

# Meet Isabella Beeton... the Martha Stewart of Victorian times

*Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - January 2025*

Every age seems to have its own style maven guiding domestic life.

Lifestyle queen Martha Stewart published her first book, *Entertaining*, in 1982. A magazine and television program followed, and Martha Stewart Living soon became the buzzword for fashionable dining and modern living.

Browsing through a bookstore in Kingston 25 years ago, Phil purchased a copy of Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* for his wife Laurie. First published in 1861, the 1,112-page tome begins with the following declaration: "I have always thought that there is no more fruitful source of family discontent than a housewife's badly cooked dinner and untidy ways."

Far more than today's domestic influencers, Mrs. Beeton emphasized the importance of keeping her man happy.

"Men are now so well served," she tells her readers, "at their clubs, well-ordered taverns, and dining-houses, that in order to compete with the attractions of these places, a mistress must be thoroughly acquainted with the theory and practice of cookery, as well as be perfectly conversant with all the other arts of making and keeping a comfortable home."

Isabella Mary Beeton was 21 years old when she began working on her book, which grew out of a series of articles first appearing in 1859 in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. Tragically, she died seven years later from a postpartum infection, at age 28. By that time, however, her reputation as the Victorian Age's domestic queen was well-established, and her bestselling book could be found in millions of British, colonial and American homes.

Few of her myriad recipes were original -- most were copied from other "cookery books" going back 150 years. However, and much like Martha Stewart 120 years later, Mrs. Beeton's advice to her readers went considerably beyond recipe ideas. In her own words, she was providing "information for the mistress, housekeeper, cook, kitchen maid, butler, footman, coachman, valet, lady's maid, laundry maid, nurse" and more.

This doyenne of Victorian sensibilities puts both dogs and children in their proper Victorian places.

"It is never advisable," she says, "to take a favourite dog into another lady's drawing-room." She further cautioned that "children, also, unless they are particularly well-trained and orderly, and a lady is on exceedingly friendly terms with the hostess, should not accompany her on her morning calls." Mrs. Beeton adds one caveat to this rule: "Where a lady pays her visits in a carriage, the children may accompany her in the vehicle, remaining in it until the visit is over."

Today, many of Mrs. Beeton's recipes seem both suspect and strange. For example, the young bride suggested boiling pasta for an hour and forty-five minutes. She also displayed a distinct distaste for food unfamiliar to the British palate of the day. She compared the taste of mangoes to that of turpentine. She similarly defamed lobster, garlic, cheese and tomatoes. In the wake of the disastrous Irish potato famine, Mrs. Beeton also cast a doleful eye on that staple of today's table.

Nevertheless, by 1890, the mere name of Mrs. Beeton had become accepted as synonymous with expertise in every aspect of domestic and culinary life. No less an authority than the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science stated that Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* "was probably found in more homes than any other cookery book, and was the most often consulted, in the years 1875 to 1914".

Today, 160 years after her passing, Isabella Beeton's torch has been passed. Hugely popular books such as the 1930s *The Joy of Cooking* and the *Good Housekeeping Cookbook* followed. Julia Child gave us *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in 1961.

Today many home cooks faced with that age-old question of what to have for dinner will instinctively consult websites such as Allrecipes or Taste of Home for inspiration. However, nothing will ever fully replace the latest "cookery book" on the kitchen book shelf.