



# Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture

*Megan J. Elias*

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## **Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture** Megan J. Elias

For Americans who came of age in the mid-twentieth century, home economics conjures memories of burnt toast and sewing disasters. But as historian Megan Elias shows in *Stir It Up*, home economics began as an idealistic reform movement in higher education in the early 1900s. Leaders of this movement sought to discover and disseminate the best methods for performing domestic work while creating new professional options for women that were based on elements of home life. Home and family were treated as subjects for scientific analysis; students wore lab coats while baking bread and performed rigorous tests on the palatability of their work. The Federal Bureau of Home Economics supplied a grateful audience with informational bulletins as Americans seemed to accept the idea that home could be a site for social change.

A major shift occurred in the 1950s, when new ideas about women's roles seemed to divert home economics into more traditional channels, and "home ec" became identified with the era's conformist culture. Even as home economists were redefining family dynamics and influencing government policies, such as school lunch programs, their field was becoming an object of scorn, especially to the feminists of the 1960s. *Stir It Up* explains what the successes and failures of home economists can tell us about American culture. The book concludes with an examination of contemporary attitudes toward domesticity, putting the phenomena of Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray, Ty Pennington, and the "Mommy Wars" into historical context.

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