FEAST YOUR EYES

When *Jenny Linford* asked people to recommend their favourite cookbooks, the response was overwhelming. Here she explains why they have an enduring appeal for us in the digital era

Illustrations by Ahoy There

Cookbooks have a special place in my life. As a hungry uni student, I learnt to cook from them; Madhur Jaffrey's Indian Cookery paperback showed me how spices could transform my grotty, cheap mince into a delicious meal. I now have hundreds of cookbooks and enjoy reading them in bed at night, fantasising about what I might cook, delighting in being transported.

I am not the only person to have a deep affection for recipe books. In May, I started a hashtag, first on Twitter, then on Instagram. I wrote, "I love cookbooks and I know I'm not alone! So am starting #7favouritecookbooks" and sent it into the ether. The response was extraordinary. Around the world, fellow food writers, keen home cooks, chefs and food producers, from chocolatiers to butchers, all shared their favourite cookbooks with heartfelt enthusiasm. There was a generosity of spirit to both the choices and the responses that saw social media at its connective best. Chosen books were wide-ranging: titles by contemporary food icons including Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, Nigel Slater, Diana Henry and Rachel Roddy, classics by Jane Grigson, Elizabeth David and Marcella Hazan and historic tomes. The novelist Lissa Evans struck a chord among those of a certain age with her pick, the My Fun-to-Cook Book. She commented that it was "from the happy days when children were encouraged to heat a huge amount of sugar with an equal quantity of golden syrup, add bicarb and pour the volcanically bubbling result onto a tray in order to make honeycomb". Touchingly, people shared photographs and memories of family notebooks containing handwritten recipes or collections of cuttings, passed down the generations and of great sentimental value.

The cookbook has evolved considerably over the centuries, according to the food historian Dr Polly Russell, a curator at the British Library. The earliest records of cookery writing are manuscripts from royal households. A famous example is The Forme of Cury (cury in Middle English means cookery), thought to have been written at the end of the 14th century by the master cooks of Richard II, chronicling banquet dishes and featuring exotic ingredients such as costly spices, porpoises and whales. "The recipes in it are written in a very cursory way to the contemporary eye," says Russell. "They don't include timings, ingredient quantities, clear instructions; at best they're aide-memoires."

After the arrival of the printing press, "printers quite quickly realised that there was a lucrative market for recipe books. Cookbooks for housewives were really the success story of the 17th century, and they started the tradition of the domestic cookery writer, writing for a domestic audience." In the 19th century, writers such as Eliza Acton and Mrs Beeton emphasised "thrift, household economy and plainness — strands you still see today". Following the Second World War, the advent of the affordable paperback and the rise of leisure activities such as travelling saw publishing houses — "Penguin in particular" — make cookery lists broad and interesting. "They grew this interest in food and cooking in the late 1960s and 1970s. You could say that all cookery books are about more than just cooking — they always speak of a particular moment and are always, to some extent, aspirational."

A popular choice on #7favouritecookbooks was Claudia Roden's influential A Book of Middle Eastern Food. Following the expulsion of Egypt's Jewish community (her Syrian-Jewish family among them) after the 1956 Suez Crisis, Roden began gathering from Egyptian refugees the recipes that eventually formed the book. Cookbooks hadn't existed in Egypt, she explains, with recipes simply handed down within families. "In the circumstances, I felt the most important thing I could do was to record the recipes. These foods we ate were the one thing we could keep from the old life. Before, people would never give a recipe except to their children, but, when I asked, they were glad that somebody was writing them down."

Given the plethora of cookbooks on Middle Eastern food at the moment, she remembers with amusement that when she went to research Arab cuisine at the British Library, all it had were translations of 13th-century manuscripts. But after reading and being inspired by Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson, Roden began to consider writing cookbooks herself. "I read a David book on Mediterranean food and found a recipe for melokhia soup in it. It's a national dish in Egypt that everyone adores and here someone had written it down. I was enthralled."

The chef Sat Bains, who holds two Michelin stars, has been fascinated by cookbooks ever since he was an impoverished student. He admits the first cookbook he owned, by the French chef Auguste Escoffier, was "borrowed" from the catering college library and never returned. Bains remembers vividly the thrill he experienced as a young chef when he spotted Marco Pierre White's White Heat in a remainder bookshop. "There were four copies in hardback for just £4 each, so I bought all four and sold the other three for £12 each," he says happily. "I read that sitting on the edge of my work bench. It blew my mind that someone in England was cooking like that. That book had a massive impact on me." Nowadays, Bains owns a collection of more than 1,000 cookbooks. "The best ones are in a cabinet in my office — I love flicking through them. With a book, there's the touchy-feely aspect; like food, it's physical. When you have a good cookbook, you sense that someone's made it."

In an age where you can find thousands of recipes free online, you might think that physical cookbooks would be struggling, but the opposite is true. "Non-fiction is the biggest part of print publishing in the UK, and food and drink titles are a huge part of non-fiction," says Kiera O'Brien, charts and data editor at The Bookseller. In 2018, food and drink book sales numbered a healthy 7.2m. This year, Pinch of Nom became the fastest-selling non-fiction book ever, shifting more than 210,000 copies in just three days. "Cookbooks have hardly been affected by the move to digital," O'Brien says. "We're seeing this a lot with print books in general — people will pay for a book if they feel the information is more trustworthy than that on the internet."

The continuing demand for cookbooks is good news for the ⟶

publishers who produce them. Sarah Lavelle, publishing director at Quadrille, observes that publishers go to a lot of effort to produce "absolutely beautiful" illustrated cookbooks. The price point on cookbooks is high now, "so people rightly expect a big, thick book packed with photography, which is a very expensive thing to produce." Visual appeal is vital. "People buy with one click on Amazon, so even that tiny image has to look good."

At Grub Street, publisher Anne Dolamore has created a niche republishing out-of-print cookbooks. "If there's a book where the content is great quality, why would you not keep it in print?" she says. The demand is there. "We republished the hardback edition of Jane Grigson's Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery in 2001 and have reprinted it 12 times. It's such a definitive book; chefs and the artisans now making charcuterie in the UK all buy it."

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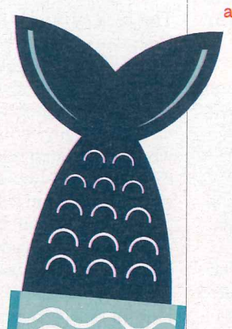
The first cookbook Dolamore republished was Margaret Costa's Four Seasons Cookery Book, which was initially published in 1970. Dolamore had come across a secondhand copy when searching for a sorrel soup recipe. "When I read it, I thought, 'This is fabulous.'" She discovered that other admirers of the book included Delia Smith and Nigel Slater. "We sold out the first print run really quickly and it's never been out of print since."

Given the popularity of cookbooks as gifts, autumn sees a cornucopia of new titles in the run-up to Christmas. This year, these include restaurant tie-ins from St John and the Quality Chop House; Diana Henry's From the Oven to the Table, which focuses on easy, oven-centred recipes; and single-subject cookbooks such as Sour by Mark Diacono and Leaf by Catherine Phipps. The diversity is noticeable. "There is always space to do something new," says Lavelle.

From a food writer's point of view, there is a special satisfaction in knowing that people are cooking your recipes. "I meet a lot of people who tell me, 'We ate a lot out of your books,' because their mother or grandmother used them," says Roden. "What you cook is so personal, so intimate, it's part of your life and your memories." It's that special capacity of cookbooks to insert themselves — in the most delicious way — into our lives that allows them to endure ■



RECOMMENDED CLASSIC COOKBOOKS

French Provincial Cooking
Elizabeth David (1960)

Four Seasons Cookery Book
Margaret Costa (1970)

The Classic Italian Cookbook
Marcella Hazan (1973)

An Invitation to Indian Cooking
Madhur Jaffrey (1973)

Jane Grigson's Vegetable Book
Jane Grigson (1978)

Katie Stewart's Cookbook
Katie Stewart (1983)

European Peasant Cookery
Elisabeth Luard (1986)

Floyd on France
Keith Floyd (1987)

The Greens Cookbook
Deborah Madison and Edward Espe Brown (1987)

The Carved Angel
Joyce Molyneux and Sophie Grigson (1990)

Delia Smith's Summer Collection
Delia Smith (1993)

Roast Chicken and Other Stories
Simon Hopkinson and Lindsey Bareham (1994)

How to Eat
Nigella Lawson (1998)

The Whole Beast
Fergus Henderson (1999)

The Naked Chef
Jamie Oliver (1999)

Moro: the Cookbook
Samantha Clark and Samuel Clark (2001)

The Kitchen Diaries
Nigel Slater (2005)

Jerusalem
Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi (2012)

Five Quarters
Rachel Roddy (2015)

Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat
by Samin Nosrat (2017)

How to Eat a Peach
by Diana Henry (2018)

Sight, Smell, Touch, Taste, Sound
by Sybil Kapoor (2018)