

Cooking with L.M. Montgomery

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A good cook will vary her menu; a good author will serve us a fresh and nourishing range of scenes, characters, and themes. L.M. Montgomery was both good cook and good writer, and in her stories we see a wonderful example of the way a real professional can shift ingredients into new forms effecting changes and surprises without any loss of wholesomeness or pleasure. Appropriately, one of her own staple narrative ingredients was the subject of cooking itself.

All readers who are fond of Anne of Green Gables will have suffered with vicarious embarrassment when her cake, made especially for Mr. and Mrs. Allan, turns out to have been flavoured (accidentally) with anodyne liniment rather than with vanilla. Anne eventually becomes an excellent cook, but cooking (not necessarily disastrous) continues to play a role in the subsequent novels devoted to her career: the tea for Mrs. Morgan in *Anne of Avonlea* (chs. xvi, xvii, xx), and Anne's first Christmas dinner in *Anne's house of dreams*, for example. Reflecting on Montgomery's ten other novels, one realizes that cooking is also from time to time a matter of importance in them. In *The story girl* and *The golden road*, much is made of the Story girl's attempts to learn to cook. And her many disasters. Sara Stanley (the Story Girl) is only partly comforted for her many failures when her cousin and teacher, Felicity, uses toothpowder to raise rusks for the Governor's wife and is eternally mortified as a result. (But the rusks did rise!) It is one of the marks of eleven-year-old Jane's maturity and level-headedness that she is prepared to take on summer housekeeping for her father at Lantern Hill, and that she takes it in her stride and becomes an excellent cook. There is a male cook, too, in *A tangled web*: Little Sam, whose excellent pea soup is renowned in the clan, but whose taste in *Objets d'art* makes for one of the entertaining subplots in that family chronicle.

Montgomery undoubtedly realized that stories having significant culinary details would appeal to readers young and old. From 1893 to 1910 she published at least sixteen stories in which cooking plays a major part, but none of them has been reprinted in the four collections of her short stories. By no means did Montgomery write up only bad experiences, however. As she did in her novels, Montgomery used the basic theme of cooking in many ways. Through a study of these short stories we gain insights not only into the diet of turn-of-the century Canadians, but also into social conventions, economic pressures,

family tensions, and pre-adolescent psychology. I propose here to summarize some of these “cooking” stories, but I have not discussed each one in detail. I have appended a chronological list of all I have discovered so far in which cooking has some importance.

Five stories that deal with mistakes in cooking also contain the idea of reward for recognition of worth. This may seem a contradiction, but Montgomery is skilled at saving the day for her cooks. Perhaps the most interesting is “A new-fashioned flavoring,” since it is the prototype for Anne’s misadventure. Ivy, aged fifteen, and her brother Edmund, sixteen, are caring for their six younger siblings in the absence of their mother. They long for music lessons and college respectively, but have given up their hopes since the recent death of their father has left the family badly provided for. Their estranged uncle arrives for a surprise visit, and Ivy, in spite of a bad cold, bakes a cake for tea. It is flavoured with liniment (kept in an old vanilla bottle), unnoticed by her because of her cold. (Anne had a cold, too.) However, the uncle, who has been greatly diverted by the four-year-old *enfant terrible* of the family, manfully eats his cake and says nothing. He writes later to say he is sending Ivy a violin and will pay for lessons, and will send Edmund to college. His reasoning is not explained, but presumably he was thinking of a reconciliation when he paid his visit in the first place.

A better motivated reward in spite of error is illustrated in “Dora’s gingerbread.” Ten-year-old Dora’s Aunt Anna promises her a trip to town if she is able to bake good gingerbread. Dora works hard and confidently, refusing to go off to play with her neighbour, Tommy. The gingerbread looks fine, but has been flavoured with mustard, not ginger. The trip is cancelled, and Dora overwhelmed with humiliation. The next day Dora discovers Tommy bewailing the fact that he has no cake to take to his class outing. She bakes him an especially delicious and attractive one and is surprised when he is rather taken aback by her gift. Ten minutes later he is marching up to Aunt Anna to confess that he switched the mustard for ginger through the kitchen window (he knew the mustard was in an old ginger can) to pay back Dora for not coming to play with him. Now he feels remorseful and asks that Dora be allowed her reward. After a short cross-examination Aunt Anna relents — and invites Tommy to accompany them on the trip to town. A reward for recognition of worth for two, in this case.

Dora is a young girl, and Montgomery’s young girls are often capable cooks at a tender age. Remember how Marigold, alone in the house and under pressure of company, was capable of whipping up the special Cloud of Spruce cake. “The story of a pumpkin pie” is a revelation to those of us whose fillings for such items come in tins. In this story two ten-year-olds, Polly and Patty, who are staying with their grandmother, must entertain the minister in her absence. He is fond of, and visits every Sunday after his sermon to partake of, their grandmother’s pumpkin pie. They resolve he shall have one in spite of her

absence. They must go to the field, choose the pumpkin, lug it home, peel it, stew it, strain it, and then concoct the pie. It is a great success (although one of them had a nightmare about flavouring it with mustard).

Clearly it often happened that kitchen spices lived in mislabeled containers. Just as clearly, all these mistakes would have been avoided if this had not been the case. Cooks of the present day are facing again the situation of their grandmothers. We have started to buy our spices in bulk as they did and must be careful that they are sorted and labeled carefully on our return from shopping. Take heed from Montgomery's girls!

A more unusual ingredient is used in "The locket that was baked," the same story that Peter includes in "Our magazine" in *The golden road*. Ten-year-old Josie Taylor volunteers to stay alone in her family's isolated house and do the family bread-making so her mother can go visiting. Her aunt allows her to wear an expensive locket as a reward. After the adults have left, a tramp comes to the door, and Josie is afraid that he will steal the necklace. There is nowhere to hide it but the bread, so she reaches up, breaks the chain, and kneads the locket into a loaf. The bread is in the oven while she gets the tramp a meal and he rummages about the house for money. After he leaves Josie is so upset that she lets the bread burn, but her aunt is very pleased with her courage and resourcefulness and gives her the locket to keep.

"A new-fashioned flavoring" demonstrated that members of a family can be reconciled through the medium of food. This reconciliation is often, however, inadvertent. Prissy Wood, in "The cake that Prissy made," is another ten-year-old who is a good cook. Her mother allows her to bake a cake all by herself to welcome a new minister's family. By the end of her labours she is so exhausted that she doesn't even scrape out the icing bowl. She should have, because — her first mistake — she had used saleratus (i.e., baking-soda) instead of icing sugar for the frosting. Her second mistake, while not her fault, was to get wrong directions to the minister's house. She delivers her cake to Mrs. Stanleigh rather than to Mrs. Stanley. Mrs. Stanleigh is pleased with the story behind the gift, especially when she hears Prissy's name, but after her first mouthful of cake she leaves the room rather hurriedly. She returns and finishes the piece, but leaves the icing. Prissy had brought the cake — through her second error — to a long-estranged friend of her mother's. The two women had long wished to be reconciled, but each had been too proud to take the first step until Prissy broke the ice. Prissy was the agent of more good will than she had intended in baking the new minister's wife a cake.

In "Uncle Richard's New Year's dinner," another Prissy, aged seventeen, keeps house for her widowed father. In the same village lives his estranged brother, Richard. In the general store Prissy overhears her Uncle Richard say he has to be away that morning and will return to a cold dinner. Since her father is out of town she decides to cook dinner for her uncle as a surprise, planning on leaving before his return, of course. He catches her in his kitchen,

invites her to help eat his dinner, and confesses to having wanted to be reconciled with her father for a long time. This Prissy, too, while intending one good deed, has achieved more than she expected.

Prissy's decision to please her uncle in spite of the brothers' estrangement is suggestive of her strength of character. Similar strength of character helps other Montgomery heroines in earning a living. "Lilian's business venture" tells how Lilian, when she and her mother are left very poor at her father's death, decides to try baking as a means of making some money. She starts in a small way for one or two neighbours, and has to steel herself to bear the sneers of several erstwhile "friends." However, after a year of hard work she has many customers, shows a profit, and can happily say that she is on her way to a successful career. She has built her character and her business at the same time, and the new friends she has made in the process are more worth her while.

Another of Montgomery's young women learns much about herself and the worth of things on the basis of a dinner. In "Elizabeth's Thanksgiving dinner," we learn that Elizabeth and her widowed mother will be alone for Thanksgiving, their large circle of relatives being unable, at the last minute and for various reasons, to make their regular annual visit. Elizabeth at first decides to invite her girlfriends to dinner to help eat up the many prepared goodies, but on a last-minute shopping expedition she realizes that there are many young women in her town who are much more in need of pleasant surroundings and a comfortable one-day holiday. The table is finally surrounded with a shop assistant or two, a seamstress, two schoolteachers, and half a dozen other "working girls." Elizabeth feels she has gained much more satisfaction from this dinner than from many she has enjoyed with her usual girlfriends, and determines to continue helping and befriending this unfamiliar group.

Cooking as a step to romance is only represented once in these stories, an unexpected proportion, perhaps, for a writer who penned many romances, in several of which, moreover, appears the dictum that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Gilbert tells Miss Cornelia, in *Anne's house of dreams*, that his grandmother's second rule for managing a husband was "Feed him well." "With enough pie," responds Miss Cornelia. "A baking of gingersnaps" is one of Montgomery's earliest stories, written before she had quite decided on L.M. Montgomery as her *nom de plume*, and published under the name "Maude Cavendish." Bessie and Alma are baking for their Aunt Clem's visitors and receive a last-minute order from her for gingersnaps. When a curious neighbour drops in, the girls are distracted by her questions, and the first batch is nearly all burnt. Knowing well their aunt's horror of waste, they hide all the cookies (even the few unburnt ones) in an old tree stump near the river, then fly back to whip up another batch before the company arrives. A day or so later, at a friend's dinner party, they meet two young men who tell a tale of finding gingersnaps in a tree stump and devouring the few good ones. One

of the young men swears to marry the girl who made them, if he can find her, and the ending suggests that he will succeed in both ventures.

None of these stories is without a good share of humour, as is to be expected with Montgomery, but perhaps the most amusing is "Uncle Chatterton's gingerbread." Not many men in Montgomery's works, besides Little Sam in *A tangled web*, are cooks. (In *Anne of Avonlea* Anne and Diana assist poor Mr. Blair in the baking of a cake, and he thanks them with a donation towards the painting of the village hall, but he certainly does not cook on a regular basis.) Uncle Chatterton's days are not complete unless he has found fault with his wife's cooking, and she has come to expect his criticisms and indeed is anxious about his health if they are not forthcoming. But a bold niece who is visiting them suggests, when he complains about the gingerbread at afternoon tea, that he make some himself. Astonishingly enough, he agrees to do so and, just as astonishingly, does it very deftly. His creation comes out of the oven looking "as light and puffy as golden foam" (a repeated Montgomery description of cakes). However, in spite of a kitchenful of witnesses he had managed to flavour his gingerbread with mustard, and the first mouthful is the last.

Family gatherings, afternoon calls, and parties were important social occasions and all required a "bewildering variety" of good things to eat. Young Grandmother and Mother were appalled at the thought that there had been company at Cloud of Spruce in their absence, and that there had been no cake. "No company had ever found Cloud of Spruce cakeless." A good housekeeper was known by her table; even when Anne managed to convince Marilla that the table should be a "feast for the eye as well as the palate," the latter insisted that Anne leave enough room for the plates and food. Hot and fluffy biscuits, preserves, and several kinds of cake and pie were necessary concomitants to any visit.

A good amount of humour, a sprinkling of sentiment, and just a dash of well-chosen moralizing make Montgomery's stories just as successful as the baking of most of her heroines. She has given us a variety of stories, each with its own flavour and spice.

A list of Stories about Cooking

A baking of gingersnaps, *Ladies' Journal*, July 1895.

A new-fashioned flavoring, *Golden days*, Aug. 1898. Lilian's business venture, *Family Advocate and Guardian*, Nov. 1900.

Patty's mistake, *Zion's Herald*, April 1902.

Mabel's cookies, *Zion's Herald*, [1903].

Uncle Chatterton's gingerbread, *What to Eat*, [1903].

The cake that Prissy made, *Congregationalist*, July 1903.

Elizabeth's Thanksgiving dinner, *Western Christian Advocate*, Nov. 1904.

Dora's gingerbread, *Zion's Herald*, Sept. 1905.

The story of a pumpkin pie, *American Thresherman*, Nov. 1905.

Elizabeth's pumpkin pie, *King's Own*, Feb. 1906.
The Falsoms' Christmas dinner, *East and West*, Dec. 1906.
Aunt Susannah's Thanksgiving dinner, *Housewife*, Nov. 1907.
The locket that was baked, *Congregationalist*, March 1908.
By way of the brick oven, *East and West*, Oct. 1908.
Uncle Richard's New Year's dinner, *Congregationalist*, Jan. 1910.

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