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Convenience and the hierarchy of meal preparation. Cooking and domestic education in the Netherlands, 1910–1930 ☆

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ABSTRACT

The concept of convenience in food products and meal preparation has changed rapidly during the twentieth century. However, there is little investigation into the way attitudes towards this concept have changed, which curbs our understanding of the importance of, and need for, convenience today. This paper uses the magazine of the Dutch schools of domestic education to examine their stance on convenience in meal preparation during the 1910s and 1920s. Recipes and articles are quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to estimate the importance of convenience in food preparation and consumption. The results of this analysis show that there was a *hierarchy* of values with regard to food choice: convenience was definitely valued, but matters of frugality and nutrition generally dominated. This provides not just a nuanced image of the role of domestic education (demanding yet flexible), but it also gives insight into the mechanics of food choice, which may at least partly still apply today.

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Introduction

Convenience – the reduction of time, physical and/or mental effort required for food shopping, preparation, consumption and clean-up – is one possible determinant in food choice, amongst others such as frugality, nutrition, and taste (Brunner, van der Horst, & Siegrist, 2010). The variety of determinants is endless, and occasionally a dish even needs to be fluffy, purple, or fun. Since these different factors do not necessarily align perfectly, they need to be weighed, or negotiated, for every product and preparation (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996). When choosing either foods or a type of preparation, this negotiation means that the importance of convenience is relative to other factors: there is a complex *hierarchy* of determinants, which differs according to cultural setting, financial possibilities, et cetera (Glanz, Basil, Maibach, Goldberg, & Snyder, 1998; Köster, 2009). Of course, this relative importance also changes through time, making it meaningful to consider the way people viewed convenience in earlier times. The aim of this paper is to map historical food choices to uncover the relative importance of convenience to those living a century ago. The study of advice literature from 1910 to 1930 will clarify ideas about cooking held by

prior generations, thereby contributing to knowledge about the past that may still be relevant today. After an explanation of the methodology, the focus is on three aspects of the advice: meal structure, the hay box, and prepared food products.

Background and methodology

The magazine of the Dutch schools for domestic education and cookery, *In en Om de Woning* ('In and Around the House'; IODW) was the official channel of the Dutch schools for domestic education, founded in 1894 and known until 1914 as *In en Om de Keuken* ('In and Around the Kitchen'). It is a pre-eminent source for research on changing attitudes towards convenience cooking, because schools for domestic education have had a significant influence on the practice of meal preparation, both in the Netherlands and other parts of the Western world (Scholliers, 2013; Shapiro, 1986; van Otterloo, 1985). In the interwar period, when commercial women's magazines featuring consumer advice and recipes were scarcer, the potential impact of this publication – on the middle-classes in particular – was considerable. The content of *IEODW* naturally reflects the attitudes of its writers, and it is those attitudes with which this paper primarily concerns itself. However, these texts existed partly because of their intended effect: a magazine such as *IEODW* forms an effort at bringing together domestic educators and an 'implied audience' of middle-class, non-working women with multiple (young) children (Livingstone, 1998). Ideas about food preparation do not exist in a vacuum, and therefore cannot be separated from the act of food preparation itself (Lees-Maffei, 2003). Taking the immense popularity of the schools into account – the number of

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pupils growing from 13,000 in 1900 to 68,000 in 1938 – one can assume these teachers and their writings to have had a significant impact on their readership. This audience, which spent considerable time and money on engaging with the ideas propagated in *IEODW* – be it as a subscriber or as a pupil at one of the schools – can at least be characterised as receptive, without ruling out deviation from, or resistance to, the presented ‘narratives of normality’ (Schirato & Yell, 2000).

The aim of the schools was educating a cross section of society, but they mostly drew middle-class girls, in part because of their tuition fees (de Rooy, 1985). *IEODW* exhibited the great bourgeois demands of the teachers: the population needed to be cleaner and more prudent with money, and to eat and work better (Montijn, 2008; van Otterloo, 1985). Home-making and cooking were seen as a ‘profession’ of the utmost importance. Domestic education also consisted of an attempt to increase efficiency in the household: meal preparation required rationalisation by implementing modern ways of thinking into the procedure (Jobse-van Putten, 1987; van Otterloo, 2005). But while increased efficiency could be effected by the use of convenience products, would too much convenience not undermine the prestige of the ‘profession’? Even futuristic accounts of automated kitchens reserved a large role for the woman of the house (albeit as a household engineer instead of a drudge). This begs the question of how domestic educators dealt with convenience cooking: was it rejected, permitted, or encouraged in *IEODW*? What was the (relative) importance of convenience in food preparation and consumption to the schools for domestic education in the Netherlands? Answering these questions helps in gaining a more nuanced and complete view of the role of the domestic education movement. Furthermore, it is an important step in acquiring a diachronic account of convenience as a determinant in food choice. To formulate an adequate response to these questions, both recipes and articles in *IEODW* were examined. The recipes were analysed for length, food type, complexity (both in the amount of ingredients and method), grammatical structure, mention of accessories, and possible convenient products or methods, for the agency given to readers, and simply for direct references to convenience. The articles have been subjected to close-reading techniques, with special attention to convenience products and preparations, discussions of effort (be it mental or physical), tone, instructional language, and matters of food choice. Descriptive statistics are given when appropriate. In contrast to research that focuses exclusively on measuring the reduction of time spent (e.g. Schwartz-Cowan, 1983), this paper uses a broad notion of convenience more in line with Brunner et al. (2010): any reduction in time, mental and/or physical effort, be it as a primary or secondary effect of the proposed method, recipe or product, is considered a suggestion of convenience.

The period of investigation, the 1910s and 1920s, encapsulates both a phase of crisis (the First World War) as well as one of relative prosperity (most of the 1920s). It allows for a diachronic view on the need and/or room for convenience in changing contexts. The period also marks the first acceleration in the disappearance of the servant in Western middle-class households, lending the concept of convenience an additional layer of meaning (Henkes & Oosterhof, 1985; Sarti, 2006). Since *IEODW*’s articles and recipes were generally remarkably consistent with regard to content and tone, and because most were not signed, they have been treated as if coming from one ‘voice’.

From 1910 to 1930, *IEODW* appeared monthly and had about ten pages, with an average of 7.1 articles and 5.7 recipes per issue. The amount of recipes gradually declined over the years (\bar{x} = 6.7 for 1910–1914, \bar{x} = 4.1 for 1925–1929), whereas the number of articles increased (\bar{x} = 5.9 and 7.8, respectively). Articles were usually instructional, while their scope was broad content-wise. In 1910, for example, two articles named “Acquiring Happiness” and “Some Ways of Cleaning Stains from Outerwear” featured on the same page

(10–1910, p. 94). As said, the readership consisted mostly of middle-class women, corroborated by the general tone of the publication, the fact that social problems were discussed as if the working class was not ‘listening in’ (e.g. 05–1916, pp. 45–47) and the subscription fee (f 1.90 in 1910; enough to buy 27 kilos of potatoes or 3.8 kilos of sugar (01–1910, p. 9). Since *IEODW* contained over 1700 articles and nearly 1300 recipes between 1910 and 1930, this paper zooms in on three specific topics: the hay box as an example of a ‘convenient’ kitchen aid, the structure of the meal, and the use of prepared food products.

The hay box

The hay box was rather popular in its day, so much so that in 1917, *IEODW* proclaimed, “We assume that every kitchen is presently equipped with one or two hay boxes” (08–1917, pp. 76–78). Although this was probably an overestimation, it is easy to imagine this ‘wonder oven’ being quite popular, especially since it was – and is – such a simple contraption. The small chest, lined with hay or newspapers for insulation, facilitated slow-cooking *avant-la-lettre*. A cooking vessel, brought to the boiling point on the stove, then immediately placed in the box, would very slowly lose its heat because of the insulation, gently cooking the food within (see Fig. 1). While insulation cooking is millennia-old (e.g. earth ovens: Wandsnider, 1997), this ‘fireless cooker’ was introduced in the Netherlands in 1895 in the newspaper *Het Nieuws van den Dag* (‘News of the Day’; 06–17 1895, p. 9).

There was a significant potential for convenience in this type of preparation. Now, one’s attention could be shifted, while timing – a crucial factor with regard to convenience (Warde, 1999) – became unimportant: the technique made both burning and overcooking food almost impossible, lessening the mental effort involved in meal preparation. But there were more convenience elements to the box: contrary to stovetop cooking, odours were not a problem, and in summer, meal preparation would not heat up the kitchen or the house as much. It is clear that the relative effort devoted to house-keeping, or at least ‘convenience’, cannot simply be measured by the reduction of time spent, as has sometimes been argued (Schwartz-Cowan, 1983).

This wonder oven was occasionally praised in *IEODW* for its convenient nature: “These days, if one chooses to do so, one can prepare meals in a hay box [...], while going for a walk in the meantime.” (03–1914, pp. 21–22). In an article titled “What Shall We Eat, When the Maid is on her Fourteen-day July Holiday?” (07–1922, pp. 57–58), use of the hay box was recommended, which would ensure the

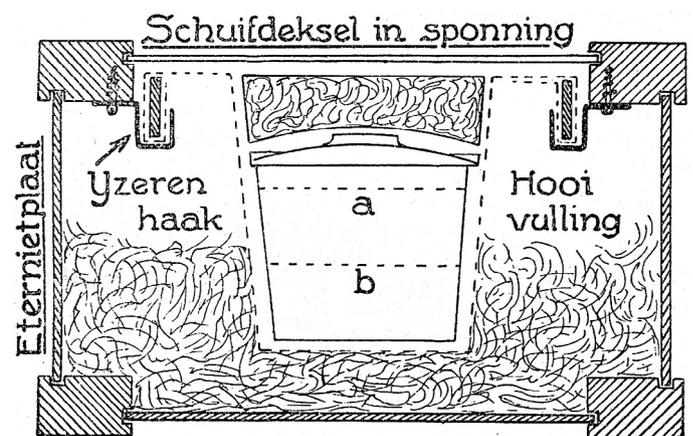


Fig. 1. A picture of a hay box, displayed in *IEODW* (10–1917, p. 91). The text reads (top to bottom, left to right): ‘sliding lid in rebate’, ‘plate of asbestos cement’, ‘iron hook’, ‘hay filling’.

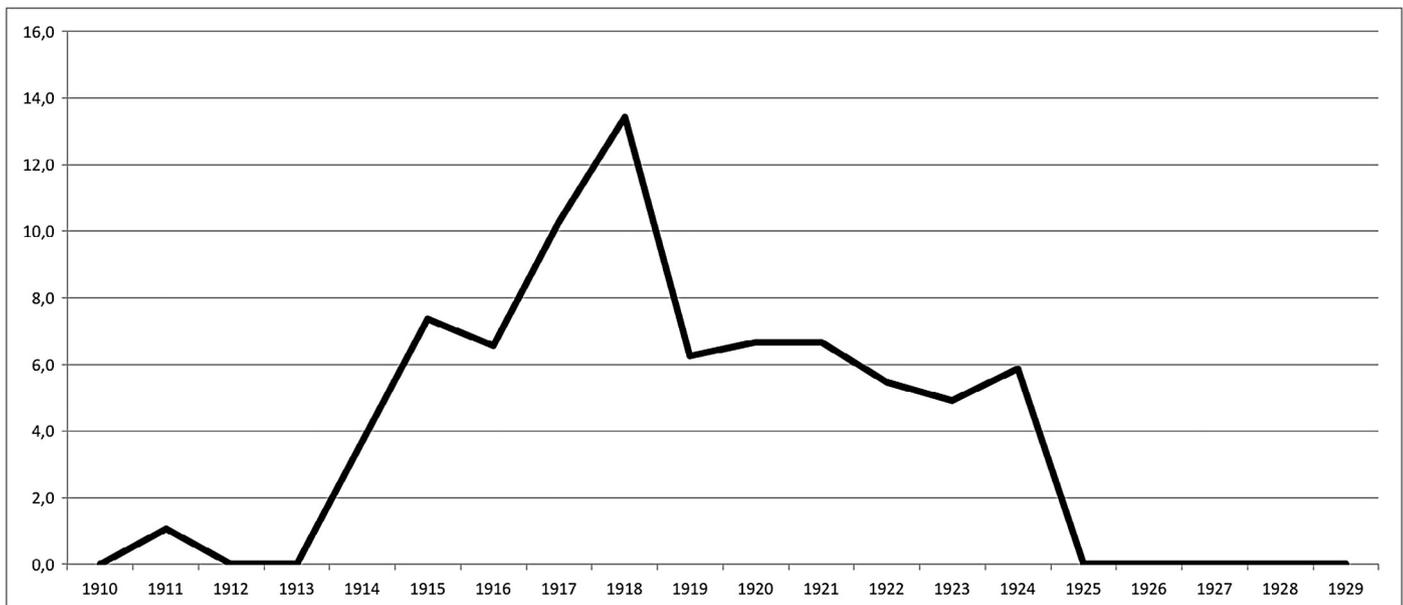


Fig. 2. Percentage of hay box recipes of total recipes in *IEODW*.

housewife “plenty of time to be busy outside the kitchen”. The corresponding fourteen-day menu incorporated the box no less than seven times. But most times, the possibility of saving fuel was mentioned first (e.g., 09-1917, p. 87; 10-1917, p. 90; 10-1917, pp. 91–92). Moreover, 27 of the 50 hay box recipes in *IEODW* were published during the First World War, during which it was called the ‘official coal saver’ (08-1917, p. 77; see Fig. 2).

Internationally, the trend was similar: in 1915, American home economics celebrity Christine Frederick published an entire book on the fireless cooker – albeit a very advanced one – and her colleague Martha Van Rensselaer instructed her readers that “Every kitchen should be equipped with [...] a fireless cooker” (Frederick, 1915; Van Rensselaer, Rose, & Canon, 1919; p. 207). Using Google Ngram Viewer, which shows the occurrence of phrases in English literature through time, the number of references to the ‘fireless cooker’ (the more common name in American-English) can be plotted. Interest increases almost twenty-fold between 1907 and 1917, gradually declining by 50–70 per cent per ten years for the five decades thereafter.

Since *IEODW* stopped publishing hay box recipes long after the war was over, it would be wrong to suggest that the contraption’s popularity was simply hype. As a matter of fact, in its *articles*, the magazine indirectly mentioned a few reasons for its dwindling interest in the box. Meals prepared this way were kept at ‘dangerous’ temperatures (24–70 °C/75–160 °F) for a significant amount of time, which alarmed authors in 1917 and in 1929 (10-1917, pp. 90–92; 03-1929, p. 38). Furthermore, readers were warned that vitamins, whose existence had only recently been discovered, did not survive the protracted heating, doing “more damage than shorter cooking times on the stove” (12-1920, pp. 110–111). It appeared that hay box meals could not satisfy nutritional demands. The above allows for an estimation of *IEODW*’s priorities. The ideal recipe was economical, nutritious, substantial, and convenient. Taste, albeit less prominent in the hay box recipes, was also a factor. Laura Shapiro, in her well-known book on the women of the American domestic science movement, commented on their apparent disregard for taste (Shapiro, 1986). Dutch domestic educators have been accused of that very same attitude, but their portrayal as Calvinist killjoys has been challenged (Montijn, 2008). In fact, many recipes in *IEODW* alluded to flavour as an important factor, and frequently tips were given for

improving taste, often – although not necessarily – at the cost of convenience and/or frugality. The words ‘taste’, ‘tasty’, and ‘aroma(tic)’ feature 716 times in 1295 recipes, hence the concept was considered of some importance.

The magazine displayed a *hierarchy* of food qualities: a recipe had to be economical, nutritious, and substantial first. Convenience and taste were part of the equation, but at least in the case of the hay box, not a priority. Once a meal’s value had declined by being too expensive, unhealthy, or insubstantial, its recipe was no longer considered appropriate, *regardless* of how convenient (shorter preparation, less washing-up, et cetera) it seemed. Here, the example of the hay box shows us the *relative* importance of convenience to the domestic educators.

Curiously, the fireless cooker is making its comeback. Fully commercialised, the box is now sold at prices as high as € 120 (or \$160), although various instructions can be found online for making one’s own. Current-day users present the hay box as ‘sustainable’ as well as convenient, its energy saving qualities now seen as benefiting both the environment as well as the household budget. This sets the fireless cooker apart and has made its return possible, despite the availability of perhaps more modern cooking methods. Food spoilage and vitamin intake are more easily managed, so that the negative traits of this ‘official coal saver’ can be ignored – at least occasionally.

Meal structure

Prevailing ideas about meal structure are of great importance when it comes to convenience cooking. After all, notions about what comprises a ‘meal’ determine the amount of effort needed to prepare one. Mary Douglas has argued for the importance of the *cultural concept of the meal*, explaining that it greatly influences the choices made regarding food preparation (Douglas, 1999). In *IEODW*, the meal was expressly presented as a three-course affair. The feature ‘Calculated Meals’ (‘Berekende Maaltijden’; featuring exact cost and nutritional value) which ran until 1921, offered 63 menus in total. All of these ‘calculated’ menus contained a dessert, while 76 per cent also prescribed a starter. The previously mentioned fourteen-day menu for use during the maid’s holiday mostly skips the starters (2/14), but it still includes no less than twelve desserts, despite being

labelled 'simple meals' (07-1922, pp. 57–58). In the regular recipe columns of *IEODW*, 516 instructions for sweet dishes/desserts were published between 1910 and 1930, constituting 39.8 per cent of all recipes. This percentage fluctuated little, even during the war years ($SD = 5.5$). The ubiquity of desserts in this practical magazine is remarkable, considering the course lacks – at least according to several historians – any real biological purpose (Kronl, 2011; Santing, 1986).

One might conclude that, on the surface, the dominant idea of meal structure exhibited in *IEODW* opposed the notion of convenience, demanding a three-course dinner for the majority of days. But on further inspection, there was a significant mitigating factor. The composition of the 'Calculated Meals', for example, was consistently explained in terms of the amount of carbohydrates, fat, and protein; sometimes 'salts' – later to be called vitamins and minerals – were mentioned. Starter and dessert were part of that model: they had an important nutritional role. Hence, the characterisation of dessert as "[...] frivolous, unnecessary [...]" (Kronl, 2011, p. 3) is ahistorical.

In *IEODW*, desserts rich in dairy represented a source of protein, while other types of first or last courses were seen – or rationalised – as an attempt at increasing the amount of carbohydrates in the total meal (e.g., vermicelli soup, pancakes). The eleven 'Calculated Meals' that suggested the starter or dessert could be skipped for more convenience are further proof of the *hierarchy* employed in *IEODW* with respect to determinants in food choice. Here too, convenience was allowed once the family's nutrition was guaranteed: "The peas and the meat give the meal a good amount of protein, meaning that the dessert, featuring milk and egg, can be skipped if so desired. An apple or a little bunch of grapes is just as good a conclusion to this meal" (13-1913, p. 136). This attitude, stressing the nutritional importance of starters and desserts, can perhaps also explain their lasting, historical presence in meal patterns (Douglas, 1999; Jerome, 1976).

If we look at the actual descriptions of these starters and desserts, their functional, convenient nature becomes obvious. The twelve desserts in the menu for when the maid is on holiday feature leftover cake, leftover rice, apricot purée from a can, and rusk with jam (twice). Exactly two-thirds of all the starters featured in the 'Calculated Meals' are relatively simple soups, at times called "potage à la minute" (e.g. 09-1912, p. 93), many of them calling for ready-made products (see 'Maggi and cans' section below). The dominant idea of what constituted a meal might have seemed inconvenient, but there were many shortcuts to the daily preparation of three courses.

It appears not much has changed. While families still enjoy a multiple-course meal, starters and desserts are now increasingly bought ready-made. Such products, often packaged as single-servings, are increasingly popular in the Netherlands (and worldwide), making starters and desserts the most convenient courses to prepare (te Pas, 2009; S.N., 2014). Being a direct result of the industrialisation of food production, these commodities show how manufacturers have greatly influenced both meal preparation and the concept of convenience itself.

Maggi and cans

A look at the products featured in *IEODW* can help understand the influence of manufacturers on food preparation. One of these products was Maggi meat extract (a similar product to that of Liebig), which greatly reduced both the effort and planning involved in preparing soup. Maggi advertised in *IEODW* until 1915, quite literally applying the food choice hierarchy ("Nutritious. Affordable. Appealing." 07-1911, p. 85). The product was also endorsed in thinly veiled advertorials (e.g., 09-1912, p. 94; 06-1929, p. 87). Although the total amount of recipes featuring Maggi extract was not that impressive (47; see Fig. 3), their use meant saving a great amount

of time and effort. Moreover, soup recipes often called for 'stock', without specifying whether it should be home-made stock or not. Maggi cubes helped further simplify the aforementioned daily preparation of three-course meals.

As a product group, however, canned foods were most clearly visible in *IEODW*. Regarding convenience in meal preparation, the can had its advantages with respect to both time (shorter/no cooking; little clean-up) and timing (being a non-perishable). Its popularity grew amongst the bourgeoisie, becoming more affordable around the turn of the century. Production of cans rose by a factor of 40 in the Netherlands in the 1920s (de Knecht-van Eekelen & van Otterloo, 1997), but they were popular in countries such as Belgium, France, and the United States as well (Bruegel, 2002; Petrick, 2012; van den Eeckhout & Scholliers, 2011). Still, it remained somewhat of a luxury good: in 1910 a 1.5 litre can of string beans cost 37.5 cents, while a hundred fresh string beans were only between 20 and 25 cents (06-1910, p. 60; 11-1913, p. 116; 10-1911, p. 101).

In *IEODW*, coverage on the can was generally favourable:

"[...] if a product is offered to us, which meets a need, that is good and not too expensive, then of course it will be bought. [...] The taste, almost equal to fresh vegetables, fruits, (meats, soups, sauces), is the big attraction. The realisation that vegetables and fruits lose so little of their juices during sterilisation, making their nutritional value approximately equal to the fresh product, makes them even more desired [...]" (07-1918, pp. 65–66).

This quote contains the previously mentioned hierarchy of determinants for making food decisions: not just frugality and nutrition are discussed, but taste and convenience ("meets a need") as well.

In articles, canned foods were compared to home-made preserves. Especially near the end of the 1920s, using Weck jars for private bottling was portrayed as expensive, time-consuming, and thus simply irrational – in particular for city women (03-1928, pp. 33–34). While *Wecking*, "one needs to make sure the commendable care taken for lean times does not degenerate into a overenthusiastic sport of ostensible housewife-ish respectability" (08-1929, pp. 117–118). *Wecking* would eventually decrease in popularity after the Second World War – at least in part because of the abundance of affordable canned foods.

In *IEODW*, 83 recipes (6.1 per cent of the total) contained canned foods. Although a relatively small number, one has to take into account the nature of the recipe genre: an instruction on how to prepare food would not generally be expected to include much food that has already been prepared. The percentage was also influenced somewhat by the lean years of the First World War, during which it dropped to 3.3 per cent (see Fig. 3). Canned foods found in *IEODW* recipes generally played a significant role as the main fruit or vegetable. The reduction of time (and consequently effort) in food preparation was clearly central to the recommendation of cans in *IEODW*. A recipe for a dessert called 'Quick and Tasty' (cursive mine) featured a can of 'Californian' apricots, leftover cake or stale bread, and cream, and consisted of little more than slicing and decorating (01-1916, p. 8).

However, as these products integrated into everyday cooking, the growing interest in vitamins raised some questions about canned foods. It was "probably without vitamins" (12-1920, pp. 110–111), leading to the conclusion that "fresh is better than preserved" (07-1926, pp. 82–83). Oddly, the amount of meal suggestions featuring canned foods remained unaffected. Here – at least occasionally – nutrition *lost* to convenience. Nevertheless, there were limits. After an article about dangerous processing techniques in 1925, *IEODW* contained no canned food recipes for the rest of the year. This contradictory treatment of the can was indicative of the complex image of the product group. Both in the United States and in Europe, canned foods' growing popularity was somewhat curbed by their confusing portrayal in the media. They were praised for their efficient nature and their hygienic production process as well as distrusted

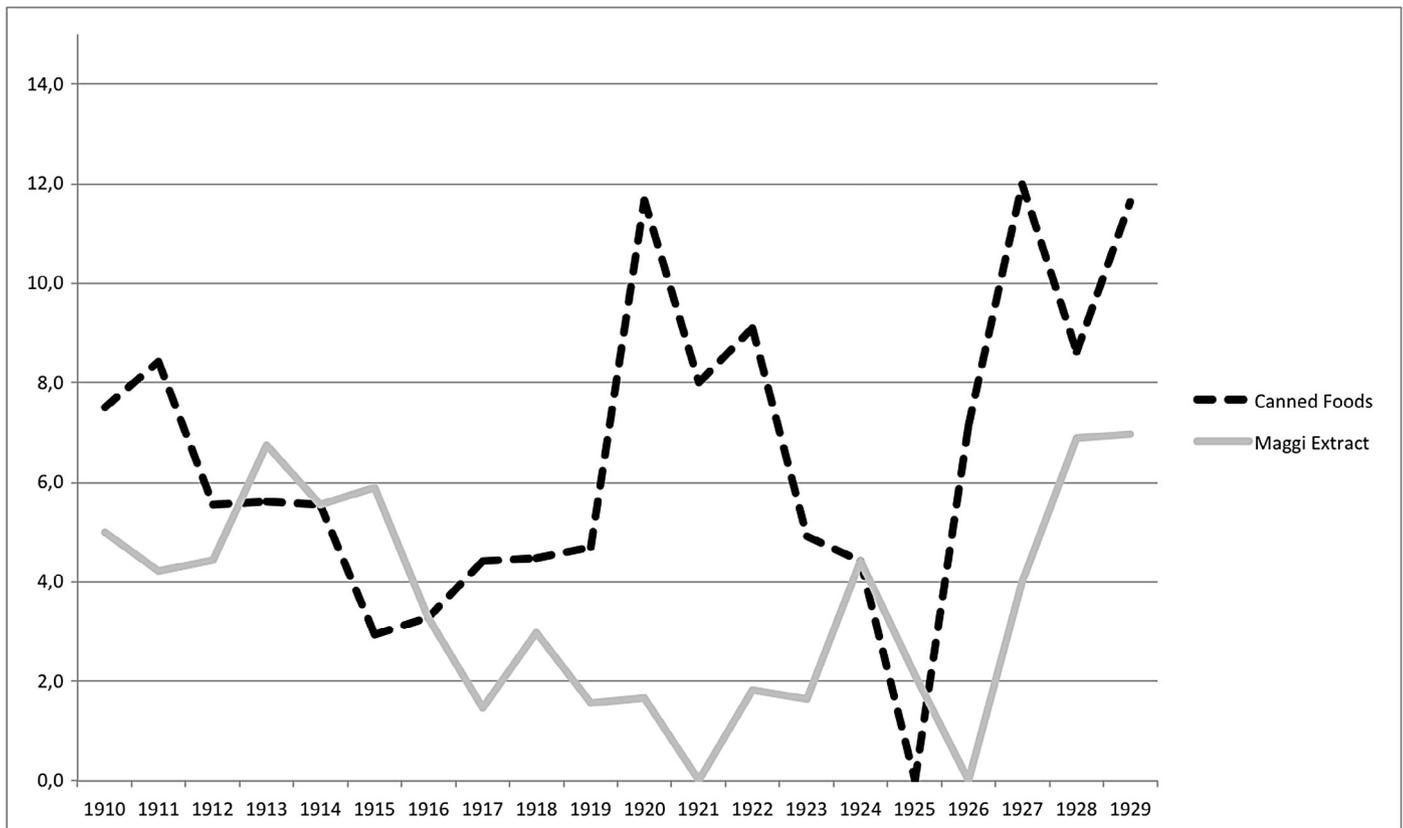


Fig. 3. Canned foods and Maggi meat-extract recipes as a percentage of the total amount of recipes in *IEODW*.

for their role in food scares and their uncertain nutritional status (Bruegel, 2002; Hollows, 2006; Zeide, 2014). Perhaps the Dutch public had grown accustomed to a certain degree of dietary scepticism, since food regulation laws were not introduced in the Netherlands until 1919. In this period of rapidly increasing nutritional knowledge, *IEODW* followed the trend: it published both glowing reviews and cautionary tales. Regardless of its opinion on canned foods, however, it consistently stressed the importance of proper nutrition.

Canned foods and bouillon cubes were not the only type of products that were incorporated into the recipes of *IEODW*. But the possibility for convenience always came at a price – literally. Buying filet instead of a whole fish, opting for self-rising flour instead of mixing it yourself, purchasing raspberry purée instead of preserving it at home: although the extra cost was noted, the reader was still given the option (04-1911, p. 37; 07-1913, p. 75; 04-1926, p. 44). Frugality was a major food value, but while the hierarchy of food values propagated by *IEODW* might have been dominant in the Netherlands between 1910 and 1930, there would have been those who could – or had to – make different choices with regard to lifestyle. For this reason the magazine's principles were often pliable, which created what has been called “a space for the production of [...] different forms of middle-class lifestyle” (Hollows, 2006, p. 22). *IEODW* underlined its own flexibility by describing the recipes as “not the decrees of a dictator” (03-1913, p. 33). Most were in fact quite non-committal in tone, leaving room for convenience to those on a different budget, or housewives dealing with specific situations, such as the maid's holiday.

Conclusion

IEODW constructed a food choice hierarchy. Nutrition and substance were essential, while taste and frugality were also of importance.

The weight of convenience was less pronounced. Interestingly, although teachers of domestic schools have been depicted as strict ideologues for bourgeois living, their cooking instructions tell another story. Despite great expectations cast on housewives in the 1910s and 1920s, *IEODW* was empathetic when it came to food preparation. It sympathised with housewives and tried to spur on the ‘rationalisation’ of cooking. Meanwhile it used convenience foods and accessories, and offered flexibility in meal structures, to help its readership cope with the servant-less household. This ‘rationalisation’ of the household was an international trend that lasted decades. Despite their complex image, American convenience products such as canned foods were generally met with enthusiasm on European markets.

Reviewing considerations made a century ago also reveals some changes in our food choices. Back then, food preparation often demanded time *and* timing, more knowledge, and greater physical and mental effort. This means that ‘convenience’ clearly needs to be conceptualised as much more than simple time reduction. At later moments such as the 1950s and the 1980s, convenience and its accompanying products were also mostly welcomed, but research suggests that there was a specific time and place for them, and their presentation mattered greatly – at least in the Netherlands (S.N, 1990; Verriet, 2013).

In absolute terms, the amount of effort spent on meal preparation has greatly diminished. Such quantitative changes also cause qualitative effects, however. Starters and desserts are now often bought instead of prepared, altering our relation to these courses. Cooking accessories have advanced from hay box to microwave, but food choice is still dependent on matters such as frugality, nutrition, taste and convenience. It is difficult to assess whether the hierarchy has changed for Western societies, but it is clear that nutrition and convenience are still an awkward combination (e.g., Brunner et al., 2010; Carrillo, Varela, Salvador, & Fiszman, 2011).

Expectations were high during the 1910s and 1920s, but IEODW itself was rather flexible: “[T]he demands that are made upon everyday life have become higher, but [...] all of it is voluntary; one does not need to join in if one does not want to [...] there truly is much less to do for she who is running the household” (03-1914, pp. 21–22). As long as housewives heeded nutrition, economy, and taste, then domestic educators were in favour of the various available forms of convenience: “Always, always keep in mind that there needs to be a certain balance between exertion and relaxation: it helps both our performance as well as our body” (01-1915, pp. 7–8). Hence convenience products and methods helped cement the idea that food preparation could and should at times be adapted to the rhythm of everyday life, instead of the other way around.

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