

"Mexican Cookbook Devoted
to American Homes."



12:00-1:00 p.m.
Wednesday, August 8, 2012
Zimmerman Library, Waters Room

Diana Montaña

Cooking up Mexican Modernity: Josefina Velázquez de León, 1940-1960

Abstract: Electricity played a central role in crafting Mexico's path to modernity from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The nationalistic agenda pushed by post World War II revolutionary governments reserved an important role for this technology in their quest to rationalize and modernize the nation, its economy and society. Nevertheless, the promotion and use of electricity, both symbolically and physically, was not reserved for government officials. Businessmen, salespersons, door-to-door vendors, housewives, maids and domestic advisors became "electrifying agents" of modernity as they adopted both imaginary and tangible notions of electricity.

Josefina Velázquez de León was one of those agents. Through her cookbooks, radio shows, and domestic advice in women's magazines as well as the close relationship her cooking academy developed with electric companies, Josefina played a central role in the construction of the ideal modern Mexican housewife and the incorporation of electrical appliances in the elaboration of national dishes. In other words, she bridged modern kitchen technology with the traditional national cuisine.

The home as the location where class, gender, consumerism, nationalism, and technology interact on a daily basis provides a unique window into how individuals experience, define, interpret and make sense of their existence. Despite its importance, the intersection between the domestic space and modernity has not received the analysis it deserves. Traditional ideals of republican motherhood intersected with discourses of science and modernity to create a new social role for mothers. The cult of middle-class domesticity, found in women's magazines, advice literature, newspapers, fashion guides, catalogs and works of fiction, espoused new attitudes about work and family. If modernity (i.e. women working outside the house, movies, fashion, radio, etc.) disrupted the family, women, as the central pillar of the home, had to meet that threat by maintaining an orderly home and becoming skilled housewives. Women played an important role in constructing society after World War II in Mexico. The new ideal housewife employed the latest domestic technology in her mission to build a modern nation one house at a time.

Cookbooks as cultural texts not only provide step-by-step instructions on how to dazzle family and friends with a mole oaxaqueño or chiles en nogada, but also they reveal much about their historical and cultural context. The Josefina Velázquez de León Cookery Collection, in particular, and Latin American Culinary Arts Collection in general, will help me open up the kitchen window to analyze understandings of class and gender, and how women connected their domestic spaces to the world at large.

Diana Montaña is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Arizona. She was awarded the Greenleaf Visiting Library Scholar travel grant, which is funded by a generous gift to the LAII from Dr. Richard E. Greenleaf. The travel grants provides faculty and graduate students the opportunity to work with one of the largest and most complete Latin American library collections in the United States. Montaña will be at UNM until August 10, 2012 to examine cookbooks, advice manuals, women's magazines and electrical appliances' manuals.

Presented by the UNM Latin American & Iberian Institute and University Libraries.