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Paper, Prestige, and Recipes: Cataloguing Watermarks in Early Modern Cookbooks

My study of watermarks in early modern English manuscript cookery and commonplace books (c. 1650–1790) is focused on their potential connection to the books' contents. I aimed to explore whether a correlation existed between the choice of recipes and the quality or cost of the books. Although watermarks cannot definitively date or pinpoint the origin of a manuscript's creation, they proved valuable for establishing a general timeframe and providing insights into the economic status of their owners. The rarity and character of watermarks often reflected the costs invested in the manuscripts, which, in turn, frequently corresponded with recipes for either luxurious or more accessible dishes.

I catalogued approximately thirty English culinary manuscripts from the collections of the Getty Library and the Clark Memorial Library at UCLA, identifying patterns in watermark distribution. Up to the 1720s, two dominant watermarks – the Strasbourg Lily and the Amsterdam Coat of Arms – coexisted with a variety of others, hinting at diverse paper sources in France and the Netherlands. This period coincided with a surge in culinary manuscript creation in Britain. From the 1720s onward, however, Dutch paper featuring *Pro Patria* and *Britannia* watermarks became predominant, with the latter designed specifically for the British market.

To scale these findings, it is crucial to develop a database where watermarks from other recipe books can be continuously added to the core collection, allowing the pattern I observed to be tested against data from culinary manuscripts of different geographical origins. The online digital collection of watermarks from culinary and commonplace books, which were among the most important mediums in early modern households, will contribute to a deeper understanding of the connection between the materiality of notebooks and culinary discourse.