

Tapioca Pudding—Food's Interconnections

Heather M. Gillis et J. Estelle Reddin

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1990

L'alimentation
Foodways

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081659ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081659ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Gillis, H. M. & Reddin, J. (1990). Tapioca Pudding—Food's Interconnections. *Ethnologies*, 12(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081659ar>

Tapioca Pudding—Food's Interconnections*

Heather M. GILLIS & J. Estelle REDDIN

Yet knowing how way leads onto way
Robert Frost, "The Way Not Taken"

Storytelling, singing, and dancing have long been considered folkways worthy of scholarly study. Cooking, another aspect of folk-life, has received a good deal less attention. Just as the folklorist hears the stories told, the songs sung and sees the dances danced, to understand foodways he or she needs to cook and taste the food.

Historical studies of food such as Tannahill's ". . . survey of the forces which have shaped man's diet throughout the course of 30,000 years"¹ and the work of such authors as Drummond and Wilbraham,² Cummings,³ and Root⁴ have given formal knowledge of food and foodways. Agriculturists, geographers, statisticians, and sociologists, among others, have added to our knowledge of various aspects of food on the broad scale, while nutritionists and health educators are interested in factors influencing food behaviour.

*This article is based upon a paper read at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada Annual Meeting, Quebec City, Quebec, May 1989. The authors would like to thank Isabell Brynes and Helen MacDonald, both of Charlottetown, for permission to use taped interviews.

1. Reay Tannahill, *Food In History*, New York, Stein and Day, 1973, p. 7.
2. J.C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet*, London, 1964.
3. Richard Osborn Cummings, *The American and His Food; A History of Food Habits in the United States*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1940.
4. Waverley Root, *Food*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Pierre Bourdieu, in an ethnographic and sociological analysis and interpretation of French survey data touching on all topics in any way related to the cultivation and expression of "taste," includes foodways as an important aspect of what he terms "the habitus."⁵ The recent investigation of the role of "scientific cookery" and cooking schools, such as The Boston Cooking School around the turn of the century, has added to our knowledge of foodways and women's culture of that era.⁶ The massive changes in food technology from the beginning of this century and their effects on foodways is a study in itself. Through a content analysis of food advertisements in a women's magazine, Barr has shown an overall decrease in the advertising of separate food ingredients, indicating a move towards the purchase of prepared "convenience" foods between 1928 and 1986.⁷

Yoder has called to our attention the endless interconnections of food and its central role in the maintenance of culture.⁸ Truly the patterns of our foodways are changing. It is well, given their central position in the culture, to step back and assess the way we have taken. Cooking as an aspect of folklife is most appropriately studied from within the household, from the perspective of the participant in the folk culture. In this essay we consider the foodways of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, in the 1920s.

To examine foodways in their interconnected central position we use a human ecosystem approach rather than a linear cause/effect model.⁹ The basic assumption is that food as an essential

-
5. Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 170 states: "It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste) that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted."
 6. See for example Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1986. Unfortunately Shapiro's work is somewhat marred by its ethnocentricity in applying today's values and perceptions to an earlier time.
 7. Susan I. Barr, "Nutrition in Food Advertising: Content of a Canadian Women's Magazine, 1928-1986," *Journal of Nutrition Education* 21 (1989) 64-72.
 8. Don Yoder, "Folk Cookery," in Richard M. Dorson, ed. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 325.
 9. For description of this approach see M.M. Bubolz, J.B. Eicher, M.S. Sontag, "The human ecosystem: A model," *Journal of Home Economics* 71 (1979) 28-31; Nancy C. Hook, and B. Paolucci, "The family as an ecosystem," *Journal of Home Economics* 62 (1970) 315-318; and R.E. Deacon and F.M. Firebaugh, *Family Resource Management*, 2nd ed. Boston, Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1988.

resource is interrelated to all other life components, such as work and play, human relations within the family and in the wider social milieu, the availability of material and human resources, and worldview or one's general perspective on life. We see foodways as built up over the years by individuals operating in a household environment within and interacting with the larger social and natural environment. Our vantage point for their study is the kitchen, for as Black has said, "It is less than obvious that an understanding of society is more easily generated in the isolation of the study than in the dense social interaction of the kitchen."¹⁰ Rather than following Bourdieu's class-based analysis, using the perspective of the sociologist "in his study," we look out from the kitchen, and take Patricia J. Thompson's stance in regarding the world as made up of two domains. One of these is the realm of everyday necessities — food, clothing, shelter — centered on the household hearth. This domain Thompson describes as Hestian from Hestia, the ancient Greek goddess of the hearth. The other is the public world of economics and politics which she designates as Hermean, from Hermes, god of communication and the market place.¹¹ (Fig. 1) Bourdieu's description of foodways as determined by social class, although to some extent true, misses their Hestian characteristics. L.M. Montgomery on the other hand, in her many novels of girlhood and young womanhood, captures these extremely well.¹² She portrays the pleasures of gathering, cooking, serving and eating good food, whereas Bourdieu would designate these as merely the "virtue of necessity."¹³

This paper is derived from a student project, by the junior of the authors, in a course in Foods and Foodways of Atlantic Canada. The methodology is based on the use of personal interviews, life stories, and specific recipes freely shared. In this interview concerning one family's life and the foods and foodways of Charlottetown in the 1920s, Tapioca Pudding plays a central role.

-
10. Naomi Black, "Feminist Perspective on Social Science," in Winnifred Tomm and Gordon Hamilton, eds., *Gender Bias in Scholarship: The Pervasive Prejudice*, Waterloo, Ont., Sir Wilfred Laurier Press, 1988, pp. 167-189.
 11. For a full explication of her argument see Patricia J. Thompson, *Home Economics and Feminism: The Hestian Synthesis*, Charlottetown, Home Economics Publishing Collective, UPEI, 1988.
 12. Especially, L. M. Montgomery, *Jane of Lantern Hill*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1937.
 13. Bourdieu, p.371, states his fundamental proposition that the habitus is a virtue made of necessity.

It is Saturday, August 7, 1920. Lucy Ferguson works busily in the modern kitchen of her employers on Euston Street. She hears the chirping voices of four girls entering the rear porch. They have just arrived home from the Celebration Fair in Victoria Park in honour of the Great War Veterans. They chatter excitedly about the midway rides, amusements, and the triumphal band concerts that they had experienced that afternoon.

The smallest girl, who is Lucy's own daughter, is Isabell. A mere seven years old, she has spent the morning helping her mother iron sheets and other linen, all in anticipation of the afternoon she would spend with her mother's employer's three daughters at the fair.

Now, as they return, Lucy is setting the table for their typical Saturday evening supper. In the dining room she sets only two places, for the gentleman and lady of the house like to share their own company on this day. Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, another table is set for the four girls and herself.

Saturday is the only day that Isabell is with her mother at work. The rest of the week she is home with her grandmother on Park Street. All week, Isabell anxiously awaits this day when she can play with the "city girls." They give her the clothes they've grown out of and let her play with their toys. They, too, loved the day when Isabell would come over. Most of all they loved mealtime, when they could eat in the kitchen, still in their playclothes. And the climax — Isabell's mother sets a large bowl of heavenly tapioca in the middle of the table! The children eat contentedly. After supper Isabell and Lucy walk home, a distance of well over a mile, exhausted but happy.

Today, 67 years later, as she gives me her recipe for Tapioca Pudding, Isabell reminisces about days gone by from her home on Belmont Street just around the corner from the house on Park Street where she was born and raised.

Recipes freely shared and life stories freely recited form the subject matter for analysis to help us link the food and the cook, just as we link the song and the singer.

Margaret Mead, working with the National Research Council Committee for the Study of Food Habits, listed the many aspects to be investigated to give a complete picture of foodways. She included the technology of how food is acquired (including transportation) and stored; how prepared; which foods are consumed; who prepares; who eats, with whom, when and how; and in what quantity.¹⁴ Yoder has,

14. National Research Council Committee on Food Habits, *Manual for the Study of Food Habits*, NAS-NRC Pub. 111, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945.

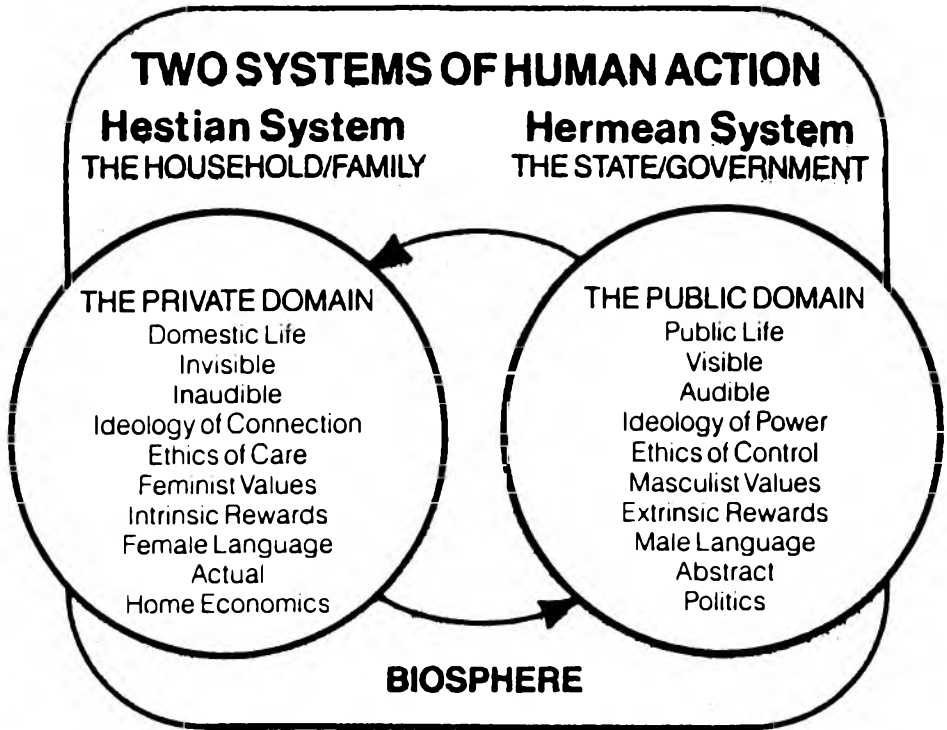


Figure 1

like Mead, emphasized the many dimensions of foodways and the central role of food in a culture. He lists the following six problems in the study of foodways of a particular ethnic group in North America, and suggests appropriate approaches: (1) determination of the dietary profile, (2) acculturation of ethnic cuisines, (3) diet of emigrant generations, (4) American influences, (5) reactions to changes in food technology, and (6) relation of urban to rural foods.¹⁵ These are some of the questions students attempt to answer through the methods of oral history and material culture study.¹⁶

15. Don Yoder, "Historical Sources for American Traditional Cookery: Examples from the Pennsylvania German Culture," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 20 (1971) 16-29. There was, perhaps, less differentiation between urban and rural in a small city like Charlotetown in the 20s than would be true in other cities and at a later time.
16. Y.S. Lincoln and E.C. Guba in *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, Inc., 1985, p. 268, describe the value of the unstructured interview to identify what the respondent considers relevant and of interest. In the present case the interviewer would not likely have chosen Tapioca Pudding as a food of special interest.

Prown, in an introductory paper on the theory and method of material culture study, states the basic concept that artifacts reflect the values of a culture. The response to the artifact at the time of its creation may differ from the response at a later time in a different society: nonetheless, the study of systems of belief through an analysis of artifacts offers opportunities to circumvent the investigator's own cultural perspective.¹⁷ Prown describes three steps to be taken in this analysis: first, description, recording the internal evidence of the object itself; second, deduction, interpreting, preferably through sensory evidence, the interaction between the object and the perceiver; and third, speculation, questions leading to external historical or other documentary evidence concerning the object.

Since food is perishable, it cannot be studied "as an artifact in its original creation" some seventy years after its preparation. However, recipes as recorded responses, preserved either orally or in written form, are accessible. Although recipes may be modified somewhat over the years, we are able to recreate the dish using, inasmuch as possible, ingredients and methods of the time of its creation. In the case of a 1920s recipe we have the benefit of the memory of our informant to help us reconstruct the original dish.

Further information from Isabell's interview gives us additional background on ethnicity, everyday diet, and the family's response to foodways of the day; additional information on the social environment of Charlottetown comes from another interview. Then we apply Prown's method of examination to a particular recipe and its reconstruction.

Isabell tells us that her mother, Lucy Ferguson, was married young to a Spaniard. Together they established a ranch in Colorado. When Lucy became pregnant, she grew lonesome for her mother

17. Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982) 1-16. Prown comments, "The evidence we study is the product of a particular cultural environment. We the interpreters are products of a different cultural environment. We are pervaded by the beliefs of our own social groups — nation, locality, class, religion, politics, occupation, gender, age, race ethnicity — beliefs in the form of assumptions that we make unconsciously. . .biases that we take for granted. . . Thus only a few patterns of cultural beliefs are accessible: those of the original fabricator and the modern perceiver. These may be expanded by any other society intervening in time or removed in space for which there are recorded responses." Prown notes that while "the fundamental attitude underlying the study of material culture is . . . a pervasive determinism, . . . in practice omniperception leading to omniscience is not a real possibility."

and Prince Edward Island. With her thoughts in Prince Edward Island, she told her husband that she was going home. He said that if she chose to return to Prince Edward Island she would never see him again. She did return home and one month later a daughter, Isabell Marie, was born. Neither mother nor daughter ever had sight of the father again. Lucy had no other children. Other than these bare facts, Lucy never spoke of her husband to Isabell.

Lucy's paternal grandparents were Scottish and English; her maternal grandparents were purely Scottish. In 1772 the ship *Alexander* arrived in Prince Edward Island carrying the first Scottish Catholic immigrants, 210 Highlanders including Lucy's forebears from the Isle of Uist and the Scottish mainland. They sailed up the East River and settled in a spot near the North shore which they named Scotchfort.

The generations between these first settlers and Clara MacRae and George Ferguson, Lucy's parents, are not known, but the two met in Tracadie, P.E.I., and were married in 1881. They lived in Charlottetown all of their married life, where Mr. Ferguson worked for the railroad. Their one child, Lucy, was born in 1893. Lucy's daughter Isabell was born 20 years later, just weeks before the death by accident of George Ferguson. Life in Charlottetown with no regular source of income was difficult for three generations of females living in that home on Park Street. As soon as baby Isabell was old enough, Lucy went to work as a housekeeper for one of the more affluent families in Charlottetown while grandmother Clara looked after the baby.

Lucy did her own grocery shopping along with her employers'. Items high on the food frequency list for this Scottish Canadian family included cabbage, oatmeal, hearty soups, preserves (such as jellies, jams and marmalades), potatoes, fish and organ meats. (Fig. 2) Isabell tells us that the foods her mother prepared at home were the same as at work. Lucy went regularly to the Farmers' Market both market days, Tuesdays and Fridays. Here she bought butter, eggs, milk, berries, dressed chickens, ducks and geese, along with anything special that might be considered a treat. Both Lucy and her employers regularly had a vegetable garden.

Lucy was accustomed to buying brand name products that, had she not worked for such a family, she probably would not have bought. These included the convenience foods of the time such as prepared ready-to-eat cereals, and "store-bought" bread. The treats and candies that Isabell remembers are also a reflection of the tastes of her "city girl" friends.

	Figure 2	Food Frequency
<i>Breakfasts</i>	<i>Main Dishes</i>	<i>Staples, Spices, etc.</i>
oatmeal	meat pies	salt
egg	roast chicken	pepper
scones	roast beef	butter
kelloggs corn	spare ribs	lard
flakes	pot roast	team
grapenuts	corned beef	eggs
fresh bread	meats in broth	milk
marmalade	and stews	beaver flour
shredded wheat	hearty soups	yeast cakes
porridge	baked beans	ginger
omelets		garlic
souffles	<i>Fruits</i>	magic baking powder
hot cocoa	fruit jellies	wheat flour
<i>Meats</i>	preserves	heavy cream
bacon	marmalades	brown sugar
pork	fresh fruit in	molasses
rabbit	season	canned milk
beef	apples	<i>Candy, Treats</i>
heart	pears	butterscotch sticks
liver	crabapple	taffy
kidney	strawberries	ice cream (Hughes')
<i>Fish and Poultry</i>	blueberries	cream soda
plums	blackberries	ginger ale
dressed chicken	cranberries	
ducks	wrigley's gum	moirs chocolate
geese	<i>Breads</i>	kool-aid type drink
partridge	fresh wheat bread	chicklets
salmon	biscuits	bags of candy
trout	shortbreads	<i>Items bought at market</i>
cod	scones	<i>square</i>
clams	bannocks	butter
mussels	buns	eggs
haddock	oat muffins	milk
halibut	store bought bread	berries
<i>Vegetables</i>	<i>Desserts</i>	dressed chicken
cabbage	tapioca	ducks
canned peas	plum pudding	geese
fresh peas	bread pudding	<i>Typical Christmas Dinner</i>
turnips	oatmeal cookies	roast chicken
leeks	homebaked pies	dressing
onions	shortbread	mashed potatoes
parsnips	scotch cakes and	turnips
potatoes	cookies	steamed fruit pudding
carrots	steamed fruit	
beans	pudding	
beets	cakes	
	gingerbreads	

Charlottetown in the 1920s was a bustling small city and the centre of Island activity. For further understanding of this setting of Isabell's early life, we need to go beyond her story. It was an upbeat time — between two major wars with a serious depression in the offing, although not yet anticipated. Great technological changes were taking place — the railway, employer of Isabell's grandfather, had been around for barely two generations; automobiles were just arriving in Prince Edward Island. The silver fox industry was a generator of instant wealth and a handful of wealthy playboys. It was a matter of course for the more affluent families to have at least one domestic servant.

A vignette of the social life of the city at that time, with its emphasis on fun and sociability, and a description of another aspect of its foodways is illustrated in this conversation between the long-time Chairman (sic) of the Tea Committee of the Charlottetown Lawn Tennis Club and another former member:¹⁸

The Charlottetown Lawn Tennis Club's Saturday afternoon teas were famous. Membership for the "Ladies" cost \$8-10, for men about \$18 — a lot of money for those days. Men paid more, but the ladies had to serve on the Tea Committee for at least one tea a year. Four of them worked on each tea, sometimes more. Mrs. Pound came and made the tea and washed up the dishes.

We held open tennis tournaments — players came from all over Canada to play on our beautiful clay courts — so we had to be prepared to serve tea. This was a private club and helped teach young people the social graces. There were strict rules about dress: for women, no short shorts but white pleated skirts down to the knees and white blouses. Men wore cream flannels or whites, white cable sweaters, and jackets. There were 125 members and always a waiting list.

For the teas we had many benches to put around on the verandah of the clubhouse. Food was put out on a large table with a white linen tablecloth which the committee had to get done up at the laundry. The four hostesses did the serving. For making the tea and heating water we had a 3 burner oil [kerosene] stove; water had to be got from the well at Dead Man's Pond — there was an outside pump. There was no electricity then, so we closed down at dusk.

18. Excerpts from an audio tape recording of a conversation between Helen MacDonald and Lillian Duchemin, both of Charlottetown, PAPEI.

Here is the printed list of food for each committee member to bring: "100 sandwiches, 1 large cake, 5 doz. small cakes, 1 large loaf of fancy bread buttered or 5 doz. more small cakes, making a total of 10 doz. of two different kinds."

At the bottom it reads: "Afternoon tea is served from 4:30 to 6:30 and then, in very large print: Failure to serve tea will result in expulsion from the club." (Fig. 3)

As a 7-year-old, Isabell was not much concerned with questions of social class. Equally oblivious to its implications were these two former Tennis Club members. Although Tapioca Pudding is not in the Tennis Club list and not an appropriate food for afternoon tea, it does seem to fit the lifestyle represented by the Tea Committee. Because of its importance to Isabell it could be seen as a link between the two lifestyles.

The initial recipe followed to create the tapioca pudding is given in Fig. 4. In order to return it to its original state, as in 1920, special consideration must be taken in choosing the ingredients. The milk should be raw rather than pasteurized and homogenized. For this project both the milk and the eggs were donated by a local farmer hoping that these products would be close to those from 1920 cows and hens. The sugar was obtained from a Charlottetown natural foods store. Pearl tapioca and real, not artificial, vanilla were used.

The challenge of making appealing tapioca is cooking to the "just right" stage — long enough so that the pearls are clear and tender but not so long that the tapioca becomes extremely sticky. The trick, I discovered after several trials, is to cook the milk and presoaked tapioca pearls at a low rather than medium temperature as instructed in the recipe, and for a longer time (70 to 90 minutes). Isabell says that her mother cooked the pudding in the top of a double boiler. The beaten egg whites should be added as close to serving time as possible. Although the recipe calls for the pudding to be chilled, Isabell recalls that it was served still warm at meal time.

Now let us apply Prown's method of examination to this cultural artifact. As we examine the finished product, in our imaginations now, but at the time of the project through tasting, smelling, feeling, and seeing the actual pudding, we find a light fluffy product, not something robust and solid like mashed potatoes; it has a delicate sweet flavour; its principal visual characteristic is its whiteness.

Figure 3

The Charlottetown Lawn Tennis Club

Saturday Afternoon Teas

Each committee member to bring:

- 100 sandwiches
- 1 large cake
- 5 dozen small cakes
- 1 large loaf of fancy bread or
- 5 dozen small cakes, making a total of 10 dozen of two different kinds

Afternoon tea is served from 4:30 to 6:30

FAILURE TO SERVE TEA WILL RESULT IN EXCLUSION FROM THE CLUB

Figure 4

Tapioca Pudding

- 1 cup Pearl Tapioca
- 6 cups milk
- 1 1/3 cups sugar
- 4 eggs
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 tsp. vanilla

Put tapioca in small bowl. Add water to cover. Let soak overnight. Drain any water left in bowl.

Scald milk in top of double boiler. Add soaked tapioca and salt. Cover and cook over medium heat until tapioca is clear (45-60 minutes). Stir occasionally.

Mix egg yolks and sugar together. Add small amount of the hot mixture to the egg yolks. Stir yolks into tapioca. Cook for five minutes, remove from heat and cool slightly. Beat egg whites until stiff, gradually fold into tapioca. Add vanilla. Chill.

It is obvious from the first hand experience of preparing this dish that tapioca is a thickener, and in its 1920 form, a difficult one to handle. Experience also showed that preparing Tapioca Pudding then was a time-consuming task — 70 to 90 minute cooking period, after a lengthy soak. It belongs to an era when women were at home in the kitchen, or had domestic servants to do the cooking.

In her food list Isabell mentions several products by brand name. Food production and processing were moving out of the home. Some early convenience foods such as canned fruits and vegetables were becoming common. Most prominence however was given to the new forms of ingredients. Tapioca was one of those new ingredients. Teachers of the cooking schools were being enticed and co-opted (not unwillingly) by manufacturers¹⁹ to “sell” the housewife on the virtues of these wonderful new products. Examples of these brand name ingredients are common in food lists and cook books of the time. For example, *Mrs. Flynn’s Cookbook* published in Charlottetown in 1930²⁰ unselfconsciously promotes such products as “Baker’s Breakfast Cocoa,” “Swansdown Cake Flour,” and “Camp Coffee.”

The effects of technology are far-reaching. The newly arrived processed foods were thought to be more healthful and more desirable than foods consumed in a natural state, particularly since these new foods were presented in some kind of package rather than in bulk. These factors contributed to the prestige of store-bought foods that was reflected in Lucy’s food choices.

Another technological advancement was the processing and refining of foods such as sugar and flour. The Fergusons preferred white sugar and the new white flour to brown sugar and whole wheat flour, reminding us of the desirability of white. Mrs. Sarah Tyson Rorer, of the Philadelphia Cooking School (whose cookbook was published in 1901), we learn, had a special fondness for the all-white meal!²¹

However, Tapioca Pudding’s principal place in the foodways was not in the “Ladies Lunch,” but rather as a “Nursery Food.” Jane and Michael Stern tell of its relegation to the nursery and point up its advantages as a “comfort” food: smooth, sweet, and filling, “an edible security blanket.”²² The term “nursery food” seems a more appropriate designation for Isabell’s little friends, daughters of her mother’s affluent Charlottetown employer, than for Isabell herself. But for Isabell too Tapioca Pudding is a remembered food of childhood.

Over the years, Tapioca Pudding has come to hold an ambiguous role in our foodways. On the one hand, it is a comfort food. But on the other hand, it has also produced some most unpleasant food memories, as Edna Staebler points out: “Fish eyes and glue we used

19. For example, see Shapiro, pp. 214-216 and Tannahill, p. 323.

20. Katherine Lewis Flynn, *Mrs. Flynn’s Cookbook*, Charlottetown, 1930.

21. Shapiro, p. 84.

22. Jane and Michael Stern, *Square Meals*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984, p.182.

to call the half-cooked, large-grained, starchy tapioca without flavour that we were served every week in our residence at university. How I longed for the creamy pudding Mother used to make!"²³

Even the question of the status of Tapioca Pudding as food for the rich or food for the poor is now confused. It is not for us a basic food to depend on in times of hunger or need, and therefore may belong more to the economy of abundance. For Isabell it was a treat, something very desirable but only for special occasions such as these Saturday afternoons or birthdays. Over the years perhaps it has lost status: we were told that a local nursing home never serves Tapioca because the residents would be insulted as they consider it food for the poor! On the other hand the 1980 edition of *The Eastern Junior League Cook Book* lists a recipe for a Baked Peach Tapioca.²⁴

Tapioca Pudding was a relative late-comer to the foodways of the Maritime Provinces. It is not the type of dish one would prepare over an open fire; therefore it had to wait for the introduction of the cookstove.²⁵ Moreover it is not a food that could be stored in the pantry, like molasses or sugar cookies, or even the many varieties of pies early cooks specialized in. It required some form of refrigeration other than being kept in a bucket in the well.

Yet the origins of tapioca go back several centuries. When Columbus first reached the West Indies the Arawak Indians were eating cassava bread made from the root of the manioc or cassava. Over the next few centuries the indigenous technique of heating the poisonous root to dispel the poison and give an edible useful product was modified and produced pearl tapioca, a form which was accepted for use by European immigrants to North America.²⁶

Through the usual combination of imagination, ingenuity, and recipe exchange, tapioca found its way into many dishes in many spots throughout the world. In the early pioneer days some New England housewife added tapioca to her Indian Pudding: perhaps it improved

23. Edna Staebler, *Food That Really Schmecks*, Toronto, McGraw Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1968, p. 260.

24. Anne Seranne, ed., *The Eastern Junior League Cookbook*, New York, David McKay Co. Inc., 1980.

25. Tannahill, p.366-367, gives a brief history of the cooking range. She notes that electric stoves were not safe until about 1920. Iron cookstoves were available to the middle class around 1860; thereafter "sautes, sauces, and souffles" were possible, in addition to Tapioca Pudding.

26. Root, p.51.

the texture. However that may be we still find that recipe in cook-books today.²⁷

Then came the era of the great cooking schools, of which Fanny Farmer and the Boston Cooking School acquired most fame and no doubt had the greatest influence on the cookery of Atlantic Canada, *The Boston Cooking School Cookbook* being the one most frequently found alongside the hand-written or, in the oral tradition, supplementing the unwritten recipe collections of our grandmothers.²⁸ Towards the end of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th, migration to the "Boston States" was extremely common from the Maritime Provinces; and in our interviews covering the turn of the century we hear frequent reference to siblings and other relatives who "went to Boston." This connection provides a plausible explanation for the appearance of Tapioca Pudding in Charlottetown amongst other primarily British foods.

Tapioca did not halt its journey along the route of technology. Pearl tapioca gave way to Minute Tapioca, a brand name product, prepared by the same basic process, but giving a smaller-particled and quicker-cooking product than the pearls of Isabell's time. Long after Isabell's Saturday afternoon outings, food scientists discovered that tapioca had particularly useful properties in that it did not separate in frozen food products.²⁹ The end result of this long journey through time is that tapioca now is an endangered species as that creamy pudding mother used to make: it has gone underground as a disembodied thickening agent found only on a list of ingredients. Cassava products on the other hand are still a staple hunger-preventing food in certain Third World countries.³⁰

-
27. Duncan Hines, *Adventures in Good Cooking*, New York, Duncan Hines, 1947, "#471 Indian Tapioca Pudding;" and Mildred Trueman, *New Brunswick Heritage Cookbook*, Willowdale, Ont., Hounslow Press, 1986, p. 148 "Indian Meal Pudding." Without the cornmeal and the tapioca, the resulting product would be the equivalent of custard, of the British/French long-time cuisine, plus molasses (itself chiefly an American food and one of high folk significance).
 28. Tannahill, p. 369-372, gives a brief discussion of the rise of the cookbook in domestic cookery.
 29. A. D. Campbell, M. J. Penfield, R. M. Griswold, *The Experimental Study of Food*, 2nd ed., Boston, Houghton, Mifflin, 1979, p. 288.
 30. M. E. Lowenberg, E. N. Todhunter, E. D. Wilson, J. R. Savage, J. L. Lubawski, *Food & People*, 3rd ed., Toronto, Ontario, John Wiley & Sons, 1979, p. 334. Is there a reversal in the offing? Since presenting this paper, I have found a recipe in Restaurants and Institutions and discovered Uncle Ben's have a new convenience food "Rice Pudding."

This consideration of folk cookery has dealt with only one strand in a complex interwoven fabric. Even this example helps illustrate how the study of foodways can free us from the constraint of being locked into time and space. Through its many links to other times it provides a sense of continuity. Recipes handed down over generations extend the span of time within our comprehension. Our foods, although they have their idiosyncratic forms in family and ethnic variations, reach out world-wide. The differing meanings they convey in other times and other places can foster appreciation and thoughtfulness about our food supply.

Examining the way taken to arrive at the values of today's world expressed in our "taste" in foods, from regarding food as necessary for nourishment through the manufacture and promotion of convenience foods (supposedly to "free" the homemaker), to today's emphasis on food as pleasurable consumption in a leisure-time activity may encourage us to stop, take stock, and try new directions for our foodways in the future.

University of Prince Edward Island
Charlottetown, P.E.I.