

« Back Print

A Little Lore on America's No. 1 Cookbook

Who knew that a cookbook born in the lean, difficult years of the Depression would turn out to become America's favorite cookbook?



For years cookbooks have come and gone, but never before has there been a cookbook like this. So boasted the full-page ad introducing My Better Homes and Gardens Cook Book.

That was in 1930 -- and it was no false claim. Cooks all over America really took to the book, boosting it onto the best-seller list in just three months.

What made this unassuming book such a runaway hit in those meager times? For one thing, cooks loved the revolutionary ring binding, allowing the book to open flat on the countertop. No cookbook had ever offered this feature before. Cooks also appreciated the blank pages at the back, inviting them to add their own favorite recipes to the book.

And those clever tab dividers? Readers loved them -- when closed, the book resembled a mini-filing cabinet. In short, it combined the advantages of both a book and a recipe card file for a true all-in-one kitchen resource.



Of course, no cookbook, no matter how handily it lies flat on the counter, could be a best-seller without top-notch, trustworthy recipes. And that's just what cooks found inside the New Cook Book. The foreword to the 1933 edition promised the cream of thousands of tested and tasted recipes approved by the Better Homes and Gardens Tasting-Test Kitchen.

Not only did the recipes yield great-tasting results, but they were also more informative and easier to follow than ever before. In many books at the time, a recipe for a Currant Pie might have read something like this: Add one cup of raspberries to three cups of ripe currants, and bake in two crusts. Serve plain or with whipped cream.

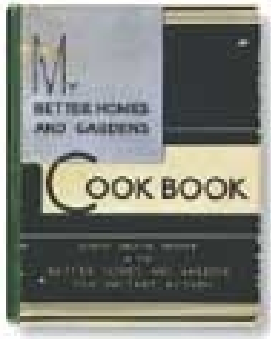
The writers of such a recipe assumed, of course, any cook knew how to make a pie crust, how to prepare the fruit to use in the pie, how long to bake the pie and at what temperature. And doesn't every cook just naturally know to add at least

3/4 cup sugar to sweeten the thing, plus some flour for thickening?

Evidently, many cooks didn't, and the Test Kitchen came to their rescue. The Test Kitchen experts championed a new style of recipe writing that called on level measurements (no more "little bit of this, a little bit of that"), and more precise, descriptive methods (no more "bake till done"). Cooks all over America looked to the book for practical, reliable recipes.

In the foreword to the 1933 edition, an editor wrote about the new kind of homemaker for whom the cookbook was intended. She is quick to adopt the new, when it proves efficient; and ready to discard the old, when she finds something better.

That describes the vision of the Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book through all its editions: It changes as America changes. In fact, looking through past issues of the book is like surveying a history of America at the table from 1930 to the present:



- During the days of wartime rationing in the 1940s, a revision of the cookbook featured a supplement entitled "An Easy Guide for Your Ration Points." Oven meals, in which the main dish, a vegetable, and dessert were baked at the same time, provided a handy way to save fuel.
- More money and leisure time brought by the prosperous post-war 1950s ushered in a new appreciation for backyard grilling and entertaining at home. That's when Chicken Divan and Chef's Grilled Steak debuted. A new salad craze also hit the scene -- in fact, Better Homes and Gardens magazine editors are credited for coining the term "tossed salad."
- The 1960s saw an increased interest in foreign food and gourmet meals. For example, in the 1968 edition, the humble chicken swung international with Chicken Kiev, Chicken Cacciatore, Chicken Parisienne, and Island Broiled Chicken. And, as home entertaining became less formal, the cook-at-the-table craze began -- readers grew especially fond of fondue.
- In the 1970s, inflation shrunk the home cook's purchasing power, and budget meals became common fare in the cookbook's pages. While many women returned to work to help ease the budget crunch, the Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book called on convenient new appliances, including crockery cookers and microwave ovens, to help ease the time crunch.
- In the 1980s, families became smaller, and yields of recipes decreased to reflect this. Casual was the word for entertaining -- in fact, 1980s editions dropped table-setting information. An increased interest in healthy eating brought more low-fat recipes to the pages, and nutrition analyses were added to each recipe in the book.
- To keep pace with the decade's hectic lifestyles, the 1996 edition began the practice of flagging fast recipes as well as adding preparation times with each recipe. Focaccia, tiramisu, and Brie en Croute were some of the discoveries of the decade that debuted in the cookbook.

Throughout the years, the cookbook adapted to the times while remaining true to its original mission of providing cooks with a trustworthy cooking resource. The formula has worked. The Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book -- with its distinctive red-and-white plaid cover -- is one of the world's most recognized books. In 1930, when that full-page ad claimed that there had never before been a cookbook like this one, it might have seemed quite the boast. But 34 million copies later, it's almost an understatement.