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Recovering a forgotten Australian cookery teacher and food writer: Wivine de Stoop

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the career of an important, but largely forgotten, Australian food writer, Wivine de Stoop. A well-known advocate of Continental and especially French cookery in Melbourne, Belgian-born de Stoop ran influential cookery classes from 1960 until to at least the 1980s and wrote a popular cookery book. Active in Australia when post-war European migrants are acknowledged to have brought their foodways to Australia, de Stoop's work and its reception casts light on how our now everyday Australian food habits were popularised through both the popular media of cookery books and hands-on-training in suburban kitchens offered by these migrants, as well as via the more popularly accepted ways of restaurant and café menus.

KEYWORDS

Food writing
Creative writing
Wivine de Stoop
*The Pleasure Of
The Table*

INTRODUCTION

Asserting the value of female experience, important research in the 1970s and 1980s documented and therein 'reclaimed' forgotten women's lives. This paper continues foundational biographical work on 20th century Australian women food writers that is currently being conducted by a number of scholars in Writing and Publishing Studies, Food Studies and Australian History. Logging and assessing the contribution these women made to popular and culinary culture reveals that many also worked in associate areas of the food industry, including as recipe developers and/or testers, food stylists, illustrators, photographers, editors, and publishers. They also directly influenced home cooking as both demonstrators of food and other culinary products, and as cookery teachers.

Jillian Adams' recent research reveals that (at least some) women in post-war Australia found satisfaction and a creative outlet in cookery (see, for example, 2014). Following the Second World War, cookery demonstrations and cookery schools played a significant role in

this aspect of women's domestic lives, not only reflecting this interest, but supporting and encouraging it (see, Adams 2013). In the decades following the mid-century, women such as Maria Koszlik Donovan, Greta Anna, and Beverley Sutherland Smith taught thousands of (mostly women) students in Melbourne and Sydney, also embracing other facets of a gastronomical approach, including the appreciation of Australian wine. This paper outlines the biography of one such influential figure, Wivine de Stoop.

WIVINE DE STOOP

Born in French-speaking Belgium, the youngest of 17 children, Wivine was raised on one of the most prosperous farms in that country. De Stoop was, she stated, 'taught from an early age regional and classical French cuisine and its correct presentation' (de Stoop 1981: back flyleaf), adding in an interview in 1981 that 'Mother was a good cook and we had a lot of help, too. But mother thought we should know everything in the household. So we girls had to cook, iron, clean' (qtd. in Welsh 1981: 17). After marrying Roger de Stoop when she was about twenty years of age, she moved to the small West Flemish town of Kortrijk (Courtrai) some 75 kilometres west of Brussels, and the location of the leading textile company his grandfather had established (de Vries 2007).

Perhaps as a response to the effects of the war, and looking to develop the family business, the company made the decision to expand to Australia in 1950. Articles in a number of Australian newspapers late that year detailed the extent of the de Stoop company's wealth (the significant sum of £350,000) and, in his role of managing director, Roger de Stoop's plans to build a factory in the Melbourne outer suburb of Box Hill, where the company had purchased 50 acres of land. Wivine de Stoop was later to reflect that they 'decided that it would be best for the whole family to move to this country and settle permanently' (1981: 14) and, in 1952, the couple and their five young children then aged between 11 and 2 years, immigrated to Australia. They also brought their domestic help with them, which de Stoop wrote that she felt, 'was essential to help me settle in a new faraway country and look after my large family' (1981: 14). Twenty weavers and their families (some 100 people in total) also travelled from Belgium to staff her husband's business venture (The Advocate 1950; Sunday Times 1950).

Soon after their arrival, the family moved into a large home set in an extensive acreage of gardens and bushland in the leafy outer Melbourne suburb of Blackburn, some seventeen kilometres east of the city, near Box Hill. *Middlefield House*, designed by the de Stoops while

still in Belgium (Dexter 1968: 18), featured a dramatic colour scheme of black horizontal boards with features – doors, windows and shutters – painted vivid white. The interior was noted to be a mixture of ‘all modern conveniences’ but furnished ‘with the charm of the past’ (Anon 1961: 7). Surrounded by orchards, this property became a place where artists and cultivated members of Melbourne society gathered (see, Ansel 1954–1960). The de Stoops were, indeed, described as belonging to a ‘select group of distinguished and cultured European migrants who arrived in this country shortly before or after World War II’ that included architect Fred Romberg and art dealer Georges Mora (Jones 2000).

Although she had no economic necessity to work, de Stoop felt she needed an occupation ‘to keep my mind off nostalgic memories’ (de Stoop 1981: 14). Later she recounted how her early years in Australia were lonely, but she then met ‘the person who first encouraged me to share my knowledge and experience in cookery by giving cookery classes’ (de Stoop 1981: 14): Hungarian immigrant Maria Kozslik Donovan. Crediting Kozslik Donovan (whose surname she hyphenates as Kozslik-Donovan) with starting the first Continental cookery classes in Melbourne, de Stoop describes how they became good friends and how, when the Donovans were readying to leave for overseas – Patrick Donovan joined the Diplomatic Service and the couple never returned to Australia to live (Brien 2014) – her friend suggested that de Stoop ‘take over’ (de Stoop 1981: 14) and begin her own cookery classes (de Stoop qtd. in Welsh 1981: 17). De Stoop agreed, reportedly thinking it would be a way of making new friends (Gibson 1998: 5).

In February 1961, in her column in *The Age*, ‘Epicure’s Corner: Continental Recipes by Maria Kozslik’, Kozslik Donovan wrote that that week’s recipe for Homard a la Morsque (Lobster Moorish Style) was one served by her friend, who she named, in the old fashioned manner, ‘Mrs. R. de Stoop’ (1961: 11). This luxury dish poaches the lobster in a *court boullion* made with dry white wine and fresh herbs, then sautéed the meat in butter, before finishing with a cream sauce flavoured with truffles and paprika (Kozslik 1961: 11), indicating the rich, traditional European food de Stoop favoured for special occasions.

At this time, the area was developing around the de Stoop’s property, with the orchards being sub-divided for housing estates (Coney 2008). So much so that the Blackburn and District Tree Preservation Society was founded in 1959 to champion the preservation of remnant natural flora in the face of suburban expansion (Sydenham 1990; Coney 2008). In 1961, *Middlefield House* was still, however, set on the 50-acre property that included the factory (Anon 1961: 7) and, from the front terrace, ‘the setting is still very much the country,

as thickly growing gum trees and wattles screen encroaching suburbia' (Anon 1961: 7). By this time, the grounds had been developed to include extensive vegetable gardens and their own orchard.

Kozslik Donovan assisted de Stoop to place a small announcement in *The Age* and, the following month, in August 1961, de Stoop held the first of her traditional French cookery demonstration classes (Anon 1961: 7). She originally gave five lessons a week at the cost of six guineas (£6 6s) for a six lesson course, a not insubstantial sum when the basic weekly wage for female workers in Melbourne was £10 15s (in July 1961) (ABS 1962: 447). At this time, an article in *The Age* noted that, despite still having their cook who had come to Australia with the family from Belgium, cookery was 'one of Mrs. De Stoop's favourite hobbies [and] ... Mrs. de Stoop likes to do a lot of the cooking herself on special occasions' (Anon 1961: 7). Although it was noted that she collected recipes from a number of countries, her preference for French cooking was firm, for she felt 'no other country's cooking can equal the French for flavor' (Anon 1961: 7) and her preference was for presenting her food in the formal French manner, 'in a beautiful setting of fine linen and cutlery' (Anon 1961: 7).

Women journalists and/or their editors were clearly interested in these classes, with articles regularly appearing in Melbourne newspaper profiling them and de Stoop in her role of demonstrating instructress. An article in 1968 described how rows of chairs were drawn up in her attractive kitchen, which had cream-tiled walls, stained pine cupboards and a red tiled floor, as well as a combustion stove with copper hood. Tumblers of fresh herbs scented the air. There were, journalists noted, few elaborate cooking implements, instead she used 'plain aluminum saucepans, wooden rolling pin, wooden chopping block, all well worn' (Dexter 1968: 18). Each class, the menu was chalked on a blackboard and comprised an entrée, main course, vegetable and dessert (Dexter 1968: 18), always classic, although simple, French dishes (Welsh 1981: 17). Classes began promptly at 10.30am. De Stoop would read out lists of ingredients, then, apron-less, begin to demonstrate the dishes in the order in which they needed to be prepared in order to cook, rest and/or cool in the two hours before lunch (Dexter 1968: 18). Dishes included 'a proper mayonnaise or a creamy Bernaise sauce ... a delicate duck a l'orange or blanquette de veau (veal stew)' (Gibson 1998: 5). De Stoop was described as 'brisk and charming', but there was 'little small talk' because de Stoop found this 'friendly, but distracting' (Dexter 1968: 18). De Stoop described these as 'traditional, family recipes many from my mother's and grandmother's recipe books ... not ... intricate cookery at all' (qtd. in Welsh 1981: 17), and ensured she included information about 'substitute

ingredients, short cuts and proper methods' (Erich 1981: 18), for the elucidation of her students.

After the demonstration, everyone would then move into the spacious, traditional dining room, which was dominated by two sets of floor-to-ceiling hand-carved double doors, providing a view over the acreage. The main table would be set for 12 'with fine silver and china and with a flower centerpiece' (Dexter 1968: 18) on a beautiful, hand embroidered cloth, while a smaller table would be similarly laid for the overflow. Gibson described this as the best way to 'present a meal: framed on a clean white tablecloth with the right cutlery and glasses' (1998: 5). The dishes de Stoop prepared were then served for lunch with matching wines to the students by de Stoop's household staff. This provided an opportunity for de Stoop to model presentation and serving suggestions, as well as offer advice on alternative linen, crockery and cutlery choices (Smith 1981: 8).

Writing of these classes in 1968, a journalist stated that 'Learning to cook, and to appreciate good food and wine are the "in" hobbies of the sixties', adding that 'Every day, every week, all over Melbourne, women – and in many cases, men – gather to watch, listen, taste and learn, and then go home to test their own efforts on the family' (Dexter 1968: 18). At that time, de Stoop's students were noted to be largely from the professional classes (Dexter 1968: 18). These students then had the choice of five different programs, stepped in difficulty. Each program consisted of six lessons and cost \$20 (over \$300 today) (RBA 2015). De Stoop, however, had enough dishes in her educational repertoire that the same menus were only repeated every three to five years (Dexter 1968: 18), and many students not only undertook all five levels of programs, but also sometimes repeated them, and de Stoop was so successful that places in her classes were booked out for 18 months in advance (Dexter 1968: 18). At the peak of her enterprise, de Stoop ran a class each weekday, most weeks of the year, tutoring some 80 people each week (Gibson 1998: 5). In 1981, de Stoop estimated some 6,000 to 7,000 students had attended her classes (Welsh 1981: 17).

THE PLEASURE OF THE TABLE

After almost two decades of teaching, de Stoop compiled a book of her recipes, *The Pleasure of the Table: The Cooking Artistry of Wivine de Stoop* (1981). This was edited by 'second generation de Stoop student' (Welsh 1981: 17) and cookbook author Penny Smith, who wrote a biographically-focused foreword for the book. The hardcover volume was a deluxe production produced by prominent publishers Macmillan, featuring gorgeous images of

Middlefield House's interiors and gardens by artist Donald Green and photographer Mark Strizic. Taking her title, and opening dedication, from Brillat-Savarin's statement – '*The Pleasure of the Table* belongs to all ages and conditions, to every country and to every day. It may be linked with all other pleasures and remains as the last of all to console us for the loss of the rest' (qtd. in de Stoop 1981: 5) – de Stoop reveals both her approach to the culinary arts and her continued longing for Europe.

De Stoop stated that she felt her book was 'a reflection of the success of my class' (Welsh 1981: 17) but, although principally an instructional volume of the recipes she demonstrated in those classes, the volume also reveals much about its author. Aside from the lengthy introduction, which outlines de Stoop's early life, her relocation to Australia, and the establishment of her cookery classes, some of the recipes also include introductory texts. While these mostly focus on specific ingredients and how to prepare and serve them, these brief narratives also contain such information as that she returned to her childhood home regularly and had visited a wide range of European locations around Belgium and in France including Brittany, Normandy, the seaside towns of the Cote d'Azur, and the wine regions of Burgundy, as well as touring Italy.

De Stoop and her husband took an active role in promoting the book. In Melbourne, the book had two launches – one for the press at *Middlefield House* and a larger reception at an up-market antique showroom in a suburb closer to the city. De Stoop prepared the catering for these functions, which featured recipes from the cookbook (Welsh 1981: 17). In Sydney, the publishers hosted a luncheon at popular French restaurant, *Claudes*, in affluent Woollahra, which was then owned and run by Damien Pignolet de Fresne – a chef held in high esteem by de Stoop (Hogan 1981: 27) – and Josephine Carroll. The menu chosen for this meal again relied on recipes from the book – scrambled eggs with truffles, chicken with lemon and endive, a watercress salad, and chocolate timbales – selected by the author (Evans 1981: 117). Two editions of the book exist, with a paperback edition reissued by Sun Books in 1984. This had the same number of pages, but a slightly different (and more vibrant) cover image. At the time of its launch, de Stoop stated that she always felt her book was 'her first and last' (Welsh 1981: 17).

The book was well received, with prominent restaurant critic Rita Erlich describing it as 'handsomely produced' (1981: 18). In her review, Erlich described the recipes as others had described the menus for de Stoop's classes: 'good straightforward French cooking with a healthy respect for ingredients and considerable care in their presentation' (18). Erlich also

wrote of her many friends who had attended de Stoop's cooking classes and served her the meals they had learned to make – and recalled 'asparagus soup ... mushrooms à la grecque ... onions Monaco style ... quiche Lorraine ... [and] duck with cherry sauce', adding that 'when that friend went to the classes, quiches were unknown, and I think it was the first time I ate one' (18). At this time, although acknowledged as being Belgian, de Stoop was described as 'everyone's idea of the typical French woman – petite, gentle, charming, gracious, immaculately groomed, and after nearly 30 years of living in Australia, retaining a delightful French accent' (Welsh 1981: 17).

AN AUSTRALIAN CULINARY 'LEGEND'

The year before the book was published, 1980, the de Stoops moved to the well-to-do inner city bayside suburb of Toorak, where she continued teaching. The twenty-first year of her classes was marked with a long article in *The Age* newspaper (Welsh 1981). By this time, although she had cut back her lessons to twice a week (Welsh 1981: 17), de Stoop maintained the same model of demonstration followed by a shared meal but, by then, her husband (presumably retired) served the wines, which he would discuss with the students (Welsh 1981: 17). On reflection, de Stoop attested to the strength of this demonstration-style of cookery class, and how she now saw the book and demonstrations as working together: 'People like to see you doing things and then they go home and do it straight away. It is very different to see a demonstration than read a recipe. I can point out very important details that are not in the book' (Welsh 1981: 17).

De Stoop continued to be well respected in food and wine circles in Melbourne and, in 1998, was honoured as an Australian culinary 'legend' at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. In an interview with the festival's director, de Stoop was described as urging a return to a more classic simplicity in cookery: 'While she is pleased Australians have reached maturity in their appreciation of food, she believes some restaurants have become over-zealous in their bid to create new and more exotic tastes' (Gibson 1998: 5).

In 1981, when her book was released, de Stoop mused, 'I will teach till I die, I suppose' (qtd. in Welsh 1981: 17), but few traces of her life or work remain in the public record after that 1998 Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. An exception is when, in 2007, Melbourne socialite Lillian Frank wrote in her newspaper column that she had met de Stoop at that year's festival and, although describing her as 'looking very chic in black and white Chanel' (n.p.), used the past tense to describe de Stoop's considerable influence. Frank stated that de

Stoop had had ‘a huge influence on the way we entertain at home’ and described how the ‘social set sent their daughters to her from all over Australia to learn not just culinary skills, but how to be the perfect hostess. In some instances she has educated the grandmothers, mothers and daughters of some Toorak families’ (2007: n.p.). Frank added that de Stoop’s fame also had an extensive range in geographical terms, ‘So famous did she become that even mothers in the UK sent their daughters to Madame’ (Frank 2007: n.p.). This echoes how, in 1981, Welsh described de Stoop as ‘the undisputed doyenne of Melbourne cookery teachers’ (17).

CONCLUSION

De Stoop’s career reveals interesting, and often unrecognised, information about the role of French cookery in the development of Australian foodways and palates during the decades she taught her cookery classes. De Stoop was aware of these developments and, at various times when she was interviewed, noted the changes she observed. In 1981, for instance, she commented that, compared to when she arrived in Australia in the early 1950s, ‘more people are interested in fine food and wine’ but that there was still room for improvement as, for example, in how she thought people consumed too much frozen meat and vegetables, when ‘they should [instead] buy ... and eat them fresh’ (Welsh 1981: 17). Over 25 years later, in 2007, de Stoop proudly reflected that, she had influenced her students’ attitudes to meal preparation: ‘When I started, things were very different ... Food was just meat and three veg. I introduced my pupils to French food and wine and taught them how to make a soufflé’ (qtd. in Frank 2007: n.p.). Her career also provides suggestive glimpses of the roles some post-war migrant women played in Australian cities, the importance of culinary education through demonstration at that time, and how women could run small businesses from their homes. It also reveals how womens’ careers could be supported by a network of other women including friends, students, professional colleagues, and journalists. The above biographical profile opens up a discussion about these factors, and points to the ongoing research necessary to uncover the career paths followed by, and the legacies of, such influential educators and writers as Wivine de Stoop.

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