

from stupid. State and local politics are worthy of meaningful and rigorous exploration, whether it be in relation to Nebraska, Iowa, or other midwestern states. Benes does his best to bring to life a political narrative that ought to encourage the reader to scrutinize Nebraska and consider local jurisdictions beyond Nebraska. Can the public good be achieved in a highly partisan milieu? Can good communities be achieved through politics? After all, Aristotle claimed that good politics can lead us to a good life. If Benes is correct, the good life through engaged politics is possible. Still, Benes's observations suggest that many challenges await in Nebraska. The book has considerable merit as a catalyst for additional consideration. In the meantime, readers ought to enjoy *Rural Rebellion: How Nebraska Became a Republican Stronghold*, by Ross Benes.

*Backstories: The Kitchen Table Talk Cookbook*, edited by Cynthia C. Prescott and Maureen S. Thompson. Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, The Digital Press, 2021. 403 pp. \$20 paperback. Free ebook.

Reviewer Jill Nussel, Ph.D., uses cookbooks and food history to examine immigrant lifeways and community development in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

My mother-in-law was a homemaker for over sixty-eight years. She was a family legend in the kitchen and I could always count on her for a recipe for any occasion. After her death this past March, we sorted through bags of recipes, some cut from magazines, others carefully copied, and some just scribbled on the backs of envelopes. This was a daunting task until I took a break to read *Backstories: The Kitchen Table Talk Cookbook*, edited by Cynthia C. Prescott and Maureen S. Thompson.

Examining rural women's history began with women's studies in the 1970s, but was mostly relegated to anecdotal discussions. However, in more recent scholarship, rural women have taken a more prominent place and *Backstories* builds on that legacy. Drawing on a long tradition of women's organizations compiling fundraising cookbooks, *Backstories* combines elements of history, memory and folklore, rural studies, and women's studies. Part cookbook, part memoir, part scholarly commentary, this compilation offers a unique perspective on foodways and social dynamics. Prescott and Thompson assembled forty-three contributors from diverse backgrounds, including scholars from many fields, home economists, community activists, farmers, and homemakers. This wide range of contributors from the United States and Canada produced a volume that elevates cookbooks to a scholarly level while remaining an intimate conversation—exactly what the editors intended.

As a form of intimate conversation, *Backstories* explores those intersections of food and culture where the principal method of conveying meaning and instruction is through a recipe. Recipes bind individuals together, define the limits of a group's identity, serve as a medium of communication, celebrate cultural cohesion, and provide a context for ritual performance. Many contributors shared their family recipes, many of these forgotten or made obsolete by commercialization. Among the 130 recipes, Mazie Hough (Chapter 9) shares her Kurtz family recipes including Buckaroo Stew, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg (Chapter 25) serves up a recipe for chicken and noodles, and Eli Bosler (Chapter 38) gives us a recipe for chocolate pudding that doesn't come from a box. One of the recipes that has probably fallen to obsolescence is shared by Rebecca Sharpless (Chapter 3); "To Prepare Rennet" starts with the stomach of a newly killed calf—not something I have ever seen in my local grocery store—but the recipe itself offers further evidence that recipes are worth preserving because they demonstrate the work of rural women.

*Backstories* is divided into five themes. The first, *Studying Rural Women through Cookbooks*, examines different approaches to studying rural women while providing a brief history of the Rural Women's Studies Association, the group responsible for this collection. There is an excellent review of cookbook publication history that analyzes cookbooks as a women's literary genre. The second theme, which focuses on *Community Cookbooks*, examines compiled cookbooks not only as a vehicle for fundraising, but also for exploring relationships of production and consumption. Of particular interest are the chapters focused on the borders. Mary Murphy (Chapter 14) looks at foodways along the U.S.-Canadian border, and Steph Nowell (Chapter 17) uses a family treasure-trove of cookbooks to explain the differences in tamales along our southern border.

The third section, *Nostalgia and Foodways*, looks at foodways in an even more intimate way through understanding the kitchen table as the epicenter of rural life and family dynamics. Many of the heirloom recipes that are contained here examine historical memory and oral narratives, including recipes for ginger cordial, homemade mincemeat, brains on toast, and pigeon casserole. The essays focused on the theme of *Politics and Authority* look how cookbooks have been used to bridge political and cultural divides, including examinations of foodways gleaned from slave narratives and the Great Depression. Finally, the last theme of *Twenty-First Century Foodways* examines how the media has constructed rural womanhood and how rural women have navigated COVID-19 restrictions.

*Backstories'* strength lies in its effective combination of formal scholarship and informal reflection. As a busy woman, I really appreciated the short chapters. As a scholar, I have added a new and better understanding of rural women. As a cook, I want to try every recipe (well, maybe not the rennet). The only criticism, which the editors admitted, is that while the Rural Women's Studies Association is global in nature, the submissions were exclusively from North America. The next volume will just need to focus more on global foodways. The ideas are endless but what they need are contributors. As the book is free of charge in digital format, it can be emailed to your Kindle account for easier reading.

Thanks to *Backstories*, I have found new vigor in organizing my mother-in-law's recipes. For my family, that means they all received a *Grandma's Cookbook* for Christmas.