

THE WORLD IN A COOKBOOK



OLD COOKBOOKS ARE CAPTIVATING, and important too, leading us into the world beyond the hearth. Without them, we could not have tasted our way down the centuries to the dishes we embrace with such affection today. This book began as a personal account of Mark's and my collection of cookbooks and culinary images. It has gradually expanded to be a more general history of European and early American cookbooks, though always seen from a personal viewpoint. We've made some surprising, illuminating connections between the way people lived and the books they used.

What is a cookbook? First, it is a collection of recipes—blueprints for a cook to recreate a dish. More specifically, according to cookbook bibliographer Henry Notaker, “A cookbook is a book with about two-thirds cookery instruction and . . . at least 40–50 percent in recipe form.”¹ Surprisingly early, right from the start of the age of printing, a number of published books fit this description. The recipes in them may be embryonic, expressed in just a few lines, but their purpose of instruction is clear. Early books with recipes covered far wider topics as well. Some sought to preserve the wisdom of the ancients, others offered advice on how to live a healthy life, and still others were preoccupied with glorifying the banquets and feasts of a wealthy patron. In later centuries, the voices of the authors come through more clearly and, indeed, a few such books seem designed to showcase a personality rather than to instruct their readers.

In writing about the evolution of cookbooks, I have separated chapters by century (rarely does an author overlap from one century to the next). The first chapter gives an outline of manuscript cookbooks before printing began. The opening date for the main text, that of the first printed cookbook in 1474, was easy to determine. The close-out of 1830 allows a little leeway for the geopolitical map drawn at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to become firmly established, opening avenues for cookbooks to develop that were to remain clearly defined for almost a century.

The first four printed cookbooks are known as *incunabula*, from the Latin word for “swaddling clothes,” which came to be used figuratively in nineteenth-century England for the “childhood” of books, denoting those printed with moveable type before 1501. These early books were intended for the small audience of professionals who already

knew how to cook, serving more as an exchange of ideas among the initiated than as instruction manuals for the novice. Each was published in a different country and compiled in a different language—Latin, French, German, or English. From these books' roots grew many genres. The sixteenth century brought cookbooks intended for the *maître d'hôtel*, or steward responsible for managing the household of a wealthy nobleman or a prince of the church. Their authors gave space to organizing elaborate banquets and planning menus; recipes were numerous but sometimes played a secondary role. Many aimed to enhance the reputation of their patrons or employers. A famous early example is *Banchetti composizioni di vivande e apparecchio generale* (Banquets, Composition of Dishes and General Presentation, 1549), by Cristoforo di Messisbugo, steward at the famous court of Alfonso d'Este, duke of Ferrara. Around the same time, a new prototype author appeared, the gentleman dilettante who enjoyed spending time in his kitchen, which he sometimes described as his laboratory. He discussed cooking, but within the broader context of distillation and other scientific or medical experiments. Some cookbook writers were also medical doctors, one example being Nostradamus, famous for his astrological predictions.

Later books often explored cooking in combination with gardening. For example, Nicolas de Bonnefons's *Les delices de la campagne* (The Pleasures of the Countryside, 1654) includes excellent advice on how to cook garden produce. This book, together with François Pierre de la Varenne's *Le cuisinier françois* (The French Cook, 1651), strongly influenced the evolution of French classical cuisine. (As a good luck talisman, I kept a copy of *Le cuisinier françois* in my desk drawer when I opened La Varenne Cooking School in Paris in 1975.) In England at the same time, books containing household advice began to appear regularly. Many, such as Gervase Markham's *The English Hous-wife* (1615), were primarily recipe books that provided extensive instructions for preparing food and drink, whereas others, such as Hannah Woolley's *The Gentlewomans Companion* (1673), emphasized domestic conduct side by side with the practicalities of cooking. In England from the seventeenth century on, many books about cooking were written *by* women for a readership *of* women. These books were the seminal influence in the kitchens of the new nation of America.

The words on the pages of old cookbooks reveal the cooks themselves. An almost messianic fervor is characteristic of many great cooks, no matter what their nationality. In his *Opera*, Scappi addresses the young man who is his chosen successor: "I [took] you on as an apprentice and instruct[ed] you to the fullest of my ability in all that makes up the very best of my profession . . . making you a knowledgeable and astute expert in the art, so that . . . all my work and practical experience . . . should remain in you."² This ideal of passing knowledge and practical expertise from generation to generation likely stemmed from the apprenticeship structure common in many kitchens. In large establishments, cooks were ranked in a formal hierarchy, almost military in its precision—an organizational structure that was already developed in medieval times and remains firmly entrenched in today's French professional kitchen. Such a



ABOVE *Tacuinum sanitatis* was a treatise on health and hygiene written in Arabic in the eleventh century by Ibn Butlân, a Christian physician born in Baghdad. When the book was first printed in Latin and then highly illustrated in the mid-1470s, it had immediate and long-lasting success. Ibn Butlân recommended a healthy life in harmony with nature, and the more than two hundred images illuminate everyday life in medieval Italy. He talks of the seasons, food and drink, sleep, and the humors of body and mind. The original *Tacuinum sanitatis* was republished by fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in the twentieth century as part of a celebration of Italian heritage.



pattern was rarely found in England, and then usually in kitchens headed by a French-trained chef.

English cooks took a different path, opting to write household books on cooking at home for the family. The importance of a well-ordered home kitchen became a central topic in sixteenth-century England, first promoted by male authors and then by women writers, who supplemented their recipes with earnest advice for the novice and the poorly educated about menus and marketing, diet and medicine, brewing and preserving, the management of staff, and, inevitably, financial economy. The first books were lively, venturing into a new world of exciting ingredients and semiscientific discoveries. Later household works became more evangelical, useful no doubt but less warmhearted.

Until the eighteenth century, writing cookbooks was a sideline. Then as now, few authors could expect to earn a living from books about cooking (hence Hannah Glasse's second career as a dressmaker). Promotional ideas began as early as the sixteenth century, when an author's portrait might be used as a frontispiece or titles might allude to a famous personage, as in *The Queen's Closet Opened* (W.M., 1655). The acknowledgment of a patron, which had customarily appeared at the opening of

a cookbook, gradually gave way to a first-person preface with declamatory statements about the superiority of the author above all rivals. Publishers began to piggyback on the reputation of a known author; for example, several texts were attributed to La Varenne but almost certainly not written by him. Yet another approach was to solicit subscribers as a guarantee of revenue before publication.

If cookbooks did not enrich their authors' purses, they did enhance their reputations. Chef François Menon wrote eight cookbooks in twenty years, not just to record his knowledge but also to ensure his professional success in the competitive environ-

ABOVE This early 1596 edition of Bartolomeo Scappi's *Opera*, one of the most authoritative cookbooks of any century, was printed in Venice and contains nearly thirty woodcuts chronicling life in the kitchens of the time. Here in the "cold room for working with milk," cooks are pouring milk from a bag, whisking cream, and churning milk, probably to make butter. For cleanliness, all three are wearing hats and aprons. Scappi is one of the first cooks to give complete cooking instructions and include little asides on what to do in tricky moments and how to avoid disaster.

ment of mid-eighteenth-century Paris. With the establishment of restaurants and gentlemen's clubs with fine dining rooms toward the end of the century, the chefs at these elite venues began writing cookbooks for their patrons to take home, thus making the general public aware of what delicacies they might be missing. As a further twist, in the free and easy atmosphere of the early Napoleonic era, Grimod de la Reynière actually made a business of selling his personal journal, the *Almanach des gourmands* (perhaps benefiting from free dinners in the many restaurants he reviewed).

In the four centuries after the first four printed cookbooks appeared, they moved far beyond the role of simply documenting what happened in the kitchen. As we'll see, they became textbooks, memoirs, dietary guides, gardening manuals, scientific treatises, restaurant guides, and even political tracts, as well as leaders of fashion into the future.

About This Book

One of my roles has been testing and tasting recipes from each century for inclusion in this book. I've embarked with excitement on the pungent spiced sauces of medieval times, moving through the massive roasts and *ragoûts* of Louis XIV's court to the elegance of eighteenth-century chilled and molded desserts. All the recipes are from books in our collection, and for each, I note the edition in which it appears—often a first and usually an early edition. Within each chapter, recipes appear in the order of their date of printing. The style of the text is a whole other subject, as I explore in “The Writing of a Recipe.” I have chosen the recipes both to represent their century and to be accessible to today's home cooks. Most are easy to prepare: Carême's apple soufflé (1815), for example, calls for just three ingredients. A few are more challenging: Hannah Glasse's Yorkshire Christmas Pie (1747) calls for five different birds, all boned and reshaped one inside another to bake inside a robust, freestanding wall of pastry crust. The modern recipes follow the old as closely as possible, though the early authors can be difficult to interpret, their mind-set and methods of cooking being inevitably so far from our own. In all of these dishes, I've looked for that little element of surprise, the opportunity to try an odd combination of ingredients or a new way of doing things.

Each chapter in this book has two parts: text interspersed with boxes and a separate section of recipes (translated into English as needed) with notes and renderings for the modern kitchen. Boxes supplement the text and add a contemporary slant, covering subjects such as women in the kitchen and changes in the use of sugar. Spelling was not standardized in Europe or the United States until recently. For this reason, the spellings of book titles and authors' names in the text may not match what appears in the images. Unless otherwise stated, the English translations in the text and recipes are by me or Mark. Where a published English translation is cited, quotations in the text have come from this version. All images are from our cookbook and print collection, unless otherwise stated. Bon appétit!

THE WRITING OF A RECIPE

When I set out to explore the style and content of recipe texts, I had certain expectations. I assumed that at the dawn of printing, culinary recipes would be just a few lines, with rare measurement of ingredients and minimal directions. The details that we look for today—precise quantities, with comprehensive, step-by-step instructions for the finished dish—would be lacking. I also believed that as time advanced, recipes would become longer and more precise, with authors providing more background details and flourishes. The reality is far more complex.

The word *recipe* in all the Latinate languages shares the root *recipere*, meaning “to receive,” which when conjugated in the imperative becomes *recipe*. Sources agree that “recipe” (or “receipt”) originally meant a medicinal formula, with the first English usage of the term appearing in the late fourteenth century. Recipes were a valuable tool, giving readers access to expert advice on how to achieve consistent results when making remedies for gout or headache, curative wines and herbal infusions, hair dye and skin cream, as well as tasty dishes. Doctors, alchemists, apothecaries, and cooks came to depend on these formulas. One eleventh- or twelfth-century poem addressed to Robert of Normandy, son of William the Conqueror, sums up the benefits: “Every man may be a Graduate, and proceed [as] Doctor in the ordering of his owne body.”¹

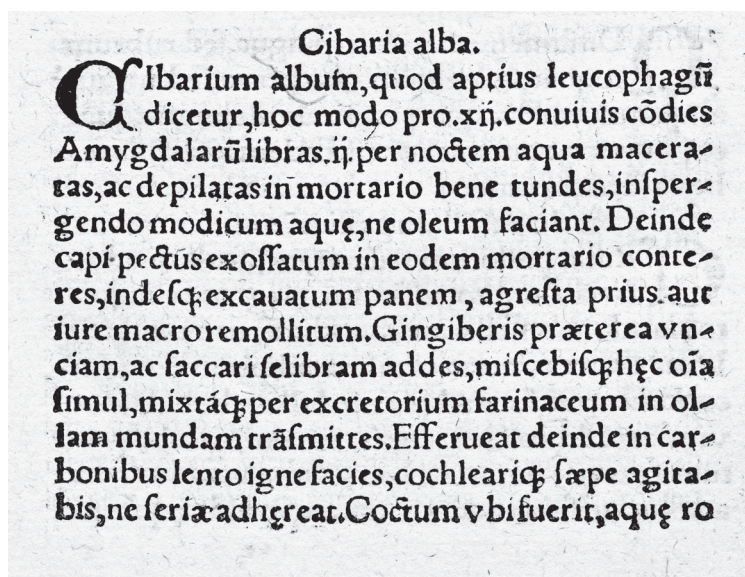
Though rare, cooking instructions existed long before cooks developed the notion of a “recipe”; they appear in manuscripts at least as far back as the fourth century—for example, in Apicius’s *De re coquinaria* [On Cooking]. By the fourteenth century,

cooking instructions were still uncommon, though in his manuscript cookbook *Forme of Cury*, King Richard II’s master cook precisely describes the ingredients of dishes and explains how to cook and serve them.² Printing brought books of recipes into the kitchen, until at last in the late sixteenth century, the term *recipe* appeared in print to describe a specifically culinary preparation.³

In investigating the progress of printed recipes, I decided to follow the dish called “white eating,” famous throughout Europe from medieval times to the present day under such names as *blancmange* in English, *blancmanger* in French, *bianco mangiare* in Italian, and *manjar blanco* in Spanish. Chaucer mentions “Blankmanger” in the prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*

at the end of the fourteenth century. The dish itself changed radically over the centuries, but here I’m interested in the style and coherence of the recipe explanation and its value as an instructional sheet on the page.

The recipe for *cibaria alba* (white food) in *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, the first printed cookbook, already had most of the key elements of a successful recipe.⁴ Every recipe has two basic components: a description of the required ingredients, preferably in order of use, and a clear explanation of how to put them together. Other details—ingredient measurements, information on equipment, cooking times, serving suggestions—are secondary to the essentials. The style in which these elements are presented varies markedly over time and from



In this recipe for *cibaria alba* (white food) from the first printed cookbook, *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, 1520 edition, Bartolomeo Sacchi (Platina) acknowledges his debt to his friend, the “immortal” cook Martino of Como. The advice to add a little water to emulsify the oil when grinding almonds, along with many other such tips, most certainly came from Martino rather than from Platina. The recipes also include quantities for many ingredients, though little in the way of cooking instruction.