

The Philadelphia Chef: Mastering the Art of Philadelphia Cookery

THE AUDITORIUM was filled to capacity and already there were some standees, although the program would not begin for another half hour or so. Philadelphia's women had learned that to get a good seat, or any seat at all, it was necessary to come early. Since two o'clock, or even earlier, women had been filing in. Some had been coming every afternoon for the past week and had struck up acquaintances with other "regulars." Although the room was overheated and poorly ventilated, they waited patiently, chatting among themselves and looking over the literature that had been handed out.¹

All classes of society were represented, and seats were strictly on a first-come, first-served basis. As a Philadelphia newspaper, *The Press*, had it, "Nora on her afternoon out may sit next to Mrs. Money Bags from Walnut Street." The matron in her tailor-made gown vied for a seat with the impecunious newlywed who was decked out in her shabby best. Sprinkled in this assemblage were a few men—the club habitu  with his gardenia boutonniere, the domestic bachelor, even a flannel-shirted workingman or two. Many had notebooks and pencils in hand.²

Why was this disparate group assembled? For whom were they waiting? The attraction was the Queen of Cookery, Sarah Tyson Rorer, the 1890's forerunner of Julia Child. Promptly at three o'clock Mrs. Rorer, as she was known, appeared. Amidst enthusiastic applause she stepped to the front of the room where a small

¹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 16, 1895; *Philadelphia Press*, Nov. 16, 1900.

² *Ibid.*; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 6, 1901; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 11, 1895; *Philadelphia Record*, Jan. 24, 1900; *ibid.*, Nov. 8, 1894; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 17, 1900; *Philadelphia North American*, Jan. 31, 1900.

“model kitchen” was set up. She was middle aged, above average in height with an ample figure. The photography of her day did not do justice to her best features—waving blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes and a peaches-and-cream complexion that would have been the envy of a schoolgirl.³

To anyone who didn't know Mrs. Rorer's ways, her costume must have been a surprise. Could it be that her gown was made of silk? Surely everyone knew that it was madness to wear such a delicate fabric in the kitchen! Granted, she was wearing an apron and sleevelets, but they were made of sheer white cloth and edged in lace, hardly much protection against the messes created in most kitchens. Anyone who had seen Mrs. Rorer before knew that she believed that “Housework is the easiest work in the world when thoroughly understood and any woman who has no more than ten or twelve people to cook for has her lines cast in very pleasant places.” To prove how clean and easy cooking was, she always wore a silk dress, delicate apron and sleeve protectors, and topped off her costume with a tiny lace cap. A few people did remark that much of the toting and cleaning up was done by her assistant who wore calico.⁴

Everyone present knew of Mrs. Rorer through other connections. Her *Philadelphia Cook Book*, published in 1886, was a popular bridal gift and had become a kitchen bible in many Philadelphia homes. Her monthly articles in periodicals—*Table Talk*, *Household News*, *Dietetic Gazette* and *Ladies' Home Journal*—were eagerly awaited. Some members of the audience, their friends or their cooks, had attended her Philadelphia Cooking School on Chestnut Street, where Mrs. Rorer also gave a “normal course” to train dietitians and home economics teachers.

Those who had traveled to Chicago in 1893 for the World's Columbian Exposition had seen her preside over a “corn kitchen” where every item prepared featured a corn product as an ingredient. (Yes, Philadelphia scrapple had been included in her repertoire!) Several people present had visited or summered at the Pennsylvania

³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 10, 1900; *Press*, Nov. 26, 1896; *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 22, 1897; *Philadelphia Record*, Nov. 21, 1901.

⁴ *Philadelphia Times* Nov. 15, 1893; *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 9, 1897; *North American*, Nov. 12, 1897; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 8, 1894.

Chautauqua at Mt. Gretna, where she held forth in a large building constructed for her use and named Rorer Hall. Mrs. Rorer was a busy woman, working through all the educational and communications media of the time. Her cooking demonstrations at the Philadelphia Food Exposition were especially popular, for they gave her followers a good opportunity to savor the epigrammatic wit for which she was famous.

The talking stopped and pencils were poised as Mrs. Rorer began to speak. "Under protest I shall make for you some new desserts which I hope none of you will think of imitating. Remember, desserts are both unhealthy and unnecessary as articles of food."⁵

Newcomers may have been startled to hear this, but her devotees smiled, assured that Mrs. Rorer was in good form. As the *Evening Bulletin* noted, "It sounded somewhat paradoxical when the lesson began with a philippic on desserts. But then, Mrs. Rorer delights in startling an audience. . . ." The *Press* reported: "Mrs. Rorer has her strong likes and dislikes and desserts come under the latter heading. She does not temporize with this fact; she does not meet it halfway; she turns the cold shoulder decidedly and her audience were not long left in doubt as to her feelings."⁶

Philadelphia newspapers were ecstatic in their praise of her performances.

No one ever accused Mrs. Rorer, however, of being "dry" in her lectures; her epigrams are as good mental nourishment as her cookery is physical nourishment. She is a brilliant cook but she is also a brilliant talker.⁷

To watch Mrs. Rorer cook is a liberal education in the culinary art. She is the neatest, daintiest and deftest of queens of the kitchen. . . . The kitchen looks as though it had never been invaded, and her snowy fichu and cuffs are absolutely undefiled.⁸

Like the conjuror tossing a half dozen balls, she had them all in the air at the same time. One after another was put upon its way into the fire or into the cooking pan, and while the egg-beater went chop, chop, chop, Mrs. Rorer was eloquently discoursing upon the advantages of gas stoves

⁵ *Ibid.*, Dec. 4, 1896.

⁶ *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 16, 1895; *Press*, Dec. 4, 1896.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1900.

⁸ *Times*, Nov. 23 1895.

for cooking, the waste of coal by carrying a heaped up fire, the danger to digestion by eating fried potatoes, the injurious effects of too close an intimacy with the great American hog. . . .⁹

Mrs. Rorer stayed at the front of the stage talking to the audience with occasional side directions to the assistant. Her delivery was "colloquial and simple, and just slow enough for the amateur note takers." Every step was explained together with the "intricate little whys and wherefores that go to make up the art of cooking at its best." "Such craning of necks and rising in place when some particularly interesting point was brought out . . . was never seen before outside a clinic."¹⁰

As Mrs. Rorer concocted her dainties, she denounced the typical American diet. Americans were a race of dyspeptics; the Singhalese or "dirty Turk" knew more about what went into his mouth than the American. If people ate the proper foods there would be little illness except contagious diseases. Such disease could not be guarded against so long as one must sit next to diseased persons in public cars and live near bad drainage and drink Schuylkill water. "A headache is a crime for which any woman should blush and an attack of biliousness is an indiscretion for which a person should do penance."¹¹

Sweets were not the only class of foods that aroused her ire. After recommending vinegar and salt to clean brass, she asked "Haven't you often seen people eating lettuce and dressing it with vinegar and salt? What kind of stomachs do these people imagine they have? If salt and vinegar will eat away copper, what will it do to the delicate mucous lining of the stomach?"¹²

The immediate result of eating fried foods was heartburn, followed by fever or chronic indigestion, which could end in catarrh of the stomach. "If you can digest those things [*fried potato cakes*] you deserve to have a monument erected to your digestion at your death. Lard, heated and mixed with cold boiled potato is unfit for

⁹ Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, Nov. 12, 1897.

¹⁰ *Times*, Nov. 29, 1893; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 18, 1898; *North American*, Nov. 13, 1900; *Public Ledger*, Nov. 15, 1894; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 3, 1892; *Public Ledger*, Nov. 12, 1897.

¹¹ *Times*, Nov. 19, 1893; *Press*, Dec. 3, 1896.

¹² *Ibid.*, Nov. 12, 1898.

any refined person to eat." Banish the frying pan and there will not be much sickness either in city or country. "No product of the hog is fit to eat. Do I eat ham? Certainly not. I have no time to eat anything which takes five hours to digest."¹³

Occasionally Mrs. Rorer became even more extreme in her sweeping denunciation of bad and poorly cooked food. "Bad cooking is largely responsible for the crowded conditions of our insane asylums, almshouses, prisons and hospitals. Bad cooking not only engenders disease, but is directly provocative of crime, while good cooking is the art of making home a paradise for the breadwinner."¹⁴

All the while she was showing the audience the correct technique for preparing food—frequently the same foods she was condemning. The *Inquirer* remarked that after hitting "straight from the shoulder in opposition to the candy eating habit . . . her lecture and demonstration which followed were such as to make the candy-eating vice, if vice it be, ten times as tempting. . . ."¹⁵

Not all of her comments were negative. Mrs. Rorer was an especial champion of salads, and her favorite advice was that salad should appear on the table of every well-regulated household 365 times a year. Salad was nature's lubricant; it purified the blood and cleared the complexion. People who did not eat salads had pimples, blotches, liver marks, headaches and biliousness.¹⁶

Mrs. Rorer's pet piece of equipment was the chafing dish; no well-regulated home could be without one. It was a "source of much economy to the poor and delight to the wealthiest epicure." It enabled one to utilize scraps and serve hot foods hot, and it was a godsend on "Blue Monday" when washing was being done in the kitchen. One's chafing dish might be a cheap item from the seconds at the bargain counter or a silver ornament with bejeweled golden handles; the principle was the same. Mrs. Rorer did, however, have her reservations about jewel-studded handles, for "It is just not convenient to grasp a lot of diamonds when you use a chafing dish!" For demonstrations, Mrs. Rorer herself used a large, elaborately

¹³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 1, 1896; *Times*, Nov. 18 1893; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 27, 1900.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 25, 1896.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 20, 1901.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Nov. 12, 1895; *Evening Bulletin*, No v. 11, 1895.

ornamented silver dish with ivory handles that had been presented to her at a supper at the Stratford Hotel.¹⁷

Men flocked to her chafing dish demonstrations. In 1896, Mrs. Rorer announced that her son James's chafing dish parties were among the most popular social functions at Harvard College. The same year she modestly allowed that of fifty or so receipts from which chafing dish devotees could select, twenty-five had originated with her.¹⁸

The audience knew that Mrs. Rorer could rise to any occasion.

At a certain stage in the preparation of a dish a pastry bag was needed. Every conceivable place was searched by the two attendants but the bag was not to be found. The sad fact was communicated to Mrs. Rorer and everybody held their breath. Turning smilingly to her audience Mrs. Rorer said, "I once made the remark that there was no such a thing as the servant girl question in America and I want to take it all back." Then she deftly folded a teatowel into a three-cornered bag, pinned one side and placed her little tube through the hole in the corner. A burst of applause bore testimony to the general admiration.¹⁹

Her listeners loved her and waited eagerly for the witticisms that made them "applaud with delight and gasp in horror." "Always open the oven door of a gas stove when lighting the oven—if you value your life." Fish was not brain food, for no fishermen of her acquaintance were overly brilliant. "The question of choosing evening refreshments is not which is more wholesome, but which is less deadly." "When a woman tells me she is a born cook, I am always glad that I do not live in her house."²⁰

She did not confine her comments to food preparation. Philadelphia matrons were frequently criticized for failing to follow the Golden Rule in their relations with their servants. "If heads of

¹⁷ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 20, 1897; *Evening Bulletin*, Dec. 4, 1896; *Public Ledger*, Nov. 26, 1896; *Press*, Nov. 20, 1897; *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 25, 1896. Mrs. Rorer was always willing to answer questions: "After the lecture a bevy of troubled looking maids and determined looking matrons assembled about the speaker and asked all kinds of questions regarding the mysterious art of pleasing the hungry American male. Mrs. Rorer gave hope to the despondent and calmed the irate and all went away happy." *North American*, Nov. 14, 1900.

¹⁸ *Evening Bulletin*, Dec. 11, 1896; *North American*, Nov. 26, 1896.

¹⁹ *Press*, Nov. 10, 1900.

²⁰ *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 10, 1898; *Press*, Nov. 13, 1900; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 10, 1894; *Press*, Nov. 19, 1898; *ibid.*, Nov. 16, 1900.

homes would remember that children and servants reflect the character of the family to which they belong they would take enough interest in the latter to want to be proud of them." "Sunday afternoon belongs to the household domestic and this brief vacation should not be an excuse for the increase of her Sunday morning duties." Mrs. Rorer then committed the heresy of wondering aloud why domestics did not organize. At that, "the help, present in large numbers," smiled broadly, as the faces of their employers grew serious.²¹

Mrs. Rorer abhorred the colossal waste that she said took place in the average American kitchen, and she was full of suggestions for utilizing every bit of food purchased. Starting a lecture on "Luxurious Economy," she declared that "One four pound chicken is always enough for eight people." "A general ripple of laughter followed her statement and the ladies in the audience settled themselves more comfortably in their chairs to learn how to perform this, the nineteenth century miracle." Mrs. Rorer then took a chicken, used all except feathers, head, claws and innards, and made chicken pilau, chicken à la Crane, chicken timbale, and giblet soup, each in sufficient amounts for four persons.²²

She was also full of crafty ideas for working leftovers into the menu, "to inveigle the unsuspecting man into the belief that his food was not prepared on the installment plan [and] . . . stave off the storm until all the odds and ends are used. While it is a bunco game pure and simple, nobody but a veteran boarder or hash expert would know the difference."²³

One way of eliminating waste was by planning menus ahead. "Don't wait until it is fairly meal time before deciding what is to comprise said meal. It's the beer used in washing down many a badly cooked dish that really keeps up the one who partakes of such a meal." When the Woman's Health Protective Association was agitating on the question of collecting garbage, Mrs. Rorer said she wished the Association would teach women to eat what they throw away as garbage.²⁴

²¹ *Public Ledger*, Nov. 9, 1898; *Evening Bulletin*, Dec. 5, 1896.

²² *Press*, Nov. 11, 1897.

²³ *North American*, Nov. 15, 1900.

²⁴ *Philadelphia Record*, Jan. 23, 1900; *Press*, Nov. 10, 1897.

Mrs. Rorer sometimes gave marketing lectures to assist her audience in getting the most for its food dollar. To illustrate meat cuts, a side of beef was cut up by a butcher—or by Mrs. Rorer herself. “It is not every day that one may see a pair of dainty white hands framed in real lace fairly ‘taking the bull by the horns’—and even cutting him up.”²⁵

As a Philadelphian, Mrs. Rorer enjoyed tossing occasional friendly insults at Boston. She expressed approval of the kitchen setup in which she was working and told of the “small dingy corner” she had at a recent appearance in Boston. “We have one city where people live largely upon beans. It is a great place for nervous prostration which is the result, not of brain exertion, as many Boston people claim but of bean eating.” “The reason the University of Pennsylvania beat Harvard at foot ball was because the latter weren’t well fed.”²⁶

Her own city did not escape her acerbic tongue. She frequently complained about the ubiquitous fried oysters and chicken salad she was served wherever she went in the Quaker City, and she often had unflattering comments about Schuylkill water. She once pronounced Philadelphia water as brown as chocolate sauce and suggested that some enterprising member of the audience might start sanitoriums with mudbaths using Philadelphia water.²⁷

Samples of Mrs. Rorer’s cooking were much sought after. For example, “it was only through the greatest precautions that it [*a duck Mrs. Rorer had roasted*] escaped the fate of so many other articles in the show—being savagely devoured by formidable looking martrons with sample-stuffed flour bags.”²⁸

The first day, in fact, the temptation proved too strong and the appetizing viands were carried off piecemeal. Next day Mrs. Rorer announced that “The ladies” the emphasis was strong “would please not eat the dishes which are for inspection only.”²⁹

²⁵ *Philadelphia Record*, Nov. 13, 1900.

²⁶ *Public Ledger*, Nov. 21, 1891; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 19, 1893; *Press*, Dec. 3, 1896.

²⁷ *Times*, Nov. 16, 1895; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 18, 1900; *Public Ledger*, Feb. 19, 1908.

²⁸ *North American*, Jan. 30, 1900.

²⁹ *Press*, Nov. 17, 1900.

Many are loath to withdraw from the lecture room when the lesson is over. But they wait in vain! No one except those directly concerned know exactly how the dainties are disposed of, although it is whispered that the powers that be, including Mrs. Rorer and Mr. Smedley [*William Smedley, secretary of the Exposition*] quietly enter the model dining room every evening and come out looking very happy.³⁰

The first food exposition, or Retail Grocers', Manufacturers and Pure Food Exposition as it was formally called, was held in Horticultural Hall on Broad Street near Spruce in 1889. Sponsored by the Retail Grocers' Association of Philadelphia and opened by Governor James A. Beaver, its stated purpose was to bring together consumer and manufacturer, giving the former knowledge of the best and purest foods. The exposition probably was an outgrowth of a Pure Food Convention held in Washington, D. C., January 19-20, 1888. Finley Acker, a Philadelphia grocer prominent in civic and business affairs and later president of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, was elected treasurer of the National Pure Food Association, which was formed at this convention. Mrs. Rorer was already associated with Acker through the periodical *Table Talk*, which has been called the "outstanding culinary magazine of the nineties." The exposition proved so popular that the idea was soon copied in other cities.³¹

The hall was trimmed with evergreen wreathing, bunting, flowers and flags. An orchestra gave several concerts daily. Manufacturers of food, equipment, and related items sought to outdo each other with eye-catching exhibits, such as a model of the White House constructed from Napheys Pure Leaf Lard. Samples of products were much in demand and food items were served up in style on fine china and crystal. A matron weary from her promenading and perhaps slightly queasy from tasting doughnuts, pickles, oatmeal, pancakes, catsup, crullers, soup and gelatin might relax with a cup of Van Houten's chocolate, served in delicate cups by waitresses wearing

³⁰ *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 12, 1895.

³¹ *Public Ledger*, Feb. 26, 1889; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 25, 1889; *Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 1888; "The Pure Food Convention," *American Analyst*, IV (Feb. 1, 1888), 48; *Public Ledger*, Feb. 13, 1913; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1885-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 363.

lace Dutch caps in a garden setting complete with cooing doves. The *Philadelphia Record* marvelled at the reckless visitor who threw himself into "an orgie [*sic*] that must simply make his stomach shudder."³²

Mrs. Rorer lectured in the "ladies' parlor" at the first Exposition and was an immediate hit. "The popularity of the cooking lectures by Mrs. T. S. Rorer [*sic*] at the Food Exposition is seen in the fact that in deference to numerous requests that lady will exhibit her skill every afternoon and evening instead of on alternate days, as was at first proposed."³³

The next year her lectures had to be increased from one to two daily to accommodate the throngs, and in 1892 the Exposition was moved to Industrial Hall at Broad and Vine, where Mrs. Rorer held forth in a large lecture room. Reports of 1895 mention 800 attending a lecture of hers and a total of more than 100,000 visiting the Exposition during the three weeks it was open. In 1897 it moved to even larger quarters at the Second Regiment Armory at Broad and Susquehanna, but in 1900 it returned to Industrial Hall because of the more central location. Mrs. Rorer continued to pack them in at all these sites. When an 1898 lecture filled all 650 seats and drew an equal number of standees, she maintained that Philadelphia needed a hall seating 1,000 to 1,200.³⁴

Mrs. Rorer was especially interested in diet for the sick,³⁵ and beginning in 1891 a session was devoted to this topic at each Exposition. Designated as Doctors' Day, it attracted not only homemakers but "scores of the city's best known hospital and private physicians . . . and the number of nurses ran up into the hundreds." The nurses from the Philadelphia Training School came as a group, and there were delegations from Medico-Chirurgical, German, Jef-

³² Mrs. M. C. Myer, "Philadelphia Food Exposition of '91," *Table Talk*, VII (January, 1892), 14-18; *idem*, "Philadelphia Food Exposition," *ibid.*, VIII (January, 1893), 33-37; *Philadelphia Record*, Nov. 10, 1898.

³³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 28, 1889.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 4, 1890; *Public Ledger*, Nov. 15, 1892; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 22, 23, 1895; *North American*, Nov. 9, 1897; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 23, 1900; *ibid.*, Nov. 17, 1898.

³⁵ Because of her numerous activities in this area, the American Dietetic Association considers Mrs. Rorer to be the first American dietitian. See Mary I. Barber, Editor, *History of the American Dietetic Association* (Philadelphia, 1959), 13.

person and Hahnemann hospitals at the 1894 lecture, which had the hall filled by two o'clock although the lecture did not begin until four. Her lecture on diet for the sick was so popular that on several occasions Mrs. Rorer repeated it by popular demand.³⁶

Another especially popular lecture of Mrs. Rorer's was on bread making. In 1898 she received several hundred letters requesting that she repeat this lecture and demonstration. Because her schedule was full she had to do it on Thanksgiving Day, and, even so, she packed the house.³⁷

Mrs. Rorer was born Sarah Tyson Heston in 1849 in Richboro, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and spent most of her formative years in the Buffalo, New York, area, where she attended a female seminary. Her family returned to Pennsylvania around 1869, and in 1871 she married William Albert Rorer of Philadelphia. In 1879 she enrolled in a cooking school sponsored by the New Century Club, where she took the "full course—two practical lessons a week for three months and a course of twenty-four demonstrated lectures." This was the extent of her formal training in cookery. She proved such an apt pupil that when the principal of the school resigned, Mrs. Rorer was elected to replace her. After several years of conducting the school under New Century Club auspices, Mrs. Rorer set out on her own with her Philadelphia Cooking School. In the meantime, she had made her first known platform appearance at the Franklin Institute in 1880, in connection with a lecture given by Dr. Rachel Bodley of the Woman's Medical College.³⁸

Books, articles, and testimonials by Mrs. Rorer followed with blinding speed. Her appearance at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, where nearly a quarter of a million people saw her, helped give her a national reputation, and after this she was called upon to lecture and demonstrate all over the United States.³⁹

³⁶ *Public Ledger*, Nov. 15, 1894; *Philadelphia Record*, Nov. 15, 1894; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 15, 1894.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 25, 1898.

³⁸ Mrs. Talcott Williams, "The Most Famous Cook in America," *Ladies' Home Journal*, XIV (February, 1897), 7; Sarah Tyson Rorer, "Early Dietetics," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, X (November, 1934) 290-291; *Public Ledger*, Dec. 21, 1880.

³⁹ Frederik Fernald, "Household Arts at the World's Fair," *Popular Science Monthly*, XLIII (October, 1893), 804; *Household News*, I (November, 1893), 170.

Between 1889 and 1901 Philadelphians flocked annually to the food expositions to learn improved methods of cooking and home management, to hear Mrs. Rorer's strong opinions on diet and nutrition, and to savor the personal magnetism of this charismatic Queen of Cookery.⁴⁰

Philadelphia, Pa.

EMMA SEIFRIT WEIGLEY

⁴⁰ Mrs. Rorer closed her cooking school in 1903, but continued to lecture and to write about foods and cooking. Her last book was published in 1917. The final two decades of her life were spent in Colebrook, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, where she died in 1937. Politics became an interest of her later years. An ardent Democrat, she was president of the Lebanon County League of Democratic Women. In 1928, aged seventy-nine, she traveled throughout Pennsylvania making stump speeches for Al Smith.