



PBS

FEATURE

Masterpiece Theatre

THE SECRET LIFE OF MRS. BEETON

Sunday, May 20, 2007 at 9pm ET on PBS (check local listings)

Backstage Pass: Move Over, Martha Stewart

Masterpiece Theatre Tells the Story of Victorian England's Domestic Diva

"A place for everything, and everything in its place."

—Isabella Mary Beeton (1836–1865)

Nearly 150 years before Martha Stewart and Nigella Lawson became household names, the face of domestic order belonged to Mrs. Isabella Beeton. Who was this high priestess of Victorian-era values? A new MASTERPIECE THEATRE tells the story of the woman behind the world's most famous recipe book in *The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton*. The program airs Sunday, May 20 at 9pm ET on PBS and stars Anna Madeley (*Inspector Lewis*) as Isabella Beeton and JJ Feild (*To the Ends of the Earth*) as her husband and business partner, Sam.

For years, the name "Mrs. Beeton" has conjured images of a stolid, crinolined matron of domesticity. But the real Isabella Beeton, who died at the age of 28, was anything but. In fact, she wasn't even much of a cook. She was, however, a sassy, feisty and gifted journalist and editor, with a keen eye for order. Together with her husband, Beeton captured the attention of a generation of English women who found themselves caught between the old world and the new and who were looking for a domestic ideology to help them navigate their times.

One of four children, Isabella Mary Mayson was born on March 12, 1836 in Cheapside, London. Her father died when she was a young girl, and her mother later remarried and moved the family to Epsom. Young Isabella was sent to school in Heidelberg, Germany, where she became an accomplished pianist.

On a visit to London after completing her education, the future domestic diva met Samuel Orchard Beeton, a wealthy publisher of books and popular magazines in what might today be referred to as the "how-to" genre. The two were married on July 10, 1856 and began a creative partnership that not only was wildly successful but also rather unusual for its day.

Soon after they were married, Beeton began to write articles on cooking and household management for her husband's publications, and between 1859 and 1861 she wrote a

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a monthly supplement to *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. In October 1861, the Beetons published the supplements in a single volume titled *The Book of Household Management Comprising Information for the Mistress, Housekeeper, Cook, Kitchen-Maid, Butler, Footman, Coachman, Valet, Upper and Under House-Maids, Lady's-Maid, Maid-of-all-Work, Laundry-Maid, Nurse and Nurse-Maid, Monthly Wet and Sick Nurses, etc. etc. – also Sanitary, Medical, & Legal Memoranda: with a History of the Origin, Properties, and Uses of All Things Connected with Home Life and Comfort*.

The book—commonly referred to as *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*)—essentially offered a guide to running a Victorian-era household. It contained advice on fashion, child-care, animal husbandry, poisons, the management of servants, science, religion, industrialism and nearly 2,000 recipes. Most of the recipes were written by others, but Beeton illustrated them with colored engravings and pioneered a new recipe format that is still in use today. In its first year, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* sold 60,000 copies, and by 1868 nearly two million copies had been sold.

For Beeton, success was to be short-lived. She died in 1865, following the birth of her fourth child. What killed her remains a topic of some disagreement. Was it puerperal fever contracted during childbirth or something more unseemly? Did the Beetons' public image of domestic bliss belie a darker truth? Tune in and find out!

From the Kitchen of Mrs. Beeton

Though she did not claim to have written every recipe in *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, Isabella Beeton did test all of the nearly 2,000 recipes herself before including them. Any recipe found to be too costly, difficult or impractical she discarded. How do her standards hold up today? Try one of her famous recipes and see for yourself.

Taffy (Everton Toffee)

(Mrs. Beeton's Recipe Number 1597)

1 lb. of powdered loaf sugar
1 teacupful of water
_ lb. of butter
6 drops of essence of lemon

Mode: Put the water and sugar into a brass pan, and beat the butter to a cream. When the sugar is dissolved, add the butter and keep stirring the mixture over the fire until it sets, when a little is poured on to a buttered dish; and just before the toffee is done, add the essence of lemon. Butter a dish or tin, pour on it the mixture, and when cool, it will easily separate from the dish. Butter-Scotch, an excellent thing for coughs, is made with brown, instead of white sugar, omitting the water, and flavoured with _ oz. of powdered ginger. It is made in the same manner as toffee.

Time: 18 to 35 minutes.
Sufficient to make 1 lb. of toffee.

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Learn more about *The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton* at [**www.pbs.org/masterpiece**](http://www.pbs.org/masterpiece).

The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton is written by Sarah Williams (Wallis & Edward), produced by Katherine Lannon and directed by Jon Jones. The executive producer is Jessica Pope. The executive producer of MASTERPIECE THEATRE is Rebecca Eaton.

MASTERPIECE THEATRE has been presented on PBS by WGBH since 1971. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and public television viewers provide funding for MASTERPIECE THEATRE.

Press materials and photography are available at [**pressroom.wgbh.org**](http://pressroom.wgbh.org) and [**pbs.org/pressroom**](http://pbs.org/pressroom).

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