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***Gourmet* and *The New York Times* Bust Cookbooks**

News flash: Many recipes in cookbooks don't work. You already knew that, right? Recently, both *Gourmet* and the *New York Times* have discovered this fact.

Gourmet Editor-in-Chief Ruth Reichl said in the June issue that most of the cookbooks the magazine received this year were poorly conceived and sloppily written. She worried that those who try disappointing recipes would think, "Why bother to cook at all?"

Really? I used to believe I was a mediocre cook because I my recipes didn't work. But I still loved to cook. Now, being in this business for a while, I know it's more likely that the books were not written well, or not tested by people other than the author.

To keep us from following more bad recipes, *Gourmet* launched the Gourmet Cookbook Club, where cooks in the test kitchen test the recipes strenuously. "You can't imagine how many books by beloved authors we have rejected because the recipes turn out to be disappointing," writes Reichl. Whoa. Wouldn't you love to know who didn't make the cut?

Unlike other book clubs, you don't have to buy a minimum number of cookbooks. *Gourmet* reveals the winner each month. See: http://www.gourmet.com/magazine/2000s/2008/06/cookbookreview_fish_without_a_doubt

Next, *New York Times* Editor Sam Sifton piled on in a June roundup of cookbooks. "Most cookbooks are failures," he wrote. Of recipes, "Too often there result is mediocrity, food that just sits there on the plate,

undercooked, overcooked, not rich enough, broken, or worse, boring." I hate to admit it, but he's right.

A few days later, my favorite *New York Times* writer, Kim Severson, wrote about "recipe deal breakers." She called Thomas Keller of the French Laundry the king of fussy recipe writers. Here's her list of deal breakers, plus those of people she interviewed:

1. Says "If you don't have a helper" or requires more than one person
2. Deep frying, because it's messy, hard to dispose of the oil, and hard to get the temperature right
3. Asks for 48 tender young grapevine leaves, freshly picked (Paula Wolfert)
4. Asks for two quarts of pig's blood (Diana Kennedy)
5. Requires ingredients such as local wild boar
6. Expects you to stuff olives or cut vegetables into precise shapes like matchsticks
7. Expects you to truss and lard
8. Asks you to pound food in a mortar or force something through a sieve
9. Requires rubber gloves, handling something carefully with tongs or removing all jewelry before proceeding
10. Says "Serves 18"
11. Says the final item will vary with the weather
12. Contains recipes within a recipe (I used to agree, but decided there are exceptions. In *Grilled Pizzas & Piadinas*, we couldn't put the recipe for tomato sauce in every recipe that calls for it)
13. Requires unusual equipment such as a couscouchiere for couscous, or a candy thermometer for candy making
14. Requires equipment no longer in production
15. Uses phrases or techniques hard to understand or anxiety producing, such as "working quickly before it hardens"
16. Requires split-second timing, such as "just until it..."
17. Any recipe involving gelatin.

Now, I'd like to defend recipes and cookbooks, because I love them, own too many, and I have friends who are cookbook writers. But these writers are correct. I devoted an entire chapter of *Will Write for Food* to how to write recipes well and covered these issues. *The Recipe Writer's Handbook* is a whole book on the subject. Yes, bad recipes are epidemic, but they can be fixed.

For me, it's all about understanding the audience. Chances are, my readers don't have a Wolf range, so I don't have one in my kitchen. My

readers do not have scales, so I don't write "2 ounces flour" in my ingredient list. I know readers are busy, so when my co-author proposed a flatbread sandwich that required two tomatoes roasted for five hours, I talked him out of it.

In their defense, Paula Wolfert and Diana Kennedy probably called for fresh fig leaves and pig's blood because they watched a cook make the dish in another country, and wanted to present the true dish. But the cookbook is written in English for an American audience, and some things just don't translate, including ingredients. If they said in the headnote, "When Esther made it she used fresh fig leaves, but you can use this substitute," they acknowledge that a readily available ingredient here in this country works almost as well.

What are your recipe deal-breakers? If they are not on this list, send them and I'll include them in the next issue.

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My Cookbook Debut: Trials of a Co-author

When our cookbook came out in April, my co-author Craig Priebe and I did our first signing of *Grilled Pizzas and Piadinas* at the International Association of Culinary Professionals' (IACP) annual conference in New Orleans. It was familiar territory because I go to the conference every year, and because *Will Write for Food* debuted there.

I had to do a little ego adjusting, to be honest. While Craig and I sat at the booth, people came by and spoke to Craig about doing cooking demos for them. There was no reason, really, to talk to me. They also had Craig sign the book and then walked off. That was um, hard.

But now, Craig is doing the publicity alone, which is correct. It's his book. I have recovered. Right now he's on a media tour of several cities. He's doing a killer job with interviews, such as this one in the Boston Globe:

http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/food/articles/2008/06/04/grilled_pizza_is_almost_as_easy_as_pie/

Dorling-Kindersley, our publisher, sent our book to bloggers for review. These two posts that made me happy:

http://thebarefootkitchenwitch.typepad.com/the_barefoot_kitchen_witc/2008/04/cookbook-give-1.html

<http://www.andreasrecipes.com/2008/05/04/grilled-pizzas-piadinascake-cookbook-give-away/>

I was nervous about the recipes. Maybe I only imagined that they worked. But here, two strangers tried the recipes and said they worked beautifully. That's gold. They enjoyed the pizzas so much they wanted to try more. That's platinum, the best feedback in the world.

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News from Clients and Alumni

-- **Melissa Wagenberg Lasher** scored this year's Passover feature article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/16/FDVKVQUHN.DTL&hw=Passover&sn=005&sc=833>

Tracey Cuervels O'Grady penned a feature for the *Boston Globe* on boullabaisse:
http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/food/articles/2008/03/12/a_comforting_stew_of_creativity_and_tradition/

-- **Jane Staley Boaz's** op-ed piece on food legislation appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*:
<http://news.enquirer.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080527/EDIT02/805270333/1090/EDIT>

Gastronomica accepted a query from **Marolyn Charpentier** about almond lore.

The *Los Angeles Times* travel section accepted a story from **Angela Frucci** on ice fishing in Minnesota with 11 women. One made a seafood stew right there in the shack.

Cheryl Sternman Rule, a contributing editor of *Eating Well*, started a blog as a creativity tool to discover her passion. Great idea. See <http://www.5secondrule.typepad.com/>.

Becky McKinnon's story about making baby food appeared in the March issue of *Pregnancy and Newborn* magazine.

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Resources

-- If you love to find recipes in food blogs, or are wondering if yours have shown up in them, search on <http://foodblogsearch.com/>

-- Columbia University's Gina Boubion interviews top editors at *Gourmet*, including Editor-in-Chief Ruth Reichl. Boubion even says how to pronounce Reichl, worth the price of admission alone.

http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer?pagename=JRN/Render/PrintThisPage&childpagename=Journalism/JRN_Page_C/JRN_SimplePage&cid=1175295262587&c=JRN_Page_C

--Who doesn't love the food writing in the *New Yorker*? Here's a web page with a handful of past food-related articles:

<http://www.newyorker.com/arts/food/index>

-- Dana McCauley & Associates has a free newsletter on the latest food trends. See the entire newsletter at

<http://www.danamccauley.com/Newsletter.html>

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News You Can Use

-- The next time an agent or editor tells you cookbooks don't sell, give them a few stats on **the health of the business**:

- Cookbooks were a \$530 million business in the US in 2007, according to Michael Norris of Siba Information
- *Gourmet* says more than 24,000 cookbooks were published in 2007
- Consumers purchased nearly 14 million books about cooking and entertaining in 2007, according to Book Scan.

Okay, these last two don't match. But the stats are still encouraging.

-- Working on a book and need money (what food writer doesn't?). Apply for the **Harry A. Bell grant**, which "assists writers by providing support for travel and research expenses during the time in which a proposal is being written and before a publishing contract has been awarded. Proposals should demonstrate significant contributions to the knowledge about food." The Culinary Trust takes applications from September 15 to December 15, 2008. See

<http://www.theculinarytrust.com/html/applications.html>

--*Slate's* Sara Dickerman takes the food press to task for rarely **writing about how much food costs**, then lists a raft of older cookbooks that did so: <http://www.slate.com/id/2189234/>.

-- We got into a fascinating discussion on the ASFS listserv recently about the accuracy of recipe measurements. It reminded me of a story *Gourmet* did in September 1999. Staff members brought seven measuring spoons from their homes and compared the amount of salt (by weight) each tablespoon held. Results ranged from 8 to 17 grams. What does that tell you about the accuracy of measurement?

If you'd like to join the listserv, where historians, food writers and academics discuss food in all its manifestations at (sometimes excruciating) length, go to the home page, <http://food-culture.org/>, where you will learn more about the purpose of the Association for the Study of Food and Society. The home page has some excellent links to food studies courses and academic journals.

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Just for Fun

-- In my last newsletter, I dared readers to write one sentence using the form taught by Tom French, an instructor at the Poynter Institute. He uses "sequencing" to order stories, starting strong, with a line of action, and building energy to a powerful end.

I suppose I asked too much. Ken Albala, a professor at the University of the Pacific, sent the only reply. "Faced with impending disaster, Suzy made a desperate last-ditch effort to save her birthday party: after a brazen glare in the direction of the miscreant caterer, she dumped the entire bowl of shrimp salad into the sink, with a fury worthy of Penthesilea, the Amazon queen." Nicely done. Can you tell he's a historian?

And he pointed out, "I just tend to balk whenever someone tells you, this is how your sentence or whole story should be structured. It's like saying, this is what makes a painting beautiful, now go and do it."

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Katrina-Damaged Museum Needs Cookbooks

Alumnus **Laura Martin Bacon** sent this email: Liz Williams, president of the Southern Food & Beverage Museum, estimates the museum lost over half of its cookbook collection to Hurricane Katrina. Liz needs cookbooks, and lots of them.

The museum seeks culinary books about the American South and volumes from areas that have influenced Southern foodways. This means all new and used food-themed books, in all conditions (food-spattered and beat-up is just fine), dealing with cuisines from all over the world. Liz emphasizes that they're seeking everything from professionally written cookbooks and culinary histories to community cookbooks and pamphlets. Send your donations to:

Liz Williams
Southern Food & Beverage Museum
1 Poydras Street, #169
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130

Include your name and address so the museum can acknowledge your generosity. For more, visit <http://www.southernfood.org/> (click on "collections," then "library") or email liz@southernfood.org.

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Upcoming Classes and Appearances

June 30, 2008

Write that Cookbook

7 p.m.

Burlingame Public Library

<https://www.burlingame.org/Index.aspx?page=1089>

480 Primrose Road

Burlingame, CA 94010

Free 1-hour discussion

August 19 - September 16, 2008 (Five Tuesdays)

Food Writing for Food Lovers

7 - 9:30 p.m.

The Writing Salon

<http://www.writingsalons.com/classes/index.php?p=23>

2121 Bonar St., Studio D, 2nd floor

Berkeley, CA

\$185 members/ \$215 non-members

If you live in the San Francisco Bay Area and have thought about food writing but are not sure where to start, this is the class for you. We'll cover freelance writing for newspapers and magazines, recipe writing, cookbooks, and blogs. You'll get a taste of all forms to help you decide how to move forward.

October 14 - November 18, 2008

6-week Online Food Writing Class

UCLA Extension

Price and class info to come

I'm excited about this because now people can take my class from all over the world

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Please forward this email to anyone you think might be interested in this newsletter. All previous issues are archived on my website, www.diannej.com. There's a place to sign up as well.

To change your email address or unsubscribe, please email me: dj@diannej.com

I will not rent, trade or sell my email list to anyone for any reason.

Happy Summer,
Dianne

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