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The cookbooks of Maria Kozslik Donovan

Abstract:

This paper discusses the cookbooks written by Australian food writer, Maria Kozslik Donovan. A prominent advocate of Continental and Asian cookery in Melbourne in the 1950s, Donovan wrote and illustrated a number of very popular cookery books. This article profiles her cookbooks – *Continental cookery in Australia* (1955); *Epicure's corner: world recipes* (1956); *The Far Eastern epicure* (1958); *The Blue Danube cookbook* (1967); and, *Astrology in the kitchen* (1971) – in the context of her international career as a food writer.

Biographical note:

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While today many Australian food writers are high profile celebrities, Australia has a long tradition of such authors who made a significant contribution to our culinary culture, but who are now largely forgotten. This paper outlines and discusses the extraordinarily successful career of one such writer, Maria Kozslik Donovan. A prominent advocate of Continental and Asian cookery in Melbourne in the 1950s, Donovan wrote and illustrated a number of very popular cookery books, which were published in Australia and overseas. She also went on to have a successful international career as a food writer in the 1960s and 1970s. As a wife, mother, columnist for *The Age*, cookery teacher, world traveller and bestselling author, Donovan's career trajectory not only reveals much about food writing at this time, but also challenges prevailing myths of the mid-twentieth century Australian career woman. At a time when post-war European migrants were bringing their foodways to Australia, Donovan's work and its reception also casts light on how our now everyday Australian food habits were popularised half a century ago through the mainstream media forms of newspapers, magazines and cookery books.

In considering Maria Kozslik Donovan's work and its impact, it is important to remember how much Australian food has changed over the past half century. At the beginning of the 1950s (although there were, of course, exceptions) dining out was a special occasion event, drinking wine with meals was unusual – and without even more rare – and the first espresso coffee machines were imported into Australian cities. While it has been widely recognised that restaurants and cafés have made a significant contribution to the internationalisation of Australian cuisine and today's wide embrace of cosmopolitan, multicultural eating habits in this country, the influence of food writing and publishing on what and how we eat has not been investigated in the same depth. Nor, has how food writing offered Australian women the opportunity to build viable and sustainable professional careers been probed.

The impact of an important food writer at this time, Margaret Fulton, has begun to be acknowledged (see, for example, Brien 2006, Gibbs et al. 2007). In 2007, after a more than 50-year long career as cookery writer and food editor for a series of the most popular Australian women's magazines and the author of a long series of influential cookbooks, food historian Barbara Santich, who worked with Fulton at *Woman's Day* in 1973, described Fulton as 'the acknowledged leader [and] style-setter' in her introduction of the then 'exotic cuisines of India, Italy, France, Scandinavia, South-East Asia and the Middle East' to Australian readers (2007: 34, 38). Similar claims have also been made for the food editor of *The Australian women's weekly* at this time, but Maria Kozslik Donovan is one of a number of other important food writers who made a significant contribution to Australian eating habits, but whose influence has been largely overlooked.

Maria Kozslik was born in Hungary, where she was educated before undertaking tertiary education at the University of Chicago where she met and married an Australian, Patrick Donovan, migrating to Sydney with him in 1950. After a brief stay there, they moved to Adelaide (taking Maria's mother, who by this time had joined them in Australia), where Patrick became a Reader in Law at Adelaide University, their first baby – Patrick Christopher, known as Paddy – was born, and Maria started writing about cookery. After

only a year in Adelaide, Patrick was appointed to the newly established Chair of Commercial Law at the University of Melbourne. Moving to Melbourne in January 1953, they purchased a large two-storey stone-faced historic home in Kew. The house had sweeping city views, and Maria was to write about it, and their time there, very warmly. In July 1954, the birth of their daughter – Christiane Daisy, known as Daisy – was reported in the social columns of a number of Melbourne newspapers.

Two months before this birth, on 28 May 1954, Maria began writing a weekly column for Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper. Titled 'Epicure's corner: Continental recipes with Maria Kozslik', this column was widely syndicated in regional newspapers around at least Victoria and in Tasmania. She composed over 350 of these columns for 7 years, until 26 May 1961. During this time, Maria also ran a successful cookery school, and was a popular department store cookery demonstrator in Melbourne.

Her first article was modestly sized, a third of what it grew to in the later 1950s. In terms of content, this first piece set in place what became her standard format for 'Epicure's corner': a general discussion of an aspect of everyday life in Melbourne, segueing to a European culinary tradition followed by a recipe or two. Her first article thus begins with a discussion of Melbourne's main fresh produce market, the Victoria Market. Donovan then compared this with French markets she had visited, sharing a vivid personal reminiscence of tasting bouillabaisse in France. She then gave the recipe for this traditional European dish, with some necessary substitutions for Australian preparation, but without any concessions to taste (Donovan 1954a: 7). Her piece the next week rehearses a theme that runs through the entire run of her articles; that European cookery takes standard ingredients and then economically turns them into flavourful dishes. Reflecting another of her recurring themes – how well wine and food go together – her recipe for Boeuf Bourguignon in this column urges readers to make use some 'excellent Australian red wine' for flavour alongside thyme, marjoram, garlic, stock and rendered bacon (Donovan 1954b: 7).

Unlike many of the other newspaper recipe columns of this time that featured a preponderance of sweet recipes, 'Epicure's corner' featured mostly savoury dishes accompanied by informative and entertaining tales of famous European chefs, restaurants and providores. In this, Kozslik Donovan profiles a wide range of European specialities as well as international slants on Australian favourites. Confessing, for instance, that she found barbecue 'an acquired taste', she came up with a column that featured Lamb Shasliks flavoured with garlic, onion, lemon and bay that were grilled on skewers with onion and bacon (Donovan 1955b: 7). She also regularly included Asian dishes. Even at Christmas – when most newspapers and magazines feature the most traditional of dishes – 'Epicure's corner' suggested new and interesting ideas, including chilled chicken and lobster dishes and Chinese sweet and sour pork and chicken with almonds.

Some of the desserts Kozslik Donovan included in 'Epicure's corner' were special, dinner party dishes, often accompanied with an interesting serve of historical background. This could be quite hard hitting such as when she described sweet nut pancakes served

with a chocolate sauce named in honour of a famous Bundapest restaurant which, she explained, was 'desecrated by German occupation ... When the defeated army retreated at last, they did not forget to take Gundel's famous silver and golden plates as souvenirs' (Donovan 1955a: 7). In other cases, her desserts were simple, elegant dishes such as *Fraises dans la Neige*, strawberries and cream cheese whipped with cream, caster sugar and vanilla, and then refrigerated or frozen (Donovan 1961a: 13).

Much more typical of 'Epicure's corner', however, were Kozslik Donovan's tasty savoury dishes. In August 1954, she dedicated four weeks of the column to the four courses of the prize-winning menu from the International Culinary Fair in Berne, Switzerland, which had been held earlier that month. Her series of Liver Dumpling Soup, Boiled Trout, Stuffed Breast of Veal and Cheese Pancakes were prefaced with the reassuring remark that 'none of these recipes requires the skill of a trained chef – they are middle class dishes and very simple to make' (Donovan 1954c: 7). She also presented simple savoury preserves such as a column describing how to preserve artichokes by bottling them in olive oil and white wine vinegar with garlic (Donovan 1960: 15).

In 1955, on the strength of her readership of this column, her first book *Continental cooking in Australia* was published. Like 'Epicure's corner' it mainly featured savory dishes, in an Australian culinary world where most cookbooks reflected the valorisation of cake, other baking and dessert cookery. The book was a great success, with a UK edition following in 1956, a reprint of the Australian edition later that year, and an expanded second edition in 1960. *Continental cooking in Australia* was well received, with many reviewers noting an approach that would not be out of place today, more than half a century later – that the recipes were designed for people who liked good food but had little time to spend on its preparation. Published, as all her later books and food writing, under the name of Maria Kozslik Donovan, she wrote in the introduction that she hoped her book would be a 'good down to earth companion to the Australian housewife' (1955: xiii), but her text also reveals much about the current state of food and cooking in Australia at that time. She had to tell readers, for instance, that spaghetti 'should never be broken into pieces', and deemed Italians 'devilishly clever' for being able to twist pasta around their forks 'in the proper way' (64). She also warned her readers to 'never, never, take the short-cut and serve pre-cooked and tinned spaghetti. Leave that for boy scout picnic and scout use' (65).

In 1956, Patrick won a Carnegie Fellowship to travel around the world for a year with his family, a record of which is available to readers through a book Kozslik Donovan wrote about their trip. This is a touching and humorous narrative which is told through using the narrative device of Paddy's third grade voice and which is titled, *It's a square world* (1959). At this time, she was clearly focused on her writing, setting off, as 'Paddy' tells us, with work to promote to agents and publishers:

There is an overnight bag for me, Paddy. Daisy has one too, but Mum stuffs hers full of manuscripts. You see, Mum wants to be a writer. She wrote these six novels and two

cookery books. All she needs now is to find somebody to print it and make it into books (1959: 2).

In New York, she met and successfully secured a prominent agent, Alex Jackinson, who secured the best international publishers for her food writing. There is no evidence that her novels were ever published.

In 1958, the first edition of what Kozslik Donovan called her 'favourite book' (Matheson 1978b: 13), *The Far Eastern epicure*, was published in both New York and London. This volume also attracted positive reviews, many of which judged it in line with the *Saturday review* reviewer who judged it a 'superb guide to good cooking for the fledgling or average housewife' and noted that the 'general food information is worth the price of the book' (De Voto 1959: 35). Most of the reviews also noted the charming line drawings with which Kozslik Donovan illustrated this and her other books. Fascinatingly, despite advances in photography and its increasing use in cookbooks, this volume was republished well into the 1980s with the same line drawings instead of being updated with photographs.

In 1961, the family moved to Italy where Patrick Donovan took up the role of counselor at the Australian Embassy in Rome, a post he held from 1961 to 1964. For some months, 'Epicures corner' still appeared in *The Age*. Kozslik Donovan's final column, printed on 26 May 1961, was for the most famous of Hungarian cakes, Dobos torte (Drum cake), a multi-layered sponge cake filled with a rich cream, topped with glazed caramelised sugar (Donovan 1961b: 11). The next week, she was replaced with a Dutch writer who presented simple dishes, most of them sweet (her first was an apple and breadcrumb pudding) and, in general, far less authentically Continental or gourmet than Kozslik Donovan's.

Her next book was *The Blue Danube cookbook*, published by Doubleday in New York in 1967. This volume concentrated on a wide selection of recipes from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Bulgaria and is still cited by cooks on social media today as a valuable culinary source. The family then moved to London where Kozslik Donovan wrote her most popular book, *Astrology in the kitchen*, which was published by Doubleday in New York in 1971, 1972 and 1974. It was very positively reviewed in *The New York times book review*.

In the 1970s, Kozslik Donovan also became a regular writer for US *Gourmet magazine*, the prominent food publication of this period. A number of her long feature and, sometimes cover, articles were published as part of the magazine's Gourmet Holidays section. Most of these articles featured European destinations, but there is also a beautiful series on South East Asia including on 'Enchanting Bali', which was published in October 1973, which suggests Kozslik Donovan had travelled at least this close to Australia at this time. All of these articles are a charming, interesting, readable and very contemporary mixture of general travel and food related information, including details of restaurants and their chefs, bakeries, markets and local food purveyors, as well as more modest establishments and their cooks.

In 1973, Kozslik Donovan and her husband, who was by this time a respected diplomat, relocated to Paris. Moving into the new Australian embassy with its view of the Eiffel Tower, an article in *The Australian women's weekly* in 1978 described her catering prowess and how she had, single handedly, taken over the embassy kitchens (Matheson 1978a). At this time, *The Far Eastern epicure*, which was first published in 1958, and then reprinted in 1961 and 1962, was republished again with new editions in 1978 and 1980, and Donovan continued to contribute articles and chapters to prominent food publications.

As further research continues to uncover the important works and lasting legacy of this significant food writer, her significant (but forgotten) publishing history also reminds readers and researchers of the other important, but forgotten cookery book authors and other food writers, whose history and legacy awaits recovery.

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