

From the sublime to the ridiculous: a cookbook collection

Stephanie Clifford-Smith's culinary library

Central heating, French rubber goods, and cookbooks are three amazing proofs of man's ingenuity in transforming necessity into art, and, of these, cookbooks are perhaps most lastingly delightful.

- MFK Fisher

I picked up a cookbook about the great London restaurant, Le Caprice, by AA Gill the other day. A hardback, it was reduced from \$60 to \$3.99. Now, officially, I've given up buying books about food. Once my floorboards started to bow under the weight of my existing collection and I was coming no closer to thinning it out, I had to call a halt. But \$3.99! AA Gill! Le Caprice!

It's a sorry tale, I know, and it only gets worse when I confess that that was actually my *second* cookbook purchase that day. The first was *Mediterranean Grains and Greens* by Paula Wolfert, another hardback also reduced from \$60, to \$9.95. Look, it was a book I'd seriously considered buying from Amazon because Paula Wolfert can be quite hard to track down here, and she writes so well, and her recipes are so fabulous and her research is so thorough and vicariously enjoyable, and think what I was saving on freight...

Cookbooks for me are about much more than working out what to cook for tonight's dinner. While few books will do everything, a good collection should have the ability to transport you to foreign places, educate you about culinary and social history, tell you what to do with bizarre ingredients *and* make your mouth water. A few gems will actually give you a laugh as well.

Brilliant references

Stephanie Alexander's *The Cook's Companion* is as close to a desert island choice as I'm likely to get, though the thought of actually having to *make* such a selection brings me out in hives. I put off buying it for years after it came out, arguing that for \$75 and seven centimetres of shelf space it would have to be exceptional. I also knew secretly that after regular browsing I would eventually succumb.

The joy of *The Cook's Companion* is its scope, which, in its new edition is even broader. (It's also thicker and now costs \$120.) It has all the classics from around the world as well as enough new stuff to keep you happily exploring for years. But it's as a reference that I find it most useful. When a recipe from elsewhere told me to wrap a terrine in caul fat, it was Stephanie who told me where on the beast it came from, how to prepare, use and store it. When I wondered after a meal in a French bistro if the meat I'd been served really was veal [it was redder than the white veal I'd known] it was Stephanie who explained the definition of veal and its various uses, colours and textures.

If you're approaching your cooking by ingredient, having picked up say, a really fresh ridged gourd or some great feta cheese, then Charmain Solomon's *The Encyclopaedia of Asian Food*

and Greg Malouf's *Arabesque* are fantastic. Then of course there's the extremely daggy and dated *The Good Cook* series edited for *Time Life* by Richard Olney in the late 70s, early 80s. This series is great on technical detail with clear photos of boning, stuffing, clarifying and rolling and is just the thing if you feel moved to spin sugar or carve carrots. But go to the anthology at the back for the most incredible selection of recipes from books you're *never* going to pick up at Angus & Robertson. This opens a whole new world of sources, many interpreted from old or foreign texts. You could try Beef Stew Saint-Honoré with parsley, tarragon and capers from *Néo-physiologie du Goût* by Comte de Courchamps (1849) or a simple Wine Jelly from *Theory and Practice of the Confectioner* by JM Erich Weber (1927).

Travelogues

Call me old fashioned but I'm a mug for a cookbook that gives me a bit of visual context for the food I'm reading about. 'The Beautiful Cookbook' series from the late 80s, early 90s has good, dependable recipes as well as vast, glossy photos of rice paddies, vineyards, temples, markets and maps to really get you inspired. Some of the food photography is less than appetizing, with amber filters and thick glazes featuring in some shots, but I like props, local crockery, cutlery and materials. Murdoch Books is now doing a similar series, "The Food of France/China/Italy" with better photography but which focuses on the classic, rather than unusual dishes of the countries.

I've never actually *cooked* anything out of *The Taste of France* based on a Sunday Times magazine series from 1983 because the food all looks a bit dark and the layout's confusing. But the photo of a chipped pottery bowl filled with three kinds of wild mushrooms, five eggs still in their shells and an old wooden spoon holding sea salt, ground pepper and garlic cloves is fantastic. It doesn't immediately make me want to *make* scrambled eggs with mushrooms but it does make me want to rent an old house in the Auvergne, in October (mushroom season), shop at the markets for my eggs and butter and *then* make the recipe. It's just something a white-styled Donna Hay book can't do.

Street Food from around the World by James Mayson brings out my inner backpacker. It's among my most splattered cookbooks and it's the writing, rather than the photography that transports you. It's a compilation of recipes picked up over eight years of budget traveling throughout South-east Asia. Thailand, India and Nepal, Egypt, Morocco and Mexico and while his prose sometimes verges on the purple, his love of the places, food, vendors and markets is obvious.

Fish man, Rick Stein, is another writer whose enthusiasm for the subject is infectious. He's the only British chef who has a handle on Asian food because he spends so much time there (and here for that matter). The openings to his chapters in *Seafood Odyssey* which also covers Australia, Italy, Spain, the US, England and France, show a man who hangs out at markets, pestering fishermen and hawkers for recipes and rushing home to replicate them. Not for him the timid, self-conscious use of lime juice and palm sugar we see with Delia Smith (God bless her); Rick's laksa pastes and Thai fish cakes are the real deal.

He recounts watching the action at the market in Hua Hin: 'I remember a smiling Thai lady mixing raw, shelled mussels with a tapioca and ground-rice batter and pouring it on to a hot flat griddle. As the mixture started to cook she broke it up a little, then cracked an egg on to it. Alongside, she fried some chopped garlic, then she added bean sprouts, chilli vinegar, fresh coriander, shredded spring onion, fish sauce, sugar and salt. She flipped the omelette

over on to the vegetables, and scooped it all up to serve it with a chilli dipping sauce.’ Next flight to Bangkok please.

Good recipes, honest cooks

Bistro Cooking by American, Patricia Wells, is stuffed with accessible, reliable, delectable recipes that are so well written pictures are unnecessary. The woman I’ve bagsed coming back as in my next life lives in Paris (where she reviews restaurants), and in her restored farmhouse in Provence (where she visits markets, inhales the aromas from her wood-fired oven and occasionally conducts cooking classes for small groups).

The fact she’s a journalist and not a trained chef has given her the facility to entertain while informing, and to write recipes that anyone can tackle. She prefaces recipes with anecdotes about the inspiration behind them, be they cosy Paris bistros, Provencal butchers or wine growers from the Languedoc. Think of this book and think garlicky roast chicken, creamy potato gratin, green salad with bits of bacon and walnuts, and Tarte Tatin.

Paula Wolfert, another American, is a purist who assumes a higher level of commitment to cooking in her readers. I love her recipes and the stories about the people behind them (chefs, housewives, goose fatteners) but there are quite a few that require you to start them several days before you want to serve them. Thankfully there are many simple ones as well and all I’ve tried have worked.

Too many cookbooks written by high end restaurant chefs seduce with pictures and recipe titles but exasperate as soon as you read the recipes in full. The Roux brothers and Christine Manfield are indisputably fantastic cooks and by no means the only ones guilty of writing ridiculous cookbooks, but you’d need their full army of sous chefs and kitchen hands to tackle their instructions. I’ve eagerly fallen onto recipes which at first glance appear to have only six ingredients but half of those turn out to be recipes in themselves (1 quantity of Chilli Cumin Dal, 300ml Pepper Glaze, 3 teaspoons of Chilli Jam).

Essays, asides and opinions

Some of the best food writing is as much about evocation as recipes. A big part of Elizabeth David’s appeal was her timing. She wrote about Summers in France, Italy and Greece, eating delectably al fresco, for an audience of sun-starved British struggling with post-war rations. She understood the potency of an aside to a recipe for a tuna and salad sandwich: ‘Pan bagnata is served in Provençal cafés with a bottle of wine when a game of *boules* is in progress.’

Jane Grigson, Claudia Roden and Madhur Jaffrey share David’s astuteness and their own rich culinary backgrounds give them plenty of raw material for their writing. Grigson comes closer than the others to matching David’s hard-line opinions, a trait that can be amusing and at times excluding.

Where Elizabeth David expects her readers to be able to make pastries and bind sauces with no instruction other than ingredient measurements, Edouard de Pomiane sympathetically anticipates the cook’s struggles. In his recipe for Boeuf à la Ficelle (top rump suspended in boiling water by a string) he says: ‘Lift the beef from the saucepan and remove the string.

The meat is grey outside and not very appetizing. At this moment you may feel a little depressed.'

AA Gill, the notorious restaurant critic for London's *Sunday Times*, isn't big on sympathy but is wildly entertaining. *The Sydney Morning Herald* quoted him in May as opening a review with the line "Why is there never a Palestinian suicide bomber when you need one?" and finishing with: "My chickpea soup was like sucking wet sand, the Blonde's bourride was an accident involving a hair-dryer and an aquarium, the flat chicken supreme was a battered hen, the ham was sweaty and curling, the wine (I'm told) was having a sex change to vinegar, and the service was resting while its agent placed the treatment/novel/play."

His essays in the *Le Caprice* book on subjects including brunch, etiquette and cocktails are just as much fun but he does occasionally go overboard, a tendency that's made him a regular in Private Eye's Pseuds Corner. AA on Eggs Benedict is Pseuds Central:

'Eggs Benedict is as direct as an advertising punch line, it is a dish that says something about you and the person you want to be. Eggs Benedict is a people person, it's dressed down, it's loafers and a polo shirt, it's unisex cologne, it's Sunday papers and films with subtitles and baby papooses. It's sybaritic without being self-indulgent. It's that smooth, smart, committed liberal, sexy, witty, off-white, lifestyle thing, that PR agencies and glossy magazines have been teasing us with for a generation... It's you and it's me and it's the whole shtick of post-war, post-modern, politically savvy, free-market, free-thinking, free-from-want, free-as-a-bird, happy-ever-after, Western capitalist dream, and which of us in the goddamn world doesn't want that? ... Reading 'Eggs Benedict' on a menu is politically and socially potent and pregnant with meaning - the clenched fist, the 'High Five' manifesto of nice people.'

And while we're on opinionated writers, Italian chef and former MP, Stefano de Pieri can't just stick to writing great recipes; his books include essays which frequently reveal his strong views on politics and the national palate. Bernard King's cookbooks are typically opinionated *and* hysterical, the humour often winning out over the palatability of the recipes.

So it seems just these few cookbooks, a mere sample of my library, give me everything I could ever want from a collection. Really, I'll never need to buy another volume. But there's nothing wrong with browsing, is there?

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