

History of cookbooks

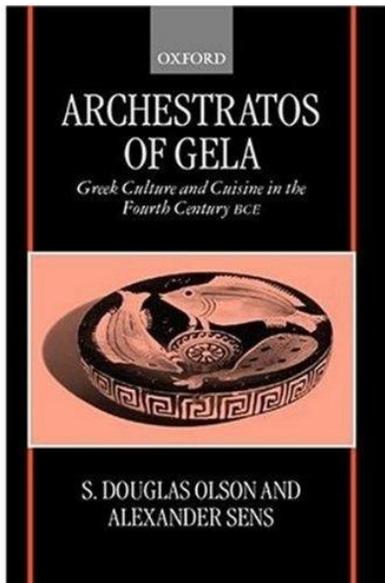
Taco Hoekwater

Introduction

Cookbooks as we know them, with detailed instructions, ingredient list, and illustrations, are a fairly modern invention. This paper presents some famous cookbooks from history, starting in ancient Greece and ending with Internet-based modern approaches.

The Life of Luxury

Archestratus was a Greek writer and traveller who lived in the 4th century BCE. Coming from Sicily (then a Greek colony) he travelled throughout the Mediterranean. He wrote a poem called 'Hedypatheia' (meaning 'Pleasant Living' or 'Life of Luxury'). The original of the poem is lost, but luckily parts of it were quoted in another ancient work, and so some 60 verses are still known.



Here is a small sample:

But I say to hell with saperde, a Pontic dish,
And those who praise it. For few people
Know which food is wretched and which is
excellent.

But get a mackerel on the third day, before it
goes into salt water
Within a transport jar as a piece of recently
cured, half-salted fish.

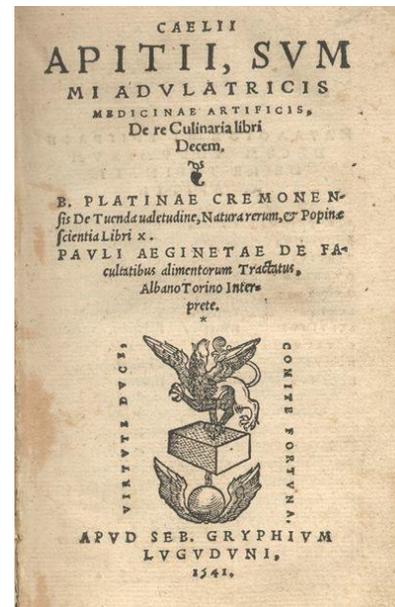
And if you come to the holy city of famous
Byzantion,
I urge you again to eat a steak of peak-season
tuna; for it is very good and soft.

Archestratus, fragment 39
Olson and Sens translation

Taco Hoekwater

Apicius, a.k.a. 'De re coquinaria'

Whereas 'Life of Luxury' seems to have been more of a travel guide, the Roman recipe collection known as 'Apicius' was intended to be used while cooking.



Compiled around the start of the 5th century, it is a collection of ten books on various topics related to food and cooking. It has actual recipes, although not quite the way we are used to them. An example:

ANOTHER LAMB STEW — put kid or lamb in the stew pot with chopped onion and coriander. crush pepper, lovage, cumin, and cook with broth oil and wine. put in a dish and tie with roux.

Apicius, translation from Project Gutenberg

This recipe is concise almost to the point of uselessness, but that is a common problem with historical cookbooks: for most of their history, cookbooks were written by professional cooks *for* professional cooks (working for royalty and popes). Helpful information for amateur cooks like cooking times and ingredient amounts is omitted.

Book of Dishes — al-Warrāq

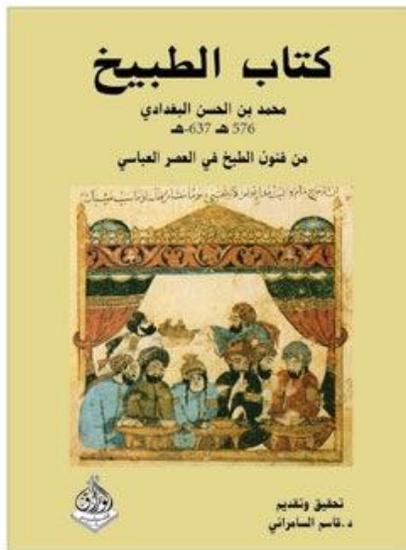
After the disintegration of the Roman empire, European interest in cookbooks became nearly nonexistent for centuries. As the cookbooks of the time were very much a 'haute cuisine' affair, a certain level of cultural prosperity was a prerequisite to new books being written. This was the case in the Arabic world, and two famous books come from that background.

First there is Kitab al-Tabikh ('The Book of Dishes'), composed in the 10th century by Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq. Some of the recipes in this collection are

as terse as the earlier example, but most are fairly elaborate, e.g., mentioning amounts for ingredient spices. In 2007, Brill published an English translation by Nawal Nasrallah under the title ‘Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens — Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq’s Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook’.

Book of Dishes — al-Baghdadi

The second Arabic ‘Book of Dishes’ was compiled by Muḥammad bin Ḥasan al-Baghdadi, in 1226. Besides that information and the cover image below, I could not find much information about this book. I suspect that is mostly because the 2007 edition of the *other* Book of Dishes pops up in every Internet search using English language text ... and I do not understand enough Arabic to get around that problem.



Liber de Coquina

At the end of the ‘middle ages’, European culture once again reached a high enough level that there was interest in cookbooks. One of the first was a collection from the early 14th century named ‘Liber de Coquina’. It has two parts: ‘Tractatus’ (part 1) and ‘Liber de Coquina’ (part 2). Both parts are written in (medieval) latin.



It is interesting that while the text in the Arabic collections was often quite detailed, this is not the case in the European manuscripts. While much attention was given to the look of the manuscripts, the recipes themselves are very terse.

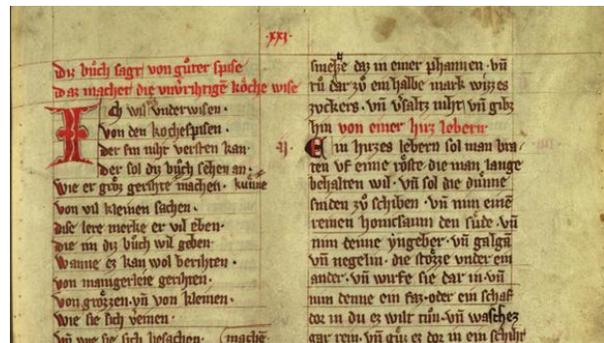
Le Viandier

This book is generally considered to be the start of ‘French cuisine’. It was compiled in the early 14th century by a French author with chef Guillaume Tirel. Note the use of ‘compiled’ in the previous sentence: plagiarism was quite normal in these times. In fact the first known (but incomplete) manuscript containing this collection is older than Tirel.



Das Buoch von guoter Spise

Much like ‘Le Viandier’ is considered the first ‘French’ cookbook, ‘Das Buoch von guoter Spise’ is the first ‘German’ cookbook.



A sample recipe (for apple sauce):

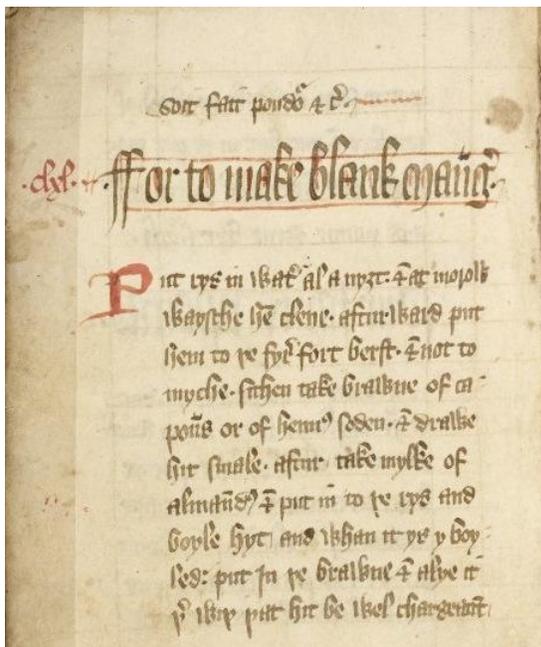
69. Ein apfelmus

Wilt du machen ein apfelmus. so nim schöne epfele und schele sie. und snide sie in

ein kalt wazzer. und süde sie in einem haufen. und menge sie mit wine und mit smaltze und ze slahe eyer mit wiz und mit al. und tu daz dor zu. und daz ist gar ein gut fülle. und versaltz niht.

Forme of Cury

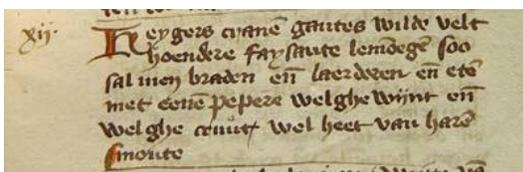
With French and German progenitors, there should be an English one as well! The 'Forme of Cury' in a compilation by 'the chief Master Cooks of King Richard II'. The text is in Middle English and it dates to the end of the 14th century.



For to Make Blank Maunger
Put rys in water al a nyzt and at morowe waisshe hem clene, afterward put hem to þe fyre fort berst & not to myche. ssithen take brawn of Capons, or of hennes. soden & drawe it smale. after take mylke of Almandes. and put in to þe Ryys & boyle it. and when it is yboiled put in þe brawn & alye it þerwith. þat it be wel chargeant

Wel ende edeljike spijs

This is a Dutch cookbook from the second half of the 15th century.



Reygors crane gantes wilde velt
hoendere faysante lemdege soo
sal men braden ende laerden ende eten
met eenen pepere wel ghewijnt ende
wel ghecrut wel heet van haren
smoute

English translation:

Herons, cranes, geese, wild partridges, pheasants, pheasants (a variety)

Roast them and lard them, and eat them with a pepper [sauce] with enough wine and spices, very hot from their fat.

De honesta voluptate et valetudine

This Italian book ('On honourable pleasure and health') from 1474 has the honour of being the first 'printed' cookbook. The publisher/composer is Bartolomeo Sacchi (a.k.a. Platina), but it is mostly based on earlier work by Maestro Martino of Como. It became widely popular and had a large influence on the Italian cooking tradition.



Een notabel boecxken van cokeryen

A book called 'A notable little cookery book' was the first printed Dutch cookbook (not a very important book in the great scheme of things, but hey, I am Dutch). Printed in 1514 in Brussels by Thomas vander Noot, who may or may not also be the author.



Opera dell'arte del cucinare

Bartolomeo Scappi was the Italian Renaissance chef for popes Pius IV and V. The 'Works of Art of Cooking' is a masterpiece of six books containing more than a thousand recipes as well as explanations of techniques and giving helpful hints about all aspects of cooking. A notable and popular feature of his books were the beautiful illustrations.



Le Cuisinier roïal et bourgeois

After the advent of printing (and generally, the end of the Middle Ages), there was a growing market for cookbooks. An important example from this period is 'The royal and bourgeois cook' by François Massialot. Published in 1691, it was the first cookbook to contain an alphabetic recipe list. Until this, recipes were typically only grouped in categories, without any means of quickly finding a particular recipe.

LE CUISINIER ROÏAL ET BOURGEOIS;

QUI APPREND A ORDONNER TOUTE sorte de Repas en gras & en maigre, & la meilleure maniere des Ragoûts les plus delicats & les plus à la mode.

Ouvrage tres-utile dans les Familles, & singulierement necessaire à tous Maitres d'Hôtels, & Ecuiers de Cuisine.

Nouvelle Edition, revûe, corrigée & beaucoup augmentée. avec des Figures.

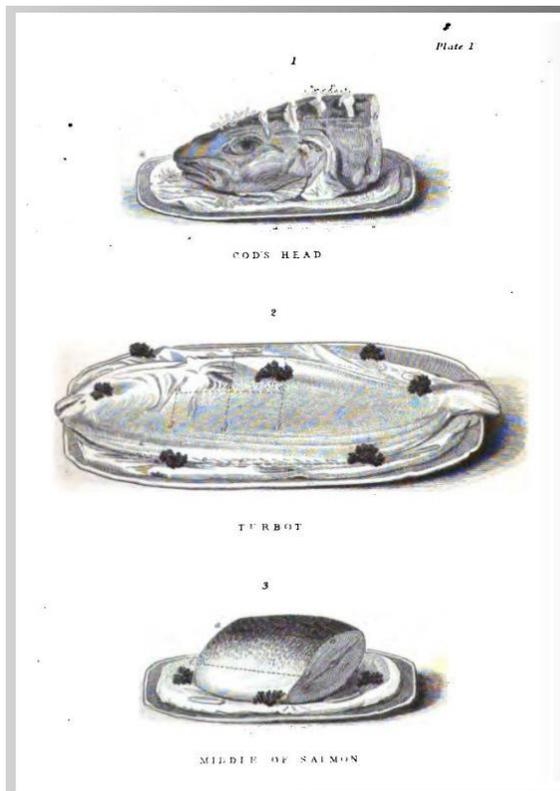
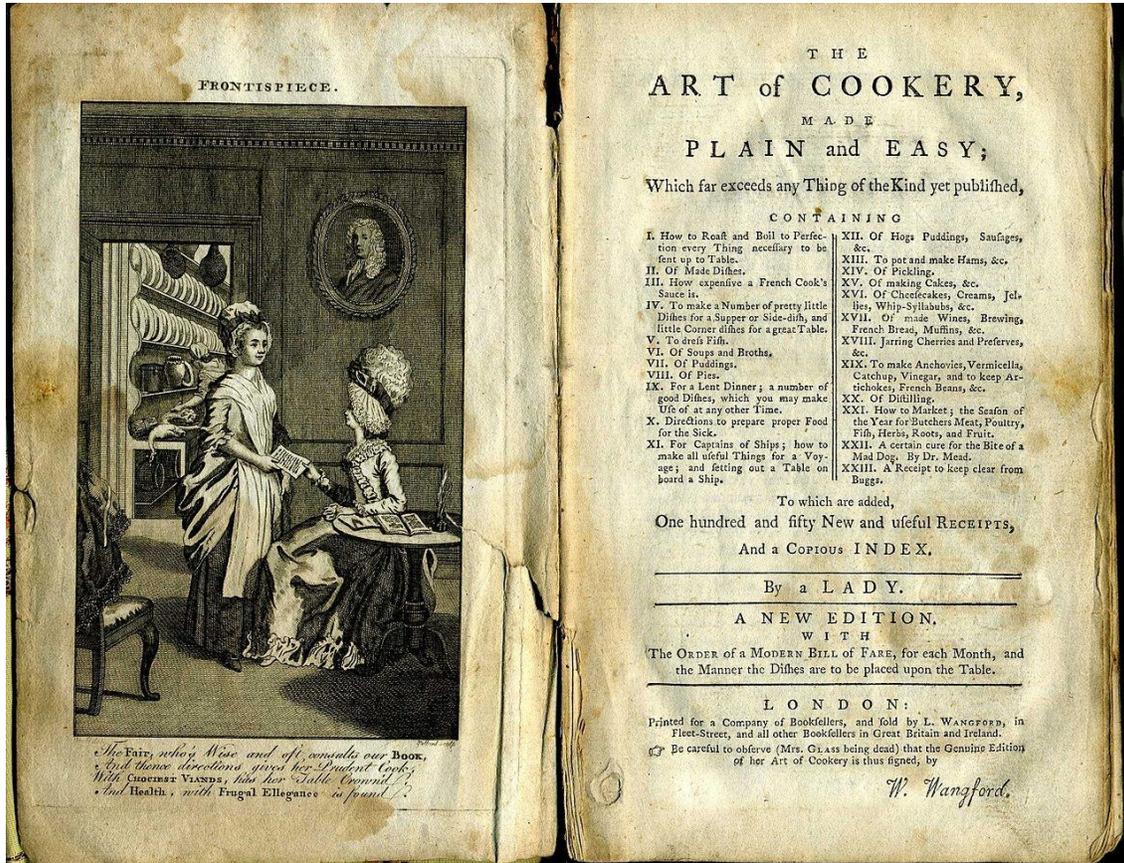


A PARIS,
 Chez **CLAUDE PRUDHOMME**, au Palais, au sixième Pilièr de la Grand' Sale, vis-à-vis la Montée de la Cour des Aides, à la Bonne-Foi couronnée.

M. DCCV.
AVEC PRIVILEGE DU ROY.

The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy

All the cookbooks listed so far were aimed at professional chefs. One of the most famous English cookbooks from the 18th century changed that. Hannah Glasse wrote recipes specifically for the servant cooks of her well-to-do buyers (the servants themselves could probably not afford her book). First published in 1747, 'The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy' was a big success. Besides the simple language, she also worked to be practical (read: economical) in the choice of ingredients. All in all, the book became very popular in the North American colonies.



MODERN COOKERY,
FOR PRIVATE FAMILIES,
REDUCED TO A SYSTEM OF EASY PRACTICE,
IN A SERIES OF
CAREFULLY TESTED RECEIPTS,
IN WHICH THE PRINCIPLES OF
BARON LIEBIG AND OTHER EMINENT WRITERS
HAVE BEEN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE APPLIED AND EXPLAINED.
BY ELIZA ACTON.

"It is the want of a scientific basis which has given rise to so many absurd and hurtful methods of preparing food."—Dr. GREGORY.

Newly Revised and much Enlarged Edition,
COPIOUSLY ILLUSTRATED.

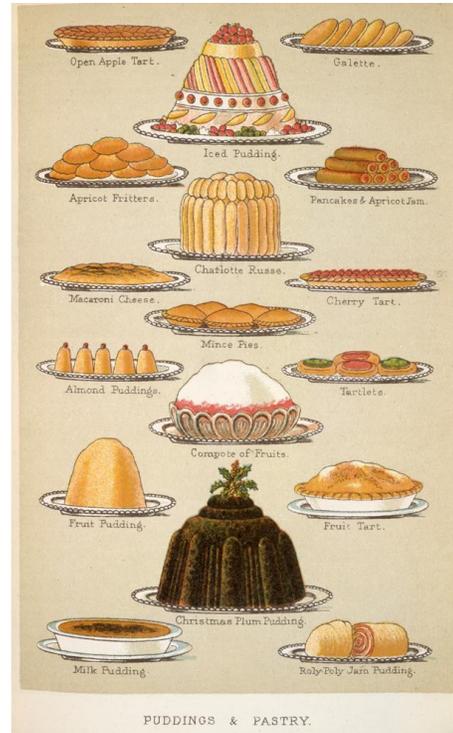
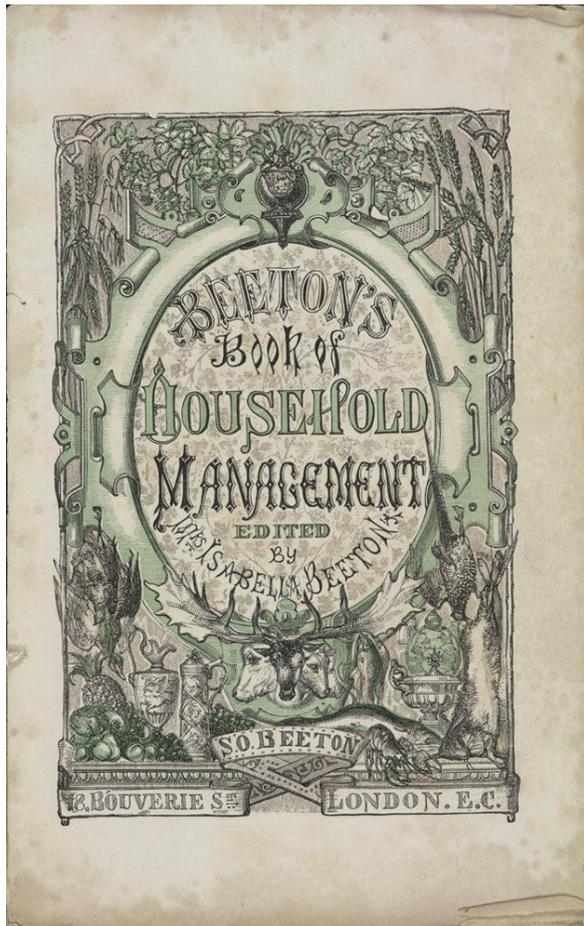
LONDON:
LONGMAN, GREEN, LONGMAN, ROBERTS, AND GREEN.
1864.

Modern Cookery for Private Families

Hannah Glasse may have been more accessible than previous cookbook authors, but she was still a chef writing for other chefs — less-educated chefs, but still cooking professionals. Eliza Acton's book steps away from that. 'Modern Cookery for Private Families' was published in 1845, well after the industrial revolution, and was aimed specifically at housewives. This audience change necessitated the inclusion of exact quantities and cooking times, and it thus became one of the first 'modern' cookbooks. (picture on previous page, bottom)

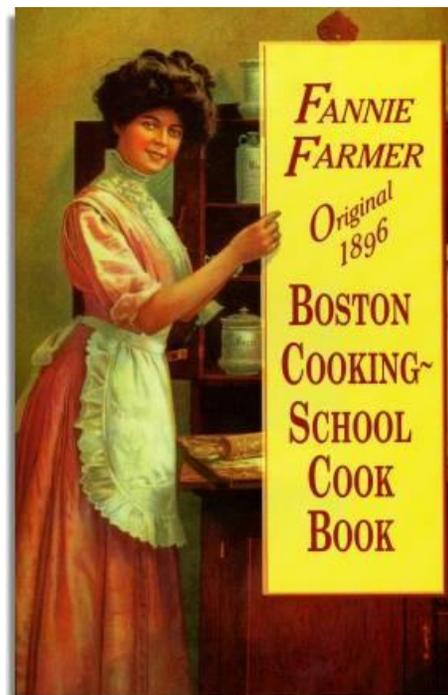
Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management

While Eliza Acton's book contained true innovations, its publishing house seems to have missed out on the marketing side of things ... Because Isabella Beeton's 'Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management' was to become known as *the* Victorian cookbook. Published in 1861, it is essentially a collection of plagiarized recipes (including many recipes from Eliza Acton's book). What it did have: excellent illustrations, and plenty of them.



Boston Cooking-School Cook Book

Fannie Farmer's cookbook is the first American contribution to this list. It was published in 1896, by the school principal of the Boston Cooking School. The keyword for this book: standardization. The modern American measuring system of cups and spoonfuls was introduced in this book.



It was also the first widely-known book to use a bullet list presentation for the ingredients, completely separate from the processing instructions that followed below that list.

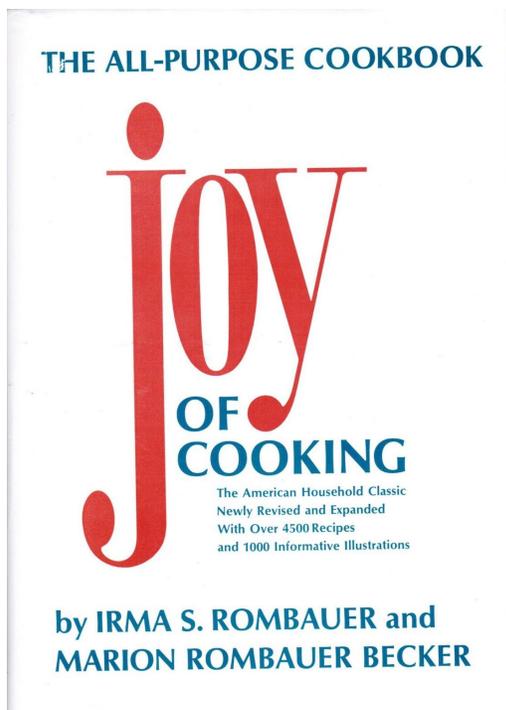
Brownies.

| | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter. | 1 egg well beaten. . |
| $\frac{1}{2}$ cup powdered sugar. | $\frac{3}{8}$ cup bread flour. |
| $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Porto Rico molasses. | 1 cup pecan meat cut in pieces. |

Mix ingredients in order given. Bake in small, shallow fancy cake tins, garnishing top of each cake with one-half pecan.

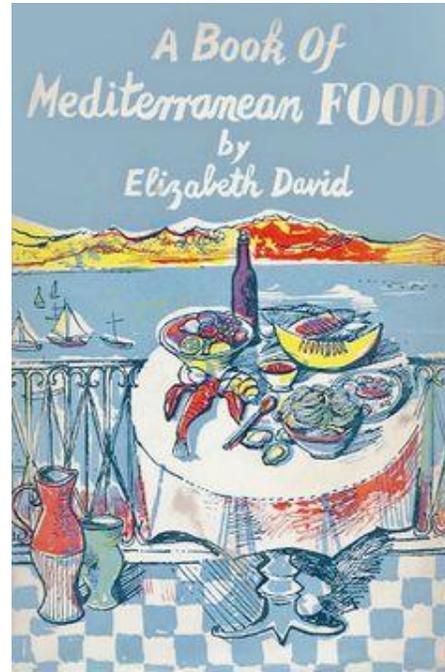
The Joy of Cooking

Entering the 20th century, Irma S. Rombauer's 'The Joy of Cooking' was published in 1931. This is the first book of all those in this article which I was familiar with even before I got interested in the history of cookbooks. In particular, I remember this cover (of a seventies edition) from the English language section of book sales that I visited as a small boy.



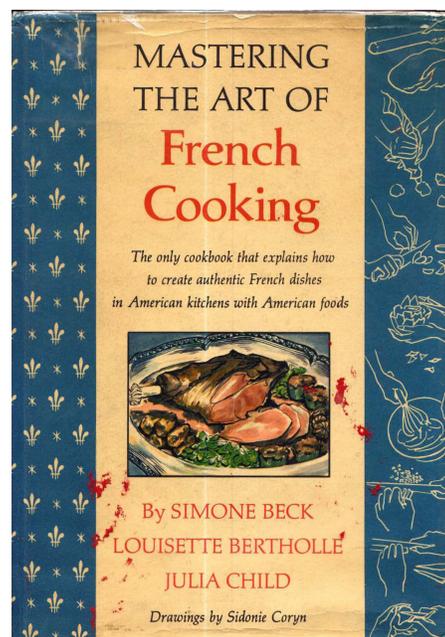
A Book of Mediterranean Food

This book is perhaps a bit of a surprise. It is by Elizabeth David, published in 1950, after her return from the Mediterranean to England a few years after WWII. Interesting points about this book: it had 'mood pictures' (black and white engravings of Mediterranean scenes) and targeted a specific 'foreign' food culture exclusively.



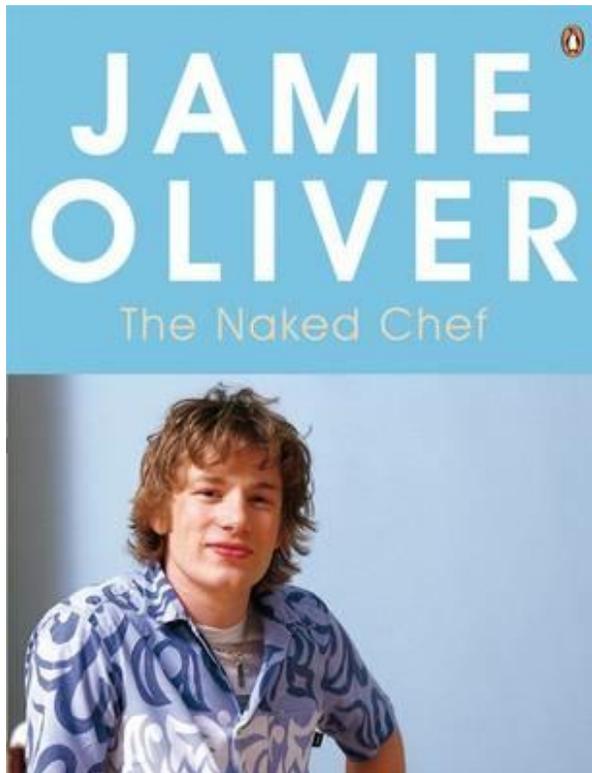
Mastering the Art of French Cooking

As the preface states, this book could also be called 'French Cooking from the American Supermarket.' First published in 1961, Simone Beck, Louisette Bertholle, and Julia Child brought French cuisine to the American audience. The recipes in this cookbook are not the easiest, but nevertheless it became very popular in the USA, not in the least thanks to Julia Child's television series 'The French Chef', first aired in 1963. Recently, interest soared again after the release of the movie 'Julie & Julia'.



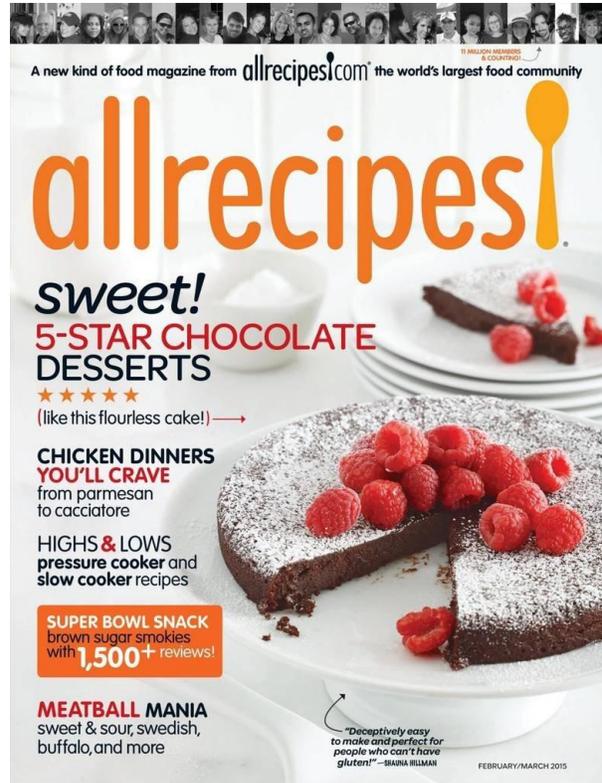
The Naked Chef

The latter part of the 20th century had many nice cookbooks, as cheaper printing costs allowed for glossy books with full colour images at a reasonable price. But nothing had as much impact as Jamie Oliver's 'The Naked Chef', which came out in 1999. The BBC television programme of the same name made Jamie Oliver a celebrity overnight, and he has now written over a dozen well-selling cookbooks.



Allrecipes.com

Modern people do not use cookbooks any more. No, they use the bookstand in the kitchen to hold an iPad while looking at allrecipes.com for a recipe. Sometimes with a video to explain the process. Originally just a web site, Allrecipes is now also a magazine, a YouTube channel, a set of online helper apps (such as a kitchen timer), and a set of mobile applications.



Recipe Fiddle

If you prefer to have a cookbook generated *for* you, you can try 'Recipe Fiddle' by David Jarvis. This is a web site (recipefiddle.com) that can generate a personalized cookbook for you, using ConTEXt to do the typesetting. Currently in beta.

Recipe Fiddle



Create personalized recipe books in minutes.

[Watch Tutorial](#)

- ◇ Taco Hoekwater
taco (at) elvenkind dot com