



***Before 'Farm to Table' Chats About Making Early Modern Food***

*With Postdoctoral Research Fellows Jack Bouchard, Elisa Tersigni, Neha Vermani, Michael Walkden & Co-Directors David Goldstein, Amanda Herbert, Heather Wolfe*

**Jack Bouchard**

Welcome to our *Before 'Farm to Table'* Team Chat at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Today we will be talking about how and why we “adapt” and “interpret” early modern British recipes through team cooking. This is meant to be a freeform discussion, but I’ll occasionally toss out questions as prompts.

A good place to start would be terminology: we are kinda split on whether to describe what we do as recreating recipes, or interpreting them, or something else. So, what should we call it? Food recreation? Interpretation? And why does it matter?

**Heather Wolfe**

I think the distinctions relate to our goals in cooking from these recipes. Which are various.

**David Goldstein**

Yes exactly.

**Elisa Tersigni**

Another term we might consider is “adaptation.”

**Jack Bouchard**

I agree that we can add “adaptation” to the mix. That's closer to what we do.

**Michael Walkden**

Of those three choices, I tend to favour “adaptation” or “interpretation” since they make clear from the outset that there is always (and inevitably) going to be a degree of variation from the source material.

**Elisa Tersigni**

To add yet another term to the mix, Marissa Nicosia (food scholar and author of *Cooking in the Archives* blog) uses the term “updating.”

**Heather Wolfe**

It is very helpful to look to others who have grappled with these distinctions and thought about audiences and intentions in different ways: for example, [Michael Twitty](#), [Stephen Schmidt](#), and

as Elisa mentioned, [Marissa Nicosia](#).

### **David Goldstein**

I think recreations are attempts to get the recipe as right as possible from an early modern perspective, from the ingredients to the cooking techniques down to the equipment if one can manage it. If something goes weird, you're guided not by your taste buds or knowledge of modern cooking, but by a kind of WWMBD (What Would Mary Baumfylde do?) approach. [Editor's note: you can view the item record for Mary Baumfylde's recipe book on [Hamnet](#) or learn more about it on the [Manuscript Cookbooks Survey](#).]

### **Amanda Herbert**

There's an important social justice element to the naming conventions, too. As Heather mentioned, Michael Twitty has taken a rightly forceful stance on this, stating that his work interpreting the lives of his enslaved ancestors is not acting, recreating, or role-playing.

### **Heather Wolfe**

For him, it is as much interpretation as embodiment. And it is important to use the terminology intentionally, and perhaps move away from the fallacy of "re-creation." Which is a weird word anyway.

### **David Goldstein**

Yes Heather, that! I really like Michael Twitty's way of talking about it, partly because he brings social justice into it. There's no such thing as an uninterested or objective "recreation," for any of us. One always interprets according to one's biases, prejudices, and life experiences, as we all well know.

### **Amanda Herbert**

Marissa Nicosia's "updating" is interesting—we (for better or worse) have done a lot of that, to make recipes more palatable, or to make them even workable in a modern kitchen.

### **Michael Walkden**

I wanted to pick up on Amanda's point about "updating," because I think that's still in many ways an open question for us. What do we consider to be more valuable: recreating a recipe exactly as it was (even if many 21st century palates would find it unpleasant or at least unfamiliar) or genuinely "updating" it to appeal more to (sometimes very different) modern tastes?

### **Jack Bouchard**

I personally come down much more on the "recreating" than the "updating." I think recreating is more useful for us as scholars; I think it's a fun and important exercise; and I also don't think the public is as anti-recreating as we think. Really, I just think that we need to treat early modern food and food-makers seriously and on their own terms—their way of thinking about food and taste was sophisticated and honestly makes a lot of sense to me. And I think that when we go in with that attitude, people respond well to our work.

**David Goldstein**

Yes me too. For me it's tied to the question of "relatability," which is something I've long taught against in my classes. People have recently begun to encounter literature asking to find the familiar, to be assuaged and comforted. I am more interested in the ways we encounter the "other" in literature—the stranger, the one we do not already know and must work to understand. The challenge of figuring out our connections and obligations to the other is one of the hallmarks of literary and historical study. I think the same is true for me with recipes. It's not how we return to the comforting same, it's how we encounter the challenging and vulnerable other—vulnerable because we have to go beyond ourselves to begin the process of connection.

**Neha Vermani**

I totally agree with this. The search for relatability is also linked to the anachronistic exercise of understanding the past by employing a present-day lens. Particularly in the context of food recipes, such an approach can reduce them to a set of ahistorical phenomenon, possessing a fixed grammar.

**Heather Wolfe**

I'm very much in favor of experiencing unpleasantness and difference, and I think the public would be interested as well.

**Elisa Tersigni**

My understanding of "updating" is that it is not meant as an appeal to modern tastes; it is meant to make recipes recognizable for modern recipe users (readers or cooks). A recognition that we are working with different materials (both food and technologies).

**Heather Wolfe**

As long as "updating" acknowledges what we are moving away from—the hidden labor, the lack of electricity and ovens.

**Jack Bouchard**

Perhaps to make this more concrete, let us think about how we've actually approached the problem in the past. How has BFT actually gone about cooking? What are the kinds of choices we've made when we've cooked together as a team?

**Heather Wolfe**

Cooking as a team has been as much about the planning and execution conversations as it has been about the actual cooking. We start with selection. How do we select a recipe to cook in the first place? And why? Because it puzzles us? Because we recognize it as something distinctly early modern?

## **Elisa Tersigni**

We are guided by a combination of factors: a desire to engage with the public (i.e. holiday-themed recipes), our own scholarly interests (Jack's research on humble pie), or just curiosity (gingerbread).

## **Jack Bouchard**

I will point out that I only got into humble pie because of Heather (and her freezer full of dead deer).

## **Heather Wolfe**

And Jack, I humbly thank you for rising to the challenge!

## **David Goldstein**

This is making me want to write an all-ambergris cookbook.

## **Amanda Herbert**

In our posts that were the most public-facing (eg., the ones we did for fall and winter holidays) I was hesitant to give members of the public a recipe that was inaccessible: filled with ingredients they couldn't get, or that were too expensive. If they splashed out and took a risk and tried something we suggested, I wanted to be pretty sure they'd think it tasted good.

## **Heather Wolfe**

Amanda, why did it need to taste good? What is "good"?

## **Neha Vermani**

And can taste be replicated or produced? How do we understand the category of taste?

## **Amanda Herbert**

Those are both really great questions. I think that this was more about my selection of the recipes than anything else. I think we made relatively understandable changes/adjustments to the cooking techniques (very few people have a hearth that they can use to cook with, so some changes were inevitable), but when I chose the recipes, I often chose things that I knew would be approachable. We wanted to give lots of people access to a historical encounter they might not otherwise have had the resources to discover.

## **Heather Wolfe**

I agree that accessibility and affordability of ingredients is very important for engaging our various publics.

## **Amanda Herbert**

I was hoping to avoid alienating people and reactions like "this was gross, people in the past were weird, I'm never doing this again."

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**Heather Wolfe**

Right, Amanda, your choice of recipes has foregrounded larger discussions that do very important work in contextualizing them.

**David Goldstein**

If we think about recipes as teaching tools, the same way that we would present a work of literature or a historical episode or essay, I think it makes sense that we will take care about which recipes we select for which audiences, as Amanda is saying. Not that teaching is the only thing we do when we are interpreting recipes. But it's one of the goals, especially where it's public-facing.

**Elisa Tersigni**

I don't think there's anything wrong with picking "approachable" recipes as a gentle way of introducing the public to food history. It's not any different from choosing to assign an approachable reading for a book club or to perform a popular play.

**Heather Wolfe**

Ha, *Midsummer Night's Dream* recipes! Many professors (in the [EMROC](#) circle) for example, use early modern recipe books in literature classes as a form of close reading.

**Michael Walkden**

While I personally prefer recreating recipes as close as possible to the source text, I do think that if the goal is public engagement—getting people to actually cook the recipes that we're sharing, and engage through practice—there can be value in "updating." I recently shared some of our historical recipes with friends of mine, who were excited to experience early modern flavour combinations. However, when it came down to it, they didn't want to put in the time and labour to turn out something at the end that they weren't sure whether they'd enjoy. It may be a less scholarly approach, but is it perhaps something we need to make peace with if we want members of the public to engage in this sort of practice-based historical engagement? Genuine question.

**David Goldstein**

I don't usually want to put in the time and labor either, Michael! Even in COVID quarantine I don't seem to be gravitating toward making early modern recipes. Seems too much of a busman's holiday for me I guess, but I empathize with the "oh that's a nice-looking recipe, and I'm sure I would find it fascinating to cook and eat it, but I'll just cook some pasta tonight, I know how to do that" attitude. It takes effort to engage with the other. When I do so, I usually take it on as a serious scholarly project, not a midweek dinner fling.

I don't have any problem with any of these approaches, as long as one is up front about what one is doing. It's the websites that say "This is a real ye olde medieval recipe for tomato sauce!" that drive me crazy. OK I don't know if that actually exists, but treat it as a metaphor for misrepresentation.

**Elisa Tersigni**

One of the values to “updating” is a recognition that there are many skills that are necessary to even attempting to re-create/interpret/adapt: knowing how to access early modern manuscripts, knowing how to read them (paleography), and then understanding even the basic terms.

**Amanda Herbert**

Just as a hypothetical: what if we had done one of our recipes in an educational setting? E.g., with a group of people, of any age, who wanted to learn more about the strangeness of the past, and where we could be on hand to explain and offer background, etc.?

**David Goldstein**

Isn't that similar to what you did at [Amherst](#) in January 2020 and 2021?

**Amanda Herbert**

Ha, yes, that's it exactly! When Heather and I taught undergraduates at Amherst we followed this method. And I think it's no accident that our students chose recipes that were less familiar and more challenging.

**Heather Wolfe:**

For our students, it began with transcription, and ended in the kitchen, with many transformations in between.

**David Goldstein**

It ends in the kitchen (the cooking), but also at the table (the eating), which is interesting. How does the way in which the final product is consumed change our experience of it? Eating alone, with the family or friends or roommates one lives with, sharing it with a class, discussing it in a classroom or online setting....

I would also add that I find that graduate students also tend to choose the least familiar recipes—marzipan, homemade cherry wine, stewed rabbit on sippets, to make a rock in sweetmeats—in order to encounter the early modern moment more intensely.

**Jack Bouchard**

What are some of the challenges involved when cooking in the classroom?

**Heather Wolfe**

Lack of time, the complicated logistics of cooking with groups, sourcing ingredients. Having use of a professional kitchen and an institution that was willing to cover the cost of expensive ingredients were key to the success of our Amherst courses.

**Amanda Herbert**

And a professional chef on hand to make sure we weren't accidentally poisoning ourselves/burning the building down.

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**Elisa Tersigni**

Poisoning: a real risk when you make early-modern recipes as they were written!

**Neha Vermani**

A risk of poisoning, although not rooted in the same concerns, was a real fear for early modern people. It is interesting to see that a number of recipes in our collection call for the use of a bezoar or goat stone, which changes color upon coming in contact with poison. Many of us might have heard of this stone, thanks to the Harry Potter series!

**Heather Wolfe**

Now I'm disappointed that we didn't talk about bezoars with the Amherst students! It was interesting to cook with undergraduates since some of them had a background in food (family food businesses, etc.) but many of them had minimal experience in the kitchen to start with...

**David Goldstein**

Yes it's interesting with undergraduate students, because one realizes how many steps you have to take just to get some of them comfortable in the kitchen (not always, of course, but often). With grad students I find many of those steps can be skipped. But that's not surprising.

**Amanda Herbert**

Sometimes WE lacked knowledge, too, despite the fact that many of us are active cooks! I'm remembering our phone call to Jack's dad [a restaurant owner] to ask him about the strange smell of the venison liver.

**Jack Bouchard**

Oh god I'd forgotten the liver thing... So we've talked for a good bit about what kinds of recipes we choose. Maybe we can talk a bit about how we research them and prepare them for interpretation?

**Elisa Tersigni**

For me, it begins with a transcription and a lot of searching of the Oxford English Dictionary and [Lexicons of Early Modern English](#) to ensure I'm understanding the terms.

**Heather Wolfe**

Right, Elisa, it is important not to skip over the parts we don't understand because those are usually the most important ones, the ones that truly help us to differentiate between the modern and early modern.

**Jack Bouchard**

What about the medieval? Do we explore the prehistory of our recipes?

**Amanda Herbert**

That represents a kind of historical approach, to compare them with many other variations from a similar time period.

**Jack Bouchard**

But not our approach?

**David Goldstein**

If we can, sure. And we're also influenced by the post-early modern history of those recipes too, whether or not we are aware of it.

**Amanda Herbert**

And we did do that with the Amherst students in both 2020 and 2021—we asked them to search through recipe corpora for different variations of the dishes they'd chosen to study.

**Jack Bouchard**

Has this been a worthwhile approach? And how do we translate it into public-facing writing?

**Heather Wolfe**

I think [Stephen Schmidt's approach](#) is valuable. If every recipe is the equivalent of a prompt book or a play text that needs to be performed in order to be understood, there are going to be various and inconsistent gaps among different versions. Reading as many of them as possible helps fill in some of the gaps, helps us realize what was implicit or not among various recipe writers.

**Amanda Herbert**

That is a great insight.

**Heather Wolfe**

I see it as a form of triangulation, in order to get closer to interpreting what we can't see, smell, or really know with some sort of veracity.

**Elisa Tersigni**

Reading the entirety of the book, not just the recipe across sources, is important, too. There are sometimes clues as to how the book's compiler(s) were understanding various terms.

**Heather Wolfe**

Yes, Elisa. Taking a single recipe out of a recipe book is like extracting a single poem from a poetical miscellany. You lose all context.

**David Goldstein**

I remember when I first started reading early modern recipes, so many of them looked strange to me because I was reading them out of the context of everyday cooking and eating during

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that period. Now having read dozens, I can often encounter a recipe and see it instantly as a variation rather than as a unique instance.

**Jack Bouchard**

But do we actually do that when we've done team recreations?

**Heather Wolfe**

Jack, you did it with humble pie.

**Jack Bouchard**

True! I think too it was because the word “humbles” is hard to understand and key to the whole recipe and how we interpret it—I had to figure out what humbles were before we could make the dish. I tried as best I could to find the later medieval roots of the dish and see how it changed over time, and it turns out that there are references buried in various recipes and literary sources across England and France. It took a couple months to track everything down.

**Amanda Herbert**

We followed that practice with the Amherst students, too.

**Jack Bouchard**

I wonder if this is something we've moved towards more over the course of the project—it's an idea we've only come to as our thinking has evolved, rather than a first principle. Which I think is interesting.

**Amanda Herbert**

I did not take that approach with potato pudding, but having now seen many more versions of that recipe, I wish I had! Even in the most public-facing holiday blogposts, there's no reason I couldn't have included something like “there were many recipes for this dish in the period, but THIS ONE...” etc.

**Jack Bouchard**

My plan is working. Soon we will revive Umble Pie.

**Heather Wolfe**

Don't forget the fried deer testicles.

**David Goldstein**

How could I forget the fried deer testicles?

**Amanda Herbert**

I'll remember those until the day I die. Jack and Elisa, didn't you do a similar thing with gingerbread?

**Jack Bouchard**

Yes a bit, though that was early on, and I wish I'd done more research.

**Elisa Tersigni**

Yes, we ended up cooking two different versions of gingerbread at the same time: early and late. It was an interesting comparison!

**Jack Bouchard**

And since then we've only found more and more gingerbread. I am still team Medieval Gingerbread.

**David Goldstein**

Heather, you talk about the fact that looking only at an individual recipe comes at the cost of removing it from its context. I think that's certainly true (though often those recipes are themselves removed from other contexts—copied from printed books, interpellated by later writers into someone else's recipe book, etc.). But I think removing a recipe from its context can be fine too. It depends on your goal. It would be interesting to think of us sometimes as New Critics, extracting a recipe/poem from its context in order to close read it, and at other times as historicist critics, seeing the recipe foremost as a contextual piece of evidence in a larger whole.

**Heather Wolfe**

David, I think we are doing both—close reading of individual recipes (New Criticism) but then expanding out to the rest of the book, and to other versions of the recipe elsewhere.

**David Goldstein**

I agree.

**Amanda Herbert**

David, I love thinking about framing recipe interpretation as new criticism vs. historicism. So often this work is framed as “scholarly” vs. “amateur” and that immediately downplays and disrespects the insights of people who interpret recipes but aren't in the professoriate.

**Heather Wolfe**

Okay, what about some terminology: recipe books vs receipt books vs cookbooks?

**Elisa Tersigni**

“Receipt book” is more accurate, but “recipe book” is more approachable, since we're thinking about approachability here.

**Heather Wolfe**

I prefer modernizing “receipt” to recipe, in terms of describing them.

### **Amanda Herbert**

And you can have a recipe for a medicine. I think “cookbook” does make people think about food, even though, as Michael’s and Neha’s work shows, early modern food WAS medicine and vice versa.

### **David Goldstein**

I think it’s understandable that we slip into using the term “cookbook” when we are dealing exclusively with foodstuffs, with the understanding that most of these objects are not properly cookbooks. To be fair, there are many cookbooks among printed books, going back to the 16th century and even earlier.

### **Neha Vermani**

Another term we could use would be household manuals. Similar manuals, covering domestic departments associated with mansions of the elite, were commissioned at the Mughal court. The topics range from making electuaries, sweetmeats, everyday food dishes to making candles, perfumes, and even constructing gardens.

### **Michael Walkden**

Yes, exactly! It’s so important to take into account that these books usually contain medical and household recipes as well as culinary—and that at times, they aren’t always easy to separate out. I’ve always felt we use the term “cookbook” too freely, when “receipt book” would be more appropriate. And far more medicine among manuscripts.

### **Neha Vermani:**

It also becomes important to tease out the meaning of food and medicine in this context. Early modern works on medicine and the body do clearly spell out the difference between the two—a difference I am very keen on nuancing and putting forward. Otherwise, it reduces these categories as being one and the same. For example, no culinary recipe with nutmeg is aimed at harnessing its medical benefits. For that, one would need to use it in prescribed quantities to be consumed in the form of a regular dosage. So it becomes important to carefully read a recipe to figure out when a particular preparation using seemingly common spices and ingredients becomes a medicine, and when it is consumed simply as a meal to fill one’s stomach. Also, dietary regimes were one part of the medical discourse. Similarly, sleep patterns, music, perfumes, too were considered to possess medicinal and curative values.

### **Jack Bouchard**

Yeah, the amount of non-food is pretty astounding in these books.

### **David Goldstein**

Michael and Neha, I certainly agree that these are almost all receipt or recipe books, not cookbooks in the formal sense, at least until you get to [Robert May](#). I think for public-facing work, using the term “recipe book” is appropriate. I don’t mind interchanging “receipt” and “recipe” for scholarly audiences. One does need synonyms.

**Michael Walkden**

I prefer “receipt,” because it reminds us that we are dealing with an unfamiliar genre which bears only superficial similarities to modern recipes—which, as we noted above, is an important aspect of encountering the past.

**David Goldstein**

Do we want to address more directly the “so what” question of why do we do this, what is to be gained? Or do we think we’ve covered/can’t really cover that?

**Jack Bouchard**

I feel like we’ve come down pretty firmly on “we do this for outreach” mixed with a twist of scholarly inquiry.

**David Goldstein**

Jack, I feel the opposite, at least for myself... scholarship and teaching mixed with a soupçon of outreach.

**Jack Bouchard**

Ah, perhaps I was misreading the room on this one.

**Amanda Herbert**

Why isn’t outreach scholarly inquiry?

**David Goldstein**

Amanda, good question: to echo what others have said, I think they can be both, and the former involves the latter—it’s more about perspective and approach.

**Heather Wolfe**

Yes, I’m with David on this—or, outreach with a lot of scholarship behind it so that everyone is learning as well as being entertained.

**Amanda Herbert**

Exactly: we’d never say that teaching isn’t scholarly. I think engagement with the public—one of the most important things about being a humanist!—informs scholarly inquiry and vice versa, just like teaching does.

**Jack Bouchard**

Ok, a couple closing questions as we are running out of time:

- 1) What are some recipes you wish we had done?
- 2) What is something unexpected you’ve learned that has shaped your work?
- 3) If you could re-do one thing we’ve cooked, what would it be?

### **Amanda Herbert**

- 1) Wish we had done: anything with quinces. Hard to get, hard to understand when they're ripe, and hard today to understand the whole concept of bletting!
- 2) Something unexpected: I've learned that the general public has more of an appetite for the strangeness of the past than I'd anticipated.
- 3) Re-do: marmalade. I think we got that one a bit wrong vis-a-vis our modern assumptions about what jam or jelly are supposed to be (eg., spreadable vs. like a springy cube).

### **Elisa Tersigni**

I would re-make the cog's biscuits recipe with the feedback that we received on our blog post. One of the benefits to the blog post as a genre is the public "peer review" process and the possibility of updating with new information.

### **Jack Bouchard**

I'll second cog's biscuits, the feedback we got was very useful.

### **Elisa Tersigni**

Particularly the feedback to use the saffron to color the milk. We had been thinking about taste, not about presentation, when we made it.

### **Jack Bouchard**

Yeah, that was a revelation. And since then we've seen so many cases of saffron being used to dye foods.

### **Neha Vermani**

This is a very common practice in early modern and even present day South Asian cuisine. Along with saffron, pomegranate peels and violet flowers were also used in the mughal kitchens to dye food.

### **Elisa Tersigni**

Exactly—and Julia Fine's work as a Dumbarton Oaks and Folger Institute Fellow picked up on the importance of turmeric in coloring early modern food (as it is today!).

### **Heather Wolfe**

Answer to "something unexpected": I still want to learn more about the extent to which manuscript recipe books are simply copied out of a variety of print sources—the flow of recipes from manuscript to print to manuscript. The corpus will allow us to do this, and observe how they are altered/adapted at various stages.

### **David Goldstein**

- 1) Wish we had done: medlars.
- 2) Something unexpected: the way curdled milk can be used as a clarifying tool (in

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hippocras). 3) Re-do: yes Amanda marmalade.

### **Michael Walkden**

- 1) Wish we had done disclaimer: I'm VERY glad that we weren't able to make anything with these ingredients, but the recurrence of musk, ambergris etc. in our recipes has made me kind of curious to imagine what they must have been like in food.
- 2) Something unexpected: I don't think I fully appreciated just how deep you can get into trying to get everything 100% accurate, and still get it "wrong." There are almost infinite ambiguities and imprecisions in early modern recipes, and the scope (necessity?) for interpretation is vast.
- 3) Re-do: I'd remake the humble pie, and use the full amount of suet the recipe called for; as I recall, we more than halved it. I want to know what the texture would've been like. Presumably, greasy, but I think it could have been good nonetheless.

### **Jack Bouchard**

- 1) Wish we had done: picking up Michael's last point, I for one wish we had a chance to do a proper preserved pie (a pie with a high fat content that congeals and can last a long time).
- 2) Flipping the next questions, but re-do: I'd re-do cog's biscuit or medieval gingerbread.
- 3) And finally, something unexpected: I have totally reversed my opinion on early modern food and now think it makes a ton of sense and tastes pretty good. And I think it has a great deal (too much?) in common with modern American cuisine—they both use so much sugar.

### **David Goldstein**

That's interesting you've found less strangeness between early modern and modern American cuisine, Jack! So you went looking for the other and found the self.

### **Jack Bouchard**

Yeah, I find a lot of 1970s American recipes more off-putting than 17th century ones. The sugar and aspic content is...really similar.

### **Heather Wolfe**

Bye guys! Have to go to a meeting! This has been great! But feels unfinished...

### **David Goldstein**

Perhaps this is only the beginning of the conversation.

### **Amanda Herbert**

Okay, time for our next meeting. Thank you all! I love this team.

### **David Goldstein**

OK also signing off. Humble pie FTW.

### **Jack Bouchard**

Well, this was fun. Y'all stay safe out there!

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