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The Limits of the Recipe

Anke Klitzing

Abstract: This article discusses the development and limitations of recipes, and why it is invaluable to allow oneself to make mistakes in the kitchen.

Keywords: *food writing, food studies, recipes, cookbooks, cooking*

As a college student, I ate a lot of green-brown stew. I may have had different plans, but for a while, everything I started cooking ended up as the same sort of undistinguishable concoction. I did not yet have the understanding of how different ingredients behave in the pot, and how I could maintain their distinct textures and flavours. Recipes were of no great help when the stove was lit and all types of things were gurgling here and hissing there, distracting from the instructions in small print in the recipe book – if it wasn't too late for those already. It was frustrating, because I would have liked to eat something other than greenish mush, something that more closely resembled the appetizing pictures in the cookbooks. If I did indeed cook from a book, because I rarely could actually afford to buy a whole set of ingredients as required by the recipe at the time.

Attractive food photography is everywhere these days, and specific-to-the-gram recipes in books and on the internet suggest that we can recreate those dishes ourselves, if only we follow the instructions meticulously. But why do so many people believe that they cannot cook, and regularly reach for ready meals and convenience food?

Many of us discover, when we live by ourselves for the first time, that we lack basic cooking skills. This is related to social change over the last few decades – it is rare that several generations live under the same roof, and it is not automatically clear anymore who is responsible for feeding the household. We are often actually quite unprepared for fending for ourselves when we leave home, but expect of ourselves to be able to instantly create delectable dishes nevertheless. The tsunami of food images in cookbooks, on TV and on social media only bolster this expectation.

Before the 19th century, few printed cookbooks existed and even fewer were directed at the home cook. Everyday cooking skills were passed down verbally, or at the most jotted down as handwritten notes. The recipes that were printed may seem quite sparse to our modern eye. Often, they gave only the core ingredients and broad outlines of the procedure, usually without detailed information on amounts, cooking temperature or timing. It is symptomatic for the zeitgeist of the 19th century, an era in which so much was regulated, analysed and categorised, that the urge for precision also reached the kitchen. Since then, recipes have become ever more exact. Today, many domestic kitchens feature digital scales and precise measuring tools, so that ingredients in the amount of 3g or 10ml are feasibly measured out. This implies on the one hand that the recipe can be recreated accurately. On the other hand, it takes the sovereignty out of the hands particularly of the untrained cook. Quite literally: formerly, it was common for recipes to call for a pinch of this or a finger of that, a dollop of something or a slug of something else. “Imprecise!” protest some, but how do you learn better if one of your own hands full of noodles is enough for your own appetite, or whether the pinch of salt ought to perhaps be a little less enthusiastic? Every hand is different, but so is every palate and every stomach.

The pseudo-scientificness of hyper-exact recipes also ignores other variables that play into the finished dish. The cooking time for a piece of meat is supposed to be five minutes, but is that in an expensive frying pan with a heavy bottom or the cheap banged-up pan in a student flat share? On a gas or electrical cooker? Is there a calculation table for those who live in mountainous areas to adapt the cooking time per hundred meters of altitude difference? Not to even mention the ingredients themselves, because a piece of locally sourced beef from a heritage breed will act differently in every pan from a piece of meat from industrially raised hybrid breeds. The kitchen is, after all, not a laboratory – it is rather a workshop where things are tried, fiddled with, and sometimes also wrongly decided. We learn from our mistakes.

We can observe another phenomenon in recipes: supermarkets today seem to be a world totally uncoupled from nature. At all times, they offer us products, including fresh ones, from the farthest corners of the world. This is made possible by enormous technological advancements in refrigeration, packaging and logistics since the middle of the 20th century. We have thus moved from an economy of supply to an economy of demand. If you have an apple tree or a kitchen garden, you will be reminded of how it used to be: times of abundance alternated with lean times. Only that today, we are rarely dependent on kitchen garden and apple tree. We cook and eat whatever we feel like, independent of season and location. This also creates waste, such as the three-quarters-full jar of tamarind in the cupboard we tried out in a recipe two years ago, or the half chicken breast that was too much for what the recipe required. Food waste has become much talked about in recent years – the cookbook industry has even turned it into a genre of “leftover cookbooks”. Not a bad idea as such, but when a recipe for bread-and-butter pudding starts with “Take 200g of stale bread”, it seems to have completely missed the point.

Cooking should be practised with all senses. Scales, clock and thermometer cannot replace the cook. At the end, it is not the listed cooking time but the browning and firming of a piece of meat that shows when it is cooked. Sometimes you can hear it, too, with popcorn for instance. You can smell when the pizza has finished baking, or indeed baked too long... and of course you can taste when a dish is ready, like with tomato sauce. No recipe can replace the decision making that is part of every step of the cooking process – which, after all, is what makes cooking such an interesting challenge.

This type of knowledge cannot simply be gained from a recipe collection. It is important to pass fundamental skills and knowledge on to young people about ingredients and options for their preparation in the kitchen, as well as about shopping and storing them. Perhaps we expect too much from the individual cookbook. And of course, a book will always be theoretical – but cooking is really learned at the stove, through practice, curiosity and the magnanimity to laugh about oneself and the mushy stew every once in a while.