"I Guarantee": Betty Crocker and the Woman in the Kitchen

Laura Shapiro

In the spring of 1954, some of America's most popular magazines, radio shows, and television programs ran a food advertisement trumpeting "one of the great recipes of the year." Great or not, Dutch Pantry Pie certainly summed up many of the nation's culinary preoccupations at the time. It called for melting American cheese in Carnation Evaporated Milk, adding potatoes, and putting the mixture in a pie shell made with Gold Medal Flour. Then the mixture was covered with cubes of Spam and a top crust was added. For the sauce, the instructions were to mix more evaporated milk with a can of soup. Even for the early '50s, an era when cookery was proud to be commercial, Dutch Pantry Pie led home cooks on a remarkable march through the food industry.

But what was equally striking about the recipe, at least as it appeared in the April issue of Woman's Day, was the person offering it up. She was Mary Blake, well known as a spokeswoman for Carnation. Magazine readers may or may not have been aware that Mary Blake, per se, didn't exist: Carnation's home economists wrote her copy, signed her mail, and made her speeches. At Libby's, home economists did the same for Mary Hale Martin; at Dole, she was called Patricia Collier; Ann Pillsbury presided over Pillsbury's recipes, and there were dozens more, typically portrayed in the ads with pen-and-ink portraits of smiling women. These women weren't real, exactly, although real women stood behind them. They were authority personified, lending a human face to food corporations bidding for the attention of female shoppers. But in the ad for Dutch Pantry Pie, Mary Blake did more than wear a human face, she made

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a strangely human gesture. The recipe, she told readers, was created “by my good friend Betty Crocker of General Mills.”

Her good friend? These two fictional figures were trading recipes? Betty Crocker, longtime spokeswoman for General Mills, was a credible source for any recipe calling for its Gold Medal flour. But a second glance at Dutch Pantry Pie hints at why this particular dish may have needed a more pointedly domestic backstory than even its name implied. The cheese was heavily processed, the milk came from a can, the meat did have animal origins but they lurked far in the past—plainly, if this meal was to qualify as home cooking, two human faces were none too many.

Mary Blake predicted that Dutch Pantry Pie would sweep the nation, and the ad did show up widely. But what really swept the nation were figures like Mary Blake and Betty Crocker, who forged a crucial link between old habits and new foods. Ever since the end of the Second World War, chemistry labs and assembly lines had been taking over more and more of the nation’s cooking. Now the food industry was overhauling the very concept of “cooking.” In ads and other promotional materials, such traditional kitchen chores as cleaning vegetables, chopping ingredients, measuring, and mixing were dismissed as old-fashioned drudgery. The new “cooking” meant opening boxes, defrosting foods, combining the contents of different packages, and decorating the results. When Kraft was promoting miniature marshmallows in 1955, for example, the company ran enormous newspaper ads featuring a “Kraft Kitchen Recipe.” Set up in standard cookbook format, the recipe started with a list of ingredients: one box of lemon pudding and one cup of miniature marshmallows. Then came the instructions: “Prepare the pudding according to directions on the package. Cool. Fold in the marshmallows.”

Right at the forefront of this effort to reeducate homemakers was the food industry’s busy sisterhood of pen-and-ink home economists. In person and in print, they taught women how to use new electric stoves, mixers, and blenders, how to cook blocks of frozen peas, how to garnish canned ham with pears dipped in food coloring, and how to make crepes suzettes with pancake mix. Known in the business world as “live trademarks,” these figures were designed to project specific, carefully researched characteristics to women shopping for their households. “Ideally, the corporate character is a woman, between the ages of 32 and 40, attractive, but not competitively so, mature but youthful-looking, competent yet warm, understanding but not sentimental, interested in the consumer but not involved with her,” explained a business publication in 1957. To a historian tracking them, these women seem both ubiquitous and elusive, flourishing in a surreal universe that left purely optional the distinction between fiction and reality. In the pages of Forecast, a home economics magazine where real and invented home economists mingled especially comfortably, Mary Alden of Quaker Oats was given a byline for an article on nutritious oatmeal breakfasts, and Frances Barton of General Foods presided over a luncheon attended by the magazine’s real-life editor. When Irma Rombauer, author of The Joy of Cooking, published a cookbook emphasizing convenience foods in 1939, she listed and thanked all the “home economists” who had helped her but made no distinction between, say, Jeanette Kelley of Lever Brothers (real) and Martha Logan of Swift (fictional).

On one notable occasion, Mary Barber, the real-life spokeswoman for Kellogg’s, took a cruise to Honduras courtesy of United Fruit, accompanied by its real-life representative, Ina Lindman. In an ad published in Forecast, Mary Barber acknowledged Ina Lindman but saved her most enthusiastic praise for another home economist at United Fruit: Chiquita Banana. “I came home with a new understanding of what makes Chiquita Banana the successful teacher she is!” wrote Mary Barber. “It’s Chiquita’s warmth, her sympathy, her stoutness.”

The most famous by far of these figures was, of course, Betty Crocker. A treasured property of General Mills, Betty Crocker has outlived her sisters by several decades. Over the years her job has varied—today she’s more symbolic than genuinely authoritative—but during the immediate postwar era she was a sure, steady voice guiding homemakers through a time of tension and change in the kitchen. Millions of Americans listened to her on the radio, read her column in the newspaper, and watched her on TV. In part she flourished because General Mills, unlike many of the other companies with live trademarks, recognized the value of her widely trusted persona and poured considerable resources into promoting her. But she also took up a permanent place in the nation’s culinary consciousness because of the food with which she was most powerfully identified—the classic, frosted layer cake. Few products emerging from the middle-class American kitchen have had the emotional heft of this iconic dessert, universally recognized as a triumph of love as much as skill. Betty Crocker knew very well the enormous resonance of a cake baked at home. “Cakes from every land have been introduced to America—but none is so glamorous as the typically American cake developed in this country—the gorgeous confection of richly tender layers, crowned with luscious, creamy icing!” she wrote in a 1942 Gold Medal flour recipe booklet. “No wonder that
more cakes are made in American homes than any other type of baked food. They are a real achievement in the art of cooking. And cakes have become the very symbol of home life in our country."

Home cooks didn’t need to be reminded that the stakes were high. Baking a cake is, in fact, a precarious undertaking: much can go wrong even in an oft-used recipe, depending on such factors as the weather, the size of the eggs, or the freshness of the baking powder. And when the cake is meant for a birthday or a company dinner, failure hits hard. Questions and lamentations about cake-baking had long predominated in forums where women had a chance to ask for help with cooking. *Household* magazine, published during the 1940s and ’50s in Topeka, Kansas, for a largely midwestern readership, ran a regular column in which a cooking expert answered readers’ questions; and month after month, their questions were about cakes. “I never had any trouble making cakes of any kind by hand. Since receiving my new electric mixer I do not have good cakes.” “After my angel food cakes stand a while the surface gets moist and sticky.” “What causes my chiffon cake to be heavy on the bottom?” In the columns of the Confidential Chat, a long-running readers’ question-and-answer forum in the women’s pages of the *Boston Globe*, letters on baking and cakes appeared constantly. “Will some experienced cook tell me why cakes fall on the bottom though they rise on top?” “Do you know how to measure shortening exactly, with the aid of water?” “When my beloved husband reached home this evening he as usual gave me a big hug and kiss and asked: ‘Did you make a cake or pie today? I’d just taken your wonderful two-egg cake’ from my oven.”

Not surprisingly, it was trouble with baking that gave birth to Betty Crocker. In 1921 Washburn Crosby, the Minneapolis flour company that would become General Mills, ran a magazine promotion inviting people to complete a jigsaw puzzle and send it in to the company. Those who did so would receive a pincushion in the shape of a flour sack. Thousands of people sent in the jigsaw puzzles, and many took the opportunity to include letters to Washburn Crosby, seeking advice on their breads, biscuits, and cakes. The company saw this as a good chance to communicate with customers, so home economists on staff answered every letter, signing them all “Betty Crocker”—“Betty” for its homey quality, and “Crocker” in honor of a longtime company executive. Betty Crocker was little more than a signature at first, but she gained a voice in 1924 when “The Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air” began broadcasting from a Minneapolis radio station, with a Washburn Crosby employee as Betty Crocker. The show ran for nearly three decades, registering more than a million “students.” Other radio pro-

grams followed, with different women over time personifying Betty Crocker, but the public had no problem fixing her identity. By the early 1950s, General Mills surveys showed that 99 percent of American housewives were familiar with Betty Crocker’s name, more than two-thirds correctly identified her with General Mills and its products, and some 20 percent spontaneously said “Betty Crocker” when asked to name the home economist they found “most helpful.”

Betty Crocker’s presence in print advertising was widespread, and millions of people requested copies of her recipe booklets, but she had her greatest impact on the public through radio. The radio, declared *Fortune* magazine in 1945, “made” Betty Crocker. Not only did it have a national reach that no print publication could match, it was also a peculiarly appropriate home for a figure whose relation to the real world was so intangible. To hear her voice was to add a dimension to her persona that print could not provide, but for a listener to complete the picture required imagination—itself a good medium for someone who was, in fact, imaginary. “And here she is, America’s first lady of food—your Betty Crocker,” the announcer used to proclaim on “Time for Betty Crocker,” underscoring the fact that Betty Crocker could be whatever her public wished or believed.

Betty Crocker’s radio shows, developed before broadcasting enforced any important distinction between editorial content and advertising, conveyed a remarkably fluid version of reality. They seemed to emanate from a world without boundaries, where real people conversed easily with made-up colleagues, and genuine discussions melted into commercial fantasies. “Time for Betty Crocker,” for instance, was a five-minute show that played nine times a week in the ’50s and reached more than eight million homes. The real-life Win Elliot—Betty Crocker’s longtime announcer and interlocutor—always introduced the fictional Betty Crocker: “Hello, everybody,” she would say cordially. Betty Crocker was portrayed from 1950 to 1964 by Adelaide Hawley Cumming, who had been a radio and TV commentator specializing in fashion and women’s news during the 1940s. Cumming’s voice was pleasant and confident, never intimate, and never coy. Her Betty Crocker was a grown-up and a professional, someone to be trusted for her expertise. “You know we’ve found that noodle casseroles are popular with most families,” she informed her listeners on a typical show. “But they can become pretty humdrum unless we’re careful to vary them. And our Noodles Cantonese recipe from my new Good and Easy Cookbook does just that.” Win Elliot, by contrast, spoke in warmer, less formal tones. “Hey, from all I gather, Betty Crocker, the gals are really going for all the recipes in that new cookbook of yours.” When the talk turned
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to 4-Square Fudge Cake, the vehicle for discussing Gold Medal flour, it was Win Elliot who created the domestic context. His wife Rita, he said, had just made the cake for company. “The women all wanted the recipe, and the men—well, they wanted second and third helpings. What a success! The crunchy nuts in that moist, chocolatey, rich, tender . . . delicious cake . . . ummmm mmmmmmm.” Betty Crocker then chuckled and told him, “Win, you’ve just been describing what we like to call ‘that good Gold Medal texture!’” And she went on explaining the merits of Gold Medal until Win Elliot said, “Well, Betty Crocker. It looks like time’s up.” “So it is, Win,” she agreed.17

Strikingly, while she calls him Win, he invariably addresses her as Betty Crocker. There’s an implicit hierarchy in Betty Crocker’s radio world, one that subtly reverses traditional sex roles. Betty Crocker is the professional, Win is the homebody; she’s the source of information, Win is the enthusiast; she’s authoritative, and Win is supportive. In her books and in print advertising, Betty Crocker often made a point of praising the housewife’s importance; but this message gained tremendous power by going undercover, in a sense, on the radio. Rather than overtly patting housewives on the back, she simply ran the show with confidence, described her work and travels, and emphasized that good cooking was an achievement in which women could take a great deal of pride. This kind of unselfish esteem for housewives had begun with Marjorie Husted, one of the first Betty Crockers, who built up the home service department at General Mills through the 1940s and became a company executive. As she explained in a speech to advertising copywriters in 1948, her research among modern homemakers had convinced her that they felt “uncertain—anxious—insecure” about their work and its status. When she asked what they would need in order to be satisfied with their domestic careers, the answers echoed one another: “Encouragement and appreciation . . . Appreciation and recognition . . . Family appreciation . . .”18 Hence nobody in Betty Crocker’s identity was in danger of being identified as “just a housewife,” not even Rita, whose chocolate cake—“What a success!”—was applauded prominently by all. In any home where Betty Crocker reigns, her radio shows promised, the woman in the kitchen finally reaps the respect she’s due.

General Mills could see that Betty Crocker was unparalleled when it came to reaching homemakers and building trust in the company. The phenomenal success of Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book, published in 1950 with a then record-breaking first printing of nearly a million copies, showed just how much home cooks wanted the simply phrased reassurance and reliable advice they associated with her name. By the end of the 1940s, however, her traditional home base in radio was start-

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ing to seem dowdy. Americans were in thrall to the new medium of television, and radio was fast losing ground as an advertising vehicle. Many of the country’s favorite radio personalities were moving to TV; why not Betty Crocker? Her radio shows continued, but in 1950 General Mills gave Betty Crocker her own TV series, filmed on location at company headquarters in Minneapolis. Now the nation would meet her in person.

This move to television coincided with one of the company’s most important new ventures. According to General Mills, American homemakers served more than a billion cakes a year,19 and the company knew from its own mail just how nervous many of those homemakers were about baking them. Along with its competitors, General Mills had been hard at work for years developing a cake mix. In 1948 the company launched its first one, called Gingercake—italics in the original—and followed it with Devils Food Cake and Party Cake mixes. (Party Cake, explained a company newsletter, offered something for everyone. “With egg yolks, it produces a golden cake, with whole eggs, a yellow cake, with egg whites, a white cake and whole eggs plus spices, a spice cake. In combination with icing recipes that come with every package, it will make 64 different cake and icing combinations.”)20 Pillsbury and other companies also introduced their first cake mixes around this time, and ads for what Swans Down called “Miracle-perfect! Miracle-easy! Miracle-quick!” baking sprang up in magazines and newspapers.21

Despite the trauma associated with cake-baking, the new mixes were not an easy sell. For women who believed, with Marjorie Husted, that family love was best symbolized by “the fragrance of good things baking in the oven,”22 a cake mix was guilt in a box. “Many women have resisted the innovations designed to make their job easier because they feel it makes their role seem less necessary and worthwhile,” reported advertising expert Janet Wolff.23 Much of the early publicity about cake mixes justified them by dwelling on the huge expenditures of time and strength that went into old-fashioned baking. Making traditional gingerbread, according to General Mills, called for “13 distinct steps, several of which involve two or more individual operations. . . . Only a homemaker who has gone through the ordeal can appreciate grandmother’s near heroism.”24 But if cake mixes were so very easy to use, the challenge and the sense of achievement dropped right out of baking—and by extension, homemaking. Moreover, survey after survey showed that of all their household tasks, women tended to like cooking best, perhaps because it did have the potential to be involving, demanding, and creative.25 Consequently, many ads urged women to think of a cake mix not as an end in itself but as the starting point for a burst of
imagination. “One of the best ways a woman can express her personality is through the foods she serves,” counseled Ann Pillsbury. “Mixes are not designed to destroy that creative instinct—but for the busy homemaker, they are the base. The basic product is supplied—the frosting, filling or topping is left to her.”

General Mills was counting on mixes of all sorts to dominate the American kitchen in years to come. By 1950 the company was producing cake mixes and pie crust mixes as well as the familiar Bisquick, and more products were in the pipeline. Television would be the key to persuading women that these emblems of speed and certainty deserved pride of place in modern housekeeping. Here, after all, was a selling medium so new that Americans came to it without preconceptions.

Through television, they could be persuaded that what counted in baking were triumphant results—not genuine effort, not even genuine contact with the ingredients. Betty Crocker would guide women as she always had, but this time embodying a more dignified, almost impersonal relationship to the kitchen. Only one show from her TV series survives, the very first, and it hints at a persona and mission for Betty Crocker very different from any she had before.

Broadcast on CBS-TV in the fall of 1951, the inaugural program opened with a dramatic tableau staged far from sink or stove. A woman, anonymous, stood on a promontory against the sky, two young children clinging to her hands. Her chin was lifted, her gaze was unfreking, and her purpose was grave, if not precisely definable. She seemed to personify a valiant young America, defender of truth and protector of the helpless. Then, as she paused with her little family on their arduous though unspecified journey, a firm, masculine voice came clear to viewers just what it was she stood for. “Hosmakin,” he announced. “A woman’s most rewarding way of life.” And with the theme thus proclaimed, the hostess of the show appeared—giving the nation its first view of Betty Crocker as a live person. This transubstantiation from fantasy to flesh was handled with great care. Adelaide Cuming’s name was not spoken, nor did it appear in the credits. Instead, the announcer welcomed viewers into the immediate presence of Betty Crocker herself. And there she was, looking just like her famous portrait; Cuming’s dress and hairstyle had been chosen to resemble it. Her greeting was familiar, too: the well-modulated “Hello, everybody.” But Betty Crocker did not take human form for the first time surrounded by baking pans and measuring cups. When the camera zoomed in, she was seated, with perfect poise and a gracious smile, behind a desk.

The show had what was known as a “service” format, providing detailed information about cooking and baking with constant reference to General Mills products. Interspersed with these segments, which were filmed in the General Mills kitchens, there was a patriotic soap opera in two scenes about a woman who invites an immigrant family for Thanksgiving dinner. Her need for a mince pie recipe gave Betty Crocker all the transitions she needed to get from the American way of life to pie crust mix. But during the frequent segments of the show devoted to rolling out pastry or making instant biscuits, Betty Crocker was never seen cooking. She did show up in the kitchen, but she shared it with a (real-life) General Mills home economist introduced as Ruth. It was Betty Crocker who gave the advice and instructions, and Ruth who did the work, swiftly and efficiently. Even more starkly than on the radio, Betty Crocker’s world was free of old-fashioned female drudgery. In fact, it was free of old-fashioned females. Ruth’s work was depersonalized, and Betty Crocker’s was managerial. Betty Crocker herself, though very much in the kitchen, was not of it. Tall, handsome, and perfectly at ease in front of the camera, Cuming had such beautifully molded dictio she could barely say “Stir-N-Roll” pastry with the requisite slur. It came out “Stern Roll.”

This highly professional stance made a pointed contrast to the sentiment-drenched Thanksgiving dinner in the dramatic segment of the show. With her new persona, Betty Crocker seemed to be distinguishing between home cooking and home cooks. Yes, the meal was still the heart of the holiday, she emphasized, but in these modern days the meal would practically cook itself with the help of the right products. What was truly important—and “rewarding”—were the intangibles of home life, summed up in the opening imagery of female courage and commitment. At the end of the show, seated once more at her desk, Betty Crocker urged viewers to pause during the holidays to remember the blessings of “family living and loving.” Then she read aloud a Sunday school hymn, one that thanked God for all the good things of everyday life, and bid farewell.

The series flopped. In 1952 General Mills tried again with another format, this one featuring Betty Crocker as the hostess of an entertainment show with guest stars. That flopped, too. Americans could listen to Betty Crocker on the radio, they wrote her thousands of letters a week, they bought her cookbooks in record numbers, but they were never comfortable with a real, live Betty Crocker who sat down in their living rooms once a week for a visit. Apparently the cognitive dissonance was just too overwhelming. The portentous message of the first program too was unpersuasive: women never wholly submitted to the notion that homemaking was their most rewarding way of life. Married women had been entering the workforce in steadily increasing
numbers since 1940. The decade that began with Betty Crocker’s TV debut ended with nearly 30 percent of married women working outside the home.

But Betty Crocker did continue appearing on television, and her new emphasis on depersonalized cooking settled in for a long run. For the rest of the decade she was featured in short commercials, where she pitched General Mills products—an unambiguous role that viewers apparently found less disconcerting than her experiment as a guest in their homes. Most of her work was confined to cake mixes, and her message was pared to their chief selling point: mixes were easy to use and infallible. Often in TV commercials she showed up in Gracie Allen’s house, just as Gracie was telling George Burns that she couldn’t think of what to make for her club meeting or a holiday dinner. “Why don’t you ask your friend, Betty Crocker?” George would say. In a moment, the two women were admiring a marble or spice cake that had been produced with almost no visible effort. “It’s so easy, even I can bake a Betty Crocker cake!” Gracie would exclaim with relief at the end. Perhaps because Gracie, like Betty Crocker, was a seamless blend of the real and the imaginary, the two women seemed thoroughly comfortable together. But unlike Betty Crocker’s radio world, where a woman’s voice took the lead and women’s accomplishments earned full recognition, she and Gracie had virtually nothing to do in the TV kitchen. It took no skill to come up with this particular marble or spice cake—indeed, that was the point of their delighted self-congratulation. Betty Crocker, who had started her career by sharing a vast store of culinary expertise, now wielded little more than an air of conviction. By the mid-1950s her persona in print ads followed the tone set by TV. “In strawberry season—or any time—you have it all over mother’s generation,” she told readers in a 1954 angel-food cake mix ad. “Much of the guesswork is gone from cooking. Kitchen time is cut way down. By the ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook foods. By magical appliances that practically think for you. . . . These days, you can even bake without experience.” During this period her TV commercials introduced a tagline that would become famous. “I guarantee a perfect cake, every time you bake—cake after cake after cake,” she assured viewers, conjuring an image of identical, flawless cakes rolling off an assembly line. With this, the woman in the kitchen effectively became redundant. In 1960 Betty Crocker herself disappeared from both radio and television (though she continued to thrive in print). In one of the TV cake-mix commercials that followed her departure, nobody cooked at all—a cartoon spoon Merrily mixed batter in a cartoon bowl.

By the end of the 1950s, packaged foods had gained a permanent place on the nation’s tables, and most of Betty Crocker’s sisters were out of business. Even cake mixes, which had been poor in quality at first, improved enough over time to lure many home cooks. “There are some good mixes on the market,” James Beard wrote to his friend and fellow cookbook author Helen Evans Brown in 1960. “I like the hot roll mix of Pillsbury and the buttermilk pancake mix of Duncan Hines, and their cake mixes aren’t so bad either.” But to many women, including some who cooked from boxes and jars, the hands-off approach to making dinner was fundamentally unsatisfying. It didn’t have enough to do with food, or genuine work, or the pleasure of eating. Analyzing the emptiness at the heart of “the housekeeping role” in the age of convenience, the psychologist Lois Hoffman observed that “many a housewife is saddened to learn that with a package mix she can make an angel food cake two inches higher than the one she had previously made from one cookbook and twelve left-over egg whites.” Her essay was published in 1963—the very year that Julia Child first appeared on television, up to her elbows in flour, butter, and garlic. Here was a culinary authority different from any who came before. There was nothing corporate about her image, nothing packaged about her message; when she stirred the sauce you could practically smell the shallots. But what distinguished her most sharply from her predecessors was the way she spoke to home cooks. Julia Child offered no guarantees, and she never promised she could make cooking easy. Instead, she promised to make it understandable—and to make the woman in the kitchen strong. Home-makers watched and listened, hungrily. More than four decades later, her daughters number in the millions.

Notes

2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
15. “General Mills of Minneapolis,” Fortune, April 1945, 117.
17. Ibid.
19. General Mills, “Eat Your Cake and Have It, Too,” Progress Thru Research, Fall 1949, 10.
27. I am grateful to the staff of the Corporate Archives at General Mills for making it possible for me to see a videotape of this show, which is not normally available for viewing.
29. Once more, I am grateful to General Mills for the opportunity to see a sample of these commercials on videotape.