



2006

A cookbook for the tropics

Jane Downing

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Downing, Jane, A cookbook for the tropics, *Kunapipi*, 28(2), 2006.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol28/iss2/13>

A cookbook for the tropics

Abstract

The *Kochbuch für die Tropen*, first published in Berlin in 1907, has on the titlepage the information that the book was compiled by Antonie Brandeis née Ruete and is based on her many years experience in the tropics and subtropics. The cookbook went to four editions, all in the original German. Whether, a century later, that success can be attributed to the quality of the more-than-three hundred pages of recipes or to the name of the author, is difficult to say. Antonie Brandeis clearly wanted her maiden name advertised. The German book-buying public, and more especially those interested in the colonies of the tropics and subtropics, would have recognised the name, 'Ruete', for Brandeis' mother, Emily Ruete, was a Princess of Zanzibar and Oman, whose memoir, published at the end of the nineteenth century, had given the name a measure of notoriety.

JANE DOWNING

A Cookbook for the Tropics

The *Kochbuch für die Tropen*, first published in Berlin in 1907, has on the titlepage the information that the book was compiled by Antonie Brandeis née Ruete and is based on her many years experience in the tropics and subtropics. The cookbook went to four editions, all in the original German. Whether, a century later, that success can be attributed to the quality of the more-than-three hundred pages of recipes or to the name of the author, is difficult to say. Antonie Brandeis clearly wanted her maiden name advertised. The German book-buying public, and more especially those interested in the colonies of the tropics and subtropics, would have recognised the name, 'Ruete', for Brandeis' mother, Emily Ruete, was a Princess of Zanzibar and Oman, whose memoir, published at the end of the nineteenth century, had given the name a measure of notoriety.¹

Antonie Brandeis née Ruete was born in Hamburg in 1868, the daughter of Heinrich Ruete and Emily, formerly Sayyida Salmé of Zanzibar and Oman. She was their first daughter and their first surviving child. A son, born in Aden after the princess's flight from Zanzibar, had died within weeks. A diplomatic furore abated when the couple withdrew to Germany, though the Sultan and subsequent Sultans, all of whom were Sayyida Salmé's brothers, never forgave her affair with the German trader and more damningly, her conversion to Christianity. Antonie was presented with two siblings in quick succession, a brother in 1869 and a sister in 1870. When Heinrich was killed in a tram accident on the streets of Hamburg in August 1870 the former princess was left a widow with three children under the age of three.

The little family led a peripatetic life, chasing cheaper and cheaper living circumstances from Hamburg to Dresden, Rudolstadt, Berlin and Cologne. It was only at the age of nine that Antonie learned from a school friend of her brother that their mother was a princess. As her mother writes of their discovery, the children 'behaved somewhat strange towards me' but they soon adjusted and found something to be excited about. 'Come, come! Mama is going to unlock the big cupboard and we can have a quick look at the Arab things' (1993 490).² Emily Ruete did not want to give up on the 'Arab things' she had left behind, and in 1885 and again in 1888 she made aborted attempts to return to Zanzibar to claim her inheritance. In this she was a pawn to Bismarck's wider political game based on Kaiser Wilhelm's aspiration to establish colonies like the other European powers. East Africa was the prize, and Zanzibar was eventually traded off for the closer island of Heligoland: Emily Ruete and her German-born son, a potential puppet Sultan of Zanzibar, were no longer of use. Emily felt the family could no longer

live in Germany and, when Antonie was in her early twenties, she settled on the (then) Syrian coast, first at Jaffa and then Beirut. Antonie's experience in the subtropics became the basis of her cookbook — early experience that would be extended by time spent, upon marriage to Eugen Brandeis, in the German colony of the Marshall Islands.

Antonie was thirty on marriage, Eugen fifty-two with a full life in the Pacific already behind him. Robert Louis Stevenson, more famous for *Treasure Island* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, had devoted an entire chapter to Brandeis in his book on the Samoan situation, *A Footnote to History*. Stevenson obviously admired Brandeis's in his role as 'Prime Minister' to the Samoan chief Tamasese during the inter-colonial conflict over those islands.³ The Stevensons, husband and wife, later met up with Brandeis when cruising the Pacific on the *Janet Nichol*.⁴ On Jaluit, in the Marshall Islands, Fanny Stevenson was also much taken with the German Landeshauptmann or Commissioner, a man with 'the most extraordinary eyes of glittering blackness.' (150). But then he was also named in a briefing document for the 1919 Versailles Peace negotiations after World War I for his treatment of indigenous peoples under German colonial rule, having, it was reported 'flogged with an excess of zeal' while in the Marshalls (qtd in Hempenstall 94).

Antonie arrived on the island of Jabwor in the atoll of Jaluit in 1898, a new wife in a new and difficult situation. Jaluit, the centre of administration for the Marshalls, was about as isolated a situation as a colonial *hausfrau* could find herself. Just a few degrees above the equator, the islands were not only hot but humid, and prone to typhoons: one would demolish her home within months of her leaving it in 1905. Though it was the busiest port in Micronesia, with six or seven ships in anchor at any one time, Jaluit was isolated, being thirty-five days from Sydney, Australia, and three months between any question and its reply from her mother in Beirut. The colony was founded on the copra trade and when formerly annexed by Germany in 1885 the islands were at first administered by the trading firm the *Jaluit Gesellschaft*, a merger of *Hernsheim & Co.* and the *Deutsche Handels-und Plantagen-Gesellschaft de Südsee Inseln zu Hamburg*, or the DHPG (more colloquially known as 'the long-handled firm'). By 1898 the European community on Jaluit numbered about forty people and by 1900 they could boast a two-storey hotel, the *Germania Inn*, said to be the most elegant structure in Micronesia, which included a tap room, billiards hall, restaurant and general store. The town also included administration buildings, a courthouse, a post office, a small hospital and the headquarters of the trading firms. The European residences were whitewashed and fenced like any German town, simply relocated across the world. Despite this European façade, it was not going to be easy keeping appetising food on the table in an ongoing battle with the heat and isolation. However, to put Brandeis' worries on this score into context, alongside this European development, the local population had been diminished by about a third in the previous thirty years.⁵

A nostalgic reminiscence of her time in Jaluit, 'Südsee-Erinnerungen', was published in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (German Colonial Newspaper) in January 1908 over three instalments. Brandeis writes that she immediately fell in love with the inhabitants of her new home. She was to be there five years as 'Mrs Commissar' or 'Woman belong Commissar', and during that time gave birth to her two daughters. She also had time on Jaluit to sew the almost entire dowry of both girls (1906c 36). From these observations and the subsequent publication of her cookbook directly targeting young *hausfrau*, it would be easy to dismiss Antonie as the archetypal wife and mother, but this would be a misconception, for Antonie did much more than devote herself to domestic life. She took many photographs, developing the plates at night when the water was cooler (1908c 37), and she compiled a collection of material culture from the Marshall Islands and Nauru for the Friburg Ethnographic Museum at the request of the director (1908a 6)⁶. Antonie mostly traded with women — bartering cotton dresses for the desired items; but despite hobbies and ambitions, the household duties were not to be neglected, nor the standards diminished. Antonie herself appears in photographs of the time immaculately in white. The staunchness and cleanliness of the colonial household should never be threatened. As she writes in the introduction to her cookbook:

If she herself [the young *hausfrau*] has to put her hand to it [cooking], it can be done in the shortest possible time, and she should structure her time in such a way that she can wash herself and put on a clean dress before the dinner is served. (1907 4)⁷

Antonie Brandeis introduces her *Kochbuch für die Tropen* by stating a number of aims: she wants it to be 'useful'; she wants to 'arm' the young *hausfrau* against the 'wearing-down climate' and 'daily nuisances'. Her advice is immensely practical and demonstrates her belief that where good nutrition is available less alcohol is consumed (excessive consumption of alcohol being identified as a lamentable problem in colonial life); while good cooking, she believed, also prevented all manner of health problems. But for Antonie, good cooking is not just a question of nutrition, but also one of adequate management — a question in the colonies directly related to the relationship established between the *hausfrau* and her staff: 'young and inexperienced hausfraun', she observes, 'are faced with the difficult question on how to direct coloured staff' (1).

This is a difficult question indeed. Even at the time this was a contentious issue, and one that makes for uncomfortable reading now. The adversarial tone, both in the words said and not said, speaks of her unquestioned idea of racial superiority. Although for Brandeis this superiority was not entirely confined along racial lines. In her world servants were a given: she had a wet nurse as an infant and even in the straightened circumstances of her mother's widowhood in Germany there was always a maid to help look after the children and the household. However the racial element cannot be played down. Brandeis is adamant that,

Whether they are yellow, brown or black rulers of the cookhouse, they all have a considerable portion of stubbornness, and in many cases also some malice, therefore it is important to be always friendly but firm.... Don't think this is easy. (5)

She warns the *hausfrau* to control herself at all times — to be punctual, to be prepared and never to give up, break down, or 'surrender to the goodwill of the servants' (6); and always taste before serving!

Antonie describes the less than perfect circumstances, as when there is only a kitchen boy to help, in which case essential chores must be taught (grinding coffee, plucking the chickens, breaking up the salt among them) and she notes that it is imperative he should always be kept busy or he'll 'go for a walk, meat will be grabbed by the cat and the casual thief will steal the bread from the cupboard' (7). Later, in Brandeis' advice on how to set up a kitchen, she interrupts her discussion with one more warning — expressed with a passion that denotes actual experience:

Do not tolerate that the people do any work in the kitchen with a naked upper body, otherwise they will sling the dishtowel over their sweaty shoulders and soon after use it on the glasses and plates. (13)

If this were not bad enough, in the worst case if the *hausfrau* is without the help of even the semi-naked factotum, the *hausfrau* is admonished to keep her composure. There are standards to be maintained and whether in the jungle or a colonial headquarters, these standards were not to be forgotten.

Antonie herself got around the 'problem' of hiring the 'lazy' and 'unreliable' locals who needed the greatest training by employing a Chinese cook and a Chinese houseboy direct from Hong Kong (1908a 7). She does not however mention this to the *hausfrau* audience. She also arrived on Jaluit with a personal maid, a Sudanese woman, who caused quite a stir amongst the Marshallese because of the colour of her skin. She was only the second black person to come there (the first being Tom Tilton, an African-American who owned a hotel and restaurant there in the 1870s [Hezel 1993]). (How a Sudanese woman had come so far from home is the province of speculation. It may be a coincidence that Brandeis' grandfather Sayyid Sa'id bin Sultan, the longest reigning Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar (1804–1856), was one of the greatest slave traders in world history.) But after advice on nutrition and management of staff, there was one more stated aim to the *Kochbuch für die Tropen*: running the household according to Brandeis' advice, with the natural result of 'delight' and 'pride' in well served dishes, would mitigate against the 'boredom and apathy' women tend to fall into in the tropics (3). Her optimism shines through all.

Yet the romance and poetry often evident in Brandeis' reminiscences in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* are nowhere transferred into her cookbook. In her descriptions of the tiny atoll on which she lived for five years, she is entranced by beauty. The surface of the lagoon 'reflects all colours in the daylight'; at sunset the colours are like an opal, with an 'overpowering play of colours'; and at night

the lagoon has a ‘fairytale’ appearance when the stars and moon are reflected on its surface. As for the fish in the lagoon, they are colours a northern European could not even dream about.⁸ The *hausfrau*’s dreams were, on the contrary, to be of stoves (petroleum or wood), of flymesh (not only against flies, but also cats and chickens) and of keeping the dishcloths clean. Order and cleanliness, order and control are priorities.

Before any recipes are presented, first the *hausfrau* and thus Brandeis in her directions, must work on the setting up of the kitchen (*Kücheneinrichtung*) and the arrangement of the larders (*Einrichtung der Vorratsräume*). The directions are definitive.

The kitchen must be downwind of the house so smells would not invade the residence, and separate so the house would not be burnt down in a cooking accident. Shade trees and large windows (well-netted with flymesh) were recommended, as was an interior coat of white — preferably oil — paint. There was, ideally, a scullery for the washing, and an anteroom for plucking poultry, cleaning fish and cutting up pigs. Other animals, dead or alive, it was preferable to keep out. Crevices and cracks should be covered against wasps and vermin, and all table legs should be placed in pots of petroleum to prevent ants climbing up (this advice extended to the legs of a baby’s cot, as she says in her newspaper article when discussing the birth of her daughters). The tables should be away from any wall for the same reason. A mat placed at the front door on which to clean feet before entering the house was just as essential.

Within the kitchen kingdom, the *hausfrau* was to stock items made of the best galvanised and enamelled materials lest they be lost to rust. Enamelled items were easier to clean, ‘where you don’t have to worry about clumsy staff’ (7). If you did have to worry, Löwenmarke (Lion Brand) grey enamel showed the chips less noticeably than brown or blue. Brandeis provides a complete list of necessary pots, pans, knives, sieves and cucumber slices.

The larder was even more a labour of love in her description. Once again the larder buildings were to be away from the house, if possible, but also away from the kitchen since the heat ‘gets through the wall and spoils everything’ (20). In the anteroom to this structure the *hausfrau* could store suitcases and all those things she had put in the attic in Germany. The storage of food was more problematic.

The larder needed to be meticulously ordered for it would only be filled at long, often irregular intervals. For Brandeis in the Marshall Islands, orders were filled from Hamburg, Berlin, Sydney and San Francisco (potato, onion, oranges, apples, other fresh fruit and vegetables and table wine from the latter two, all else from Germany). She kept a ledger with the date of the order and the approximate date of arrival. It was a constant juggle: calculating against all contingencies, all those unexpected events like the arrival of scientific expeditions, while not getting in too much that would decay in the hot and humid climate (1908c 36).

According to the instructions in the *Kochbuch für die Tropen*, there should be sheds for the wheat and maize (for the chickens) because of beetles contaminating the cereals, and this on the sunny side to protect the rest of the larder from the sun. Each building should be built off the ground, so potato, onion, yam, sweet potato, taro and so on could be stored underneath. The rest of the foodstuffs were to go on the shelves on all sides of the actual larder. Above the shelves a cardboard label, nailed on, helped with the ordering, though a colour code system was recommended for the servants (one could ask a servant to 'bring the blue/red/yellow'). The zigzag fringes on the shelf edges would not have raised eyebrows when recommended to the German colonial housewife, though they could well do today. Behind the decorative fringes, tins were to be lined, six tins deep, always with the forward side of the label showing. This pattern also helped the woman of the house to instantly recognise if anything had been stolen. Tins should be ordered and separated (meat, vegetables, fruit). Sugar, sultanas and anything else of 'interest to ants' (21), plus tea, coffee, spices, should all be stored in sterilising jars against the humidity. Hams, sausages, tongues, should be hung from nails along a length of dowel from the ceiling, while all meat being marinated in vinegar or milk, or sausages in the midst of being made, should be kept under a fly cage made of brass flymesh.

There were no butchers, bakers or candlestick makers in these circumstances. Brandeis passed her wisdom on. The colonial *hausfrau* must do it for herself, and she must supervise her staff. She must clean and clean again. 'Dust shelves weekly'. Mop and sweep. 'Sweep ceilings too for spider webs'. Even if the larder was one small room, or just a fly proof cupboard, the basic advice was sound. Brandeis advises the *hausfrau* to be sure it can be locked, that it is not exposed to the heat of the kitchen, and to educate the servants 'so there is always order and cleanliness' (22).

It is of course easy to take a mocking tone from a hundred years in the future with the knowledge that there are now refrigerators and weekly airflights, but Brandeis' impulse is universal across time: order is something to cling to when faced with the unknown. When in a strange place, control of the food on the table might be the only control a *hausfrau* could realistically aspire to. New stores to fill the prettily decorated larder shelves may not arrive for months, sickness might strike, or cats through the flymesh, or silverfish in the flour. Yet still the *hausfrau* is responsible for presenting a menu day-in-day-out, and that responsibility is deemed to be a personal one, even if she has the luxury of a cook and a kitchen boy and a personal maid. This cookbook is no frivolous exercise for Brandeis. It is the work of a pedant, but one whom circumstances had perhaps made that way as she followed her princess mother around Germany and then the world; adjusting to life in Beirut; then to a husband with 'glittering eyes' and a zealous flogging arm; giving birth in a tiny isolated Pacific island.

Kochbuch für die Tropen consists of more than three hundred pages of recipes: soups and meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, legumes and cereals, tubers and potatoes, hors d'oeuvres, salads, sauces, egg dishes, dumplings, puddings, breads and pastries, beverages, pickles, conserves; meals for those who are ill (*krankenkost*) and for picnics (*picknicks*), for the family, the bachelor, for unexpected guests, and for large scale entertaining. It includes food to remind of home (the breads, the dumplings, roasted quail and *schweinefleisch*), and meals that acknowledged the situation of the cookhouse (roast breadfruit, mashed breadfruit, Samoan breadfruit dumplings). Brandeis acknowledges that for any new circumstance:

...in foreign countries the conditions are so different, the preservation of the food, the preparation of the meat, and the utilisation of food stores and supplies is so different compared to home. (1)

The heat is unbearable, and lingers in the evenings long after the sun lifts from the tin-roofed house, but routine has to go on. Kitchen and staff must be administered efficiently, the larder must be full and food must be put on the table at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. Set up first, 'so you don't need to despair' (10) she optimistically recommends.

NOTES

- ¹ Emily Ruete born Sayyida Princess of Zanzibar and Oman, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar*. A number of English translations exist.
- ² From a collection of unpublished Letters Home and Sequels to the Memoirs that have been translated and published more recently, *An Arabian Princess Between Two Worlds*.
- ³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*.
- ⁴ Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Cruise of the Janet Nichol*.
- ⁵ For a good understanding of the colony during the time Antonie Brandeis would have been there, see Francis X Hezel, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, pp. 48 ff.
- ⁶ A commemoration of 100 years of the museum was published in 1995, acknowledging Antonie Brandeis' contribution and particularly the ethnographic commentary she put to the items. See E. Gerhards, *Als Freiburg Die Welt Entdeckte*, pp. 109–45.
- ⁷ Gratitude to Dr Spennemann for the English translations made orally which have been used here.
- ⁸ All descriptions from the first instalment of her 'Südsee-Erinnerungen', p. 6.

WORKS CITED

- Brandeis, Antonie 1907, *Kochbuch für die Tropen*, D. Reimer, Berlin.
- 1908a, 'Südsee-Erinnerungen', *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, 25 (1), pp 6–7.
- 1908b, 'Südsee-Erinnerungen', *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, 25 (2), pp. 20–22.
- 1908c, 'Südsee-Erinnerungen', *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, 25 (3), pp. 36–38.
- Gerhards, E. (ed.) 1995, *Als Freiburg Die Welt Entdeckte*, Promo Verlag, Freiburg.

- Hempenstall, P.J. 1987, 'The Neglected Empire: The Superstructure of the Colonial State in German Melanesia', *Germans in the Tropics: Essays in German Colonial History*, ed. Arthur Knoll and Lewis Gann, Greenwood, New York.
- Hezel, Francis 1995, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, U of Hawaii P, Honolulu.
- 1983, *The First Taint of Civilization*, U of Hawaii P, Honolulu.
- Ruete, Emily 1886, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar*, Friedrich Luckhardt, Berlin.
- 1993, *An Arabian Princess Between Two Worlds*, ed. E. von Donzel, E. J. Brill, Leiden.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis 1892, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*, Scribner's, New York.
- Stevenson, Mrs Robert Louis 1914, *The Cruise of the Janet Nichol*, Scribner's, New York.

Creme à la Sultan

*Add 90g of sugar to ½ glass of fresh water in a stew pan and heat until brown, then add 1 L of cooked-milk and a little cinnamon leaving it to boil, pour the milk through a sieve and let it cool. Then take a little sugar, 6 egg yolks, the peel of a lemon and the chilled milk, mix them in a porcelain bowl, place the bowl in boiling water until the creme solidifies then let it cool down. Beat the whites of the eggs with 2 spoons of sugar and some lemon peel, place the solidified creme into the centre of a serving bowl and take the beaten whites and place this around the creme. Finally sprinkle the creme again with sugar. (From Antonie Brandeis *Cookbook for the Tropics*, p. 277.)*

Note

This is a popular recipe; there is no indication in the text that Antonie Brandeis' grandfather was a Sultan.