

Early Twentieth-Century Viennese Cake-Mix: Changing the Rules, Erasing the Recipe

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Irányi's Wiener Gugelhupf und Kuchenmasse

In December 1940, government officials knocked on the door of my great-grandmother Malvine Löb Irányi's apartment on Cumberlandstraße in Vienna's 13th district. Their intention was to shut down the cake-mix company she had taken over from her sister-in-law, Rosa Irányi, and renamed in 1911: Irányis Kuchenmasse und Backpulver Fabrikation (Irányi's Cake-mix and Baking Powder Company). Because she was a Jew, my great-grandmother's business would have been closed and its assets seized. Fortunately, she was no longer there: just months before Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938, she had left Vienna to visit her children in Canada and never returned.

That was the end of the story of Malvine's company. What I have set out to understand are its beginnings and the context in which Rosa and Malvine Irányi – sisters-in-law married to Jewish brothers who had changed their last names from Israel and converted to Christianity – began their operation and kept it going in one way or another for several decades. Their story combines the beginnings of the twentieth-century love affair with convenience foods, the rise of women's rights, and the fate of European Jewry. This essay

marks the start of this investigation and is mostly concerned with how to interpret the introduction of cake-mix into Austro-Hungary's cake-loving society.

What does Gugelhupf have to do with rules or rituals? One answer is the ritual of *Kaffee und Kuchen*, famous throughout middle-Europe but specifically associated with the special history of the Viennese coffee house, or *Konditorei*, culture, which since 2011 has been on UNESCO's national inventory of intangible cultural heritage. Sometimes called a *Kaffeeklatch*, *Kaffee und Kuchen* is an afternoon ritual in which family and friends get together for coffee, a sweet, and gossip. While Gugelhupf is not the only cake that might be served at a *Kaffee und Kuchen*, it is strongly associated with it. Gugelhupf is also associated with Sunday breakfast, when bakeries are closed and homemakers are expected to make their own cakes.

In *The German Cookbook*, Mimi Sheraton writes that cakes baked in a round, Gugelhupf, form are very popular in central Europe:

they may be simple sand cakes...marble cakes, poundcakes...or they may be made of a rich yeast dough as the classic Kugelhupf. The Kugelhupf is the original cake to be baked in this high, round, fluted center-tube mold, a shape created after the Turks were defeated at the gates of Vienna in 1683. The Viennese bakers who helped defend their city during the siege created this victory cake, modeling it after the sultan's turban.¹

The traditional Gugelhupf is yeasted. However, even in 1913, in the first edition of the venerated *Wiener Küche*, both yeasted and baking-powder-based Gugelhupf recipes appear.

It's no wonder then, that when Rosa Irányi set out to create cake-mixes for her middle-European compatriots, she chose to do so under the label *Wiener Gugelhupf*, or 'Viennese Gugelhupf'. As any baker knows, baking yeasted bread requires planning. The virtue of baking

powder is that one can decide to make a cake in the late afternoon and serve it for that night's dessert. While bakers developed new cake recipes, they also adapted old ones, such as those for the traditionally yeasted Gugelhupf, which baking powder made possible without too much preparation. Thus, when she developed her cake-mixes, Rosa must have taken the recipes that used baking powder as her models, because without baking powder, there could be no cake-mix.

Adolf Hess's famous book *Wiener Küche* appeared in 1913, five years after Rosa launched her cake-mix company. The almost simultaneous appearance in Vienna of a new cookbook as well as a cake-mix may indicate that there was a general desire to standardize traditional kitchen know-how and define Viennese cuisine in a series of, if not rules, specific directions for a particular outcome. Several questions arise from this simultaneity. One is, to what extent did cake-mix, by virtue of its goal of taking the guesswork out of the recipe – whether handed down through kitchen knowledge or found in a recipe book – erase that recipe? In addition, given that these two historical trends occur – codification and erasure – toward the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one wonders whether they signal attempts to preserve and widely distribute one of the signal products of Viennese culture, the cake or *Kuchen*, just as the empire was about to crumble.

The American literature on cake-mix traces the first commercially available mixes to 1930, when Pittsburgh's P. Duff and Son's began to market their molasses-based cake-mixes in the United States.² However, Irányi's Gugelhupf und Kuchenmasse was established in 1908, and I was curious to know how unusual the company was in its day. In reading family papers, I may have found the answer. Two of Rosa's children, Paul Irányi (1901-1990) and Dora Irányi

Amann (1884-1993), left unpublished memoirs. Paul writes that their mother's *Kuchenmasse* was inspired by the German cake-mix that their father Bernhard Irányi had seen upon visiting Germany. It occurred to Bernhard that with seven children to support, they might develop and market an Austrian version of cake-mix. Rosa would create and test the recipes while he took care of the business end of things.³ When her cake-mix-based Königs-kuchen – a German fruitcake – won the golden medal at Vienna's 1908 *Kochkunstausstellung* (culinary exhibition), they were off and running. While my search for German cake-mixes in this period has yet to yield conclusive results, Dr Oetker's *Kuchenmasse* is one likely possibility. By the turn of the century, Oetker had made a name for himself with puddings and baking powder, and advertising for his *Kuchenmasse* can be found in an edition of the magazine *Moderne Welt* from 1926.

According to Paul, the youngest of Rosa's children, the cake-mix production took place in their apartment on Untere Viaduktgasse and was a family affair. His mother experimented with recipes until she got them just right; the children were her guinea pigs. In her memoir, Dora recounts the unpleasant surprise of biting into a piece of a cake sprinkled with what she assumed was icing sugar only to discover it was baking powder.⁴ Paul remembers helping to package the mixes: 'Exact portions of flour, powdered sugar, vanilla, cocoa, baking- and egg-powder, and powdered milk' were measured on apothecary scales, then spooned into paper bags which were then placed into cardboard boxes. Around each box, the children affixed the instruction labels with the company logo of two elves holding cake-mix boxes. This label was designed by Rosa and Bernhard's daughter, Ella Irányi, who would go on to become a member of the Wiener Werkstatte with a career as a graphic artist and illustrator. She was deported to Poland in 1939 and murdered at Izbica in 1942.

Family stories aren't always complete, so how and why the cake-mix company was transferred from Rosa Irányi to my great-grandmother Malvine Irányi is not entirely clear. However, Paul Irányi writes that because Malvine's husband was unable to make a living toward the end of his life – he suffered increasingly poor health from syphilis – his aunt 'Malvine was now destitute and had three teenage children [at home] to raise'. Paul's father decided that Rosa should hand over the cake-mix company to Malvine – to help her out economically. By this time, Malvine and her family were living around the corner from his family, and the business 'was set up in the basement of [that] house'. As he puts it, 'in this way, Father also took care of' his brother's family.



Figure 1: An advertisement in Czech ~~with baking instructions in Italian~~.

From Yeast to Baking Powder

It would be difficult to overstate the miracle of the invention of baking powder. In the United States, in 2006, ‘The American Chemical Society [...] named the development of baking powder a National Historic Chemical Landmark’.⁵ In eighteenth-century America, bakers used pearlash, or potash – potassium carbonate – which appeared in one of the first American cookbooks, Amelia Simmons’s *American Cookery*, in 1796.⁶ However, because potash was unreliable and often smelly, chemists around the world were looking for an affordable, stable, and commercially viable option. While both English chemist Alfred Bird and American chemist Eben Norton Horsford were among the first to find solutions in the mid-nineteenth century, in Europe, the German pharmacist Dr August Oetker created his own very successful version. He first marketed *Backin Backpulver* in 1893, and it continues to be a dominant brand in Europe today.

This was the context in which Rosa launched her cake-mixes, which replicated the most venerated cakes of middle Europe: Gugelhupf, Linzertorte, Königs Kuchen, Sachertorte, Schokolade Torte, and Sandtorte among them. In the fall of that year, Rosa sent out a card to her many purveyors, asking them to respond in writing to the question of customer satisfaction. From their replies, she produced a folio of repetitive but supportive reviews. Her preface to the self-published brochure explains the project to her potential clientele – the grocers and shopkeepers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

The Viennese Gugelhupf and Cake-mix has been in production for several months and, due to its advantages for the housewife and its excellent quality, wherever it has been introduced, has found a good market, as the letters of appreciation below demonstrate. Since the product finds many buyers, especially in winter, I invite you to order it soon. Note that the cake-mixture is not subject

to spoilage.

Sincerely,

R. Irányi⁷

The addresses of her respondents indicate that Rosa had already reached a far-flung group: their letters come not only from Vienna in the east, where Rosa lived, but from many small towns throughout the north, south, and west of the country. Among the documents in my possession are an advertisement in Czech and baking instructions in Italian, which make it clear that Rosa aimed to interest all Austro-Hungarian homemakers (Figure 1).

Often written in the subject-less but endearingly polite early-twentieth-century business prose of German-speaking shopkeepers – mostly men – these testimonials encouraged buyers (understood to be women) to be confident in their purchase and its results. The cake-mix has, they report, ‘endeared itself to the customers and is repeatedly requested’; they assure Rosa that its virtues are being spread by word of mouth and that they intend to keep ordering it.

The reviews reveal a pattern of at least three arguments for the cake-mix. The first is time-savings. Writes one shopkeeper, the cake-mix is good for those with ‘very little time’. J. Aisteleitner of Vienna responds that the cake-mix was ‘a truly modern means to bake, in a hectic time, where the main focus depends on creating fast, cheap and tasty preparations’. Albert Zani, owner of a delicatessen in what is now Bolzano, Italy, writes that the cake-mixes are ‘easy and practical for summer vacations.’ Convenience then, is another selling point, which overlaps with time-savings. From the consumer’s point of view, as one manager of a buyer’s club declares, customers are satisfied with this ‘easy way to create baked goods’, and he assures Rosa that he will order more soon to keep up with demand. From the store management end, R. Tschernitschek of Obernberg am Inn writes that ‘one need not weigh

individual portions of sugar and flour, which is certainly an advantage for every shopkeeper'. In a period when the grocer served each customer individually – before pre-packaged bags of sugar and flour were the norm – shopkeepers also saved time.

The third recurring selling-point is taste. Shopkeepers continually report that customers 'praise' the cake-mix's quality. Julius Grill, a shopkeeper from Friedberg, writes that 'because of their good taste, the cakes are happily bought by housewives, that they are good for small families, and that the cake-mix is excellent'. Furthermore, many testimonials suggest that the merchants are pleased with their 'lively sales'. In other words, they are making money from it. These accounts reveal that Irányi's *Kuchenmasse* was filling an important role in the lives of certain homemakers: not only were these cake-mixes convenient, they were also tasty; they relieved the baker of certain mundane aspects both of shopping and measuring; and the results were dependable and delicious.

This begs the question of the more insidious effects of cake-mix in a culture famous for traditional torte and *Kuchen* recipes passed down over generations. One shopkeeper, Karl Nowotny of Vienna's 14th Bezirk, writes that his 'customers are very pleased that without a cookbook and without work they can succeed in making baked goods with your cake-mix', and Rudolf Wiener writes that 'the invaluable advantage of your cake-mix lies especially in the fact that a failure is impossible'. From the homemaker's perspective, one can certainly understand: many women have no interest in cooking and baking – why not dispense with the fuss, and especially, with the risk of failure, which also results in waste?

The rituals of serving cake to guests means that the baking of cake is also a ritual; and if cakes come from recipes, sets of instructions passed down through generations, one might ask what the invention and distribution of cake-mix means for the survival of the recipe and culinary

tradition.

Changing the Rules, Erasing the Recipe?

In her famous short essay 'The Anatomy of a Recipe', M.F.K. Fisher gives an overview of the faults of old cookery books, many of which are unclear in a number of ways: they mis-order steps; they lack lists of ingredients; they omit important information, such as the number of portions that can be expected from a recipe; they make assumptions about the cook's knowledge of technique; and so on. There are, she opines, certain things that she requires of any recipe, and these include 'the ingredients and the method'. At the crux of Fisher's arguments against reliance on a cook's prior experience and knowledge is her assertion of what a recipe should be:

A recipe is supposed to be a formula, a means prescribed for producing a desired result, whether that be an atomic weapon, a well-trained Pekingese, or an omelette. There can be no frills about it, no ambiguities... and above all no 'little secrets.' A cook who indulges in such covert and destructive vanity as to leave out one ingredient of a recipe which someone has admired and asked to copy is not honest, and therefore is not a *good cook*.⁸

If we agree with Fisher that a recipe is 'a formula [...] prescribed for producing a desired result', then a cake-mix, which removes much of the capacity for failure, is perhaps a super recipe – designed to help the cook achieve consistency and reliability, even perhaps when the local bakery/Konditorei is closed, or when the innkeeper has an extra family of guests arrive and knows that they will be expecting their *Kaffee und Kuchen* that afternoon.

That said, Fisher's expectations of a written recipe have everything to do with publication: if recipes are handed down within families, they usually rely in part on hands-on

instruction – or what we today might call ‘experiential learning’. Many a cookbook is stuffed with slips of paper on which are scrawled merely a recipe’s ingredients and vague instructions in paragraph form. Often, these are missing certain bits of information, such as the temperature of the oven or the length of time needed for baking; often they end in the words ‘bake until done’. These recipes presume familiarity with ingredients and technique, and so are part of a cultural legacy of experience in the kitchen. In *A History of Cookbooks*, Henry Notaker quotes a Norwegian cooking instructor who in her own book writes that nothing in her book can supplant ‘personal instruction’.⁹ Notaker speculates that early cookbook-writers saw their books more as a mnemonic device for cooks already familiar with the recipes than as how-to books; rather than to teach her how to make something new, recipes were meant to jog the cook’s memory.

Others who write about cookbooks and recipes emphasize the collaboration implicit in the genre, something that Fisher does not address. In *Cookbook Politics*, Kennan Ferguson proposes that the cookbook genre invites readers into a creative process that is both ‘participatory and experimental’. In addition, he cites Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa Goldthwaite, who argue that ‘the recipe is inherently collaborative’, because ‘the text does not have full meaning until a reader puts the recipe in motion through cooking’. Ferguson goes further to suggest that ‘the recipe invites, even demands, a participatory engagement with its own information, inspiration, and pedagogy’.¹⁰

Where Fisher has clear and precise expectations for a three-part recipe (title, ingredients, and method), Ferguson’s description of a recipe’s function is that it is more mnemonic than utilitarian, more of a guide than a set of rules. The recipe may include information such as proportions, which are easily forgotten but can be looked up. But a recipe can also invite inspiration: maybe I will put Sriracha in the meatloaf instead of ketchup, for

example. The recipe assures you that others have come before you, but that you, too, can ‘produce a result that is both instantly recognizable as a version of something widely known and clearly identifiable as your own product’. Ultimately, Ferguson argues that ‘both the recipe and the cookbook provide freedom and structure, intertwined and codependent’.¹¹

It is possible that Fisher and Ferguson represent two schools of thought regarding the role of the recipe that live on in today’s kitchen pop culture. Think, for example, of the emphasis *America’s Test Kitchen* places on the necessity for scientific exactitude as opposed to Sam Sifton’s *New York Times* series of ‘No-Recipe Recipes’, which encourage home cooks to liberate themselves from the recipe and exercise freedom and innovation in the kitchen. What might be missing in both cases is the idea of passing down and accumulating kitchen knowledge, which includes recognizing when a cake is done or when the pan is hot enough to sear your steak. While *America’s Test Kitchen* gives so much precise information that a cook could feel confined by its rigidity, followers of Sam Sifton may feel they don’t have enough information to know when a sauce of soy sauce, mirin, and sesame oil has the right proportions of each. Much of what we call technique is somatic: sight, smell, taste, touch, even sound (the wooden spoon knocking on the bottom crust of a new loaf of bread) all help a cook to determine the stage of a dish. Much of that knowledge becomes unnecessary when we use cake-mix.

In the case of Irányi’s *Wiener Gugelhupf und Kuchenmasse* cake-mixes, each box came with its own color-coded label on which were printed instructions which make it clear that in each box were two packets – one of the cake-mix, with a mixture of flour, sugar, and other powders (e.g. milk-powder, cocoa), and another packet, of baking powder. Along with instructions for the cakes themselves, almost every instruction sheet also has alternative

‘recipes’ for other uses. Here are the instructions for *Wirtschaftskuchen* (Economy Cake), which could also be used to make buns or Bohemian pancakes if different quantities of ingredients were added.

Take a bowl and divide 5-6 dekagrams of softened, but not hot, butter into it.

Add 6 tablespoons of cold milk. If you want the cake to be really good, stir in 1 or 2 eggs, then add the cake-mixture from the package and mix the whole thing well until the dough separates from the wooden spoon. Finally, take the baking powder from the package, shake it firmly, and mix the contents in well. Then pour the mixture immediately into a buttered form and place into a hot oven.

After a half an hour, stick a wooden skewer into the cake. If no batter sticks to it, the cake is done baking and should be sprinkled with sugar while still hot. The finished cake can be sliced in two and brushed with clarified butter.

While these instructions for the baker provide two of M.F.K. Fisher’s requirements for a recipe, namely a title and a method, in the case of the first packet, a list of ingredients and their quantities are missing. In addition, the instructions rely on kitchen knowledge, such as the appropriate temperature of the oven, the normal length of time to bake a cake, etc. While the baker adds milk and maybe eggs, the cake’s actual recipe is kept from the buyer. Clearly, the company is not selling a recipe – for which any baker could consult her mother’s cookbook – but a product: cake in a box.

One might argue that cake-mix is the ultimate democratic product: anyone can succeed at making the cake from the package, and cooks, liberated from the slavery of cooking, can engage their imagination and energy in other pursuits. But one can argue equally that by eliminating the ingredients and in some cases the method used to create a cake from scratch,

one is erasing an important cultural and social connection between generations and reducing the repertoire of experiential kitchen knowledge that comes with using recipes, whether they are handed down orally or on the page. At the same time, one might wonder whether written recipes also interrupt an important element in the passing down of experiential knowledge: what cannot be captured on the page may be that which we must learn through our senses.

In this way, while Rosa and Malvine Irányi may have believed that their cake-mixes were spreading Viennese cake culture throughout Austro-Hungary and making cake accessible to bakers and non-bakers alike, their cake-mix most probably contributed to a loss: through their efforts, the landscape of Austrian cake culture transformed from one in which recipes bound generations through text and practical knowledge to one in which the recipe was kept hidden in the company's kitchen and all you needed to do was to add a few ingredients and stir.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

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⁵ Karen Weintraub and Michael Kuchta, 'A Colorful History of Baking Powder and its Unlikely Inventor,' in *Born in Cambridge: 400 years of ideas and innovators* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022) <<https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/colorful-history-of-baking-powder-and-its-unlikely-inventor/>> [accessed 15 May 2023]

⁶ Ben Panko, 'The Great Uprising: How a Powder Revolutionized Baking', *Smithsonian*, 20 June 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/great-uprising-how-powder-revolutionized-baking-180963772/> [accessed 15 May 2023]

⁷ Rosalie Irányi, 1908. Pamphlet. Family Papers.

⁸ MFK Fisher, 'The Anatomy of a Recipe,' *With Bold Knife and Fork* (New York: Tarcher Perigree, 1983), pp.13-24 (pp. 20-21).

⁹ Henry Notaker, *A History of Cookbooks: From Kitchen to Page Over Seven Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 54.

¹⁰ Kennan Ferguson, *Cookbook Politics* (Philadelphia, U. Pennsylvania Press, 2020), pp. 24, 35.

¹¹ Ferguson, pp. 36, 39.