

What's Cooking, Boys? The Cooking Boy in Danish Cookbooks for Children since 1975

By Jonatan Leer, University of Århus.

In the 1960's, the Danish women's magazine *Alt for damerne* [Everything for ladies] published a series of small brochures called *Børnenes egen kokebog* [The Children's Own Cookbook]. The front page of the first of these portrays a girl with a braid. She is wearing an apron and is preparing dough while she carefully follows a recipe in an open book on the kitchen table. The foreword is in two parts, one for “you” and one for “your mum”. The latter says:

“You have probably experienced many times how nice it is to have a kitchen assistant, and when she – or he! – can do somethings right, it's double fun. We appeal to your helpfulness and tolerance – and hope that you too will enjoy this arrangement.”



In 2013, a 13-year-old boy named Marcus won one of the first seasons of the Danish version of the television show *Masterchef Junior*. An article in Marcus' local community newspaper celebrates this achievement with an enthusiastic feature on the son who “must be

every parent's dream." Marcus, who cooks for his family 2-3 times per week and attends the cooking school of the Danish food celebrity Claus Meyer every Monday, explains: "I started cooking because my dad is a really good cook, and I'm also a boy scout and we cook at the camp fire." He is not sure if he wants to be a chef, perhaps he'd rather do "something with media," the article concludes (Lyngby-Taarbæk Lokavis, 05/22/2012).



These two food media texts suggest that a radical change has occurred in the gendering of children's cooking in Denmark from the 1960's till today. From being an issue for mother and daughter, it is today an issue for sons and fathers as well. A major game changer has certainly been the opening up of home economics for boys. Home economics became mandatory for boys in the Danish school system in 1975. As a result a new wave of cookbooks for children appeared. Contrary to the previous generations of children's cookbooks, this generation also addressed boys and thereby a new character appeared in Danish food culture: the cooking boy.

Today, the cooking boy is an integrated part of the media food-scape as the story of Marcus illustrates. This paper explores the emergence and reconfigurations of "the cooking boy" on the Danish food scene. This will be done through readings of children's cookbooks from 1975 till today. The readings will explore how cooking has been made legitimate for boys and integrated in the discourses of boys' lives and boys' universes. The article identifies three recurrent tendencies of "boying" cooking in the material.

Theoretically, this chapter is informed by a post-structural perspective and understands gender and food as "doings" that are mutually constituted through everyday social

practices (Leer 2014, in press). Food culture has a range of discursive gendered repertoires. Certain food practices can signify the very essence of a traditional understanding of ‘femininity’ (breastfeeding, cupcake baking etc.) while others can be the most hyper-masculine practices (butchering, barbecuing...) (Devault 1991). However, in between these two poles we find a number of cooking practices that have a more ambivalent and ambiguous gendered signification depending on the context (Leer 2014). While much has been written over the past decade on the gendering of foodways in the media in late-modern cultures (Hollows 2003; Moesley 2009; de Sollier 2005; Brownlie & Hewer 2008; Neuman & Fjellström 2014; Kjær & Leer 2015; Leer & Povlsen 2016), very little has been written on the role of gender in relation to children, food and media (some notable exceptions are Inness 2000; Black 2006; Kroager 2012; Kroager in Leer & Povlsen 2016). This chapter offers a historical account of the boy as a cooking subject in children’s cookbook in a Danish context and brings new empirical material to this neglected field.

Danish Children’s Cookbook

This paper is a part of an ongoing research project, *History of Danish Cookbooks for Children 1843-2014*, conducted by Caroline Nyvang and myself (2015-2017) in conjunction with the Royal Danish Library, the University of Århus and the research project Taste for Life (smagforlivet.dk).

We have registered all Danish children’s cookbooks through catalogue work in the REX database of the Royal Danish Library. The registration included publications in Danish, both first editions and subsequent editions. In the period from 1843 (when the first children’s cookbook was published) till 1975 (when home economics became obligatory for boys), 32 cookbooks for children were published (0.24 per year). From 1975 to 2014, 445 cookbooks for children were published (11.41 per year). This rise in publications within the genre should be considered in relation to a general boom of the cookbook genre. From 1970 to 2014, 5,337 cookbooks were published, rising from an average around 30 per year in the beginning of the

1970's to approximately 300 per year in the last part of the period. The number of cookbooks for children has correspondingly increased dramatically since the early 1970's and been stabilized as a subgenre with numerous volumes each year.

For this paper I have scanned the list and a selection of cookbooks from the corpus in order to analyse the ways in which boys were portrayed cooking. In this process, I have identified three tendencies across the corpus that make cooking legitimate for boys, namely *the cooking boy as the big brother*, *boys' cooking in the wilderness* and *cooking and bonding with dad*. In what follows, I develop the characteristics of each of these tendencies and conclude with a critical discussion on how the inclusion of boys in home economics and home cooking has failed to support the gender equality ideals that it was supposed to support. It might have made cooking – a new and traditionally feminine space and practices – open to boys, but gendered distinctions between masculine and feminine cooking are still a central part of the children's cookbook at present. However, I will just briefly discuss the traditional gendering of foodways in western culture and in cookbooks for children.

Girls and Boys in Cookbooks

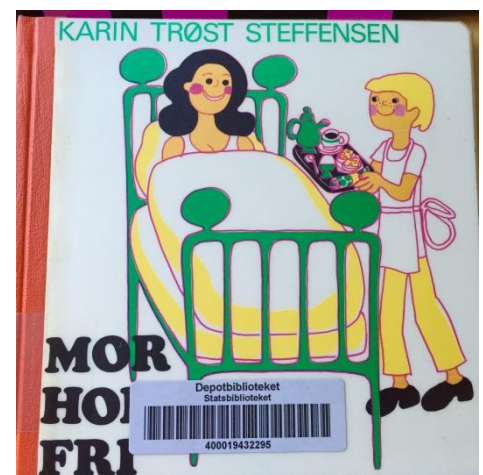
In much cooking literature for girls, learning how to cook is seen as an essential part of becoming a woman and embracing ideas of accomplished womanhood/motherhood. Cooking was a sacred element of “their” responsibility as future mothers, as argued by Sherri A. Inness in her examination of American cookbooks for children 1910-1960 (Inness 2000, 119-138). A very explicit illustration of this is the American cookbook *The Betty Betz Teen-age Cookbook* from 1953: “If a girl is reasonably attractive and a good cook as well, she has better odds for marriage than her playgirl friend who boasts that she ‘can’t even boil water’” (quoted in Inness 2000, 119). For boys, on the other hand, cooking was highly optional and not in any way seen as part of becoming a man. This is echoed in the Danish literature from the same period as my opening example illustrates.

With the inclusion of boys in home economics in the Danish school system, cooking and food/home education were also viewed as one of the arenas in which the new politics and ideals of gender equality could be stimulated (Been 1999, 40). This debate around gender, equality and feminism was important in the Danish public in the years after 1968 and was also – relatively quickly – articulated in legislation concerning education as the example of home economics illustrates.

However, this did not mean that the traditional gendering of cooking was abolished although it was challenged. The cooking boy remained distinct from the cooking girl. In relation to the cookbook genre for children, gender was articulated in less explicit ways, but gendered distinctions of the spaces and the practices of foodways have continued as I will demonstrate with my three tendencies.

The Cooking Big Brother

The first tendency that I'll discuss is found in the many cookbooks addressing boys and girls in a seemingly equal way. The books are illustrated with pictures of a boy/girl duo. However, there is an important distinction between them, namely that the boy is taller and assumes the role of a big brother. This is evident in one of the cookbooks, *Mor holder fri* [Mum's day off] (1972). This book suggests that boys and girls should help out at home and provides them with a number of tools to do so. In the foreword, the author, Karin Trøst Steffensen, takes a stand against the traditional gendering of house work. Through a reflection on the book's title, she ironizes over the fact that it is still "mum" who does the lion's



share of the house/feeding work in the households. This cookbook could be seen as a part of a larger trend in post-war Danish food media, in which new technologies and convenience food products are proposed as a way to help modern, working women to "gain time" on the "home

front,” which was still their responsibility (Nyvang 2013, Nyvang in Leer & Povlsen 2016). Karin Trøst Steffensen also stresses that boys and girls equally should be able help their mother get more free time.

On the cover of the book, we see a boy serving breakfast in bed for his smiling mother. The drawing embraces the idea of the cooking boy as an agent in providing better equality in the family by giving the working mum a break.

On a page in the middle of the book, we see the full drawing from the cover. Here the father and the daughter of the family are also part of the family scene.



To the right, we see that the father, who is also in bed, has already been served his breakfast before the mother. To the left, the little sister is holding the baby of the family. In this version, the image is less innovative in relation to gender: daddy is also having a day off, and, more importantly, although cooking is made legitimate for the boy, other less extraordinary and less applauded aspects of house work still remain part of the female subject's burden as the sister is taking care of the baby.

So despite the intention to go beyond the traditional gendering of household work and cooking, Steffensen's book still upholds distinctions between boys' and girls' cooking. Notably, only the boy is portrayed in a chef's uniform and thus associated with the professional and deeply masculinised identity of the restaurant kitchen (Steno & Friche 2015), incarnated in food media by hypermasculinised figures such as Gordon Ramsay (Nillsson 2012). So although the boy is entering the home kitchen, a traditional feminine space, the

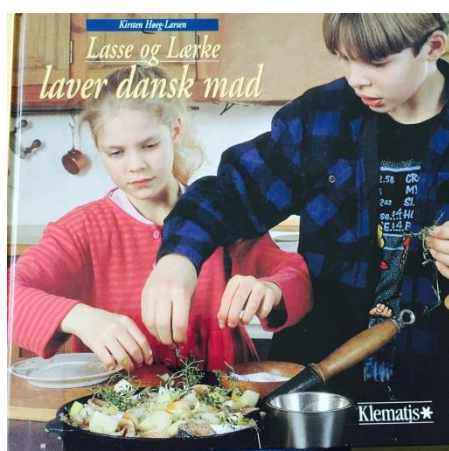


entrance is negotiated in such a way that the boy is not losing prestige or being feminised. His approach to cooking is distinct from the traditional “feminine” way of home cooking.

In this negotiation, it is also very important to note that the cooking boy is constructed as a big brother. He is taller than his sister and clearly takes the lead and the central position in the duo. This is of course clearly evident in the breakfast-in-bed-scene on the cover page.



There are several similar examples in the corpus of cookbooks: a boy-girl duo in which the boy is portrayed as the active dominant part in the couple and as the big brother. Another example is the *Lasse and Lærke* series from the 1990's authored by Kirsten Høeg-Larsen, but featuring the boy Lasse and the girl Lærke. The series consists of *Lasse og Lærke bager* [Lasse and Lærke bake] (1993), *Lasse og Lærke laver mad* [Lasse and Lærke cook] (1993), *Lasse og Lærke laver mad fra andre lande* [Lasse and Lærke cook dishes from other countries] (1995) and *Lasse og Lærke laver dansk mad* [Lasse and Lærke cook Danish dishes] (1996). Here, too, the boy Lasse is clearly the dominant part of the duo and is portrayed both as the big brother and the role model.



On the cover of the first book, Lasse is holding a heavy glass bowl with chicken salad, allowing Lærke to spoon it onto a plate. Here and in many other examples Lasse's physical strength is highlighted as a distinctive masculine capacity that Lærke doesn't possess, but he uses this capacity to help his little sister. The sister's admiration is emphasised in several pictures. Lærke is often depicted completely passive, just looking at and learning from her big brother.

In these examples the cooking boy enters the traditional feminised spaces and practices, but gendered distinctions and hierarchies are maintained. As such, boys are not turned into cooking girls or emasculated; rather they uphold dominant and active positions. So far I haven't found



any examples of a reverse boy-girl duo with an inactive, young boy admiring his big sister and looking up to her activities in the domestic kitchen.

Boys' Cooking over Fire

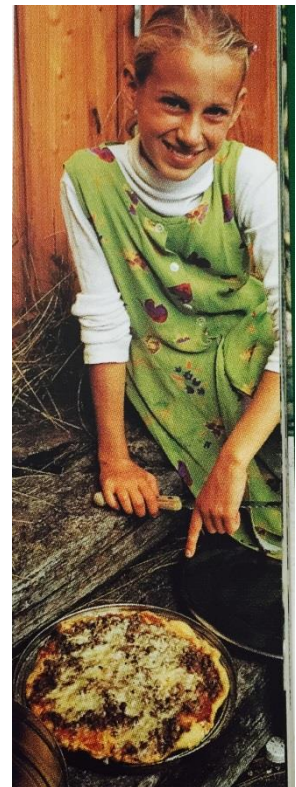
A number of the children's cookbooks from 1975-2014 deal with food over open fire or cooking in the wild. It is remarkable that almost all of these are written by men, especially because roughly 85 per cent of the cookbooks for children in the period are authored by women. The cookbooks involving cooking over fire (in Danish: *Bålmad*) evoke some very different themes, tropes and ideas of food compared to the usual cookbook for children. Cooking is taken out of the feminine sphere of the domestic kitchen and into the masculine zone of the wilderness. Hereby, cooking is disassociated from traditional feminine ideals of moderation and tidiness. In the wilderness, cooking is associated with traditional masculine values, practices and ideals of liberty and adventure. For instance, in the foreword to *Mad på bål* [Food over fire] (2000), the author, Bjørn Bielefeldt, emphasises that around a camp fire you feel like “a Robinson Crusoe, an Indian on the prairie, a Stone Age man or an explorer in the jungle” (Bielefeldt 1999, 5). *Bålmad* is clearly an out-of-the-everyday experience and is thus also an escape from the norms and constraints of everyday norms and concerns. Hereby the cooking and the food-related practices also become masculinised by their opposition to and distinction from “feminine” cooking (Leer in Leer & Povlsen). In the wilderness, male models from Robinson Crusoe to the Stone Age man dominate. The wilderness can also be help boys (and girls) to relate to more ordinary, professional masculine identities, as demonstrated in the following example from Carsten Gottlieb Hansen's *Skvalderkål og pandekager. Om bål og bålmad med børn* [Goutweed and pancakes. On camp fire and food over fire with children.] (2000):

“When I make a camp fire with the children, we often begin by chopping the wood... ‘Anyone who wants to try the axe?’ I ask, and immediately a couple of children volunteer. I hold the axe on the

wood and the children tap on the axe with wooden sticks to cleave the wood. ‘You are a real lumberjack’.” (Hansen 2000, 8).

This passage also emphasizes that the space created around the camp fire opens up for imagination and role playing. Hansen even seems to suggest that children can be liberated from the purely rational and highly restrictive mindset that controls most education situations (p. 9).

Bielefeldt’s book is illustrated by comic drawings of men and boys only around the fire or doing other “male”/hunter-gatherer activities in the wilderness. The wilderness and the campfire are sites for homosocial bonding in women-free zones. As such not only women, but also the ideal of the nuclear family and its everyday life, are absent in this book. Hansen’s book has a quite different expression from Bielefeldt’s and features colour photos of both boys and girls in the wild and around the campfire. However, the portraits of the activities of the boys and girls are different. This is evident if we contrast two of the pictures in the book. In the first (p. 31), we see a girl sitting on a bench while pointing at a freshly made pizza. She is smiling and looking invitingly at the viewer. Her hair is neatly made and she is wearing a green dress.



As a contrast to this pleasing girlishness, we find a picture a couple of pages further on (p. 46), in which a group of boys are cutting up a whole lamb placed on a wooden table. One of the boys is holding the head. Two others have a firm grip on each of the hind legs and pushing them to the side, while yet another boy is sawing the spine of the lamb. Everyone is staring at the sawing boy separating the legs and the back. The somewhat vulgar position of the lamb and the energy released in the collective cleaving of the animal body provide the photo with a crude and aggressive expression. It is difficult not to read this in relation to the debates about the similarities between meat eating, sexuality and male violence launched by Adams 1990 and others (Parry

2010; Leer 2014). Needless to say, the boys' slaughtering is a complete opposition to the portrait of the girl with the pizza, an opposition that echoes traditional gendering of foodways.



Bonding with Dad

In the 21st century, a new kind of cookbooks showing fathers and sons/children cooking together has emerged. One of the earliest of these is a book called *Far laver grillmaden – og børnene hjælper til* [Daddy's barbequing – and the kids are helping out] (2000). It is remarkable that it was published by the Danish men's wear chain *Tøjeksperten*. This indicates of course that cooking in the post-*Naked-Chef* era (Hollows 2003) has become fashionable for men – even cooking with kids. The fact that it is a barbecue book, involving a traditional masculine kind of cooking, ensures the reader that cooking with children is compatible with being a man. The front page



a blue shirt and a black apron (no risqué colours) with the words: “Daddy’s steaks are the best!” No children in this image to disturb the grilling man, they remain a potential supplement. Here again, men’s cooking is associated with leaving the domestic kitchen and going outside.

In later examples of the tendency, fathers and sons – and in some cases even daughters!!! – are portrayed together, and cooking is not seen as an escape from the domestic kitchen, but rather as an activity that creates intimacy and joyful moments between fathers and sons. For instance *Familiens kogebog* [The family cookbook] (2010):



In this picture, the father doesn't have to hide behind the grill or slogans about steaks to engage in home cooking with children: father and son wear matching T-shirts and prepare salad together.

An important contribution to the father/son constellation is the series with the boy Harry, who is the son of the Danish chef Carsten Kyster. In the first book, *Harry – med far i køkkenet* [Harry – with daddy in the kitchen], cooking is explicitly articulated as a father-son bond and as a practice that can help the son to become like daddy: “My father is a chef, and I want to be a chef as well when I grow up!” In the book cooking is also closely related to adventure and exploration of mysterious parts of food and life. In one chapter, father and son spend a day at the beach fishing and finding edible things along the shore. In another chapter, they visit an

apiculturist and learn about how honey is made. In all these journeys, Harry discovers new things about food production, but perhaps more importantly he gets new affective experiences under the guidance of his father. Harry's formation and his interaction with his father form a sensual and fun venture, rather than a moral and scientific education.

Also, father and son always return home to cook. Cooking is not taken out of the domestic kitchen and into the wilderness; rather, the home kitchen is integrated in their relationship as a place that opens up for joint experiments based on their trips to the outside world and male bonding. The mother is completely absent in the cooking process; she is only present at the table: "Mum loves our food". With this book, mum has finally gotten her day off and the men have overtaken the domestic kitchen, but in this takeover father and son also add an element of male adventure to everyday cooking.



Conclusion

In the corpus of children's cookbooks from 1975-2014, we find many cookbooks that are explicitly addressing girls and a pink female universe, as well as cookbooks inspired by girly franchises such as Barbie and the Disney princesses.



We don't find a pendant to these pink books addressing boys. However, the cooking boy has become a significant part of the children's cookbook genre, but often more indirectly and by introducing new tropes or spaces such as the wilderness. So, the absence of explicitly boyish cookbooks doesn't mean that the gendered distinction between boys' and girls' cooking is absent in the corpus. It is, in fact, quite the contrary as the above analysis has demonstrated. Gender differences are maintained and often in a way that presents boys as more active and creative than girls, and boys' cooking also appears superior to girls' cooking. So the gender equality intention that was seen as an objective of getting boys to cook in the 1970's hasn't been met; rather, the gender hierarchy of foodways has continued through new reconfigurations. As such, the children's cookbook echoes the adult media food scene, in which the increased number of men in food media over the last decades hasn't changed much in relation to the inequality and distinctiveness of gender in foodways (Leer 2014). Rather, the emergence of young and old cooking male subjects has created yet another scene for men to claim hegemony.

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