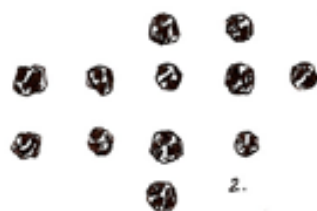


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Wine Music Food Life



RECIPES FOR DISASTER

Tonia George asks what's more important about a cookbook - that it looks bright and beautiful, or that the recipes actually work?

When I tell people I write cookery books for a living, I often hear about their recipe flops. Sometimes they've faithfully followed a recipe and it's been inedible, or other times it's just tasted distinctly average and they're left wondering what they did wrong. Quite often, these budding cooks blame themselves, but it's not always their fault. Recipe writing is an art and not everyone who does it, has it.

The rise of the celebrity chef and the glorification of big restaurants have contributed to the demise of the cookery book author. Some of the best cook books are written by food writers who are pedantic about instructions and more attuned to domestic cooking than a chef. Claudia Roden, Elizabeth David, Sue Lawrence and Jane Grigson are some of my favourite authors, but I struggle to think of a Michelin starred chef's book I rely on wholeheartedly. For a professional chef, cooking is instinctive; they'll prod a steak and know how rare it is, but communicating how to do this to a less experienced cook is a whole different kettle of fish. You can't take anything for granted. The River Café's ironically named *Chocolate Nemesis* recipe became infamous for its failure. All the information was there, but it didn't explain in detail what to look for.

Diminishing sales of cookbooks has meant smaller budgets and publishing advances rarely provide additional funds for testing recipes. It's an easy stage to neglect and, for a cocky chef, they really can't see the point. Restaurant cookbooks are always

the worst offenders. They can be a tad impractical too. Most chefs never wash up. Meat is browned in one pan, transferred to another, strained through a chinois and reduced in yet another pan. For us lot at home, we're left with a mountain of metal in the sink but no kitchen porter to magic it away.

I bitterly learnt that a poor choice of words can spell disaster in a recipe, when I casually listed "a little grated nutmeg" in the ingredients for a custard tart recipe. A reader incandescent with rage called the publication complaining that she'd searched for the smallest nutmeg she could find and grated it; yet her tarts were so vile they all ended up in the bin!

Priorities have also changed from the days of Jane Grigson and Elizabeth David and it's not just women buying cookbooks anymore. Now it's *Gastroporn* that sells. Moody photos of chocolate fondants provocatively oozing and draped with voluptuous quenelles of crème fraîche are there to be perved over, not cooked. Vast sums of money are spent on food photography whilst none is spent on checking that any of the recipes actually work.

For those of us who buy these glossy tomes of delicious promises, we should be able to trust that the recipes work. My advice: don't automatically go for a well-known name, or turn your nose up at the books without glossy photos, or else proper food writing will fade into the past. That surely would be a recipe for disaster.