
CULINARY LANDMARKS

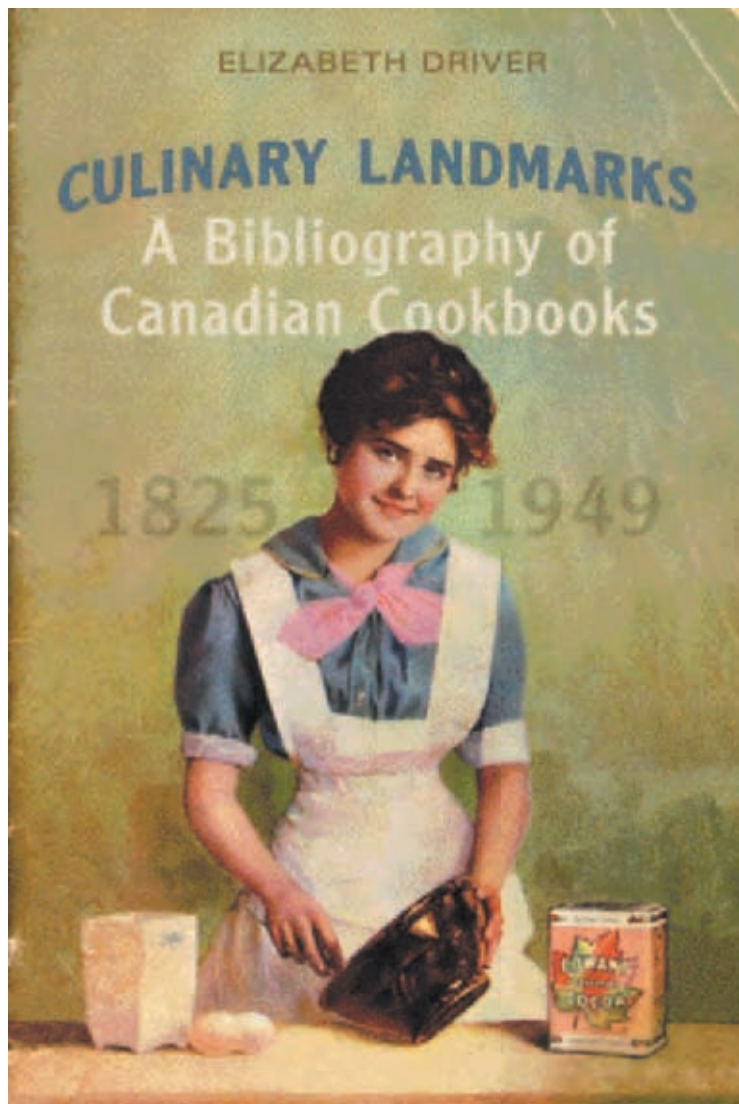
DELVING BETWEEN THE COVERS OF CANADA'S CULINARY CULTURE

BY LEA ZELTSERMAN

In a world where slow needs a movement and a publicity campaign (read *Slow Food, Slow Travel*), Elizabeth Driver seems made for times long gone: She spends much of her time rooted in the past, sifting through culinary histories long forgotten. An independent scholar and past president of the Culinary Historians of Ontario, Driver spent over ten years probing the ins and outs of our national stomach in libraries, archives and dusty attics across the country. She is probably our foremost expert on Canadian culinary history.

We are not generally a nation prone to probing our culinary roots. We don't have our own *Larousse* or *Silver Spoon*, and *The Joy* technically belongs to the Americans. Cookbooks, however, have much to say for themselves. They are, according to Driver, "meant for daily reference in the kitchen, where they are subjected to the dangers of water, fire and spills. The spots and annotations on the most-used pages are tangible and poignant links with the past user of the book, whether a mother or grandmother or someone whose identity is now lost but with whom one can still share the common bond of cooking and eating the same dish made from the same recipe."

From recipes attributed to suffragette Nelly McClung to the first official nod at our multicultural heritage with a "Foreign Recipes" chapter listing Italian and Ukrainian foods (in 1940s Saskatchewan), Driver brings them together in the first definitive guide to Canadian cookbook history, *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949*, due out in April and containing over 2,200 listings alongside descriptions, biographies, corporate histories and an overview of trends and changes in our culinary landscape. To fully



appreciate the undertaking, consider that Canada has no central archive for cookbooks: The National Library of Canada was only opened in 1967.

This is no light afternoon reading with a cup of hot cocoa. *Culinary Landmarks* is best suited to occasional dips and nibbles – a few facts about Nova Scotia cookbooks in 1888 here, a bit of Alberta fifty years later there. The one-thousand-page book is divided into sections by province or territory; each chapter includes an introduction outlining regional history and trends. Entries are chronological and include full bibliographical details of all editions, along with author biographies and corporate histories of the food producers and kitchen manufacturers that were behind so many cookbooks.

From an academic point of view, the level of precision and detail is staggering. Each edition of a book was examined (wherever possible) and, as Driver outlines in her introduction, she transcribed everything – from the title page, dimensions and types of binding to listing cita-

tions in other bibliographies and even referencing the existence and locations of microfilm copies.

For the casual reader, the joy is in the surprises wherever the page falls open: an entry for Quebec in 1943 calling upon wartime "housoldiers" to serve the nation; the discovery, in the introduction for Ontario, that in 1877 Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children published (just two years after its founding) Canada's first community cookbook and the best-selling Canadian cookbook of the century, called quite simply, *The Home Cook Book* (the recipe for carrot pudding, provided by hospital founder Elizabeth McMaster, quickly became a Christmas staple in English Canada).



Liz Driver, in the kitchen at Spadina Historic House and Gardens in Toronto

Tying it all together is Driver's unique ability to, as she describes it, "go in all places" with her material, linking all this historical trivia to larger social and economic trends that have shaped Canada. "[A] good bibliography... can be used as a sort of prism through which to perceive, with a fresh illumination, many matters other than the publishing history of the books," writes Alan Davidson in the foreword to *Culinary Landmarks*.

Driver can rattle off details about tongue-in-cheek cookbooks by men, the date margarine was legalized in Canada, and our enduring love affair with regionalism and local eating. Other, more telling markers of shifts in our social, economic, and industrial climate, also reveal themselves: the closure of the Canadian Home Economics Association and the dropping of home economics courses in our schools; the disappearance of regional call centres for major food companies, which encouraged consumers to call in to learn about how to best serve a company's products; or the sweep of dominant English culture (and foods) across the country, eventually pushed aside by the cultures and foods of the fringe. It is telling that before 1950, most cookbooks were published by women's groups, food companies and kitchen equipment manufacturers. Unlike today's oversized and lavishly illustrated tomes, most books were under a hundred pages and simply made of paper stapled together.

With the growing interest in food culture, *Culinary Landmarks* could not have come at a better time. Just five years ago, the book would likely have been of interest only to academics. But today, the bigger picture of Canadian history that emerges from its pages will capture the interest of a population endlessly fascinated by what the contents of its stomach reveal.

This is ultimately a labour of love. Driver's dedication to uncovering lost and forgotten pieces of Canadian history is admirable – and

remarkable. *Culinary Landmarks* is sure to find its way to both reference shelves and kitchens, where it will one day be as food-stained and well-worn as the books it brings to light. □

Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949, by Elizabeth Driver. University of Toronto Press, March 2008.

Lea Zeltserman is a freelance writer in Toronto who lives for books and food. Her work has previously appeared in The Walrus, Eye Weekly and Shameless.

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