
Reading a Cookbook

It's More Than Just Directions

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Author's Note: Through the INFO 6070 course at Dalhousie University's School of Information Management, I created Delicious Titles: A Cookbook Blog. This informed much of the content in this article.

Editor's Note: The RUSQ 58:4 issue will contain a article about the inaugural 2018 RUSA CODES List—Cookbooks, which is list of cookbooks recommended as essential for public libraries. CODES is the Collection Development and Evaluation Section of RUSA.

Growing up in the 1990s on my family's farm in rural New Brunswick, eating and reading were central to my childhood. Foodies today would envy the meals prepared in our household; they always featured the freshest and most local ingredients. Cookbooks played a significant role in our family's meals. My mother was (and still is) an avid reader of them; perhaps sparked by her love of books but also by the bounty from the garden, in which my father was forever experimenting.

This love of food followed me into adulthood, in both my eating and my literary tastes. At libraries, I always gravitated toward the cookbook section. I binged on food blogs, and when I bought books for myself, it was more likely to be a cookbook than any other type of book. I almost felt self-conscious to speak of this habit; these titles didn't seem to have the same weight as other literary fiction or nonfiction titles. I didn't consider this reading.

My perspective changed, and I began to see the value of cookbooks last summer, when I had the pleasure of taking INFO 6070: Reading and Reading Practices at Dalhousie University's School of Information Management. The course provided a strong foundation for Readers' Advisory tools. We attempted to define the act of reading, book appeals, and what constitutes reading for pleasure. For our final project, we had the option to select a genre and create an RA resource about it to share with our peers and colleagues. Naturally, I picked something I was passionate about: cookbooks.

My professor was positive about this topic, but a response from a coworker surprised me. She stated, "You read cookbooks? What's there to read? It's just directions." Alas, I realized she had not experienced cookbooks and food writing as I have.

DEFINING A COOKBOOK

Humans have always had a desire to share stories, including recipes. Early evidence of societies sharing recipes include

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thirty-five culinary recipes found on three Mesopotamian clay tablets from 1700 BCE, and recipe collections from the late Middle Ages remain. Western cookbooks began at the end of the 1200s and beginning of the 1300s as “manuscripts with predominantly short and condensed recipes.”¹ Cookbooks have evolved significantly since these early beginnings, and today they are an important part of the publishing industry.

Cookbooks are made up of recipes, which some argue are like short stories. In her review of William Sitwell's 2012 book *A History of Food in 100 Recipes*, writer Bee Wilson explains, “Like a short story, a good recipe can put us in a delightful trance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fiction as literature ‘concerned with the narration of imaginary events.’ This is what recipes are: stories of pretend meals.” Wilson continues, “Recipes have a story arc. You need to get through the tricky early prepping stages via the complications of heat and measuring before you arrive at the point of happy closure where the dish goes in the oven or is sliced or served. When a recipe has many ingredients and stages and finicky instructions, it can be hard to concentrate, like reading a Victorian novel with so many characters that you need a dramatis personae to keep things straight.”² A recipe is like a short story, offering characters (ingredients), action (recipe directions), and a final epilogue (culinary presentation). Cookbooks organize recipes together with a narrative that may include photographs and illustrations as well as stories, tips, suggestions, and wisdom.

In cookbook writing, the author's voice can shine through as he or she shares stories and experiences connected to the recipes. Melissa Brackey Stoeger defines this type of writing as the “narrative cookbook” style.³ Indeed, as Henry Notaker notes, “The recipes in these books are meant to be leafed through and read sitting in a sofa or an easy chair rather than followed step by step over the kitchen stove.”⁴ These are the books on my nightstand—these are the stories I tuck into before I nod off.

READING APPEAL

Theorists have spent much time considering why people read. I read for various reasons, including knowledge, pleasure, escape, and relaxation. Cookbooks encompass all of these attributes. It may be tempting to argue that the primary reading appeal for cookbooks is learning and experience;⁵ however, cookbooks are alluring for many other reasons—they provide escapism, fantasy, and a connection to other places, past and present. They offer armchair travel, inspire creativity, and provide an intimate experience. By hearing the stories behind recipes, the reader connects with the cookbook writer. The relationship can get even more personal when the reader makes a recipe from a cookbook. The story goes off the page and becomes an experience that is part of our life.

Before I started working at a library, I was in a very

stressful job. Cookbooks and food blogs were my refuge. During my lunch breaks, I would escape online with www.smittenkitchen.com, www.101cookbooks.com, or www.spoonforkbacon.com. At night I would dive into Tamar Adler's *An Everlasting Meal* (2011), Sara Forte's *The Sprouted Kitchen* (2012), and titles by the Moosewood Collective. I was so consumed by work that I couldn't read through a full chapter book, yet these writings sparked my imagination: my anxiety would briefly subside, and sometimes they energized me enough to go to the kitchen to create.

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Unlike many other literary genres, it's difficult to classify cookbooks into specific literary genres. It's tempting to categorize cookbooks based on ingredients, style of cooking, kitchen tools, or status of chef; however, these classifications do not capture reading appeals. To address the appeals of certain cookbooks, I propose the following categories:

Author Personality

The personality of the author is evident in this cookbook genre. Their character shines through in the strong narrative writing that starts each chapter or recipe: they are intimate, honest, humorous, and entertaining. Good ingredients are emphasized; however, the instructions may be informal. An example of this can be found in Nigella Lawson's directions for “Finger-Lickin' Ribs” in her 2004 cookbook, *Feast*. She writes, “[when preparing the ribs,] squidge everything around well.” She concludes the recipe with strawberries as a pairing suggestion. She writes, “Strawberries have just been found to increase sex drive more than any other foodstuff, if you can believe such things. I'm not sure how you could measure it.”⁶ In addition to Lawson, cookbook authors that write in this style include Julia Child (*Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume I*, 1961), Ree Drummond (*The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Recipes from an Accidental Country Girl*, 2009), Deb Perelman (*The Smitten Kitchen Cookbook*, 2012), Aarti Sequeira (*Aarti Paarti: An American Kitchen with an Indian Soul*, 2014), and Molly Yeh (*Molly on the Range: Recipes and Stories from an Unlikely Life of a Farm Girl*, 2016).

Healthy Eating

Reading these types of cookbooks evokes positive feelings. Much like a trip to Whole Foods or the local farmer's market, an individual can make a small change that positively affects their well-being and the planet; buying organic whole foods and supporting local agriculture feels morally right. For some individuals, something similar may happen when reading healthy eating cookbooks. Steps are straightforward, leaving the reader with a sense of optimism and achievability. Photographs of wholesome plated meals tantalize the reader to try the recipes. Ingredient lists will emphasize fresh

fruits and vegetables, as well as things found in a grocer's health section (seeds and nuts, chia seeds, beans, etc.). The reader will be inspired to attempt these recipes for healthful enlightenment. Cookbook authors of this sub-genre include Sarah Britton (*My New Roots*, 2015), Lindsay Hunt (*Healthyish*, 2018), Angela Lidden (*The Oh She Glows Cookbook*, 2014), Jamie Oliver (*Jamie's Food Revolution: Rediscover How to Cook Simple, Delicious, Affordable Meals*, 2009), and Janet and Greta Podleski (*The Looneyspoons Collection: Janet & Greta's Greatest Recipe Hits plus a Whole Lot More*, 2011). Sometimes the author will share their personal experiences with food and how they transformed their life by changing their eating habits.

Culinary Travel

Cookbooks that highlight the heritage and food culture of particular communities offer a travel experience. Writers of these types of books will share rich descriptions and personal connections to recipes, enabling the reader to imagine what the food tastes like. Sometimes curiosity about exotic ingredients will intrigue the reader. They will wonder: What are ajowan seeds? How can I know when an Iranian lime is ripe? Where can I find fresh lime leaves in my neighborhood? These cookbooks invite exploration. Examples of authors in this sub-genre include Madhur Jaffrey (*Madhur Jaffrey's World Vegetarian: More Than 650 Meatless Recipes from Around the World*, 2002), Diana Kennedy (*The Art of Mexican Cooking: Traditional Mexican Cooking for Aficionados*, 2012), Yotam Ottolenghi (*Plenty: Vibrant Recipes from London's Ottole*, 2011), Lidia Matticchio Bastianich (*Lidia's Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine: Everything You Need to Know to Be a Great Italian Cook*, 2015), and James Syhabout (*Hawker Fare: Stories & Recipes from a Refugee Chef's Isan Thai & Lao Roots*, 2018).

FOOD SCIENCE

These books investigate the chemistry and science of food preparation. Not necessarily written for the professional chef, these books provide technical information and details. Suggested titles of books that match this description include *The Baker in Me* by Daphna Rabinovitch (2016) and *The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking through Science* by J. Kenji López-Alt (2015).

FOOD MEMOIRS

Readers of food memoirs develop an intimate relationship with food icons and writers by hearing firsthand accounts of their experiences with food. These books have the look and feel of traditional memoirs; however, recipes are interspersed throughout personal anecdotes and stories. Titles that follow in this vein include *A Homemade Life* by Molly Wizenberg (2009), *Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table* by Ruth

Reichl (1998), and *Life from Scratch: A Memoir of Food, Family and Forgiveness* by Sasha Martin (2015).

HOW TO MAKE SUGGESTIONS

As a library assistant at Halifax Public Libraries, I am frequently asked for cookbook recommendations. Some of these inquiries are from individuals just learning to cook, whereas others are from kitchen connoisseurs. These searches may range from a quest for a basic how-to guide for a new cook or baker, to finding a selection that aligns with the particular reading interests of an avid cookbook reader.

Providing readers' advisory services for cookbook readers is challenging, especially because tried-and-true go-to tools don't cater to this type of reader. NoveList doesn't provide resources, and though Goodreads offers recommendations from the website's community members, I am hesitant to suggest it for cookbook recommendations because it doesn't highlight the appeal factors. As such, I often rely on my own reading experiences and friends' recommendations to make reading recommendations. Here are some questions in the RA interview process I find helpful in discovering what type of cookbook a community member may be interested in reading:

Are you looking for a particular recipe? Or are you interested in exploring?

Like in any RA interview, seeking an answer to these questions entails a lot of listening. I never pose these questions exactly like this; however, through an informal conversation, I can usually conclude if a community member is looking for a specific recipe (e.g., how to roast a chicken), if they are interested in learning about a new type of cuisine, or if they are a cookbook reader.

What was the last cookbook you used that you really enjoyed? Why?

Much like the question, "What was the last book you read and enjoyed?" this question dives into reading appeals as well as their culinary interests.

What's your favorite recipe? Why?

This question may unpack an individual's food history and what style of food writing they like. Are they seeking sparse text with concise directions, or do they enjoy meandering recipes?

What are you presently reading and enjoying?

Digging into current reading habits may also help you discover the appeal a patron is looking for in a cookbook. For example, if they like memoirs with a strong female voice,

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they may enjoy writing by Ruth Reich, Julia Child, or Nigella Lawson. If travel piques their interest, steering them toward titles that explore food from other places may align with this interest.

When I began considering cookbooks as a reading genre, I had some people tell me they only read cookbooks with photographs in them because they wanted to see what the recipes looked like when prepared. For many people, making food from a scratch is a new ideology. They grew up in households where processed foods were mealtime staples; rarely was anything homemade. As such, cookbooks and food writing offer a sense of discovery and wonder for some of these individuals. A new vocabulary is being learned. *Whisk, cream, brown, chop*, and *slice* may seem like ordinary verbs for someone with a cooking and baking repertoire; however, for someone new in the kitchen, these terms may sound foreign. As we provide readers' advisory services, we must navigate this. Much like helping a child learning to read, we must match adult readers with the right cookbook that they can connect to, on and off the page.

CONCLUSION

In the past few years, perhaps in response to issues surrounding food security, I have seen libraries shift to offering food literacy programming. At Halifax Public Libraries, this

includes Tastes Like Home cooking programs, seed libraries, and youth programs such as Plants to Plates. People from all walks of life take part in these activities, and they are integral to creating positive community connections.

As we offer programs that discuss food, we also have to create collections and readers' advisory services that align with these interests. The questions that I offer for cookbook reader's advisory are novice. Further research and critical discourse needs to take place so we can begin to grasp the reading appeal of cookbooks. In the meantime, I hope you'll consider that cookbooks offer more than just instructions—they are literary works in their own right that deserve praise and recognition.

References

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6. Nigella Lawson, *Feast: Food that Celebrates Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 150.