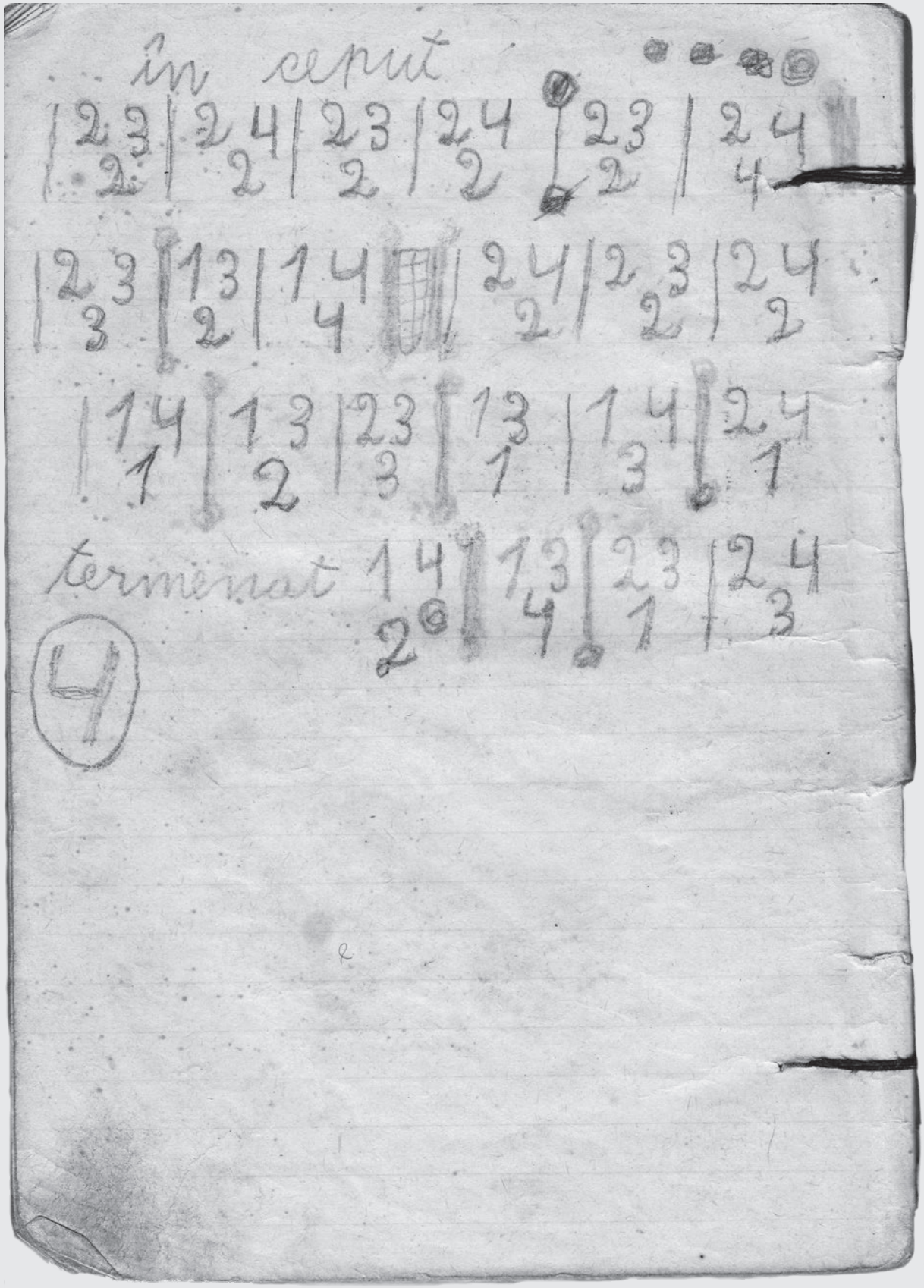
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The Handwritten Recipe Notebook as a *Place of Memory*

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ABSTRACT

A handwritten recipe notebook is not a mere domestic collection of recipes, but a material support for an immaterial tradition that combines culinary knowledge with commensality practices. These are formalized texts (a title, a list of ingredients, and directions) activated through the oral *performance* of a formalized setting (the food preparation process), which combines sequences of gestures instead of (or together with) words, or/and through a writing activity (copying a model or transcribing the recipe after dictation). The final material artefact (namely the dish and the written recipe) incorporates the syncretic and immaterial memories of all previous performances. A recipe notebook is not a simple anthology of texts either, it is instead a subjective "critical edition" which grows page by page, according to imperceptible selection criteria; with the passing of time, the pages become impregnated with smells, traces of pots of oil or sugar, children's fingerprints, figurative drawings, etc.

KEYWORDS

Cooking; performance; informal knowledge; handwritten notebook; memory.

This article concerns only tangentially the broad field of food. The focus will be on the handwritten recipe notebook as an arena for interferences between orality and literacy; these interferences articulate the texts with their paratextual uses, some of which explicitly included in the very body of the recipes (the directions), some other autonomously developed from them. Secondly, the very structure, configuration, use, and meanings of such a notebook go beyond its direct primary purpose, i.e., cooking directions, turning it into a multileveled cultural product. According to Gonzáles Turmo:

> Recipe books are extremely generous documents. They provide information about the lives of their authors, about their culinary interests and practices, and, by allusion, about numerous other topics: production and the local and regional markets, harvests, hunting and fishing practices in the area, wealth distribution, relationships between men and women, celebrations, communications with other peoples and regions, etc. (2004: 9).

They indirectly also provide information about the time, the space, and the occasion for preparing one or another dish; about daily and (mostly) festive meals; about highly demanded ingredients and the strategies for getting them; about social networks and even about different political contexts. In other words, they create and transmit the memory of different hypostases of the food culture and document "aspects of domestic practices history" (Rees 2017), which include the dynamic relation between orality and literacy.

When the practice of creating cooking notebooks for domestic use began in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was the domain of the upper classes of Europe's early modern literate culture; these notebooks could be found in the houses of educated and rich families, and in the monasteries too. The practice of copying, writing, and reading such texts proliferated and became popular when "the wives of middle-class households began to read and write" and, consequently, became interested to turn "the table into a place of social status" (Gonzáles Turmo 2004: 9–10) and prestige. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this practice also appeared in the urban semiliterate milieus and among the rural elites, as part of the modern emancipation process. Very soon, the manuscript recipe collections were joined by printed editions, which, however, did not replace the tradition of handwritten cooking notebooks probably because of their flexible structure which encapsulated a personal identity shaped within the domestic and predominantly feminine sphere of the kitchen.

Handwritten cooking recipes is a category of texts which are activated only through oral *performances*.[1] Thus, mirroring the folklore principle of variability, they are not static artefacts, but variable forms simultaneously created and transmitted as they are put into practice. There can be identified two levels of cooking recipe performances, which lead to different but interrelated products: the handwriting activities, on the one hand, and the food preparation process, which articulates gestural structures instead of (or together with) spoken words, on the other hand. They both require specific formal and informal knowledge. In the end, the integral recipe consists of a series of tangible artefacts (the successive versions of one and the same copied recipe and the prepared dishes) doubled by an immaterial component (the cooking process and its performance contexts).

Writing the "Text" and Its Models

There are three distinct writing activities that lead to a recipe text: (1) transcribing it after dictation; (2) copying out an existing written recipe; and (3) transcribing from memory a previous cooking experience. All of them assume different manners of a model involvement.

The process of dictation involves the presence of another person who is sharing her/his memories in a more or less formalized form. Transcribing is not an automatic reproduction of words, but a conversion in graphic and figurative forms (abbreviations, page layout), the creative interpretation of new information in relation with the writer's cooking practice (retroactive cognition) in order to later prepare the dish (projective cognition).

The process of hand-copying does not require fidelity to the source either, as the latter can be enhanced with comments, additional information, or abbreviated. There results an altered variant of the model that presumptively will be copied out by other hands and join a series of written versions whose accumulation will eventually lead to a corpus of versions, which share the same referent (namely a certain dish recipe) successively created by different scribes, in different contexts. This entire process can be described through what folklorists call the variable, syncretic, collective, and anonymous characteristics of folklore, as revealed only during a formalized performance event (here the very writing situation). "In these books the style changes from one recipe to the next, depending on who dictated it or where it was copied from, and infinitives alternate freely with the first or third person" (González Turmo 2004: 13).

On the contrary, writing from memory activates an immaterial model, namely a previous cooking event that will be transposed and externalized into words. Before that, the very recipe had not actually

existed as a verbal structure. Memory plays a fundamental role, being organized by mental images "and units of meaning rather than by verbal expressions" (Honko 1996: 5). Taking the concept of "mental text," as theorized by Lauri Honko in relation to the singer of epic songs, and replacing the verbal performance with a gestural performance, we may speak about a pre-narrative model externalized both through further performances and through the act of creating, from memory, a written recipe.

> To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance it seems necessary to postulate a kind of "pre-narrative," a pre-textual frame, that is and organized collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer's mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction: we may call it a "mental text" (Honko 1996: 4).

Unlike the clear narrative structure of an oral epic performance Lauri Honko referred to, in the case of a recipe for a dish, the narrative mostly consists of the organized chain of sequences. But more than this, we have to take into consideration the fact that the conventionalized structure of a recipe—title, list of ingredients, and instructions on how to combine them—was imposed after 1877, when *The Boston Cookbook* was published (Cotter 1997: 59). Previously, "the ingredients would not necessarily be listed separately but mentioned as they became relevant within the narrative" (Cotter 1997: 59), as an implicit *memorata*, abstracted by a title and functionally oriented to a coda.

Once written down, the recipe will work as a fixed, still adjustable model for the further events that actuate it. Through the act of cooking, the text turns into one of its many oral, immaterial hypostases which, instead of words, are expressed and composed of gestural sequences that follow a stable—but not identically replicated—structure. Inside a scenario that produces an artefact, the movement of the body is a manifest text that uses gestures (cutting, peeling, blending, washing, moving between the working places of the kitchen, making the fire, checking the oven, etc.) as part of a specific and syncretic language. Each type of artefact (here a certain dish) is the result of successive motion sequences organized into characteristic structures. "Structure and performance are understood as mutually constitutive" (Keller and Keller 1996: 27). In this regard, performing a gesture represents the kinetic expression of a segment of knowledge required by the very process of turning the raw material, the ingredients, into food. Making a dish entails three necessary phases: (1) activating and selecting knowledge, (2) transposing knowledge into gestures whose sum results in (3) the final product. Displayed and consumed, the prepared dish represents a material version of the handwritten recipe and of the mental models represented by its previous preparation events. Both cooking and writing the recipe can be described as part of a fluid and flexible process of oral-written creation and transmission formalized structures in variable forms.

Formal and Informal Transmission of Knowledge

The cook's skills become visible only while she/he is at work (not while reading the recipe!), using fire, water, ingredients, own body and, not least, selecting the appropriate utensils. All these activities require a rich repertoire of informal knowledge that is not explicitly exposed through the written recipe. In its older format, a recipe did not offer the exact details of ingredient amounts according to universal measurement standards of grams or litters, but very subjective indications, such as "a handful of flour," "an egg-size knob of butter," "a pinch of salt," or, much more

personalized, "just eye the amount of water," "add salt/sugar to taste." Nor is temperature precisely measured in degrees, but in colour and consistency, smell, sounds, and other corporeal sensations: "the oven is hot enough when you can keep your hand inside it as long as it takes to say Our Lord" (this might as well be a ritual indication) or "until you count to three"; the time is *appreciated* by smell and aspect: "let the onion heat until it dances" or "cook the meat until well browned," etc. Sensory stimuli involved in the cooking process have instrumental function and work as cognitive tools "that can refer to words and other intangibles as appropriately as to material objects"; hence, cooking "provides an activity in which the tools themselves are easily identifiable and the practices incorporating them easily observed" (Keller and Keller 1996: 20). Both cognitive and linguistic tools appeal to the memory of previous performance events and simultaneously activate a certain knowledge acquired through the concrete cooking experience as an apprentice and/or individual. For example, you have to know by your own senses what the expression "the onion dances" means–how it smells, what it looks like—and also to be familiar with the specific use of the cooking jargon acquired through interactive communication and performance: without the oral component of experience, the written recipe is not complete, as in the case of any informal learning of a craft which involves direct contact with matter, and sometimes accidents too.

The Recipe Handwritten Notebook as a *Codex*

The handwritten recipe notebook is not a mere anthology of culinary texts, it is instead a subjective "critical edition" of a cumulative corpus classified according to the owner(s)' personal taste, the family's or friends' preferences, or the cost of certain ingredients, etc. An illustration of this fact is the widespread habit of attaching adjectives such as "tasty" or "cheap" to the recipe's title.

The recipe collection results from random additions, page by page, of new cooking instructions or copies of those texts which, due to wear, were damaged and became illegible. Together with the food recipes, between the notebook's covers there can be found accounts and descriptions of different kinds of feminine activities, such as needlework and sewing patterns, all sort of practical tips, diets, gardening techniques, etc., which make these miscellanies qualify as an interesting subcategory of the manuscript domestic almanacs. Between the bounded pages of a recipe notebook, freestanding sheets of different sizes, written by the owner's hand, by family members or friends are inserted. The positions of these pieces of paper are interchangeable, as long as they are taken out from the notebook, used on different occasions, and then put back randomly between the covers. The result is a fluid structure, continuously redesigned into what might be called a *recipe box* that consists of an intertextual corpus in which all texts are related without having however a fixed position in the "anthology." We may speak of a veritable *opera aperta* (using Umberto Eco's term) which is reconfigured each time it is performed by different hands, an open work that creates and transmits the memory of a family, as well as a cultural hypostasis that reflects the dynamic relation between orality and literacy. Even if the handwritten recipe notebook has an owner, it also has more than one author.

The "Blue Cover" Recipe Notebook

For the final part of the essay I will briefly present a case study which illustrates some of the ideas exposed above and might also

open up new paths for further investigations. It is about my mother's recipe notebook. The following account and comments combine etic observations with personal memories, as part of the very context in which the notebook was created and "performed." I assume a certain subjectivity as a characteristic of this genre type of oral-written cultural objects.

The original paper support is an A5 48-page line-ruled notebook with plastic blue covers. This is why in our family parlance it was called the *blue cover notebook*. In time its thickness increased with more than 60 freestanding pieces of paper of different sizes, some handwritten or even detached from printed cooking almanacs. The collection, which assembles over 170 recipes (including variants of one and the same dish) together with other practical tips, remains open since new recipes can be still inserted among the notebook pages.

The owner of the blue cover recipe box was my mother (she was born in 1942 and worked as a teacher). Still, other hands contributed to it (including my own, with the calligraphy specific to my different ages), either adding a new recipe, or—reserved to family members—making marginal comments and suggestions to the texts that already figured in the collection. In doing so, we have spontaneously recreated one of the main characteristics of the early modern manuscript tradition of the so-called popular book: the written page works as an arena for interactive communication between the scribe and his/her readers, who often have familiar faces.

Some texts mention the name of the recipe's source—not of its inventor, but of the person from whom the recipe was learned or copied out, thus entering the culinary and social repertoire of my family. The dish itself is anonymous, but each version of its recipe gets an author. The phenomenon is similar to the traditional folk transmission of formalized oral narratives meant for a large audience (e.g., epic songs, fairy tales): a certain piece is attributed by the community to a certain singer or storyteller whose name is well-known in his/her area, but who becomes anonymous as the distance increases; nor is his/her authorship over that piece recognized on a larger scale, since there are other persons who perform it too, in different variants. For example, in the 1990s, at least in my birth town, one of the famous cakes was known under the name "The TV" [RO. *Televizor*]: no one knows neither who named it like that, nor who baked it for the first time. But in my mother's recipe box it is called "TV Rodica," pointing to the specific manner in which Rodica prepared the cake; in fact, the very recipe stored between the blue covers was written by Rodica's hand. I know who Rodica is but to a stranger's eyes she remains anonymous. Secondly, Rodica is not the original author of the recipe for "The TV" cake, but one of its colporteurs. We have here a fluid chain of transmission of formalized knowledge; consequently, the practice of sharing recipes turns a personal experience into a social one.

Between the blue covers there were inserted, as an autonomous corpus, six A4 line-ruled stapled sheets entitled "Recipes from Mrs. Feştilă" [RO: *Reţete de la doamna Feştilă*], with their own history. In the 1980s, my mother met this lady at a summer training school for teachers where, in the evenings (meaning leisure time) she copied out (and probably discussed) the recipes given by her colleague. This means that Mrs. Feştilă had brought her own handwritten recipe notebook in the luggage to share her recipes not only in their spoken forms, but together with their very material support and formalized structure, and, eventually, to get new recipes in exchange, ready to be written down on blank files. We identify here the feminine urban practice of exchanging recipes (and prestige too) outside the kitchen area. Among the members of our family, Mrs. Feştilă's real identity has become blurred in time, being replaced with a semi-legendary, almost anonymous profile of a lady with

authority over complex festive dishes whose preparation required both time and ingredients difficult to come by during those years of food shortage in Romania. Having made great efforts to obtain those ingredients, my mother succeeded to construct "exotic" (and "western") dinners that she offered and displayed to my parents' friends. Inevitably, someone would ask for the recipe for one of the dishes ("How did you *make* this?") and the six A4 stapled paper sheets would appear on the table, ready to be copied out and orally (and collectively) commented on (especially by the women) around the table, which suddenly turned into a specialized arena for culinary communication by means of words, smells, colours, eating, and drinking events. Nowadays, Mrs. Feştilă's recipes are no longer used neither by my mother nor by her daughters, having thus entered the passive repertoire of our family culinary habits; however, the six stapled papers are still active as part of family's palpable domestic heritage and memory.[2]

Handwritten recipe notebooks work as "tangible artifacts of past lives lived that we can often trace back directly to our immediate or distant relatives offering a historical window perhaps even into dishes and remedies we still use today or fondly remember from childhood" (Rees 2017).

Instead of Conclusions

Browsing a handwritten recipe notebook, the gastronomic and memorial successive stages of the horizon of a family and of the invisible community it belonged to are revealed through recipes, comments, names, children's drawings, fingerprint traces, a dried rose petal, faded almost invisible drops of oil or caramelized sugar. This is a palimpsest of souvenirs, a small *place of memory* as defined by Pierre Nora: "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or by the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (1996: XVII).

NOTES

1. In this regard, the cooking recipe presents interesting similarities with another genre of written/oral tradition, namely the charm, whose performance aims to activate the very power of words and of gestures.

2. As Eleonora Sava pointed out, being transmitted intergenerationally, "these handwritten recipe notebooks include (…) the level of the family memory" (2022: 426).

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