



# Justin Nordstrom (ed): Aunt Sammy's radio recipes: the original 1927 cookbook and housekeeper's chat

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*Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes: The Original 1927 Cookbook and Housekeeper's Chat* (2018) is a scholarly edition of a remarkable text in food media history. As editor Justin Nordstrom explains in his introductory essay, from 1926 to 1934 Aunt Sammy was the host of *Housekeepers' Chat*, a syndicated daily broadcast from the United States Department of Agriculture. She offered listeners practical homemaking advice and anecdotes about home and family life. This combination of neighborly chatter and home economics pedagogy proved to be an effective format for promoting USDA ideology and disseminating its research. Aunt Sammy, like her radio peer Betty Crocker, was not a real person: the USDA distributed a standard script to local radio stations, meaning many different women voiced Aunt Sammy throughout the country. Nevertheless, the fictional Aunt Sammy came to mean a great deal to listeners. Nordstrom notes that in 1 month alone, the USDA received over 25,000 requests for written copies of the recipes she dictated on-air (4). The agency responded to this demand in part by publishing *Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes* in 1927, featuring seasonal menus and frequently requested recipes. The easy accessibility of this book (at first it could be acquired free-of-charge from the USDA) and the printing of subsequent editions in 1931 and 1976 established Aunt Sammy's material presence in hundreds of thousands of homes and libraries across the US, despite her relatively short-lived tenure on-air. Her textual archival presence is therefore particularly prominent, and it is not surprising that scholars of twentieth century foodways often mention Aunt Sammy as key to

understanding how the “golden age of radio” affected US cooking and consumption habits.<sup>1</sup>

Nordstrom's revised edition of the original 1927 cookbook pairs Aunt Sammy's recipes with excerpts from early episodes of the radio broadcast, and makes judicious use of Editor's Notes to guide the reader with relevant historical context and analysis. Among Nordstrom's goals in the Introduction is to account for Aunt Sammy's popular appeal and understand how listeners related to her and to each other. Nordstrom applies Anderson's “imagined communities” and Susan Douglas' (1999) extension of that concept to early radio to argue that the wide dissemination of *Housekeepers' Chat* and *Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes* represented radio's formation of new modes of interconnection among listeners based on shared interests, rather than social or geographic proximity (8–9). As Nordstrom theorizes, a woman alone listening to her radio “friend” chitchat about family members and favorite recipes mitigated feelings of isolation—she could be comforted by Aunt Sammy's companionship and feel assured that many others (mostly women) were also tuning in across the country. Aunt Sammy carried the scientific authority of the USDA and Bureau of Home Economics and the comforting appeal of a friendly neighbor.

More to this end, Nordstrom takes note of several tensions at play in Aunt Sammy's persona and the advice she gave. Aunt Sammy advocated for both thrift and consumerism, and for modernizing American households and making

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Morleen Getz Rouse, “Daytime Radio Programming for the Homemaker, 1926–1956,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 12 (1978): 317. Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 8, 89–90. Reynold Wik, “The Radio in Rural America during the 1920s,” *Agricultural History* 55, no. 4 (1981): 184. Steve Craig, “‘The Farmer's Friend’: Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920–1927,” *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 334. Sarah Murray, “The Radio Made Betty: Live Trademarks, Disembodiment, and the Real,” *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015): 52–55.

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them more efficient while also emphasizing tradition and vaguely patriotic values. She sometimes spoke about cooking as a pleasurable activity; other times it was a chore that nevertheless needed to be done well for health and the family dynamic. Nordstrom highlights the work of the real women in the Bureau of Home Economics who brought Aunt Sammy to life, providing helpful biographic information about the cookbook's co-authors Ruth Van Deman and Fanny Walker Yeatman. Finally, Nordstrom analyzes the extent to which Aunt Sammy showed a way for people to "cook their way into the American mainstream" (16). He emphasizes that Aunt Sammy was fashioned along the lines of women like Van Deman and Yeatman: white, educated, Anglophone, middle class, American-born women who cooked mostly Anglo-inflected meat + two sides dinners (regionalism is almost indiscernible in Aunt Sammy recipes), and had a few tricks up her sleeve for holiday meals and important guests. Aunt Sammy was staid and conservative when it came to flavor, but eager to build out her kitchen with new products and labor saving equipment.

In these ways Nordstrom underscores the compelling and sometimes contradictory messaging of the USDA at a time when the US food system was rapidly becoming more corporate and political, radio was amplifying and extending feelings of national identity, and homemakers were increasingly becoming the sole domestic laborers in middleclass households. This work serves mostly as an accessible introduction to the topic. An expanded introductory essay would have been welcome; no doubt Nordstrom could have written a more detailed, critical analysis of Aunt Sammy and contextualized her more thoroughly in light of concurrent

developments in broadcasting, agricultural policy, and the lead-up to the Depression. Nordstrom does not include a methods discussion, which this reader sees as especially relevant for an analysis of early radio. A prime question left unanswered is whether any audio recordings of Aunt Sammy are available (elsewhere Nordstrom explains that he did not encounter any surviving audio in the archives). Readers who are curious about the voice(s) of Aunt Sammy and the uncanny qualities of early radio may be interested in the work of sound studies historians, such as Jonathan Sterne and Emily Thompson.

Nordstrom's revised edition of *Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes*, published by the University of Arkansas Press (Food and Foodways Series), offers readers a helpful framework for understanding a singular figure in early food radio, and anyone who is interested in how historians interpret recipes will find the Editor's Notes particularly elucidating. It belongs on the shelves of scholars and general readers alike, especially those interested in the history of broadcast media, the foodways of the interwar period, and USDA extension work.

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