

BEYOND RECIPES

FOUR MICHIGAN ALUMNAE EXPAND THE TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF THE COOKBOOK

BY CHERYL STERNMAN RULE

There are 13 brands of Asian fish sauce on the market. This fact is not likely to be of great concern—or interest—to the average home cook, but for Ruth Reichl ('68, MA '70) and the 12 members of her test kitchen staff at *Gourmet*, it is crucial. When testing a recipe for Vietnamese-Style Shrimp Curry, the test cooks prepared the dish with all available versions of the sauce. “We had to make sure one brand wouldn’t ruin the recipe,” says Reichl. This same level of care and obsessive detail informed the testing of *The Gourmet Cookbook*, a five-and-a-half pound, 1,000+ page tome containing 1,200 recipes, which Reichl edited. Extrapolating the time and attention required for a single recipe one thousand-fold gives a fair idea of the scope of Reichl’s challenge.

With 24,000 cookbooks published worldwide each year, authors’ reputations are staked on whether their recipes can be successfully reproduced by non-professional cooks in ordinary home kitchens. When a recipe fails, no cookbook—no matter how thoughtfully conceived or lovingly photographed—will achieve its aspiration to be splattered with olive oil and smeared by successive generations of chocolate-stained hands.

But the best cookbooks, those we not only cook from but relish, go beyond fool-proof recipes. They teach us something new. The works of four prominent U-M alumnae—Flo Braker, Joan Nathan, Sara Moulton, and Ruth Reichl—do just that, telling us about cooking technique, culture, and the evolution of our nation’s cuisine.

* * *

“Really good cookbook writers make you want to cook; they make you want to go into the kitchen.”

* * *



DAVID BRAKER

Flo Braker learned to bake from years of study—and lots of trial and error. In her cookbooks, she explains the science behind baking as a way to “de-mystify” it and make it fun.

“I had so many questions myself when I first started out,” she says. In 1985, she published her first cookbook, *The Simple Art of Perfect Baking* (1985), as a way of “passing down what I had learned the hard way, through trial and error. I wanted people to enjoy baking as much as I did.... I wanted to de-mystify baking.”

FLO BRAKER

NOT JUST THE HOW, BUT THE WHY.

When Flo Braker (enrolled '57-'60) left Ann Arbor after her junior year to marry David Braker (BSE '59, MSE '60), her thirst for learning was far from quenched. “I only left Michigan because Dave had become the most important person in my life, and he had graduated,” she says. “I always wanted to go to Michigan. My mother wanted me to go to Smith, but I wouldn’t even apply. Michigan was like a religion in my family.” After moving to northern California and starting a family, Braker began to bake. “Over the next ten years,” she says, “I baked for hours, every day, alone in my kitchen.” She eventually opened her own baking business and began teaching classes, first in San Francisco, then further afield. Soon she was studying in France and Switzerland, and visiting bakeries across the U.S. and Europe for inspiration.

In *Simple Art*, this de-mystification frequently comes in the form of lucid scientific explanations. For example, Braker explains that when creaming together ingredients for a butter cake, using room-temperature butter, liquid, and eggs is vital, because only at 70 degrees can the ingredients “combine with and penetrate one another to give a smooth, homogeneous batter. If each of their temperatures is not 70 degrees, the batter will suddenly become wet and lumpy. An ingredient that is too cold, such as an egg refrigerated to 42 degrees, can solidify the dispersed butter (70 degrees) which is holding millions of minute air bubbles. The walls of these bubbles will then become rigid, pop open, and collapse, allowing air to escape [and] producing what is commonly called curdling of the batter.” By taking the time to explain why specific reactions occur, Braker makes it far more likely that we’ll produce optimal results in our own kitchens. (Disclosure: I serve as a consultant to Braker on her newest book.)



JOAN NATHAN COOKBOOK AS CULTURAL WINDOW.

In Joan Nathan's ('65, MA '66) books, readers learn as much about cultural traditions, people, and places as they do about cuisine. For Nathan, food and culture are inextricably linked.

"I always thought I would become a sociologist," says Nathan, who chose U-M for its sociology department before ultimately pursuing a degree in French literature.

Upon finishing school, Nathan worked as foreign press officer for Teddy Kollek, then mayor of Jerusalem. "That was a defining moment for me," she says. "In that job, I was actually doing sociology. Mayor Kollek liked to eat, and as he sat down with Arabs or Orthodox Jews, even if they were hostile to him, people would start opening up to him as he ate their food. It was there that I realized the power of food."

Nathan co-authored her first cookbook, *The Flavors of Jerusalem* (1975), as a lark, unaware that she had found her career.

Eight more books followed, including *Jewish Cooking in America* (1994) and *The New American Cooking* (2005), both winners of awards from the James Beard Foundation and the International Association of Culinary Professionals. In these books, history, culture, and immigration form the lens through which Nathan looks at food.

Here is but one example, from *The New American Cooking*. The head note on a Cambodian recipe for Tuna and Avocado Salad with Lemongrass and Fresh Mint reads, in part: "The first upscale Cambodian restaurant in the United States was the Elephant Walk in Somerville, Massachusetts, run today by Nadsa de Monteiro and her mother. When Nadsa was a young girl, privileged and protected, she could never have predicted the journey she would take from Cambodia to Boston. But the 1975 takeover of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge changed the life of this diplomat's daughter forever. When the Cambodian government fell, Nadsa's family sought asylum in the south of France. [Several years later] Nadsa married and moved to Boston. Her parents joined her there a few years later. And in 1991, the family opened The Elephant Walk, housed in a renovated police station." Knowing the back-story of this dish, and the family that created it, brings the recipe to life in a way a traditional description of its flavors and textures never could.



When Joan Nathan came to U-M, she planned to study sociology. She fell in love with cooking, but she still gets to indulge her love of different cultures. Her cookbooks are a lens on history, culture, and immigration.

SARA MOULTON INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING THE HOME COOK.

"When somebody asks me what I do, I say I'm a chef," says Sara Moulton ('74). "But I think I'm probably a better teacher than almost anything else." Millions of television viewers would likely agree. As host of two hit cooking shows, *Cooking Live* and *Sara's Secrets*, Moulton taught legions of viewers how to turn fresh ingredients into satisfying meals.

After graduating from U-M, Moulton headed to the Culinary Institute of America. She worked as a restaurant chef in Boston and New York for seven years and taught as a culinary instructor before joining *Gourmet* magazine's test kitchen in 1984. Three years later, Moulton moved to the magazine's executive dining room, where she presides as executive chef.

Moulton's latest cookbook is *Sara's Secrets for Weeknight Meals* (2005). "This book is completely targeted to getting dinner on the table during the work week, which is sort of my religion right now," she says.

Along with practical recipes that can be thrown together after work, Moulton inspires her readers to re-think the evening meal and to look beyond the same 10 dishes most people prepare over and over again. She devotes entire chapters to pre-



RALPH STEWART



senting sandwiches, soups, salads, and even breakfast dishes in new ways—often with an ethnic flair—to make them substantial enough for the dinner table. By including recipes for Middle Eastern Meatball Sandwiches with Cucumber Yogurt Sauce, and Asparagus and Goat Cheese Souffléed Omelet, for example, Moulton shows us how to make inventive, healthful meals with a modest investment of time. Better yet, she motivates us to think creatively about meals.

“I’m not encouraging people to open up cans and boxes; I’m encouraging them to re-think dinner,” Moulton says. “I also try to anticipate problems that can arise and provide tips and tricks and strategies that you’ll remember later on.” One such tip: “Take advantage of the pre-rinsed and/or pre-sliced vegetables available in the supermarket’s vegetable section or salad bar.” Doing so ensures that nutritious meals are on the table quickly and the family has time to unwind over a leisurely, relatively stress-free meal.

Sara Moulton can do fancy. After all, she’s the executive chef for *Gourmet* magazine’s executive kitchen. But she’s built her reputation, and her hit TV shows, on her ability to make everyday meals easy, healthy, and interesting.

* * *

The best cookbooks—like these by four alumnae—go beyond recipes. They tell us something new about food, cooking technique, even culture.

* * *



RUTH REICHL CULINARY EVOLUTION.

Few cookbooks trace the evolution of American cooking over time; fewer still bring the recipes up to date so that we actually want to cook them. *The Gourmet Cookbook* (2004) does both.

Ruth Reichl (’68, MA ’70) wants to make clear that she did not write *The Gourmet Cookbook*. “I am the editor, which is a very different thing. Our book was an enormous collaboration.”

While at Michigan, Reichl earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology and a master’s in the history of art. She has since become one of the nation’s preeminent food writers, having authored three best-selling memoirs and served as the restaurant critic for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and, since 1999, as editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine.

In 2001, Reichl and her colleagues, several of whom had been at the magazine for decades, sifted through 60 years’ worth of recipes for the magazine’s anniversary issue. With the issue wrapped, the editors realized they had hundreds more recipes worth sharing. “We had this vast catalogue of recipes and decided it was time to resurrect the really good ones and make them usable today. But every recipe needed to be redone. You couldn’t just print a recipe from the 1940s, 1950s, or even the 1980s for two reasons: first, because the products have changed, and second, because the skill set

At one time the beloved (and often feared) restaurant critic for the *New York Times*, Ruth Reichl is now editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine. As editor of *The Gourmet Cookbook*, she directed the resurrection and overhaul of thousands of recipes from the magazine’s 60 years.

of Americans has changed. For example, in the ’40s many people didn’t eat garlic, so the recipes would just say, ‘wave a clove of garlic over the dressing.’ Now everyone eats garlic. You could see the vast changes in America through the prism of the magazine.”

Many cooks wonder why they should shell out \$35 for a book when they can download recipes for free with a click of their mouse. What do cookbooks offer that the Internet does not? Context. *The Gourmet Cookbook*, for instance, is only in part about how to prepare particular dishes. By including recipes from across the globe, calling for ingredients only recently made available, and updating culinary classics, the book also chronicles our culinary evolution in a way that individual recipes cannot. “You get a world with a book, not just recipes,” Reichl says. “When you’re going through a cookbook, you look at this recipe, you look at the one next to it, and maybe you flip around a little bit. It should be a kind of delicious experience.”

“Really good cookbook writers make you want to cook; they make you want to go into the kitchen.” **MT**

Cheryl Sternman Rule is a freelance food writer based in San Jose, California.

