

Central Queensland University, Australia

Jillian Adams

Crab apple jelly

Biographical note:

Jillian (Jill) Adams (B Arts (Hons), Dip Ed, MA) started a career in town planning, before she set off to Paris to pursue her dream of becoming a Cordon Bleu cook. She is a qualified teacher, a graduate of Cordon Bleu École de Cuisine in Paris and, until recently, was the Training and Development Manager of Coffee Academy, a joint initiative of Douwe Egberts Australia and the William Angliss Institute. Jillian is currently president of the Oral History Association of Australia. Her book, *Barista: A guide to espresso coffee* (2008) is used widely in espresso coffee training in Australia and overseas, while her *A Good Brew: H. A. Bennett & Sons and tea and coffee trading in Australia*, tells the story of social and cultural change in Australia through the stories of people involved in our tea and coffee industries, and will be published in 2013. Jillian completed a Masters in Oral History and Historical Memory at Monash University in 2011 and in January 2012 commenced study towards her PhD at Central Queensland University in the School of Creative and Performing Arts working on Australian culinary history post World War II. She has co-edited a special edition of *MC Journal* on 'coffee', published articles in numerous academic journals, and presented a series of papers at local and international conferences.

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Our conversation took place on a very hot Saturday in February. The tree was laden with almost-ripe crab apples. I boasted that I could make crab apple jelly and would gladly exchange for some home made jelly for some of the tree's bounty. And now it's early April, the first cool days of autumn are here, and I have been given a huge tub of ripe crab apples – hundreds of little deep crimson acid-yellow smudged fruits. This morning I am interrupting my work to make some crab apple jelly.



Fig. 1. Crab apples (photograph by the Author)

I love crab apple jelly. You can't buy it at the supermarket where I do most of my shopping, but I always look out for it at farmer's markets and country produce stores. Although I feel guilty about not working, I console myself by consulting my 1962 edition of Irma Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker's *Joy of Cooking*, purchased recently for my research.

Joy, as the book is affectionately known, was first published in 1931. Irma was mostly responsible for its creation, but her daughter Marion was recipe tester, illustrator and production manager for the first edition. As testament to its popularity, *Joy* is one of America's most published cookbooks with 18 million copies sold. It was reprinted in 1936, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1951, 1952, 1953 and 1962, and then again in 1975 and 1977. In 2006, a seventy-fifth anniversary edition was produced and there have been many other special printings and printings. This classic American recipe book was a feature of many 1950's home kitchens; many women wrote to the publisher to say how much they loved using it and how they felt Irma's presence – there in the kitchen with them (Schapiro 2004: 71). Irma Rombauer was recently widowed and struggling to support her family when she wrote and self-published it as *The Joy of Cooking: A Compilation of Reliable Recipes with a Casual Culinary Chat* in 1931. Her culinary chat is part of this book's personality and Irma's voice has remained clear and strong through the many editions, revisions and reprints.

Irma died aged 82, in 1962, the same year as my edition of her book. Although Marion has reorganised *Joy* in this 1962 edition she acknowledges Irma's 'buoyant example, for the strong feeling of roots she gave me, for her conviction that, well grounded, you can make the most of life, no matter what it brings' (1962:

Dedication). I hear both of their voices: Irma is the mother's voice. She makes sure the text is clear and simple. Hers is the old and the best. She is handing down her culinary knowledge from mother to daughter. Marion on the other hand has been given this knowledge to do with, as she will. She is interested in the finer details of *haute cuisine* on one hand, and frozen food, using electrical appliances – her blender outside BBQ for example – on the other. If there is any conflict I don't hear it. Irma provides the fundamentals and Marion takes them to new places.

I like these women: we think the same way about many things. They are also useful as they clearly reveal the changing domestic and other cultural values of the era I am working on – the 1950s. Marion asks, for instance, 'Have you ever tried to raise money for your church or club at a food stand? It's the home made breads and cooked down fruit jellies that get snapped up first for neither of these is likely to be duplicated commercially' (786). Irma and Marion represent the mother and daughter who stood on either side of a momentous change in our kitchens: Irma represents home cooking and Marion commercially produced. When my copy of *Joy*, purchased on line from America, arrived in the post there was a personal signed note in it from the seller: 'This is much loved book. I hope you will enjoy it as much as I have. Best wishes and joyous cooking!'

My work (that is, when I am not making crab apple jelly) revolves around an investigation of the housewife in Australia in the 1950s. I am curious about the images that I see of her now in 2012. Here she is, for example, in her pink pyjamas, propping open the refrigerator in a mothers' day advertisement for Peter Alexander, a company that successfully markets pyjamas to Australian men and women.



Fig. 2. Peter Alexander advertisement, *Melbourne Weekly*, 7 May 2012: 3

This season, he is selling cosy, warm flannelette pyjamas – along with nostalgia for a cosy, warm 1950s. In this image, the model poses by her Kelvinator refrigerator – a fridge that is brimming with frosted layer cakes and Pyrex containers. In another, she is vacuuming her floral flock carpet with her Hoover vacuum cleaner and, in the last,

she is on the telephone in front of her kitchen dresser which is set with Gayware canisters and ramekins. Set amid these familiar symbols of 1950's modernity, she is styled to provoke our nostalgic hankerings for this fantasy of a pastel-coloured era.



Figs. 3 and 4. Peter Alexander advertisements, *Madison*, May 2012: 87, 86

Wasn't she the catalyst for the wave of feminism that rejected the role of women as wives and mothers with their focus on the care of the home and the family? My way into this discussion is through the kitchen, by way of a careful study of cookbooks and magazines from that era. As long as I use a recipe from the era, I remain on track with my research. With this thought in mind as I examine the crab apples, and convince myself that it is research: if the recipe works, that is, if it is *cookable*, then it was most likely to have been a recipe that was used by women then, when they had a windfall of crab apples.

To understand the lives of women in the 1950s, I need to be there with them in the kitchen, just like Irma and Marion were and I need to cook their recipes. So here I am, reading and listening and ready to go. Jam, they tell me, is the easiest preserve to make and the most economical as it only requires one cooking step and uses the fruit pulp. I am not convinced. Jam making is something I just don't do. Who has the time, the jars, the fruit, the incentive now-a-days? Jelly making is more complex. It involves a preliminary step, that of first extracting the juice from the fruit pulp.

But even before I begin the first step, I can see the jars of clear red-amber jelly lined up on my kitchen bench. And I can taste it. In my mind, I have already made toast from thick white bread. I have buttered it and plopped the shimmering red jelly onto it. I am eating it – hot toast, melting butter and crab apple jelly. I am thinking ahead, but, at the same time, I am remembering the taste and feel of crab apple jelly. It is a taste from my own childhood – in the 1950s.

Every Thursday morning, my mother dropped my father at work and drove the family car into town. First she shopped at Myer's Emporium or at Bright's or Lindsay's (department stores long since replaced by the Market Square Shopping Plaza mall development) for household items or the fabric and haberdashery she needed for her

various sewing projects. Next she met her friends for a cuppa at a local café, before completing her weekly grocery shop at Dickens supermarket. She drove home around midday, stopping off at Johnny Gill – the butcher – on the way. This trip left her provisioned for her baking day on Friday when she cooked for the week ahead – filling our biscuit jars and cake tins with sweet treats, and the house with the smell of butter, vanilla and sugar. She would sometimes make jam after a blackberrying trip or if a neighbour gave her fruit from their trees, but stewed fruit was more her style. My mother never made jelly. So, Irma and Marion ... I am depending on you for instructions here. ‘Ok’ they say winking at each other and nodding towards the fruit:

Take four pounds of crab apples, quartered, stems and blossom ends removed. Place the fruit in a saucepan. Add water until it can be seen through the top layer of fruit. Cook uncovered until the fruit is soft. About 40 minutes (789).

I have so many perfectly formed cherry-sized sour crab apples and there is no way I can weigh them. I have to find my own way: I have to improvise. I have to make this recipe work for me. Rather than quarter them and remove the stems and blossom ends (how long is that going to take!) I line them up on my chopping board, handful by handful, and chop into them roughly. I do not remove the stems or the blossom ends, but I do try to pick out most of the leaves and the bits of branch that I can find. I chop until my pan is almost full then I cover the fruit with water and boil until the crab apples are soft and mushy. The tart sweet scent wafts seductively through the house.

‘Now’, Irma says. ‘Where is your jelly bag?’

Wet and wring out a jelly bag, and pour in the fruit and juice. Allow to drip through the bag without squeezing (787).

What! I don’t have a jelly bag! Does such a thing even exist these days? Will a very fine sieve do the job? The word ‘drip’ suggests a slow separation of juice from pulp. Help! ‘Go back to the general instructions,’ they scald. ‘Top of page 787 ... first line.’

This should be made of a material similar to flannel or of several thicknesses of cheesecloth. If well enough sewn the bag will eventually be suspended, if not, it will be held in a strainer. Wet the bag and wring it out before you pour the jelly into it, as a dry bag can absorb a lot of the precious juice (787).



Fig. 5. Improvised jelly bag

I have a white cheesecloth dress. That will have to do the job. The only problem is that it has tiny silver sequins sewn to its bodice and in a big 'V' down the front. They have not been attached securely and some are loose and falling off. But if I keep them on the inside – with the pulp – they should stay out of the jelly.

I rinse it and cut down the back to open it up. Then I tie two of its four corners and the sleeves to the rungs of the clothes' horse, which I have placed over a bowl. Now I can pour the fruit and juice in and allow the juice to drip through. At first juice pours into the bowl, then it slows down to a drip, drip, drip ...

Measure the juice and put into a large enamelled or stainless steel pan. Simmer the juice, uncovered, for about 5 minutes, skimming off any froth that forms. Allow 3/4 to 1 cup of sugar to each cup of juice and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Boil the mixture until it reaches the point of jelling. Pour the jelly into hot dry jars. Seal (787).

I measure 24 cups of juice into a jam pan and bring it to the boil, adding 24 cups of sugar. That's about eight kilograms and will be most of the sugar I bought on sale at the supermarket months ago. The packets had been damaged and the sugar – bags and all – had been slipped into a plastic bag and set aside for a quick sale, three for one. Given that one of the hallmarks of a good housewife in the 1950s was economy, I bought three five-kilogram bags and stashed them in the pantry.

I now have to stir until my mix reaches the 'point of jelling'. Irma! Marion! Where are you when I need you? What exactly is the *point of jelling*?

I am stirring this rapidly boiling mass, skimming pink-grey marshmallow-like scum off the surface, scooping it into a bowl, and since I can't find an explanation in *Joy*, I am searching for the *point of jelling* in the jam and jelly sections of my cookbook collection

Irma taps her foot on the floor and Marion 'tut tuts' me.

'We know your type', they scowl. 'Never reading the instructions ... just plunging in ... thinking you know it all. The instructions are there. Bottom of page 787. You really should have read this before you started!'

Begin to test the juice ten minutes after the sugar has been added. Place a small amount of jelly in a spoon, cool it slightly, and let it drop back into the pan from the side of the spoon. As the syrup thickens two large drops will form along the edge of the spoon when the two large drops come together and form as a single drop ... the 'sheeting stage' has been reached ... The required time for cooking will range from 8 to 30 minutes, depending on the kind of fruit, the amount of sugar and the amount of juice in each pan (787).

This is not very helpful. Before I set out to make the jelly, I consulted other cookery books in my collection. I found recipes for crab apple jelly in my *Good Cook Preserving* book. This volume, produced in the 1980s by Time Life, brings together recipes and instructions for all kinds of food preservation. Each chapter discusses a particular method, and gives recipes from a wide variety and range of cookbooks. There are three recipes for crab apple jelly in its jam and jelly section, from three cookery books, three eras and two countries. The recipe from *The Buckeye Cookbook*:

Traditional American Recipes (1883), suggests that it will take about 20 minutes but that I should check and it will be an amber colour when ready... also not very helpful. Meanwhile the jelly is cooking. I am stirring and skimming. I am also washing jars, sterilising them with boiling water and putting them in the oven to get hot. I know that the jars will break if they are cold and I put hot jam into them. I also know that drying them in the oven will sterilise them as this is how my mother prepared her jars on those rare occasions when she made jam.

The recipe from *Mein Kochbuch* (1968) by Elizabeth Schuler seems simple and straightforward: cook the crab apples until they are soft (about 30 minutes), then let them stand in the liquid overnight – straining them the next day. In my Rombauer recipe there are no delays. *The Buckeye Cookbook* tells me to press or squeeze the fruit in the muslin over a colander to get all the juice out: but the Rombauer version clearly specifies not to squeeze, or the result will be cloudy. Once the juice is collected, *The Buckeye Cookbook: Traditional American Recipes* says to dip a cup into the liquid and pour it back over the fruit mush in the muslin, to do this twice, and to rinse out the muslin frequently. This seems like a lot of bother. But it does say it will make a very clear jelly. I do contemplate making a batch of each but already I am cutting corners by chopping my fruit roughly and I am not sure that I got the jelly bag set up right.

The combined voices of Irma and Marion are the loudest. They argue the point with Elizabeth Schuler. Irma challenges her jelly making method, ‘Why on earth would you suggest leaving the juice overnight? It makes no sense at all! We tell our cooks they can keep the juice for six months before they cook it up into jelly. They can even freeze it.’ Elizabeth has no rationale and answers that it was the way her mother showed her and it has always produced a clear jelly. I decide to stick with Irma and Marion. I want my jelly today.

Now, is the *sheeting stage* the same as the *point of jelling*? Marion and Irma are very quiet on this point. I think they see the problem and I think they are working out how to correct the instructions in the next edition. Irma is saying, ‘once I go ... my generation ... you won’t know how to do this. You will just get your jelly from the store’. Marion agrees ‘It’s a difficult one’, she says. ‘Perhaps we need a picture to explain it’, she offers. I go with my instinct. I stir and watch carefully, hoping that see and feel the *point of jelling* before the point of burning. Finally, the drops of jelly hang onto the wooden spoon like cows’ udders heavy with milk before they fall languidly back into the pot. I decide to count to 60 (quickly) then turn off the heat. I ladle the boiling jelly into the jars and it sizzles as it hits the hot glass. Then I screw on the lids. I fill the empty jam pan with water and detergent and set it in the sink to soak. My jelly is made and I have eighteen jars of sparkling red jelly proudly sitting on the bench. Even when they are cool, I can’t bring myself to put them away in the cupboard. I am so proud of my achievement. The afternoon light is fading and am surprised: jelly making has taken the whole day and my jars match the colour of the sky outside.

From this, and other experiments, I have adapted the recipe. But if you intend to make a batch of old fashioned 1950s style jelly you will first have to find a garden with a crab apple tree.

Crab Apple Jelly

Crab apples, water, sugar

Tie on a fresh apron and roughly chop your crab apples. Do not worry about stems or pips or the odd leaf. Sweep them into a pan and just cover with water. Bring to the boil and boil until they are mushy (about 20–30 minutes).

Set some cheesecloth—you can get this from any shop that sells fabric (on MasterChef they use Chux wipes but you will need to get the extra big ones)—over a colander set over a big bowl large enough to hold all the drained juice. Pour the pulp and juice into it and allow all the juice to drip through. Once it has dripped through, measure the liquid. Throw the pulp and the cheesecloth away.



Fig. 6. The crab apple juice (photograph of the Author)

Bring the juice to the boil and skim off any scum. Then add the sugar and continue to boil until it is set. This will take about 20 minutes and you will need to skim the scum as it rises and gathers on the surface. It is the scum that will make your jelly cloudy. You can tell if it is set by the colour – a deep-amber red – and the behaviour of the jelly as it drips off the wooden spoon that you are stirring it with. Stir and lift the spoon out of the bubbling jelly. Hold it up and on the side. When it is ready the jelly will flow into one stream and will start setting before it has dripped off the spoon.

While the jam is bubbling away, prepare your jars by washing them and then pouring boiling water over them. Sit on a baking sheet in a moderate oven (150° C) while the jam is bubbling away. When the jam is ready you will need to pour it into the jars while both jar and jam are the same temperature.

Wash the lids for the jars carefully in very hot water. Dry them, and screw them on tight.

Postscript

Recently my aunt, now in her seventies, lent me two cookery books from her library. The first was the textbook she used at school, *Household Cookery* (c.1950), which had been produced by Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy in Melbourne. ‘Emily Mac’, as it was affectionately known, offered diploma courses for teachers of domestic economy and dressmaking, and vocational training for the hospitality and clothing industries, from 1906 to 1979 (Docherty 1981). My aunt did not go there but her school used one of the many cooking texts produced by its staff and this slim cloth bound cookbook was her text for domestic science at school in the early 1950s. It has an alphabetical index, and sections covering the principles of Western cookery starting with stocks and sauces and ending with icings and fillings for cakes. The book also carries many of the signs of a well-used cookbook – food splatters, dog-eared pages and additions to recipes written in pencil – but the only clue to the creative cook my aunt was to become is the addition she has made to the diagram of a pig showing ‘pork cuts’ on page 39. She has added long eyelashes to its eye and a curly tail drawn first in pencil then in pen to its hindquarters.

The second book *Australian Cookery Today: Illustrated* was given to my grandmother well after she married and rescued by my Aunt when grandma died. The book – like many of its time – is not dated but it is possible to approximate its publication date with clues in its text. The chapter on the Modern Kitchen makes it a post war publication and its publishers acknowledge Emily Macpherson College (established in the late 1920s) and Miss Emily Noble chief demonstrator at the Metropolitan Gas Company. Miss Noble retired from this position in 1953. Sometime between 1927 and 1953 this book was published. As I flicked through it looking for clues to its usefulness, I found pages marked with scraps of paper. My grandmother had changed the Christmas cake recipe and she had marked ‘X’ against the recipe for Apple Jelly. In the blank section at the end of the book for *Notes and Additions*, my grandmother had written a recipe for Celery and Walnut Rolls (the recipe is not clear but it looks like a scone dough – there is no recipe for this – filled with walnuts and celery and cheese in white sauce and rolled and baked. Clearly this recipe was a ‘prompt’ and not meant to be followed by any one other than my grandmother) and noted, ‘Apple Jelly page 480’. This was the recipe she used for jelly making and with it two of my questions were answered. The first, how to tell if the jelly has reached the *point of jelling* was explained simply, ‘Test by putting a little on a cold plate and if it jellies it is done’. But more importantly it answered the nagging question of the origin of my sensory memory about the taste of crab apple jelly.

The book and my grandmother’s marks in it took me back to the kitchen of my grandparents’ big old house on a block on the outskirts of Rochester, a country town in northern Victoria. I spent long summers at that house. I remember the smell of new-born kittens in my grandmother’s powder room; sun-warmed white peaches still on the tree; chook food that smelled of bran and sugar; hot red dirt and the spicy smell of the peppercorn trees that lined the long drive from the road to the house. I also remember the taste of cucumber with mayonnaise; wheat puffs and milk; and crab apple jelly on fresh white bread.



Figs. 7 and 8. Crab Apple Jelly (photographs by the Author)

Endnote

Luce Giard writes:

In each case, *doing cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory like the rhythms and seasons (in de Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998: 157).

'Crab apple jelly' reflects on cooking and remembering both the family and intuitive processes that link family and cookery. Writing about the process reflects on Marion and Irma Rombauer collaborating over a recipe book – Marion continuing where her mother left off – and my remembering of my Grandmother, aunt and Mother through the process of making this preserve. It is about the skill of cooking and the strategies involved and also about the delight one feels in producing something so basic as a jar of home made jelly.

These days ... when for so many people nothing remains at the end of the day except for the bitter wear and tear of so many dull hours, the preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a ferment of reality, of knowing the joys of demiurgic miniaturization, all the while securing the gratitude of those who will consume it by way of pleasant and innocent seductions (Giard 1998: 158).

Cooking is a thoughtful process linked to our female forebears. Alexa Johnson reminds us that by cooking we link to an honourable tradition that stretches back to our grandmothers and great grandmothers and great great grandmothers and that, for them, jelly making was sensible, thrifty, enjoyable and an outlet for creative energies as well as a source of pride and a way of showing love and care for others (2008: 8).

Making crab apple jelly, and writing about it, is also about nostalgia and our hankering for food from our childhood. 'Do you remember that steamed treacle pudding your mother used to make?' ask the authors of *Just like mother used to make: food from the '30s and '40s* (Nilsen & Weatherall 1980: 11). This book even 'looks

right' with its black and white photographs of food 'coloured by the almost forgotten art of colour spraying – remember those seaside scenes on postcards?' (11). And in the forward of *Ladies a Plate*, Ray McVinnie writes, 'there is a consciousness that something as ephemeral as a recipe for an excellent cake or an irresistible biscuit carries tradition and significance that is to be celebrated, enjoyed and preserved' (in Johnston 2008: 6).

Making crab apple jelly that Saturday was repetitive work that involved tedious chopping and stirring; interpretive skill, intuition and improvisation; heavy lifting and carrying; and washing up and cleaning. But nothing comes close to the joy of all seeing all those jars of jelly and the pride I feel when I open one up or give one away. With Summer almost here, I only have six more months before I start the process again.

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Research statement

Research background

While writing about food focuses on remembering, memory and nostalgia (Duruz 1999) and family relationships (Giard 1999, Supski 2005), in the absence of the generational mother-to-daughter handing down of cooking practices, recipes rely on clear instructions for their success. This work examines changing culinary technology to highlight the strengths and shortcomings of instructional food writing.

Research contribution

Examining cookbooks as historical sources (Driver 2009, Theophano 2002), this work uses creative nonfiction to deliver technical information, explore changes in culinary practice and demonstrate how food and cooking are connected to our lives from an intimate to the global level. This work also investigates the recognised, but seldom explored, American influences on Australian post-war kitchens.

Research significance

This work was an invited submission to *TEXT*, a leading journal in the creative writing field.

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