History of cookbooks

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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

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 Sayy¯ ar al-Warr¯ aq’s Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook’.

**Book of Dishes — al-Baghdadi**

The second Arabic ‘Book of Dishes’ was compiled by Muhammad bin Hasan 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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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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

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ein kalt wasser, 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
versalzt nit.

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 fyrre fort berst & not to
myche. ssithen take brawn of Ca
pouns, or of hennes. soden & drawe
it smale. after take mylke of
Almandes. and put in to þe Ryys &
boile it. and whan it is yboi
led put in þe brawn & alye it
þerwith. þat it be wel chargeaunt

Wel ende edelijke spijse
This is a Dutch cookbook from the second half of
the 15th century.

Reygers cranen gantes wilde velt
hoendere faysante lemmoegen soo
sal men braden ende laerderen ende eten
met eenen pepere wel ghewijnt ende
wel ghecrruit wel heet van haren
smoute

English translation:
Heron, 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 Bar-
tolomeo Sacchi (a.k.a. Platina), but it is mostly based
on earlier work by Maestro Martino of Como. It be-
came 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.

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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 Mas-sialot. 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.

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
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.

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.**

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\begin{align*}
\frac{3}{4} \text{ cup butter} & \quad \frac{1}{2} \text{ egg well beaten} \\
\frac{3}{4} \text{ cup powdered sugar} & \quad \frac{3}{4} \text{ cup bread flour} \\
\frac{1}{4} \text{ cup Porto Rico molasses} & \quad 1 \text{ cup pecan meat cut in pieces}
\end{align*}
\]

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’.

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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.

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