

# Do we still need COOKERY BOOKS?

What's the point in splashing out on a cookbook when there's an untold wealth of recipes available to us in seconds at the click of a mouse? Restaurant critic, book lover and cookbook author Yasmin Fahr argues the case in defence of print



On a flight recently, I was scrolling through cover options for my forthcoming cookbook. I could feel my seatmate staring at my screen, itching for a chat. Finally she said, "What do you do for a living?" When I told her, she replied with, "Do people still buy cookbooks? Everything is online... You should do an e-book." Ignoring the fact that not all recipes are online (thankfully), her comment left me a bit saddened: not only because I've written a cookbook, but also because I'm a deep lover of them. The cookbook versus online debate is like comparing a bicycle to a car: both will get you to the same destination, but they'll provide a very different experience on the way. We buy cookbooks for their inspiration and in-depth knowledge. The intimacy and engagement involved in reading from a cookbook is a world away from searching websites online, even though both methods have a valid place. Here's my argument in defence of print.

## EXHIBIT A: Cookbooks are a sensory experience

They're something to hold in your hands while you're curled up on the sofa with a cup of tea or at the kitchen table with a glass of wine, and a way to slow down and step into the world of the author. It's partly the tactility of cookbooks in our digital age that makes them so special, believes Zoe Ross of United Agents, who represents authors such as Olivia Potts, Ed Smith and Ravinder Bhogal. "A lived-in cookbook is splattered and dog-eared, not pristine pixels on a screen," she says.

Personally, I read cookbooks like novels and believe that a good one, whether written by a chef or food writer, is a glimpse into the author's life and relationship with food. It's meant to be enjoyed – slowly digested rather than scrolled over or clicked through. When we cook

from a recipe book, we form a bond with the author.

## EXHIBIT B: Cookbooks are a source of inspiration

When coming home with fresh produce from the market, Katie Cowan, the former publishing director of Pavilion Books, often looks to a 'trusted friend' from her bookshelf for ideas on what to cook with it. Stephanie Jackson, publishing director of Octopus Books, believes there's nothing better than poring over old favourites when she's deciding what to serve guests, or just reading for interest. "My favourites are well thumbed, bookmarked, slightly stained and full of handwritten notes such as 'everybody loved' or 'double the quantity'."

Good books become a way to merge your world with the author's and, in this tech-loaded era, leafing

PORTRAIT OF YASMIN: ANDREW SISK. PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES. SOURCE FOR BOOK SALES: NIELSEN BOOK DATA UK



through a well written book is a way to spark creativity without the distraction of flashing screens and attention-grabbing alerts. As Cowan notes, books give you time and space away from the pressure and immediacy of computer screens.

## THE CASE AGAINST: The ease of digital dinners

Sadly, we don't always have the time to sit idyllically in a window seat leafing through cookbooks. Digital recipe collections fill a need for immediacy and accessibility. And it's helpful to be able to sort out dinner from your desk, especially when you don't feel like working, so you can pick up the ingredients on the way home or order online.

Even ardent cookbook lovers, like the founders of Eat Your Books website, recognise that being able to search online makes finding recipes so much easier – which is why they created an online index of cookery books, enabling members to search for their favourite recipes quickly and from anywhere, rather than leafing through their book collection page-by-page.

## A PLATFORM FOR NEW VOICES

The internet has also provided a platform for voices that we might never have discovered otherwise, including some of the authors on the bestseller lists (see below), such as Joe Wicks and Pinch of Nom – the latter's debut book climbed →

## THE 10 TOP SELLERS OF THE PAST 20 YEARS

Publishing phenomenon Jamie Oliver has dominated cookbook sales, with books for healthy eating making their mark, too...



**1 JAMIE'S 30-MINUTE MEALS** by Jamie Oliver (2010; Michael Joseph)

1.87m

**2 LEAN IN 15: 15 Minute Meals and Workouts to Keep You Lean and Healthy** by Joe Wicks (2015; Bluebird)

1.36m

**3 FIVE INGREDIENTS: Quick & Easy Food** by Jamie Oliver (2017; Michael Joseph)

1.12m

**4 JAMIE'S 15-MINUTE MEALS** by Jamie Oliver (2012; Michael Joseph)

1.1m

**5 JAMIE'S ITALY** by Jamie Oliver (2005; Michael Joseph)

846,617

**6 JAMIE'S MINISTRY OF FOOD: Anyone Can Learn to Cook in 24 Hours** by Jamie Oliver (2008; Michael Joseph)

832,043

**7 THE HAIRY DIETERS: How to Love Food & Lose Weight** by Dave Myers and Si King (2012; Weidenfeld & Nicolson)

831,140

**8 NIGELLA EXPRESS** by Nigella Lawson (2007; Chatto & Windus)

787,331

**9 PINCH OF NOM: 100 Slimming, Home-style Recipes** by Kate Allinson and Kay Featherstone (2019; Bluebird)

776,165

**10 JAMIE AT HOME: Cook Your Way to the Good Life** by Jamie Oliver (2007; Michael Joseph)

750,657



the charts to number one in 2019, becoming the fastest-selling non-fiction title since records began. Carole Tonkinson, the founder of Bluebird, which published the book *Pinch of Nom*, believes its success comes down to authors Kate Allinson and Kay Featherstone listening carefully to their community when creating their recipes.

These authors had dedicated audiences online – the Pinch of Nom website had a million-plus – before they went on to create physical books. And the move makes sense: much like finding a food critic whose taste aligns with yours, once readers have found an author who speaks to them, there is a desire to bring them into their home and ‘cook’ with them.

### I REST MY (BOOK)CASE

When I go to someone’s home, I love browsing through their book collection, running my fingers along the spines and taking in the titles, to

see which authors they’ve brought into their home. Vicky Bennison, creator of Pasta Grannies (a YouTube success story which in turn launched a cookbook), echoes a similar sentiment. “The line of books on your kitchen bookshelf says something about how you live your life, your interests and aspirations,” she says.

Cookbooks are a way to catalogue and preserve the past, whether it’s the recipes of Italian grannies, handwritten notes and memories from our own lives or those of our grandmothers before us. A good cookbook brings to life the stories behind the dish you’re making, the people who created it and the hands of those who have made it before you. If every recipe tells a story, then a good cookbook speaks to you, in your own language. How was that for an answer, dear seatmate? *Yasmin Fahr’s* cookbook, *Keeping It Simple: Easy One-pot Weeknight Recipes* (Hardie Grant £16.99) is available now.

### OUR CHOICE The cookbooks the delicious. team couldn’t do without...

**KAREN BARNES, EDITOR**  
**The Cake Bible by Rose Levy Beranbaum (William Morrow)**  
An American classic. Every cake you can imagine is included, but what I admire about this tome – and it is a tome – is the science underlying every page, as well as the scholarly, thorough approach to testing, how to size up cakes and more. You learn something on every page. When Ms Beranbaum did the British edition, I believe she came to live in London for a while so she could test every recipe again with British ingredients.

**SUSAN LOW, DEPUTY EDITOR**  
**Moro: The Cookbook by Sam and Sam Clark (Ebury Press £20)**  
I couldn’t stop cooking from this book when it was first published back in 2001, and I still turn to it regularly today. The authors, a husband-and-wife team (confusingly both chefs called Sam), write so beautifully about the food they discovered on their travels through southern Spain and the Muslim Mediterranean and that they cook at their influential London

restaurant, also called Moro. Brilliant recipes and great writing – a killer combination.

**JEN BEDLOE, FOOD EDITOR**  
**The River Cottage Meat Book by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (Hodder & Stoughton £35)**  
I keep this book in the kitchen and regularly flick through it for info on timings, technique, or simply for inspiration on cuts of meat to try.

**HUGH THOMPSON, DEPUTY CHIEF SUB EDITOR**  
**A Visual Feast by Arabella Boxer (Ebury Press, out of print)**  
Each of the 12 chapters focuses on a seasonal ingredient, with an essay on its history and various uses. Excellent recipes are matched with beautiful arty photographs. It felt ahead of its time for 1991.

**PHOEBE STONE, FEATURES AND EDITORIAL ASSISTANT**  
**The Flavour Thesaurus by Niki Segnit (Bloomsbury £20)**  
Every time I need an inspired flavouring for a cake filling or am scratching my head over how to make leftovers interesting, I consult this comprehensive guide to what goes with what.

**STEPHANIE THOMSON, SUB EDITOR**  
**The Moosewood Cookbook by Mollie Katzen (Ten Speed Press £15.99)**

When I became a vegetarian in my student days, I fell in love with this book. Handwritten and illustrated, full of simple recipes and useful pictures of how to chop vegetables and put together a menu, it was as much about what lifestyle I wanted as what I wanted to have for dinner. I’m older and wiser now, and so is my battered, splattered copy, which has travelled thousands of miles by my side.

### ...and some top picks from book-loving food writers

**LUCAS HOLLWEG Roast Chicken and Other Stories by Simon Hopkinson and Lindsey Bareham (Ebury Press £18.99)**  
Hopkinson’s collection of recipes is full of his inspiring and uncompromising views and reads like a menu of dreams – perfect renditions of classic flavours: roast lamb with anchovy, garlic and rosemary; creamed endives; leek tart; crab vinaigrette; crema catalana; and the roast chicken of the title, cooked with lemon and herbs and prodigious quantities of butter. I could eat for eternity from these pages and never grow bored.

**THANE PRINCE Citrus by Catherine Phipps (Quadrille £20)**  
Such a useful book but also so inspiring. The recipes all work, from deep-fried lemon slices to



bergamot roast chicken. Whenever I want to add zest to my food this is the book I reach for.

**FELICITY CLOAKE**  
**The Prawn Cocktail Years by Simon Hopkinson and Lindsey Bareham (Michael Joseph £25)**  
Novelty is a wonderful thing, but sometimes you want a cookbook that delivers the food you already love. From chicken kiev to chocolate mousse, for me this has it all – a greatest hits of 20th-century British favourites. **£**

READ, EAT, LOVE  
Just a few of the cookbooks we think are more than the sum of their recipes

### WHERE NEXT FOR COOKBOOKS?

Luckily for book lovers and my own career, it doesn’t look as if cookery books are going out of fashion any time soon. Despite the relevance and benefits of digital media, spending on food and drink books increased by 23 per cent in the UK between 2015 and 2019 – from £79 to £97 million. Books in the health, dieting and wholefood sector went from a category share of 4 per cent of all food and drink book sales in 2009 to a quarter in 2019, according to Nielsen Book UK data, with the ‘vegetarian cookery’ sector going from 4 per cent to almost 19 per cent between 2015 and 2019.

## THE LONG VIEW: HOW SOME OF OUR OLD FAVES STACK UP...

Many of the best-known and best-loved cookbooks of previous decades were published before book data was widely available, but here’s a snapshot how the sales of some of the classics compare:



HOW TO COOK: BOOK ONE BY DELIA SMITH (1998)

1 million

78,000

Mastering the Art of French Cooking by Julia Child (1961)\*



PLENTY BY YOTAM OTTOLENGHI (2010)

275,000

31,000

The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking by Marcella Hazan (1992)

\*ACROSS ALL EDITIONS, VOLUMES AND BOX SETS. OVER A MILLION COPIES SOLD IN US



REAL FOOD BY NIGEL SLATER (2005)

306,000

76,000

Floyd’s India by Keith Floyd (2001)



MADHUR JAFFREY’S ULTIMATE CURRY BIBLE (2003)

132,000

55,000

Simple by Diana Henry (2016)



RICK STEIN’S SEAFOOD BY RICK STEIN (2000)

240,000

54,000

French Provincial Cooking by Elizabeth David (1960)