

A Social History of Jell-O Salad: The Rise and Fall of an American Icon

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By

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When my great-grandmother, Retaw "Dandieen" McCoy, passed away in 2005, at the age of 99, we gave her a proper Presbyterian funeral in her western Pennsylvania hometown. Afterward, in the church basement, the ladies of Springdale Presbyterian did what they've

always done: served a funeral lunch. There were finger sandwiches. There were the big pans of rigatoni you see at just about every Pittsburgh-area gathering. There were cookies.

And then there were the Jell-O salads. Dish after dish of jiggly, shining gelatin, molded into rings, braids—even a jellied tuna salad in the shape of a fish. Cherry-red with fruit, pistachio-green with nuts and marshmallows, a clear lemon yellow studded with vegetables: It was as if we'd stepped backward in time. Dandeen, who raised children and grandchildren in the mid-century glory days of the Jell-O salad, would have loved it.

"few foods can tell us more about life in 20th-century America than the wobbling jewel of domestic achievement: the Jell-O salad"

While Jell-O products are still very popular as snacks and desserts, the Jell-O salad—particularly in its savory forms—had fallen from culinary favor by the early 1980s. Though you'll still find it in church basements across America, today you're just as likely to see Jell-O salads on blogs like the [Gallery of Regrettable Food](#). What makes the Jell-O salad such an icon of its time? Shaped by the rise of home economics, the industrialization of the food system, World War II, and changing expectations about women's labor, few foods can tell us more about life in 20th-century America than the wobbling jewel of domestic achievement: the Jell-O salad.

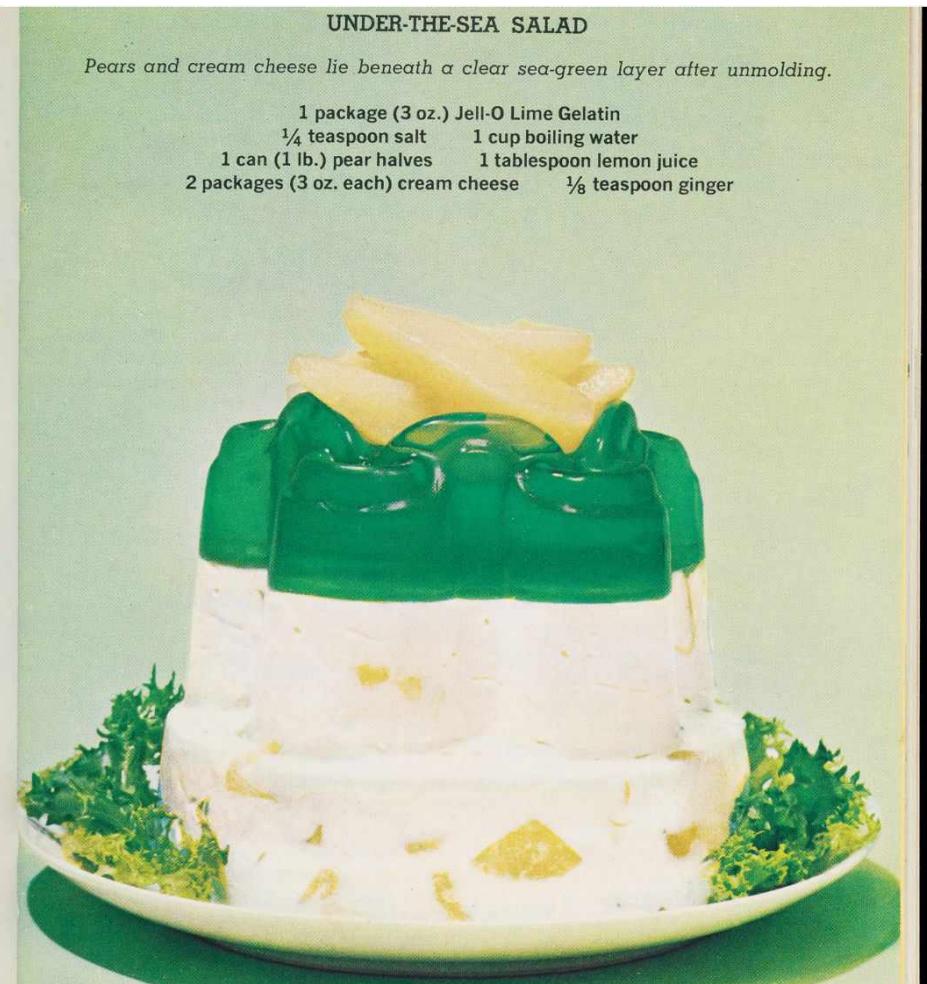
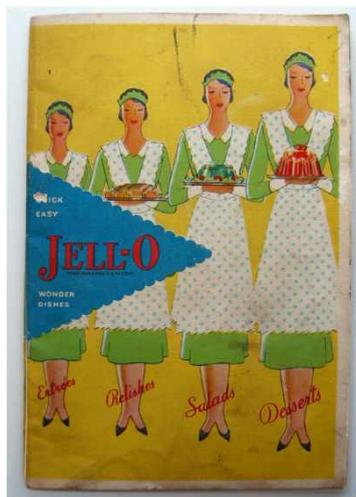
Preindustrial History

Gelatin dishes as we know them date all the way back to medieval Europe. From that period up until the mid-19th century, jellied dishes were foods of the elite, served as elaborate molded centerpieces on the tables of nobility. The reason was simple: The process of rendering collagen from animal bones and then clarifying it was exceptionally time-consuming, even by the slower-paced standards of the day. It was "not for the faint-hearted," explains Lynne Belluscio, executive director of the LeRoy Historical Society, which operates the [Jell-O Gallery Museum](#). London cookbook author Hannah Glasse described the procedure in 1747:

"Take out the great Bones of four Calves Feet, and put the Feet into a Pot with ten Quarts of Water, three Ounces of Hartshorn, three Ounces of Isinglass, a Nutmeg quarter'd, four Blades of Mace; then boil this till it comes to two Quarts, and strain it through a Flannel-Bag, let it stand twenty-four Hours, then scrape all the Fat from the Top very clean, then slice it, and put to it the Whites of six Eggs beaten to Froth, boil it a little, and strain it again through a Flannel-Bag, then run the Jelly into little high Glasses... You may add Orange-flower Water, or Wine and Sugar, and Lemon if you please, but this is all Fancy. (Quoted in Richard Sax, Classic Home Desserts)"

Few home cooks bothered with such labor-intensive dishes—gelatin indicated to dinner guests that you had a kitchen staff large and well-appointed enough to spare the hours. This remained the case in the American colonies, where elites adapted European customs to their own tastes. Gelatin dishes were a delicacy in New York high society, where the size of one's household staff was a status symbol, and on the plantations of the South, where enslaved cooks labored in the kitchens. At Thomas Jefferson's estate, Monticello, wine jelly was often served to guests, Jefferson's time in France having influenced his tastes.

Instant Gelatin



Top left: Creative Commons; bottom left: Wellcome Library, London; right: Wellcome Library, London

In the mid-19th century, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to transform the US economy. Railways were on the rise, and so was factory production; both brought radical changes to American food systems. By 1897, when a cough-syrup maker patented the brand name "Jell-O," the processed-food industry was thriving. Pearle Wait sold the brand just two years later to the Genesee Pure Food Company for \$450 (roughly \$11,000 today), according to Lynne Galia, director of communications at Kraft Heinz, which now owns the Jell-O brand.

The timing couldn't have been better. Jell-O tapped into one of the biggest culinary currents of the era: domestic science, also known as home economics. Food historian Laura Shapiro, in her sweeping study *Perfection Salad*, explains that, around the turn of the century, many women in the emerging American middle class began linking the changes brought into their homes by industrialization and scientific advances—gas stoves, electric irons, the telephone—to the domestic work they performed every day and reimagining housework. This spirit of domestic reform embraced efficiency, purity, cleanliness, and order.

"Jellied salads, unlike tossed ones, were mess-free, never transgressing the border of the plate"

Instant gelatin fit the bill. It was fast, unlike the traditional method of making gelatin. It was economical: A housewife could stretch her family's leftovers by encasing them in gelatin. And, since sugar was already included in the flavored mixes, the new packaged gelatins didn't require cooks to use up their household stores of sugar. It was also neat and tidy, a quality much valued by the domestic-science movement as well as by its Victorian forebears, who were mad for molded foods of all kinds, says Belluscio. Jellied salads, unlike tossed ones, were mess-free, never transgressing the border of the plate: "A salad at last in control of itself," Shapiro writes. Cooks in this era molded everything from cooked spinach to chicken salad, with care to avoid the cardinal sin of messiness.

The 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, passed after Upton Sinclair's muckraking classic *The Jungle* scandalized the nation, regulated product labels and created the bureau that would eventually become today's Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Companies began marketing their processed and industrial foods under brand names designed to convince customers of their safety and purity. Shopping for dry goods by the pound at the general store was old-fashioned; food brands were the way of the future. Jell-O's marketing emphasized that it was the brand you could trust: One early ad touts its "safety bag" packaging and uses the word "pure" no fewer than three times, even adding it to the company's name.

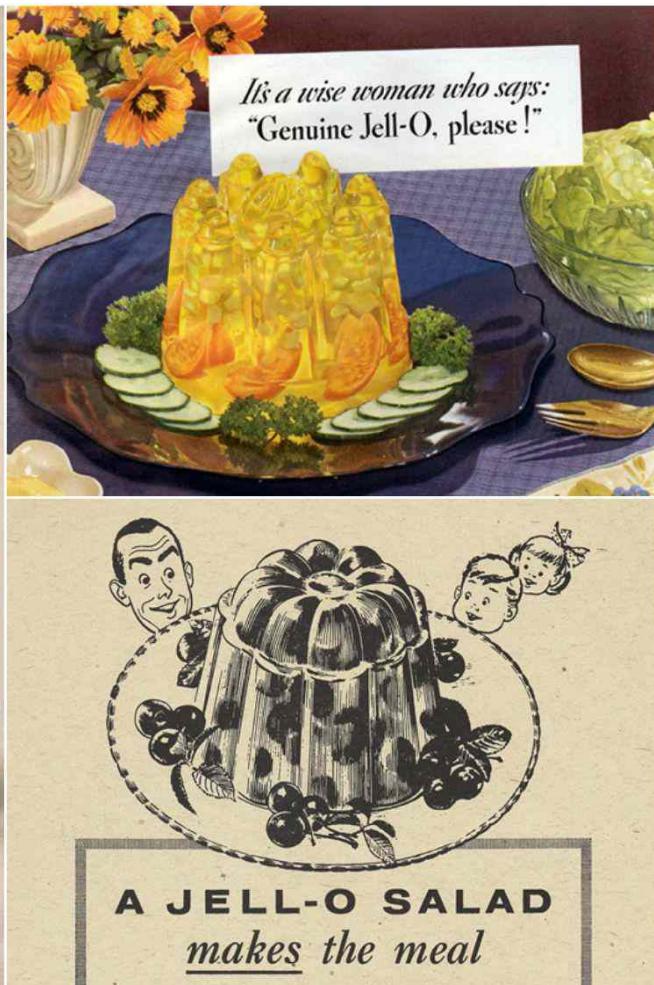
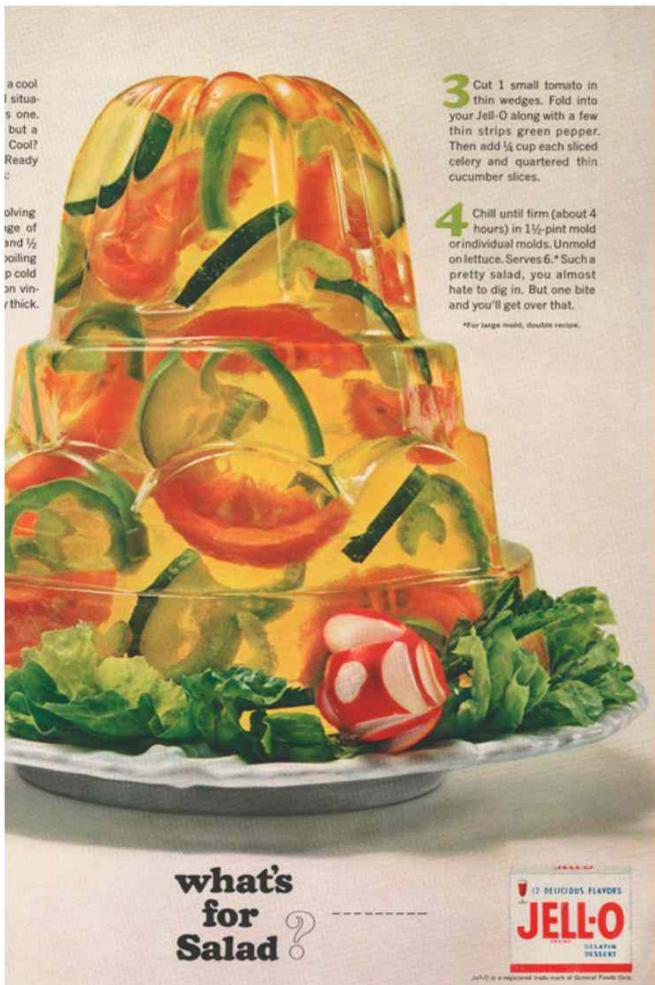
By 1902, Jell-O sales were beginning to soar. In 1904, Charles Knox promoted Knox Gelatin at the World's Fair, and in 1905, Mrs. John Cooke of New Castle, Pennsylvania, won third prize in a Knox-sponsored cooking contest with a concoction she called "Perfection Salad": "an aspic filled with finely chopped cabbage, celery, and red pepper" that graced tables with its "jewel-like and impeccable" molded precision, details Michael Stern in his introduction to *Perfection Salad*. As advertisements for "America's most famous dessert" ran in magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*, gelatin became increasingly fashionable. James Beard observes, in the 1972 edition of *James Beard's American Cookery*, that Mrs. Cooke's victory had "unleashed a demand for congealed salads that has grown alarmingly, particularly in the suburbs." Even then, the legendary chef grudgingly admits that "the jellied salad does have its delights, though, and it is without question an American innovation."

"You can follow American social history by looking at the history of Jell-O ads," Belluscio points out. Early ads promised housewives that they could serve what the rich were eating "for just ten cents a box," a major advance for a dish so refined that many working-class Americans had never even seen it. The "Jell-O girl" was introduced in 1908 and was wildly successful at convincing Americans to associate Jell-O with the purity and innocence of childhood.

Sales of sugar, and therefore Jell-O, were rationed during World War I, but in the interwar period (the 1920s and '30s), the popularity of gelatin salads soared. The Depression spurred homemakers to stretch their ingredients as far as possible, and the introduction of lime-flavored Jell-O in the early 1930s gave the salad trend a major boost. Entire cookbooks were devoted to lime Jell-O, according to Belluscio, often instructing cooks to add a tablespoon of vinegar to cut the sweetness when using flavored gelatins in savory vegetable salads.

If during the 19th century, not to mention much of the 20th, beef and potatoes represented culinary masculinity, gelatin dishes came to be seen as the perfect feminine food: "Dainty Desserts for Dainty People," as the title of a 1915 Knox Gelatine cookbook put it. Teahouses and ladies' social events served light, "refreshing" fare, and that meant Jell-O salads, as shown in this Jell-O ad featuring "Mrs. Dewey's smartest salads!" Jell-O salads were dainty and refined, but affordable, too: a way for ordinary women to aspire to a higher social status. As World War II began, they were a way to "prove to you and your friends that you can still do luscious entertaining in spite of shortages and rations," as one wartime recipe for "Olive Relish" (olives, pickles, celery, and vinegar in lime Jell-O) declared.

Women in the Postwar Kitchen



Courtesy of the Kraft Heinz Company

After the war, corporations that had begun producing instant and processed food products to feed the troops were in no rush to slow production. They'd profited on war contracts and were eager to continue their prosperity by bringing new innovations onto the market. The problem was, the new processed substitutes couldn't be sold on taste alone, as Shapiro makes clear in her book *Something From the Oven*: They just weren't as good as the real thing. But American palates had been adjusting to industrial flavors for the entire 20th century. Shapiro drily notes that "there wasn't much the food industry could do to repel a nation that was already stirring chopped tomatoes and pickles into strawberry Jell-O for a Red Crest Salad."

Industrial foods were often cheaper, and they definitely saved time. This, then, was the advertisers' angle: Busy wives, caught up with children, housework, and, increasingly, paid employment, could whip up dinner in a jiffy, with hardly any work at all! No longer would they be chained to the stove.

Nonetheless, the cultural expectation that women would feed their families remained strong. Shapiro cites a 1950 study that measured housewives' feelings about convenience foods by asking them to compare a wife who bought Nescafé instant coffee and one who brewed

Maxwell House. The results were stark: They rated a woman who resorted to instant products as "lazy, disorganized...and a bad wife."

But there was a contradiction here, one that required resolution. Instant products were here to stay: They were handy, they were cheap, and they were fast. Housewives were meant to be, and needed to be, economical and efficient. But feeding her family was a woman's duty, and that meant putting love and care into meals. Plopping some plain canned soup or a few squares of Jell-O into a bowl just didn't feel like real cooking.

To get out of this dilemma, women actually added labor *back into* the process. Instead of cooking from scratch, they used prepared foods, but "doctored them up" with additional ingredients or dramatic presentations that made it clear they'd spent real time and effort on the meal. Hot dogs? No. Pigs-in-a-blanket with an olive garnish? Oh, yes. "Gracious living" was the talk of the magazines, and presentation was a big part of that. Advertising won out, as it so often does.

The popularity of food writer Poppy Cannon and her *Can-Opener Cookbook* (1951) brought canned, frozen, and instant products into millions of kitchens. Branded cookbooks, published by food companies, pushed instant products. Blogger Ruth Clark of The Mid-Century Menu notes that filling an entire cookbook often meant shoehorning foods into places they absolutely didn't belong:

"Many of the crazier recipes came from brand-specific cookbooks produced by companies trying to put their products into every single part of your meal. That's easy to do with some stuff, like salt, but when you're talking about things like cans of condensed tomato soup or ketchup, it's a little more difficult to put those into a dessert."

They also tended to involve ridiculously simple recipes: Mix one can of this into one can of that, add miniature marshmallows, serve. The magic was in the presentation: vegetable garnishes lovingly shaped into roses; mayonnaise dyed with food coloring to fit a theme; a molded fish shape, adorned with olives for eyes, on a decorative bed of lettuce and crackers.

Gelatin-based dishes were a staple of this genre, especially since shaped molds allowed for elaborate presentations. Cooks could showcase ingredients with a clear gelatin or aspic, using "sinkers" and "floaters" to achieve a certain look, or fold cream or mayo into the gelatin for an opaque appearance. Savory salads often involved "frostings" made with shrimp or mayonnaise to complete the look. My great-grandmother's copy of *Knox on Camera Recipes: A Completely New Guide to Gel Cookery*, published in 1960, includes such unappetizing concoctions as "Green Salad Mold," "Molded Avocado and Tuna," and "Jellied Veal Loaf" (complete with two teaspoons of MSG). The standard cookbooks of the era, like the 1964 edition of *The Joy of Cooking*, devote entire sections to savory gelatin salads. Jell-

O even introduced savory flavors, like celery, mixed vegetable, and "Italian salad," during the 1960s. By the mid-1970s, though, their popularity had declined so much that they were pulled from shelves.

The Decorative Mold of History



Photograph: [Shutterstock](#)

What happened? For one thing, dieting fashions changed. Salad courses had, for decades, been edging toward the border of dessert, but in the 1970s and '80s, nutrition campaigns began to emphasize the importance of eliminating sugar. Savory Jell-O salads fell out of fashion, replaced by tossed salads and a fad for sun-dried tomatoes. This was also when the efforts of the women's movement began to bear fruit: Women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers, and more and more women were heads of households. Convenience foods much more convenient than gelatin were readily available, and working mothers were quick to choose fast, microwave-friendly options.

Gelatin brands went back to focusing on marketing their products as snacks and desserts, even adding sugar-free options to their product lines. Jell-O introduced its Pudding Pops and Gelatin Pops and marketed them heavily with a famous ad campaign featuring then-beloved

comedian Bill Cosby. Plain Jell-O and sweet Jell-O salads are still widely consumed in the US, especially in the rural Midwest and the Deep South. Savory Jell-O salads do, however, remain popular in Utah and other heavily Mormon areas. "There will be at least four or five kinds of Jell-O salads at any event," almost all of them savory, Sariah Hilliam of Roosevelt, Utah, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2002. In fact, this region is often nicknamed the "Jell-O Belt," and in 2001, the state of Utah named Jell-O its official state snack.

Jell-O salads might be passé in coastal cities, but powdered gelatin has myriad uses, and gelatinous treats have found their way to urban shores by way of Asia, where jellied textures have never gone out of style. In teahouses and restaurants across North America, tapioca pearls dot cold glasses of bubble tea, savory aspics melt into glorious fillings for soup dumplings, and chewy rice-based mochi provide a sweet finish. Domestically, molecular gastronomists are experimenting with creative uses for gelatin in savory dishes, from Grant Achatz's soy gel to Wylie Dufresne's shrimp "spaghetti." In home kitchens, its uses range from meatballs to pâté and beyond.

In its heyday, Jell-O salad was ubiquitous across the United States. Today it is, in the words of *Perfection Salad* author Laura Shapiro, "a once-loved dish safely congealed in the decorative mold of history."