A man and a woman lie in bed at night in the short hour between kid sleep and parent sleep, turning down page corners as they read. She is leafing through a fashion magazine, he through a cookbook. Why they read these things mystifies even the readers. The closet and the cupboard are both about as full as they’re going to get, and though we can credit the fashion reader with at least wanting to know what is in fashion when she sees it, what can the recipe reader possibly be reading for? The shelf of cookbooks long ago overflowed, so that the sad relations and failed hopes (“Monet’s Table,” “A Drizzle of Honey: The Lives and Recipes of Spain’s Secret Jews”) now are stacked horizontally, high up. The things he knows how to make that are actually in demand are as fixed as any cocktail pianist’s set list, and for a clientele of children every bit as conservative as the barflies around that piano: make Parmesan-crusted chicken—the “Feelings” of food—every night and they would be delighted. Yet the new cookbooks show up in bed, and the corners still go down.
Vicarious pleasure? More like deferred frustration. Anyone who cooks knows that it is in following recipes that one first learns the anticlimax of the actual, the perpetual disappointment of the thing achieved. I learned it as I learned to bake. When I was in my early teens, the sick yearning for sweets that adolescents suffer drove me, in afternoons taken off from school, to bake, which, miraculously, meant just doing what the books said and hoping to get what they promised to yield. I followed the recipes as closely as I could: dense Boston cream pie, Rigo Jancsi slices, Sacher Torte with apricot jam between the layers.* The potential miracle of the cookbook was immediately apparent: you start with a feeling of greed, find a list of rules, assemble a bunch of ingredients, and then you have something to be greedy about. You begin with the ache and end with the object, where in most of the life of appetites—courtship, marriage—you start with the object and end with the ache.

Yet, if the first thing a cadet cook learns is that words can become tastes, the second is that a space exists between what the rules promise and what the cook gets. It is partly that the steps between—the melted chocolate’s gleam, the chastened, improved look of the egg yolks mixed with sugar—are often more satisfying than the finished cake. But the trouble also lies in the same good words that got you going. How do you know when a thing “just begins to boil”? How can you be sure that the milk has scorched but not burned? Or touch something too hot to touch, or tell firm peaks from stiff peaks? How do you define “chopped”? At the same time as I was illicitly baking in the afternoons, I was learning non-recipe main-course cooking at night from my mother, a scientist by day, who had long been off-book, as they say in the theatre, and she would show, not tell: how you softened the onions, made them golden, browned them. This practice got you deeper than the words ever could.

“*There are plenty of domestic issues that need to be addressed.”

Handed-down wisdom and worked-up information remain the double piers of a cook’s life. The recipe book always contains two things: news of how something is made, and assurance that there’s a way to make it, with the implicit belief that if I know how it is done I can show you how to do it. The premise of the recipe book is that these two things are naturally balanced; the secret of the recipe book is that they’re not. The space between learning the facts about how something is done and learning how to do it always turns out to be large, at times immense. What kids make depends on what moms know: skills, implicit knowledge, inherited craft, buried assumptions, finger know-how that no recipe can sum up. The recipe is a blueprint but also a red herring, a way to do something and a false summing up of a living process that can be handed on only by experience, a knack posing as a
knowledge. We say “What’s the recipe?” when we mean “How do you do it?” And though we want the answer to be “Like this!” the honest answer is “Be me!” “What’s the recipe?” you ask the weary pro chef, and he gives you a weary-pro-chef look, since the recipe is the totality of the activity, the real work. The recipe is to spend your life cooking.

Yet the cookbooks keep coming, and we continue to turn down their pages: “The Asian Grandmothers Cookbook,” “The Adaptable Feast,” the ones with disingenuously plain names—“How to Roast a Lamb: New Greek Classic Cooking” (a good one, in fact)—and the ones with elaborately nostalgic premises, like “Dining on the B. & O.: Recipes and Sidelights from a Bygone Age.” Once-familiar things depart from their pages silently, like Minerva’s owls. “Yield,” for instance, a word that appeared at the top of every recipe in every cookbook that my mother owned—“Yield: six portions,” or twelve, or twenty—is gone. Maybe it seemed too cold, too technical. In any case, the recipe no longer yields; it merely serves. “Makes six servings” or “Serves four to six as part of an appetizer” is all you get.

Other good things go. Clarified butter (melted butter with the milk solids skimmed and strained) has vanished—Graham Kerr, the Galloping Gourmet, once used it like holy water—while emulsified butter (melted butter with a little water whisked in), thanks to Thomas Keller’s sponsorship, plays an ever-larger role. The cult of the cooking vessel—the wok, the tagine, the Dutch oven, the smoker, the hibachi, the Tibetan kiln or the Inuit ice oven or whatever—seems to be over. Paula Wolfert has a new book devoted to clay-pot cooking, but it feels too ambitious in advance; we have tried too many other modish pots, and know that, like Elvis’s and Michael Jackson’s chimps, after their hour is done they will live out their years forgotten and alone, on the floor of the closet, alongside the fondue forks and the spice grinder and the George Foreman grill. Even the imagery of cooking has changed. Sometime in the past decade or so, the actual eating line was breached. Now the cooking magazines and the cookbooks are filled with half-devoured dishes and cut-open vegetables. Michael Psilakis’s fine Greek cookbook devotes an entire page to a downbeat still-life of torn-off artichoke leaves lying in a pile; the point is not to entice the eater but to ennoble the effort.

With their torn leaves and unyielding pages, cookbooks have two overt passions right now: one is simplicity, the other is salt. The chef’s cookbook from the fancy place has been superseded by the chef’s cookbook from the fancy place without the fancy-place food. David Waltuck, of the ever to be mourned Chanterelle, started this trend with his “Staff Meals,” and now we have Thomas Keller’s “Ad Hoc at Home,” and, from Mark Peel, of the Los Angeles hot spot Campanile, “New Classic Family Dinners.” (“Every single recipe was tested in Peel’s own home kitchen—where he has only one strainer, just like the rest of us, and no kitchen staff to clean up after him.”) The simplicity is in part a reaction to the cult of complexity of Spain’s Ferran Adrià school of molecular cooks, with their cucumber foam and powdered octopus. Reformations make counterreformations as surely as right makes left; every time someone whitewashes a church in Germany, someone else paints angels on a ceiling in Rome. But simplicity remains the most complicated of all concepts, I have in one month stumbled over six simple recipes for making ragù or Bolognese—plain spaghetti sauce, as it used to be known, when there was only one kind—with chicken livers or without, diced chuck roast or hamburger, white wine or red. Yet all movements in cooking believe themselves to be movements toward greater simplicity. (Even the molecular gastronomes believe that they are truly elemental, breaking things down to the atomic level.) Curnonsky, the greatest of the interwar gourmands, was famous for preferring the c

Simplicity is the style, but salt the ornamental element—the idea of tasting flights of salt being a self-satirizing notion that Swift couldn’t have come up with. The insistence on the many kinds of salt—not merely sea salt and table salt but hand-harvested fleur de sel, Himalayan red salt, and Hawaiian pink salt—is everywhere, and touching, because, honestly, it all tastes like salt. And now everyone brines. Brining, the habit of dunking meat in salty water for a bath of a day or so, seems to have first reappeared out of the koshering past, in Cook’s Illustrated, sometime in the early nineties, as a way of dealing with the dry flesh of the modern turkey, and then spread like, well, ocean water in a
tsunami, until now both Keller and Peel are happy to brine everything: pork roasts, chicken breasts, shrimp, duck.

Although brining is defended with elaborate claims about tenderness, what it really does is make food taste salty, and all primates like the taste of salt. That’s a feature, not a bug: we’re doing what our peasant ancestors did, making meat into ham. Salted food demands a salty sweet, and we read that in Spain recently one connoisseur had “a chocolate ganache coated in bread floating in a small pool of olive oil with fleur de sel sprinkled on it,” while we can now make pecan-and-salt caramel-cheesecake chocolate mousse with olive oil and flaky-salt sticky-peanut cookie bars for ourselves.

The salt fetish has, I think, another and a deeper cause: we want to bond with the pro cooks. Most of what pro cooks have that home cooks don’t is what plantation owners used to have: high heat and lots of willing slaves. (The slaves seem happy, anyway, until they escape and write that testimonial, or start that cooking blog.) But the pro cooks also salt a lot more than feels right to an amateur home cook; both the late Bernard Loiseau and the Boston cook Barbara Lynch have confessed that hyper-seasoning, and, in particular, high salting, is a big part of what makes pro cooks’ food taste like pro cooks’ food. But the poor home cook, without hope of an eight-hundred-degree brick oven, and lucky if he can press-gang a ten-year-old into peeling carrots, can still salt hard, and so salt, its varieties and use, becomes a luxury replacement, a sign of seriousness even when you don’t have the real tools of seriousness at hand.

The urge to meld identities with the pros is tied to a desire to get something out of a cookbook besides another recipe. For beneath those conscious enthusiasms and trends lies a new and deeper uncertainty in the relation between the recipe book and its reader. In this the Great Age of Disaggregation, all the old forms are being smashed apart and their contents spilled out like piñatas at a birthday party. The cookbook isn’t spared. The Internet has broken what once seemed a natural tie, between the recipe and the cookbook, as it has broken the tie between the news story and the newspaper. You can find pretty much any recipe you want online now. If you need a recipe for mustard-shallot sauce or boeuf à la mode, you enter a few search terms, and there it is.

So the old question “What’s the recipe for?” gives way to “What’s the cookbook for?,” which turns it, like everything else these days, toward the memoir, the confessional, the recipe as self-revelation. Barbara Lynch begins her book “Stir” with a preface that sounds like the opening passages of “GoodFellas”: “We were poor, fiercely Irish, and extremely loyal. The older boys I knew grew up to be policemen, politicians and criminals (often a mix of the three.) . . . If I ever had thoughts at all as to what I might be when I grew up, they were modest ones. I might have pictured myself running a bar (in Southie) or opening a sub shop (in Southie). But having a restaurant of my own on Beacon Hill? No way. In fact, if a fortune teller had told me at fourteen what good things were in store for me, I would have laughed in her face and told her where she could shove such bullshit. . . . I marvel that any of us made it out of there without winding up in jail or the morgue.” Michael Psilakis, in “How to Roast a Lamb,” includes his own childhood traumas: “As I sat on top of the lamb, watching it struggle to free itself, as if in slow motion my father came up behind me, reached down over my right shoulder with a hunting knife, grabbed the lamb’s head and ears, and, in one swift motion, slit the lamb’s throat. . . . Blood shot out of the lamb like water from a high-pressure hose.” You never had a moment like that with Julia Child or Joseph Wechsberg.

Another answer to the question “What good is the cookbook?” lies in what might be called the grammatical turn: the idea that what the cookbook should supply is the rules, the deep structure—a fixed, underlying grammar that enables you to uze all the recipes you find. This grammatical turn is available in the popular “Best Recipe” series in Cook’s Illustrated, and in the “Cook’s Bible” of its editor, Christopher Kimball, in which recipes begin with a long disquisition on various approaches, ending with the best (and so brining was born); in Michael Ruhlman’s “The Elements of Cooking,” with its allusion to Strunk & White’s usage guide; and, most of all, in Mark Bittman’s indispensable new classic “How to Cook Everything,” which, though claiming “minimalism” of style, is maximalist in purpose—not a collection of recipes for all occasions but a set of techniques for all time.

You see a progression if you compare the classics of the past century: Escoffier’s culinary dictionary, Julia Child’s “Mastering the Art of French Cooking,” Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins’s “The New Basics,” and Bittman’s recently revised “Everything.” The standard kitchen bible, the book
you turn to most often, has evolved from dictionary to encyclopedia, and to anthology and then
grammar. Escoffier’s book was pure dictionary: quick reminders to clarify a point or make a variation
eloquent. Escoffier lists every recipe for tournedos and all its variations. His recipes are summaries,
aide-mémoires for cooks who know how to make it already but need to be reminded what’s in it. (Is a
béarnaise sauce tarragon leaves and stems, or just leaves?) This was the way all cooks cooked once.
(In the B. & O. cookbook, one finds this recipe for short ribs: “Put short ribs in a saucepan with one
quart of nice stock, with one onion cut fine, steam until nice and tender. Place in roasting pan and put
in oven until they are nice and brown.” That’s it. Everything else is commentary.)

In “Mastering the Art of French Cooking,” as in Waverley Root’s “The Food of France,” which
came out at around the same time, the turn is encyclopedic: here’s all you can find on a particular kind
of cooking, which you will master by reading this book. Things are explained, but, as in an
encyclopedia, what is assumed is the need for more and deeper information about material already
taken to be essential. You get a list not of everything there is but of everything that matters. Julia gives
you only the tournedos recipes that count.

You didn’t want to master the art of French cooking unless you believed that it was an art
uniquely worth mastering. When people did master it, they realized that it wasn’t—that no one style of
cooking really was adequate to our appetites. So the cookbook as anthology arrived, open to many
sources, from American Thanksgiving and Jewish brisket through Italian pasta and French
Stroganoff—most successfully in “The New Basics” cookbook, which was the standard for the past
generation. The anthology cookbooks assumed curiosity about styles and certainty about methods. In
“The New Basics,” the tone is chatty, informal, taking for granted that the readers—women, mostly—
know the old basics: what should be in the kitchen, what kinds of machines to use, how to handle a
knife.

The cookbooks of the grammatical turn assume that you don’t know how to do the simple things,
but that the simple things, mastered, will enable you to do it all. Bittman assumes that you have no
idea how to chop an onion, or boil a potato, much less how chopping differs from slicing or from
dicing. Each basic step is tenderly detailed. How to Boil Water: “Put water in a pot (usually to about
two-thirds full), and turn the heat to high.” How to Slice with a Knife: “You still press down, just with
a little more precision, and cut into thick or thin slices of fairly uniform size.” To sauté: “Put a large
skillet on the stove and add the butter or oil. Turn the heat to medium-high. When the butter bubbles
or the oil shimmers, add the food you want to sauté.” Measuring dry ingredients, you are told to
“scoop them up or use a spoon to put them in the cup.” And, “Much of cooking is about heat.”

This all feels masculine in tone—no pretty side drawings, a systematic progression from recipe to
recipe—and seems written mainly for male readers who are either starting to cook for friends or just
married and learning that if you don’t cook she’s not about to. The old “New Basics,” one recalls
nostalgically, was exclamatory and feminine. “The celebration continues,” reads the blurb, and inside
the authors “indulge” and “savor” and “delight”; a warm chicken salad is “perfection when dressed in
even more lemon,” another chicken salad is “lush and abundant.” The authors’ perpetual “we” (“We
like all our holidays accompanied with a bit of the bubbly”), though meant, in part, to suggest a merry
partnership, was generous and inclusive, a “we” that honest-to-God extended to all of their readers.

Bittman never gushes but always gathers up: he has seven ways to vary a chicken kebab; eighteen
ideas for pizza toppings; and, the best, an “infinite number of ways to customize” mashed potatoes. He
is cautious, and even, post-Pollan, skeptical; while Rosso and Lukins “love” and “crave” their filet of
beef, to all of animal flesh Bittman allows no more than “Meat is filling and requires little work to
prepare. It’s relatively inexpensive and an excellent source of many nutrients. And most people like
it.” Most people like it? Rosso and Lukins would have tossed out any recipe, much less an entire food
group, of which no more than that could be said. Lamb is a thing they “fall in love with again every
season of the year,” and of pork they know that it is “divinely succulent.” Bittman thinks that most
people like it. His tone is that of Ed Harris in “Apollo 13”: Let’s work the problem, people. Want to
thicken a sauce? Well, try Plan A: cook it down. Copy that, Houston. Plan A inadequate? Try Plan B:
add roux. And so on, ever upward, until you get to the old one, which they knew on the B. & O.: add a
little cornstarch. The progressive pattern appeals to men. The implication, slightly illusory, is that
there’s a neat set of steps from each point to the next, as in a Bill Walsh pass pattern: each pattern on the tree proceeds logically and the quarterback just has to look a little farther upfield. Grammars teach foreign tongues, and the advantage of Bittman’s approach is that it can teach you how to cook. But is learning how to cook from a grammar book—item by item, and by rote—really learning how to cook? Doesn’t it miss the social context—the dialogue of generations, the commonality of the family recipe—that makes cooking something more than just assembling calories and nutrients? It’s as if someone had written a book called “How to Play Catch.” (“Open your glove so that it faces the person throwing you the ball. As the ball arrives, squeeze the glove shut.”) What it would tell you is not that we have figured out how to play catch but that we must now live in a culture without dads. In a world denuded of living examples, we end up with the guy who insists on making Malaysian Shrimp one night and Penne all’Amatriciana the next; it isn’t about anything except having learned how it’s done. Your grandmother’s pound cake may have been like concrete, but it was about a whole history and view of life; it got that tough for a reason.

The metaphor of the cookbook was long the pet metaphor of the conservative political philosopher Michael Oakeshott in his assault on the futility of thinking that something learned by rote was as good as what was learned by ritual. Oakeshott’s much repeated point was that one could no more learn how to make good government from a set of rules than one could learn how to bake a cake by reading recipe books. The cookbook, like the constitution, was only the residue of a practice. Even the most grammatical of cookbooks dies without living cooks to illuminate its principles. The history of post-independence African republics exists to prove the first point; that Chocolate Nemesis cake that always fails but your friends keep serving anyway exists to prove the second. Unsupported by your mom, the cookbook is the model of empty knowledge.

All this is true, and yet the real surprise of the cookbook, as of the constitution, is that it sometimes makes something better in the space between what’s promised and what’s made. You can follow the recipe for the exotic thing—green curry or paella—and though what you end up with would shock the natives, it may be just as good as or even better than the thing intended. Before I learned that green curries were soupy, I made them creamy, which actually is nicer. In politics, too, where the unwritten British constitution has been turned into a recipe—as in the constitutions of Canada and Australia—the condensation of practices into rules can make for a rain of better practices; the Canadian constitution, for instance, wanting to keep the bicameral vibe of a House of Lords without having a landed gentry, turned it into a Senate of distinguished citizens by appointment, an idea that can rebound back as a model for the new House of Lords. Between the rule and the meal falls the ritual, and the real ritual of the recipe is like the ritual of the law; the reason the judge sits high up, in a robe, is not that it makes a difference to the case but that it makes a difference to the clients. The recipe is, in this way, our richest instance of the force and the power of abstract rules. All messages change as they’re re-sent; but messages not sent never get received. Life is like green curry. However we take cookbooks—grammatically or encyclopedically, as storehouses of craft or illusions of knowledge—one can’t read them in bed for many years without feeling that there is a conspiracy between readers and writers to obscure the ultimate point. A kind of primal scene of eating hovers over every cookbook, just as a primal scene of sex lurks behind every love story. In cooking, the primal scene, or substance, is salt, sugar, and fat held in maximum solution with starch; add protein as necessary, and finish with caffeine (coffee or chocolate) as desired. That’s what, suitably disguised in some decent dimension of dressup, we always end up making. We make béarnaise sauce by whisking a stick of melted butter into a couple of eggs, and, now that we no longer make béarnaise sauce, we make salsa verde by beating a cup of olive oil into a fistful of anchovies. The herbs change; the hope does not.

Mark Peel, in his Campanile cookbook, comes near to giving the game away: “We chefs all lie about our mashed potatoes,” he admits. “We don’t tell you we’ve used 1 ½ pounds of cream and butter with 1 ¼ pounds of potatoes. You don’t need to know.” (Joël Robuchon, the king of his generation of French cooks, first became famous for a purée that had an even higher proportion of butter beaten into starch.) After reading hundreds of cookbooks, you may have the feeling that every recipe, every cookbook, is an attempt to get you to attain this ideal sugar-salt-saturated-fat state without having to see it head on, just as every love poem is an attempt to maneuver a girl or a boy into bed by talking as
fast, and as eloquently, as possible about something else. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate” is the poetic equivalent of simmering the garlic with ginger and Sauternes before you put the cream in; the end is the cream, but you carefully simmer the garlic.

All appetites have their illusions, which are part of their pleasure. Going back to our own primal scene, that’s why the husband turns those pages. The truth is that we don’t passively look at the pictures and leap to the results; we actively read the lines and internally act out the jobs. The woman who reads the fashion magazines isn’t passively imagining the act of having; she’s actively imagining the act of shopping. (And distantly imagining the act of wearing.) She turns down pages not because she wants to look again but because, for that moment, she really intends to buy that—for a decisive imagined moment she did buy it, even if she knows she never will. Reading recipe books is an active practice, too, even if all the action takes place in your mind. We reanimate our passions by imagining the possibilities, and the act of wanting ends up mattering more than the fact of getting. It’s not the false hope that it will turn out right that makes us go on with our reading but our being resigned to the knowledge that it won’t ever, quite.

The desire to go on desiring, the wanting to want, is what makes you turn the pages—all the while aware that the next Boston cream pie, the sweet-salty-fatty-starchy thing you will turn out tomorrow, will be neither more nor less unsatisfying than last night’s was. When you start to cook, as when you begin to live, you think that the point is to improve the technique until you end up with something perfect, and that the reason you haven’t been able to break the cycle of desire and disillusion is that you haven’t yet mastered the rules. Then you grow up, and you learn that that’s the game. ♦

*Correction, February 11, 2010: Rigó Jancsi was misspelled.

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