America’s Cookbooks: Connecticut’s Revolutionary Recipe
‘Cooking by the Book’ exhibit explores culture and values through six iconic cookbooks

Hartford, CT (January, 2013) - A new exhibit, Cooking by the Book: Amelia Simmons to Martha Stewart, opens on January 18, 2013 at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS). The exhibit traces the changes in cooking and its impact on society through iconic American cookbooks dating from the 18th century to present day. Cooking by the Book was developed by students in the Public History graduate program of Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) using the CHS collection and designed by students in the Visual Communication Design program of the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford and will be on view at CHS from January 18- April 13, 2013.

Cooking by the Book showcases one of only four surviving first editions of Amelia Simmons’ American Cookery (1796), America’s first cookbook, published in Hartford, CT. Simmons’ cookbook instructed women how to combine recipes from England with ingredients in America, creating a distinct American cuisine. Later, during the mid-nineteenth century, enhanced technology, ranging from canning methods and more advanced transportation, greatly increased available foodstuffs. In response, Catharine Esther Beecher (sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe) published Miss Beecher’s Domestic Receipt-Book (1846) to guide middle class women, and their household servants, on ways to use new technology with recipes and home maintenance techniques.

Community cookbooks were first published during the Civil War (1861-65) to raise funds for soldiers and their families and they are still common today, popular as fundraisers for churches and civic groups. For women who were often excluded from political participation, community cookbooks provided important channels for female organization, civic pride, social engagement and self-expression as well.

Scientific advances, including electricity, prompted Fannie Farmer’s The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book, first published in 1896. The cookbook encouraged readers to use standardized measurements and scientific-based cooking methods to live healthier lives. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, manufacturers and retailers produced cookbooks and pamphlets encouraging women to shift their priorities from nutrition, taste and tradition to convenience, ease and speed, using pre-packaged food and modern day appliances that have become the norm.

In 1982, a Westport, CT caterer, Martha Stewart, published Entertaining, a return to homemade cuisine and a new focus on entertaining. In contrast to the previous generation’s emphasis on speed and convenience, Stewart treated food preparation, service, and dining as an enjoyable pursuit and built her name into a brand synonymous with upscale living.

Supporting activities for Cooking by the Book include an opening reception and talk on January 18 from 5-6:30pm, featuring historic recipes created from food generously donated by Sodexo. In the spirit of the community cookbooks, a “Community Potluck” will occur on Friday, April 5. Participants will compete in light-hearted categories such as “Things I Wish My Aunt Had Never Served” and “Best Casserole” to be judged by local celebrities and food bloggers.
Cooking by the Book: Amelia Simmons to Martha Stewart is open from January 18- April 13, 2013, at the Connecticut Historical Society, located at 1 Elizabeth Street in Hartford. For more, visit www.chs.org/exhibits or call (860) 236-5621.

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About the Connecticut Historical Society:

Founded in 1825, the Connecticut Historical Society is a non-profit museum, library, research and education center. CHS strives to inspire and foster a life-long interest in history and ignite a passion for learning about history through research assistance, exhibitions, tours and programs for all ages. Visit www.chs.org or call 860-236-5621.