Published in 1954, eight years after Gertrude Stein’s death, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* can be seen as a tribute and as a rebuke to Stein in which Toklas at last speaks in her own voice. There had been a plan for a cookbook while Stein was alive, a book that would combine memoir and cooking. Toklas told Thornton Wilder about her idea and he asked, “But Alice, have you ever tried to write?” Her self-doubt as a writer and her full time career taking care of Gertrude Stein kept her from pursuing the idea until Stein’s death. Toklas, modest to the end, wrote a disclaimer at the end of her book, “As if a cookbook had anything to do with writing” (*Cook Book* 298).

Despite her put-down of her own creativity, in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Toklas pushed the boundaries of the literary text toward modernism in much the same manner as Stein. Yet she preferred to publicly acknowledge her subordinate role to Stein’s “genius.” Like Stein, she “made it new” by inventing a form of writing that fused a conventionally accepted female genre, the cookbook, with memoir. Her book, a melange of recipes, anecdotes of Parisian life, reportage on World War II events, and characterizations of famous writers and artists of the 1920’s and 1930’s, is a memoir of her relationship with Stein as companion, lover, writer-collaborator and fellow *bon vivant*. Janet Malcom observes, “The ‘Cook Book’ itself sits in a bath of reminiscence about Toklas’s life with Gertrude Stein, from which its own literary virtue derives.” (Malcom, 59) Malcolm also notes, “The Cookbook” is similar in tone to Stein’s “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, “deepening the mystery of who influenced whom” (Malcom 59).
In this essay I want to focus on Toklas’s combined rebellion against and homage to Stein in her creation of a new form of writing. I will look at her use of the recipe as a subversive tool. Powerless to express herself while Stein lived, unable to speak against Stein’s “genius,” cook, typist, companion to the wives while Stein chatted with their famous artistic husbands, Toklas remained Stein’s “wife.” By writing a cookbook, she retains this wifely identity, but with Stein dead she can be witty, ironic, and playful about their expatriate life in France. Until the publication of her cookbook, Toklas was, to quote the title of one of her recipes, Stein’s “nameless cookie.” Now in a work openly authored, in contrast to Stein’s account of her in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, she makes it evident she doesn’t wish to be nameless any longer. At the same time, her self-abnegation persists, as if she felt Stein looking over her shoulder as she wrote.

Harper’s made an offer to Toklas to write a cookbook in the spring of 1952 when she was seventy-six. Linda Simon suggests “At Harper’s, the feeling seemed cooler toward the recipes than toward the prospect of getting Alice to intersperse her stories among them” (Simon 217). In being valued more for her stories of life with Stein than for her qualifications in the culinary arts, Toklas, as a writer, is deprecated from the start as well as playing second fiddle to Stein. She contributes to this evaluation by telling friends she is writing the book for the money and that it wasn’t a serious effort at writing (Simon 217). Harper’s got what they wanted, reportage of the French life-style as experienced by Stein and Toklas. But for the first time they got it through Toklas’s voice and point of view. The recipes are not neutral as one might expect from a cookbook, as Toklas frequently adds her evaluation of a recipe at the end and narrates some of the difficulties in food preparation. It can be compared in my view to the shift in academia from dry neutral research to impassioned theory and the use of “I” rather than “we.”

Toklas, a cook with opinions as well as a sense of humor, is also a travel writer. She gives us a geographical tour of those parts of France she and Stein toured in the Ford cars they owned, the first, “Auntie Pauline,” and after it broke down, “Lady Godiva.” “You will drive the car,”
Alice had told Stein after they bought it, “and I will do the rest.” Stein, *Autobio* 103) Stein did the driving, and Alice as she told Stein, handled repairs, found gasoline. In the cookbook Alice has the last word on what happened when they drove, devoting an entire chapter to their automobile touring, “Food to Which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva Led Us.” This is a fairly long chapter, forty pages, and reads like a guided tour of France from Paris to Montereau, Perpignan, Nimes, Arles, Strasbourg, Mulhouse back to Paris, the Cote d’Azur, Marseilles, and ultimately Belley where the couple found the house they lived in through World War II. The background of these travels is World War I so in addition to a travelogue, Toklas gives us a sense of wartime conditions with the characters they meet army officers: *le prefet* and his wife, various maids and cooks, and Red Cross workers.

Her voice comes through as the deadpan comedian with an impeccable sense of timing in her delivery. One example of this is in Paris when a policeman comes into the restaurant where they are dining after parking Auntie Pauline and tells her “trucks were not allowed in the Bois. They had been tolerated during the war, but an Armistice had been signed. So would Madame see that her truck did not appear there again.” The next sentence reads, “When I got back to the table an excellent dish was being served.”

A recipe follows for “Haricot” with a sub-title “(yes that is its seventeenth century name)” *Cook Book* 78). You could say Toklas learned from Stein what Stein claimed to have taught Hemingway, less is more. She achieves her ironic effects in this anecdote by leaving out the bizarre aspects of an encounter and following it with a seemingly normal French dining experience. Toklas’s effect is comic since it is unexpected.

The book begins conventionally with a Table of Contents that lists thirteen chapters, an index of recipes and a preface titled, “A Word with the Cook.” The preface suggests there is no Olympian male chef, handing down recipes that will make his restaurant receive four Michelin stars. Instead Toklas confides to her reader in an egalitarian manner, “As cook to cook I must confide that this book with its mingling of recipe and reminiscence was put together during the
first three months of an attack of pernicious jaundice” (Toklas vii). Some of the chapter titles are straightforward; others imply there is a dark underside to cooking, “The French Tradition,” “Food in French Homes,” “Dishes for Artists,” an example of the former; “Murder in the Kitchen,” “Beautiful Soup,” “Food to which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva led us,” an example of the latter.

I want to turn to the chapter, “Murder in the Kitchen,” a title she had suggested to Harper’s for the book, as an exemplar of Toklas’s technique she followed in each chapter. I chose it also because it describes not only the unpleasant aspects of food preparation, but also of war and, in my view, of life with Stein. She begins on a literary note, and, as she does throughout her book, includes Stein in her observations:

Cook-books have always intrigued and seduced me. When I was still a dilettante in the kitchen they held my attention, even the dull ones, from cover to cover, the way crime and murder stories did Gertrude Stein. When we first began reading Dashiell Hammett, Gertrude Stein remarked that it was his modern note to have disposed of his victims before the story commenced. Goodness knows how many were required to follow as a result of the first crime. And so it is in the kitchen (Cook Book xii).

Stein possesses the literary talents but it is Toklas who must learn culinary skills now that war has come. It is she who must do the cooking and food foraging, leaving Stein free to write. “The only way to learn to cook is to cook, and for me, as for so many others, it suddenly and unexpectedly became disagreeable necessity to have to do it when war came and occupation followed.” (Cook Book 40) In this chapter, Toklas discusses different ways of killing, beginning with a carp that the fisherman who sold it to her said he had no time to kill. She decides on her weapon of choice, a sharp heavy knife that she plunges into the base of its vertebral column. She declares, “Horror of horrors. The carp was dead, killed assassinated, murdered in the first, second and third degree.”(Cook Book 40). What follows is a cold recounting of a recipe, “Carp
Stuffed with Chestnuts.” Other murders follow, that of six doves she kills and cleans after drinking strong Brazilian coffee for courage. Toklas mentions that the smothering, plucking and cleaning of the pigeons had to be “accomplished before Gertrude Stein returned for she didn’t like to see the work being done” (Cook Book 43). She says, “It was a most unpleasant experience though as I laid out one by one the sweet young corpses there was no denying one could become accustomed to murdering (Cook Book 43). There is another murder of a duck that Toklas coldly reports they cooked as “Duck with Orange Sauce.” She adds, “Many times I held the thought to kill a stupid or obstinate cook, but as long as the thought was held murder was not committed (Cook Book 45). Although unstated, clearly Toklas resents Stein’s allotting such work to her and we can infer that her restraining herself from violence against stupid cooks might also on occasion include Gertrude Stein. The notion that one could get used to murder reveals the side of Toklas that Stein only occasionally saw. One such occasion was when Toklas made Stein burn the letters she had saved for many years from her triangulated affair with her first lover, May Bookstaver. Toklas never forgave her for not telling her about Bookstaver when she and Stein first met. Simon observes Alice “was vengeful when jealous, ruthless when threatened” (Simon 116). So it is clear that in spite of Toklas’s adulatory reporting of Stein’s opinions, she could be aroused to anger by Stein’s behavior.

The chapter reaches its denouement in the story of their cook, Frederich, who came to cook for them and “received the visits of an extremely pretty young girl, Duscha. Frederich was being pursued by another woman who wants to marry him and whom he calls “the devil.” Within this story she gives us his recipes for Sacher torte, Linzer torte and Gypsy Goulash. So we have Frederich’s tempestuous Viennese temperament in her choice of recipes, Gypsy moonlight juxtaposed against Goulash! Finally, there is no Frederich in the kitchen as he has left for Paris with the devil. Duscha is devastated but Toklas and Stein later on received a wedding announcement of her marriage to a well-established bourgeois. This short vignette embedded
between recipes ends with a final recipe for “A Tender Tart” revealing Toklas’s ironic wit. The last word of the chapter is “Exquisite.”

This is more or less the structure of each chapter, frequent citations of Gertrude Stein’s opinions, one or more anecdotes about dinners they had together in various parts of France and later in the United States, and recipes after the narrative that if read carefully have a lot to say about the events in the memoir. Often an evaluation of a recipe in words like “a thing of beauty,” that follows the recipe for Madame Loubet’s Asparagus Tips. (Cook Book 89). Additionally, the recipes’ titles can be coded commentary on her relationship with Stein. The references are not just about what she said or what they did together but oblique announcements of their coupling, in titles, such as, “Nameless Cookie,” “Giant Squab in Pajamas,” and “Muttonchops in Dressing Gowns.”

How much of her irony was conscious? The recipe for Haschich fudge is a good example of whether or not she was intentionally parodying straight-laced culture. The recipe is prefaced with a witty directive, “which anyone could whip up on a rainy day.” She describes fudge as:

the food of Paradis-of Baudelaire’s Artificial Paradises; it might provide an entertaining refreshment for a Ladies’ Bridge Club or a chaper meeting of the DAR. In Morocco it is thought to be good for warding off the common cold in damp weather and is, indeed more effective if taken with large quantities of hot mint tea. Euphoria and brilliant storms of laughter; ecstatic reveries and extensions of one’s personality on several simultaneous planes are to be completely expected. Almost anything Saint Theresa did, you can do better if you can bear to be ravished by un evanouissement reville (Cook Book 273).

This recipe from Brion Gysin, a painter acquaintance, and included in the chapter “Recipes from Friends,” was dropped by Harper’s when they realized marijuana was the basic ingredient. It was included in the British edition after which people began speculating that hashish accounted for
Stein’s unusual writing style. This upset Toklas who claimed she hadn’t understood Gysin’s botanical terms. Whether or not she was a naïf in her inclusion of the recipe is unclear. Nevertheless, the recipe contains some of the wittiest lines of the book’s recipes. It advises that the fudge “should be eaten with care. Two pieces are quite sufficient.” (Cook Book 274) Other friends’ recipes are equally witty. Under Beverages, Redvers Taylor’s recipe, after listing the ingredients—sloes, rock candy, and gin—contains the instruction, “Allow to stand for three months, shaking every day. Then strain through muslin and bottle. Seal the cork. Leave at least one year before drinking. The longer the better—at seven years it’s a dream” (Cook Book 275).

I am certain she was no innocent living among artists, writers, frequenting lesbian salons such as Natalie Barney’s and in spite of her monogamous marriage to Stein, surrounded by friends such as Hemingway and Picasso who had a series of wives. The inclusion of recipes from friends reinforces her own and friends’ unconventional life styles that permeates the unconventional structure of her cookbook. In fact, the list of friends who gave her recipes reads like a Who’s Who of famous artists, musicians, and society figures she and Stein knew, among them, Dora Maar, artist as well as Picasso’s mistress, Virgil Thompson, Lady Rose, Lord Berners. As if it were a society page she includes the cities where they have homes, for instance, London and Nice. Again, was she serious or is this in fact a parody of the haut monde’s society page?

Juxtaposed against these ironic titles are many recipes with straightforward titles that we would recognize from any cookbook today: “Endives,” “Browned Spinach,” “Apple Mousse,” “Italian Squash.” They seem to predate The Betty Crocker Cookbook. This is undoubtedly her San Francisco American self speaking, for she sometimes prepared the food she had made for her family when, after the death of her mother, she was the primary caretaker of her father, Ferdinand. She talks about the food of her childhood in the chapter “Treasures”, saying, “the first food I remember from my childhood in San Francisco in the early eighties was breakfast food: cracked wheat with sugar and cream, corn meal with molasses and farina with honey” (Cook
And yet I feel a tongue-in-cheek consciousness pervading even the most denotative titles. For one thing, a good number of them have place names such as “Sauce Nantua” and “Ducs de Bourgogne,” and imply exotic, possibly, at least in the United States, heretofore unheard of treats. Who can miss the suggestion of forbidden delight in the recipe, “Scheherzade’s Melon?” Or the fun of “Omelette in an Overcoat” and “Omelette Sans Nom?”

Her namedropping is not confined to the chapter, “Recipes from Friends.” There is also “Custard Josephine Baker,” Rossini’s Salad” and “Alexandre Dumas, Junior’s Francillion Salad.” She cites the salad as he gave it in his play Francillion first produced at the Comedie Francaise ending with the question, “Why it is more popularly known as Japanese salad no one has been able to tell me.” (Cook Book 127). The deadpan recitation of recipes acts as the straight man to the list of tongue-in-cheek titles. I sense a bit of Charlie Chaplin in this juxtaposition of deadpan against farce. They met Chaplin in Hollywood in March 1935, on Stein’s American tour and Stein thought about doing a film of the Autobiography. Though both women were in love with French culture, American popular culture appealed to them.

Toklas supported Stein in every way possible as cook, typist, errand runner, and most important of all to Stein, uncritical admirer of her work. In The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book, she continues her adulation of Stein, by frequently telling the reader what Stein thought. Yet she finds her own voice, creating a genre every bit as innovative as Stein’s experiments with language. Today’s cookbook writers use Toklas’s structure without even having heard of her or read her. Novels such as Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate and Nora Ephron’s Heartburn incorporate recipes into the text. By fusing memoir, travelogue, recipes, and humor Alice B. Toklas was well ahead of her time.

Works Cited