

The Ingredients for Cookbook Collecting

Jonathan Shipley discovers the essential appeal of kitchen guides and recipe compilations.

CLODAGH REEVES STILL remembers the page number. She had opened the cookbook to that page over and over again when she started cooking as a teenager: page 634, the whipped cream biscuits. She even remembers the edition of *The Joy of Cooking* she was using: the 1965 edition. She should know—she’s collected all the editions of *The Joy of Cooking*. She doesn’t tire of making those biscuits, either. Or tire of eating them.

Paula Becker, another cookbook collector, remembers her grandmother’s Dutch apple pie. She remembers that farm kitchen near El Paso where her grandmother, she says, “could cook with both hands tied behind her.” Becker has fond memories of German chocolate cake, hand-cranked vanilla ice cream and a Japanese fruitcake (“a 12-layer extravaganza that we always had after Christmas dinner... it was known as Victory fruitcake during World War II”).

Richard Engeman’s impetus for collecting cookbooks came when he inherited his grandmother’s cookbook *The Progressive Commercial Arithmetic*, published around 1897. He cherishes it, with the hundreds of recipes his grandmother clipped from newspapers and magazines for sixty-plus years and pasted within it. “She also used it to file recipe booklets, handwritten recipes from her daughter and from neighbours, advice on cooking and animal care, and cures for colds,” he says. It’s a scrapbook of a life, told by what was eaten, what was shared with family and enjoyed with friends.

Foodways—“our attitudes, practices and rituals around food,” to quote one academic definition—have become part of the social conversation of North America (witness trends from the mainstreaming of organics to the rise of reality TV shows such as Gordon Ramsay’s *Hell’s Kitchen*, the 100-Mile Diet and food trucks). And with these trends, cookbooks and food writing are becoming worthy of not only reading and using, but also of collecting and studying.

Cookbook stores are flourishing. These include Book Larder, where Reeves works, in Seattle (recently voted Seattle’s best independent bookstore), and Omnivore Books in San Francisco,

where owner Celia Sack focuses on 19th-century and early-20th-century manuals for professional food purveyors and growers (*How to Open a Butcher Shop*, *How to Grow Melons*, *How to Display Roadside Fruit*). In Vancouver, British Columbia, Barbara-Jo’s Books to Cooks, established in 1997, has become a local foodie institution.

Reeves, Becker and Engeman are but a few of the scores of cookbook collectors in the Pacific Northwest. Becker is a staff historian for an online encyclopedia of Washington State history. She’s interested in cookbooks of the 1920s and ’30s because, she says, “That’s the era when newly minted home economics experts began to impose their thoughts and systems on home cooks.” She’s interested in Pacific Northwest cookery, specifically. “I just wanted to understand what life here was like over time.” She does that by cooking from old books.

Institutions too, far and wide, are becoming more focused in their cookery collections. Kansas State University’s Hale Library houses the largest collection of its kind in a public institution, numbering over 30,000 volumes. Says Roger Adams, an associate professor at KSU, about the collection: “It covers every aspect of culinaria that you can imagine.... Yeah, I know *culinaria* isn’t a word in the dictionary, but I hope it catches on!”

Whether one favours *The Joy of Cooking* or a pamphlet on cutting meats, a first edition of Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* or the *Seattle Brides Cook Book* (c. 1911), a guide to gelatin moulds or a glossy hardcover tome of Spanish tapas, collecting cookbooks is a personal affair, usually started years back in a kitchen somewhere, a child watching an elder feeding the family.

Institutions like Kansas State and collectors like Clodagh Reeves all agree on the importance of cookbooks. They are a window into time, into society, into a human’s place in the world through what they ate. “Cookbooks represent the time they were created,” says Adams. “It’s easy to look through Platina [a Renaissance-era writer who published *On Honourable Pleasure and Health*, the first printed cookbook] and Apicius [a collection of

Roman recipes, circa the fifth century CE] and find dishes that resemble a few things we know today, like French toast.”

Richard Engeman, of the Oregon Historical Society, agrees. “Used with understanding, cookbooks can tell us a lot about the social and cultural life of the places and eras from which they sprang.... Regional and personal traits could be—and still can be—identified, and local and regional cookbooks are one of the ways historians can find them.”

Paula Becker, a state historian for Washington, says cookbooks can teach us “continuity, social history, the ongoing importance of, and ease of, providing... if one is willing to learn a few basics.” Cookbooks, she says, “offer physical and emotional sustenance.”

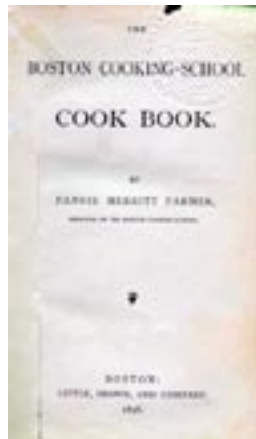
FOOD FOR BODY AND SOUL

The physical sustenance is a given. Whether it’s a pie from Mollie Katzen’s *Moosewood Cookbook* (1978) or a roast from Hannah Glasse’s *Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy* (1747); beans from Fannie Farmer’s *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1896) or an ice cream from *Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams at Home* (2011), these works helped—and continue to help—feed families.

But it’s the emotional sustenance a particular book gives a collector that’s most important. Collectors find books that speak to them personally. It’s not only a book that they have sitting on a shelf in the kitchen. Oftentimes, the books are as close to them as friends.

For Clodagh Reeves, it is the complete editions of *The Joy of Cooking* that give her joy, plus many more. There are Nepalese cookbooks, Tibetan food books, tomes on Indian cookery. “I love Indian food. They [Indians] make great lunches.” Paula Becker especially appreciates obscure books done by Northwesterners. “I have the 1930 *Fruit and Flower Mission Cookbook*, published by that organization. The frontispiece states, ‘The Seattle Fruit and Flower Mission is an organization of women, all volunteer women, which gives dietary aid to those who are ill or undernourished, irrespective of race or creed.’ ”

Cookbooks span the globe, each a microcosm of the place and time it was created. It’s that fact



The Boston Cooking School Cook Book (1896)

that thrills collectors. Celia Sack, the owner of San Francisco’s Omnivore Books, is infatuated with little Victorian-era books on ices and ice creams. “Some of them belonged to Elizabeth David [a British cookery writer who helped revitalize the art of home cookery in the 1950s and ’60s].... They have her bookplates and marginalia notes in them. These are my favourite types of books to collect because they hit two birds with one stone—Elizabeth David and Victorian books on ices!”

Every collector has their favourites. “I own the *Never Fail Cook Book*,

produced by the Presbyterian Ladies Aid Society in Burns, Oregon, from 1912,” Engeman proudly states. “It’s the earliest regional cookbook I have that is bound in oilcloth. Better than a dust jacket any day!” Adams, at Kansas State, collects cookbooks with ties to Kentucky. “I also,” he says, “have another 20 books or so on home brewing. Mmmm...beer.”

A personal endeavour, cookbook collecting is as specific to the collector as the subject matter is to the book itself. Sample titles include *The Forgotten Art of Flower Cookery*, *Is Emu on the Menu?*, *The Mad Men Cookbook*, *Mrs. Rasmussen’s Book of One Arm Cookery*, *Yacht Cookery*, and *To Love and Nourish: A Cookery Book for Brides*.

A PROLIFERATION OF CULINARY WORKS

Cookbooks began gaining popularity among the masses in the late 13th century, though recipes and the like go back to antiquity. Arabic cookbooks existed since the 10th century. *The Important Things to Know about Eating and Drinking* was written in the 13th century by Huou, Kublai Khan’s court chef.

American cookbooks began to appear in earnest in the late 18th century. Amelia Simmons’s *American Cookery* was published in 1796 in Hartford, Connecticut, the first cookbook printed in the United States. Before that time, Americans used British recipe books. Michigan State University scholars, working for MSU’s Historic American Cookbook Project, took note of Simmons’s contribution: “The importance of this work cannot be overstated. Its initial publication was, in its own way, a second Declaration of Independence.” By 1831 there were 13 known editions of the work.



Left: Julia Child signs one of her books at the 1989 Miami Book Fair International (Miami Dade College Archives/Wikipedia)

Below: Omnivore Books in San Francisco specializes in cook books (courtesy of Jonathan Shipley)



Cookbook sales increased across America through the 19th century as authors became well-known within their distinct social circles. By 1876, more than 1,000 cookbooks had been published, including *The Carolina Housewife*, by Sarah Rutledge; *The Curiosities of Food*, by Peter Lund Simmonds; *Frozen Dainties*, by Mary Lincoln; *The Jewish Manual*, by “A Lady” (the first Jewish cookbook published in English); *Livingston and the Tomato*; *Roberts’ Guide for Butlers and Other Household Staff*; and the *Virginia Housewife or Methodical Cook*, by Mary Randolph.

When the all-electric kitchen was introduced at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, the refinements of refrigerating and freezing led to an explosion of cookbook publishing. *Good Housekeeping* published its first cookbook in 1903, and countless titles followed that catered to the growing number of households with all the modern conveniences, among them Nellie Aldridge’s *National Orange Show*

Cookbook, *Dainty Things for Luncheon*, *Cox’s Gelatin Recipes*, *60 Ways to Serve Ham*, *The 60-Minute Chef*, *Cooking Out of Doors*, and *Heinz Special Dietary Foods Uses and Recipes*.

It’s this proliferation of cookbooks, pamphlets and paper ephemera that excites many collectors today. Seattle’s Paula Becker enjoys taking part in the continuum of women in the kitchen. “I love owning and using cookbooks that were useful to my female predecessors,” she says. That’s why she cherishes books like *Cupid’s Book of Good Council* and *Clever Cookery: By the Women’s Guild of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church*.

Clodagh Reeves at Seattle’s Book Larder is attracted by the tangible qualities of the book. “That splash on that page is the vanilla I used in making my daughter’s wedding cake,” she says, pointing out a drop of the nostalgia she finds in her prized treasures. But they’re not treasures untouched, placed on a shelf behind glass. She still

uses them. She cherishes her 1860 edition of Eliza Acton's *Modern Cookery* not because of its financial value but because she can still find tasty recipes inside it. It's that slice of history that Reeves enjoys getting a full plate of.

PREDICTING FUTURE VALUE TRICKY

What authors of our time will be collected and celebrated in a future time? There's no telling. "We don't know who Napoleon's chef was," Reeves says. "It's an ever-changing, fickle ecosystem." Guessing whose books will be valuable later is anyone's game.

Reeves thinks Julia Child will stand the test of time. Kansas State's Roger Adams thinks Mark Bittman, Alton Brown and Anthony Bourdain will continue to resonate. James Beard, too. Becker likes Greg Atkinson and Molly Wizenberg; David Lebowitz and Marilyn Moore. Omnivore's Celia Sack thinks Gabrielle Hamilton, Richard Olney and



Beeton's Book of Household Management (1861).

M.F.K. Fisher are worthy of both praise and collecting.

But, of course, it's neither the acquiring that's important nor the price now or that realized in the future. Richard Engeman pays no attention to how much things may be worth on the open market. "I am drawn to cookbooks that have been used and abused, stained and annotated."

And that is, perhaps, the recipe for any good cookbook collection—a book that is used, one that is loved, one that will be used again and again, one that has a vanilla stain on its pages. We value books that our

mothers used, our grandmothers, our kin long since buried, the foods they ate still waiting to be served, unearthed by the tomes of our kitchens.

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Tasteful Books

by *Gideon Foley*

"CHEF, IT'S AMAZING to meet you. I was able to eat at your restaurant last New Year's and it was probably the best experience of my life."

"No way," Chef Achatz responded, both humbled and pleased at the comment.

"I think what you are doing at NEXT is incredible, and I really hope to be part of it someday." Then, after another 20 seconds of talking, I said, "Oh, Chef, I forgot, would you sign my book?" He wrote, "What's NEXT?" on the title page and then asked for my name.

The trip to Chicago added one more volume to my collection of signed books by the world's greatest chefs. I was able to get *A Life on the Line* signed by co-authors Grant Achatz and his restaurant partner Nick Kokonas that evening.

Chef Achatz was awarded three Michelin stars

for his flagship Chicago restaurant Alinea, which was named the sixth best restaurant in the world in 2011. Worldwide in 2012, only 106 restaurants were awarded three Michelin stars, only 10 of those in the United States.

NEXT, owned by Achatz and Kokonas, completely changes its menu every three months, creating an entirely new theme and concept for the restaurant. Rather than booking reservations, diners buy tickets as they would for an opera performance or sports game. The tickets are sold online and all three months sell out within hours. The goal is to sell three-star cuisine at two-star prices.

Themes range from "Paris 1906" to "Thai Street Food" to "Childhood"—a theme designed to bring nostalgic childhood memories to diners through the exquisite, creative cuisine.