

The Year in Cookbooks: Our Favorite Reads of 2014

KATE WILLIAMS



It's a great time to be a cookbook collector. In the face of a dwindling print industry, publishers have only stepped up their game, producing more beautiful, innovative, and fun cookbooks with each passing year. 2014 has, in particular, been a year of immense variety. We've seen new books on everything from Peruvian ceviche and Texan comfort food to hipster butchery and whole grain breakfasts. And within some of our favorite books, we've watched as chefs explore global cuisines and integrate them into distinctive culinary styles.

Indeed, each cookbook on our list is helmed by a strong, opinionated personality. If this year is any indication, cookbooks are becoming more and more about the particular styles of particular chefs. It's not necessarily a bad thing; nameless tomes of technique are never as fun as the books we've explored this year. A great cookbook author doesn't need to come from a popular restaurant or write an award-winning blog (although many do). A great cookbook author only needs to be able to tell their own story through their food, and tell it well.

Here are the highlights of the year.

For the Vegetable Obsessed: *Plenty More*



The much anticipated sequel to Yotam Ottolenghi's *Plenty* arrived with much fanfare and deserved praise. Since *Plenty* was published in 2011, Ottolenghi has brought in a team of test cooks, each with their own ideas and exuberance. The increase in brain-power is noticeable: *Plenty More* is even better than the original, fresh with the flavors and ingredients of Ottolenghi's most recent travels and readings. There are still many traces of his Middle Eastern influence, but now he's incorporated touches of Southeast Asia, India, New York, and Britain. Who pairs chanterelle mushrooms, black glutinous rice, tarragon, and goat cheese, and does so with aplomb? Only Ottolenghi. Even if you've already amassed a library of his books, you'll learn something new from *Plenty More*.

For the DIYer: *Bar Tartine*



Out of San Francisco, we saw the release of the *Bar Tartine* cookbook, a dedicated DIYer's book that speaks to the creativity exploding in the Bay right now. Like Ottolenghi, *Bar Tartine* (the restaurant) manages to weave together myriad cuisines and influences, often in one single dish. Co-chefs Nicolaus Ballas's and Cortney Burns's inspired fusion of California cuisine, Eastern European fare, and Japanese flavor shines through on each page of their book. They spare no detail when it comes to replicating their food—the entire first section of the book is dedicated to recipes for their scratch-made pantry. It's challenging, sure, but in the very best way.

For the Advanced Cook: *Prune*



Gabrielle Hamilton surprised us this fall, releasing a book that has changed the way we think about cookbooks. Unlike most famous chef-penned releases, *Prune* is not one of those coffee table book of essays masquerading as a cookbook. Yes, there are many full-bleed, artfully styled photographs stacked between the recipes, and the book certainly projects a vision. But this vision is not one of a diner in a restaurant. It is, instead, a true glimpse behind the scenes of Hamilton's line. Recipes aren't written with long explanations of technique or gentle, encouraging language. Instead, each one is presented succinctly, with stern but helpful additions drawn in with Sharpie. There's no introduction to explain this tact; Hamilton demands that you jump right in and fully immerse yourself in her world. Because of these characteristics, *Prune* isn't intended for beginner cooks. Even home cooks well-versed in culinary technique may feel a little lost in the beginning, but with practice, Hamilton's recipes can become your new kitchen staples.

For the Locavore: *Heritage*



I'd be remiss not to mention Sean Brock's gorgeous exploration of the history (and future) of Southern cuisine, *Heritage*. It's a prime example of a glossy coffee table cookbook. Long, personal essays. Meticulously plated and gorgeous food. Technical recipes within recipes within recipes. But, here's the key: Brock does all of these things exceptionally. If you need a boost to get yourself to the farmer's market on the weekend, this is the book to help you to your feet. Brock's absolute embrace of true Southern ingredients and his commitment to showcasing these products at their absolute prime is an inspirational move far more characteristic of the hyper-locavores out here in California than what you'd imagine coming from an Appalachia-bred chef. Yet it works. And there are plenty of recipe nuggets that don't require complicated restaurant equipment and technique. If you get your hands on this book and don't feel inspired to make his lovingly prepared grits, well, I'm not sure what more you'd want from a cookbook.

For the Fish Sauce Fiend: *Simple Thai Food*



A slip of a book, Leela Punyaratabandhu's *Simple Thai Food* was a welcome addition to my growing collection of Southeast Asian cookbooks. It takes a measured approach to traditional Thai cuisine; it is neither dogmatic nor full of shortcuts. Some of its recipes are familiar—think tom kha gai, pad thai, and green papaya salad. Still others, like her curious leaf-wrapped salad bites filled with nuts, dried shrimp, and raw ginger, are a delightful revelation. Punyaratabandhu writes most of these recipes as she would prepare them for Thai guests, using scratch-made curry pastes and generally hard-to-find ingredients. Yet in her extensive and detailed headnotes, she includes helpful hints for preparation, shopping tips, and, most importantly, good ideas for substitutes. In this way, readers are given a wealth of options, none more (or less) delicious than the last.

For the Griller: *Big Flavor Grill* and *Pitt Cue Co.*



Chris Schlesinger and John Willoughby's *Big Flavor Grill* will probably transform the way you think about grilling. The pair abandoned the notion that long marinating times are necessary for tender meat and bold flavor, instead opting for zesty, piquant rubs and sauces that save our time and our sanity. This concept is enough to catapult the book to weekday-friendly use all summer long.

Pitt Cue Co. takes the other track, opting for detailed recipes that necessitate a serious time commitment, as well as the fortitude to prepare additional sauces and rubs for each recipe. But this surprise of a cookbook (Brits making Southern barbecue? Really?) gave us a new outlook on the genre, blending time-honored Southern technique with the British recipe canon.

For the Paleo-Curious: *Nom Nom Paleo*



Speaking of surprises, Michelle Tam's *Nom Nom Paleo* cookbook gave this bean and grain enthusiast new appreciation for all of the tricks that chopped up cauliflower and puréed nuts can perform. Tam's guide to primal eating takes a fun, colorful approach, free of the endless lecturing and proselytizing running throughout many of today's health-conscious blogs. Sure, you may want to return to your favorite loaf of sourdough next week, but there's no denying that short ribs braised with bacon are delicious.

For Vegans and Vegetarians: *Afro-Vegan*



Another master of nut cheese is Bryant Terry. His brilliant new cookbook, *Afro-Vegan*, is a love letter to the food of the African diaspora. In it, he remixes the traditional dishes of his ancestors by replacing animal products with fresh, flavorful produce. There are no apologies or tricks to cover up the flavor of the substitutions; if there's cashew cream in a dish, Terry highlights its silky nuttiness instead of hiding it behind a few tablespoons of maple syrup. But the best part of *Afro-Vegan* has nothing to do with its dietary requirements. Each recipe strikes a balance between tradition and creativity, encouraging us to always put ginger in our collards or Creole blackening seasoning on our cauliflower.

For the Anthropologist-Cook: *Yucatán*



David Sterling's *Yucatán* takes the opposite approach to tradition. His debut cookbook teaches the classics of the region's cuisine in precise, lard-filled detail. Yucatecan cooking, we've learned, is a celebration of spice, vinegar, and smoke. There is an earthy, grounded nature to the food—nuts, seeds, and corn are as common as rice and beans. Sterling's cookbook is as much an exploration of the culture as it is a guide to the food. He delves deep into the history of the peninsula, providing recipes from as far back as the pre-Columbian period. There are abundant photographs and short essays on nearly every page, lending the book a vibrant sense of place.

For the Voracious Reader: *My Paris Kitchen*



David Lebovitz's new cookbook similarly takes a narrative approach. In *My Paris Kitchen*, Lebovitz weaves together inviting and insightful tales about his adopted city with a collection of smart, fun recipes. Some of these are total French classics—think oeufs mayo and green lentil salad—while others give a nod to the ethnic diversity in the city. In a nod to his pastry background, Lebovitz includes a substantial dessert section, but it's clear from the breadth of the book that his Paris kitchen is filled with so much more than sweets. Here is a cookbook to take to a comfy chair and read cover to cover.