

A Brief History of the Recipe

We've been writing about food for as long as we've been writing. The oldest known tablets, from the beginning of written civilization, show glyphs for beer, fish, and eating. The oldest known recipe dates to four millennia ago and describes a ritual for making beer. Like its cousin, bread, beer was a food of necessity. Beer was safer to drink than potentially polluted water, so ritualizing and recording the process of making it created a recipe of necessity and survival.

The ancient Romans expanded on recipes of necessity to recipes of indulgence (roasted flamingo, anybody?). While more complicated, their recipes still read more like short notes than precise protocols with measurements and descriptive steps.

Golden Corn Cake.

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup corn meal.	$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt.
$1\frac{1}{4}$ cups flour.	1 cup milk.
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar.	1 egg.
4 teaspoons baking powder.	1 tablespoon melted butter.

Mix and sift dry ingredients ; add milk, egg well beaten, and butter ; bake in shallow buttered pan in hot oven twenty minutes.

It wasn't until the 1800s that cookbooks began to give more precise measurements, with Fannie Farmer's *the Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (Little, Brown & Company, 1896) being a notable early bellwether in the United States. Her book is still enjoyable today. Here is her recipe for what we'd call cornbread (although I think her name, Golden Corn Cake, is more apt).

Fannie Farmer's book sold 4 million copies, changed the way we cooked, and set the stage for Irma Rombauer's culinary classic *Joy of Cooking* (1931), which to date has sold 18 million copies. Ironically, both authors had difficulty with their initial printings, having to pay for the initial print runs themselves. Breaking the status quo has never been easy.

Joy's innovation was "casual culinary chat," weaving in the ingredient lists with the instructions that give the reader a description of what to look for. It's one of the first books to walk the reader through the process of cooking, serving as both a culinary guide and source of notes for the aspiring cook. (Growing up and thumbing through my mom's copy of the 1975 edition, I remember reading "How to Skin a Squirrel," which made an impression on me of what cooking was like only a few generations ago. Plus, ewww. The latest edition has understandably dropped that section.)

Even modern recipes that inherit Fannie Farmer's precise measurements and *Joy's* woven narrative should still be viewed as notes from one cook to another. There's simply too much variability in ingredients and preferences. A teaspoon of dried oregano in your drawer won't necessarily be the same strength as a teaspoon of the dried oregano in my drawer, due to age, breakdown of the chemicals (carvacrol, in this case), and variations in production and processing. And food preferences are just too varied—there simply is no "perfect" chocolate chip cookie; we each have our own version.

What will the future of recipes look like? While I don't believe—or choose not to believe!—that printed cookbooks will go away, we are clearly in the digital age. Books no longer need to be authoritative or exhaustive, but should be entertaining and inspirational. With Internet access becoming universal, you'll be able to find a good recipe for chicken tagine or tofu scramble faster with an online search than by flipping to the index at the back of this book. Fannie Farmer and Irma Rombauer would be amazed.

When will we see a dynamically generated cookbook with recipes tailored to our individual tastes—emphasizing slow food, or healthy meals, or low-sugar recipes? Or recipe generators that allow us to choose our own parameters? “Computer, change the recipe to make the cookies crispier!” Some attempts at this exist, but they haven't been breakout successes. In part, digital ebook formats don't have the capabilities, and installing apps is a higher barrier than most creators imagine.

I also think we've reached a simplicity point: cooking for pleasure is a pastime. We find it enjoyable to have a challenge rewarded with success. I call this *maker's gratification*: the emotional reward and sense of accomplishment that one gets by making something that has some level of difficulty. Good brownies, made from scratch, are gratifying to make and to eat. The food industry understands this all too well.

Instant brownie mixes could be formulated to not need eggs, oil, and water, but then they wouldn't deliver maker's gratification. How much reward would you feel for putting a store-bought pan with batter into the oven and hitting the “on” button? Probably not much.

Regardless of the source and format of a recipe—short note, culinary essay, flowchart, or whatever may come—read it thinking of the source and the author's intent, translating as necessary in order to achieve what you want.

Condensed recipes, like those that Maureen Evans posts on Twitter (@cookbook), are easy to follow for experienced cooks:

Lemon Lentil Soup: mince onion&celery&carrot&garlic; cvr@low7m+3T oil. Simmer40m+4c broth/c puylentil/thyme&bay&lemzest. Puree+lemjuice/s+p.

Visual recipes, like Michael Chu's (<http://www.cookingforengineers.com>) tiramisu, communicate quantities and steps with minimal overhead using a time and activity chart:

Simple Tiramisu

about 20 ladyfinger cookies				
2 shots (2 ounces; 60 mL) prepared espresso	mix & chill	dip	layer & spread twice	cover
½ cup (120 mL) prepared coffee				
1 cup (240 mL) heavy whipping cream	whisk to stiff peaks			
1 lb. (455g) mascarpone cheese	mix	fold		
½ cup (100g) granulated sugar				
3 tablespoons (44 mL) rum or brandy				
cocoa powder				
shavings of unsweetened dark chocolate				

Cooking Medieval Recipes

If you're a history buff, check out old cookbooks for inspiration. If there's one time you definitely shouldn't follow the recipe, it's with a really old one. Take Maistre Chiquart's recipe for *parma torte* in *Du fait de cuisine* (1420 AD). Translated into modern English, he starts with "take 3 or 4 pigs, and if the affair should be larger than I can conceive, add another, and from the pigs take off the heads and thighs." He goes on for four pages, adding 300 pigeons and 200 chicks (or, "if the affair is at a time when you can't find chicks, then 100 capons"). He calls for both familiar spices, like sage, parsley, and marjoram, and unfamiliar ones, such as hyssop and "grains of paradise." The ending instructions say to place a pastry version of the house coat of arms on top of the pie crust and decorate the top with a "check-board pattern of gold leaf."

Chiquart's recipes were understandably complicated as they were designed for royal occasions and banquets. But even simple medieval recipes can be challenging: language, ingredients, and culinary tools have all changed. A lot. Consider another recipe for apple pie from *The Forme of Cury*, published around 1390 AD:

Tak gode Applys and gode Spycis and Figys and reysons and Perys and wan they are wel brayed coloure wyth Safron wel and do yt in a cofyn and do yt forth to bake well.

This roughly translates to: "Take good apples and good spices and figs and raisins and pears and when they are well crushed, color well with saffron and put it in a coffin and take it to bake." (The *coffin*—little basket, same root as *coffer*—is the culinary ancestor to modern-day pie pastry but would not have been edible because of the way it was cooked.) Reading recipes like this can be a starting point for experimentation. Reading this gives me the idea of mixing a mash of apples and pears, some dried fruit, spices, and saffron as a festive applesauce for a holiday meal.

Many older texts are accessible via the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>), Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>), and Google Books (<http://books.google.com>). For *parma torte*, I worked out my own scaled-down adaptation, modifying the quantities for the much smaller affair of a dinner party. I later found an adaptation in Eleanor and Terence Scully's *Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes and Modern Adaptations* (University of Michigan Press, 1996); see <http://cookingforgeeks.com/book/parmatorte/>.

