14. The "Little Chef" Stove

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little-chef.jpeg

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“Pkbites” was excited to find an antique, miniature stove in his mother’s attic in 2012. His excitement waned when he plugged it in and the hotplate got extremely hot. He wrote to “The Straight Dope” message board looking for information. “Other than to give little girls severe burns,” he groused, “I’m not sure what the manufacturers of this thing intended it for.” When “nogravity” responded and confirmed that the “Little Chef” stove was a toy, the incredulous “pkbites” vowed to cut the electrical cord and crush the tiny stove before someone got hurt.(1)

“Nogravity” was right. Tacoma Metal Products created the “Little Chef” stove in 1945 for children to play house. High-end models had a working hot plate and two functioning ovens that could be heated to 375 degrees; low-end models had only the stovetop range.(2) In the post-World War II rush to move to suburbia and establish nuclear families, the stove sold well despite competition from the “Little Lady” and “Suzy Homemaker” ovens. In 1946, Tacoma Metal sold over 50,000 “Little Chef” stoves.(3)

At the end of the nineteenth century, young girls were encouraged to learn to cook in order to help feed their families. Wealthy children might be given miniature, cast iron play stoves (heated with woodchips or bits of coal), but these children were the
exception. Most ten- to-twelve-year-old girls learned to cook on the family stove. *When Mother Lets Us Cook*, a children’s cookbook from 1908, instructed girls on how to prepare practical meals such as scalloped fish “without troubling mother and the cook too much.”(4) But in the 1920s Americans embraced new ideas about consumerism and the value of play, and these ideas changed how girls and boys learned about the kitchen. The “Little Chef” oven was a toy, although it could boil a hot dog, and the most important skill that it taught was consumerism. In *Susie’s New Stove*, a “Little Golden Book” featuring the “Little Chef” stove, Susie’s brother sells groceries at a play store that Susie then prepares in her oven. In a real life analogue, Tacoma Metal sold branded kits, such as the Campbell Kids Cooking Set, to accompany the stove.

The “Little Chef’s” successor would further the shift away from producing food to consuming it. Introduced in 1963, Kenner’s Easy-Bake oven with its safety-minded, slide- through baking tray, its two 100-watt light bulbs, and its packets of specially designed cake mixes, offered few real-life cooking lessons. Early on, Kenner sold twenty-five mixes; eventually it also offered Betty Crocker cake mixes and heat-and-serve McDonald’s apple pies.(5)

For some young women, the Easy-Bake oven’s brightly colored exterior designed to match “mommy’s kitchen” came to symbolize sexism and a lifetime of kitchen drudgery.(6) For others, both girls and boys, the Easy-Bake stove inspired careers as chefs.(7) But no one learns how to cook on an Easy-Bake oven; that is not what the “manufacturers of this thing intended it for.” Easy-Bake ovens teach children to buy more mixes.

Notes


2. Earlier electric stoves, such as the one produced by Empire Metal in the 1920s, had thermometers calibrated up to 500 degrees. A late 1920s stove produced by Lionel (the toy train maker) was large enough and powerful enough that when it failed as a toy, it was marketed to couples living in apartments. See James Leach, “Kids and Cooking: Playing with Fire,” Strong Museum, modified May 10, 2011 and accessed May 29, 2014, [http://www.museumofplay.org/blog/play-stuff/2011/05/kids-and-cooking-playing-with-fire](http://www.museumofplay.org/blog/play-stuff/2011/05/kids-and-cooking-playing-with-fire).


