

COOKBOOKS

I've often been asked—well, alright, maybe not often, but well, once or twice—what cookbooks I particularly enjoy. While I've got a roomful of cookbooks, overflowing out of the shelves, there are some that I turn to time and again. Some of these books are well known, while others are fairly obscure. I like cookbooks to be easy to follow, with recipes that can be done in a reasonable amount of time with a reasonable expenditure of effort. Any recipe that requires you to make two other recipes first before starting on the original recipe gets skipped immediately. Here's a list of some of my favorite cookbooks, and the reasons I like them.

If I had to do the one cookbook on a desert island routine, for me the choice is easy. It would be Irma Rombauer's *Joy of Cooking*. The only difficulty would be whether to pick the new or the previous edition. Both have their strong points. In my opinion, the *Joy of Cooking* is the best all-around cookbook available. There are recipes for virtually anything and they are clear and easy to follow, even for new cooks. If I'm making something for the first time, I always look in the *Joy of Cooking*.

Another all-around cookbook I often refer to—well, there are two of them but both by the same author, are Julia Child's *The Way to Cook*, and *Cooking at Home*, which she co-wrote with Jacques Pepin. Julia Child's importance to the science and art of cooking can't be overstated. *The Way to Cook* gives excellent recipes for all sorts of delicious food, which can easily be followed by—if not an absolute beginner, at least by a non-expert cook. The only problem is that sometimes her dishes are a little labor-intensive. (She has one for sautéed Brussels sprout leaves that's delicious, and once I actually stood there all afternoon and picked the leaves off of Brussels sprouts!) That's why I love the book *Cooking at Home*, which has Jacques Pepin's excellent and more labor-saving recipes and techniques as well as Julia's classic versions.

From now on, it's not so much a question of individual books as it is of specific authors that I read often. One of my favorite cookbook authors is Jacques Pepin. His recipes are easy and delicious and his techniques are clearly explained and not difficult to do. I can't think of any of his cookbooks that I DON'T like. For years, his TV shows were a staple of my Saturday mornings. I consult his *Jacques Pepin's Table* not only whenever company is coming, but often for family dinners as well. He also gives menu suggestions, pairing dishes up as well as suggesting easy variations on his recipes.

In my early days of cooking, I learned many of my skills by working out of the two books of the late Pierre Franey, *The 60 Minute Gourmet* and *More 60 Minute Gourmet*, which he adapted from his weekly column in the *New York Times*. His premise was dinner for four in an hour, using fresh ingredients. And that's the way I try to cook today. Another author I turn to often is Jeff Smith, host of the old *Frugal Gourmet* show in TV and author of a number of fine cookbooks. His *Our Immigrant Ancestors* and *The Frugal Gourmet Cooks American* both have excellent recipes, many of which have become standards in this house.

I like bold flavors, so I am often cooking in rather spicy cuisines. My favorite author for Indian cooking is Mahadur Jeffrey. My copies of her *Indian Cooking* and *Quick and Easy Indian Cooking* are worn and spotted. I also like Cajun food, and for that I turn to *Real and Rustic*, by TV chef Emeril Lagasse. While I find his TV personality a bit irritating, *Real and Rustic* has some excellent recipes that are easy to make. It's the only one of his books that I like, however—the others are too elaborate or too pretentious or both.

The greatest Mexican cookbook author is Diana Kennedy, but her recipes can be a little intimidating. But for Christmas I got *Mexican Everyday*, by Rick Bayless, and I've been cooking up a storm out of that book. The

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recipes are delicious, easy to make, and use (for the most part) ingredients that can be found at your local supermarket. And he always gives suggestions for interesting variations and complimentary dishes.

My favorite Italian cookbook authors are Viana La Place and Evan Kleiman for their three books, *Cucina Fresca*, *Pasta Fresca*, and *Cucina Rustica*; Lydia Bastianich for anything she writes, and Sacramento's own Biba Caggiano, (owner of Biba's restaurant.) I particularly like her books *Trattoria* and *Italy al Dente*.

And finally, two oddball long out-of-print favorites are *Cook Like a Peasant*, *Eat Like a King* by Maria and Jack Scott, which describes itself as "international recipes for hearty, economical farm cooking with the taste of haute cuisine", and *Fruits in Cooking* by Robert Ackart, which is kind of self-explanatory. Each of my copies is falling apart from long and hard use.

What's your favorite cookbook? I'll look forward to hearing from you soon. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook.