cooked. From this experience two things have become clear: firstly, that early modern recipes assume tacit knowledge of their readers, regardless of class differences; and secondly, that these recipes also require the ability to improvise.

Works Cited

Anon. "Receipt to Make Hessian Soup." *Nova Scotia Gazette,* 4 February 1768, vol. 2, no. 78 (NSA Reel 990).

Bliss, Jonathan. "Lady Eleanora Dundas's Recipe." 5 June, 1798. Manuscript. Bliss Family Fonds, Nova Scotia Archives, vol. 1604, no. 50, reel 22.

"Hessian, adj. and n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, July 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/86395.