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I like to think of a recipe as your mother or grandmother at your elbow, leading you through a new experience. Practical by nature, mothers and grandmothers pass on time-honored tips about using leftovers and make-ahead stages. But what your mother and grandmother offer goes beyond times, amounts, and how-tos. They put all your senses into play: The nuts toast until they tempt your nose, the marmalade boils noisily, with popping sounds as it reaches setting point, biscuit dough looks ragged and shaggy just before you gather it into a ball, you feel the silkiness of a properly kneaded yeast dough. These are the points that make the cook really learn how to cook and not just watch the clock. Make the dish sound so irresistible, the story behind it so fascinating, that I will actually get up and head to the kitchen. Just as if my mother or grandmother had invited me there.

Chapter One

The Philosophy of Recipe Writing

JUST AS KITCHEN TESTING IS the key to a successfully prepared recipe, editorial testing is the key to a well-written recipe. Editorial testing? That's just a fancy way of saying you should literally think your way through a recipe, asking the same questions you would ask if you were in the kitchen.

Think about what you're writing. Does it make sense? Is it logical? Do the steps flow chronologically? Should the sauce, which is listed last, actually be prepared first so that it can simmer while the cook is completing the rest of the dish? Are all the ingredients accounted for in the directions? Is the condition of the ingredients clearly stated—at room temperature, chopped, cooked, thawed, drained?

It sounds almost too simple, but it works. And it's based on experience.

When one of the authors started her job as food editor for a major metropolitan newspaper in 1975, she was fresh out of college and had never taken a home economics course. She soon realized that in some ways her lack of a culinary background was a blessing.

In writing a recipe that was clear enough for herself to follow, she also was writing one that would be clear for any reader. Should the bread crumbs be dried or fresh? Should the pan be covered or uncovered? Are the canned beans drained or undrained?

By asking dozens of questions of her recipe testers, she was able to write clear, concise, complete recipes that provided all the information necessary for successful results without getting bogged down in the specifics of food chemistry or sophisticated terminology. With a reporter's common sense and an editor's approach to detail, she developed a recipe-writing style based on thinking her way through a recipe. You can do the same.

Many of the questions you need to ask when editorially testing a recipe are covered in Chapter Four, "Recipe Testing." Read that chapter carefully to develop a mind-set for the things you should include in a recipe, whether working in the kitchen or at the computer.

The recipe writer-editor needs the same information that can—and should—be gathered during the recipe-testing process. If you do not do the testing yourself, you should have the phone number of the recipe tester so you can call to resolve any questions.

Never Assume Anything

Sometimes, such as when you're editing a wire story, there is no source to call. You can make many editorial corrections based on standard information (such as basic can and pan sizes) or by comparing the recipe in question with similar recipes to estimate approximate yields. But if certain aspects of a recipe are unclear and you have unanswered questions, don't pass them on and expect the readers to figure out what to do. They'll be on the phone asking those very questions—or, worse, in their



kitchens, angry at your publication because they're having trouble with the recipe.

If a recipe is not clear and questions remain, use a different recipe. *Never assume anything*, in regard to either the ingredients and directions, or the reader's level of ability.

Know Your Audience

Know your reader. How you write a recipe depends on the cooking experience of your target audience. Recipes for children or beginning cooks require more explanation than recipes for basic home cooks, and recipes for professional chefs need yet another approach.

An experienced reporter who was assigned to work on a newspaper food section did not know the difference in recipe writing between a lowercase t and an uppercase T (teaspoon and tablespoon, respectively). Needless to say, he didn't last long on the food beat. The point is that this reporter's level of knowledge may be typical of the people reading your recipes. Never assume knowledge on their part.

Phone calls we've received from readers illustrate this point. For example, a woman called to say she had a new oven. She wanted to know whether it was preheated. Another person complained that her cake had turned out gritty. Had we had that problem? In going over the ingredient list with the caller, we discovered that she had used whole eggs—shell and all.

Another caller had driven all over town looking for powdered sherry. She was furious that we had listed an ingredient that wasn't available. The recipe had called for dry sherry.

Other calls we've received include questions about how far to drop drop cookies, how to tell whether a pan is 9 inches, where to get a soup can of water, and whether the recipe would fit in the caller's yellow bowl.

Even before food safety became a critical issue, there were alarming calls. One cook had left a turkey on the kitchen counter for several days and wanted to know whether it was still OK to serve. "How could you miss a 20-pound turkey?" we asked. "I just didn't see it," she replied.



Most food professionals who answer consumer calls can tell similar stories. The point is that you must know your audience. Always keep foremost in your mind your audience's level of knowledge and sophistication, its access to ingredients, time constraints, food budget, and other key considerations.

Accuracy and Consistency

Regardless of the audience, accuracy is paramount. Mistakes cost readers time and money and consequently can cost your publication a loss of goodwill. Food writers and editors put a great deal of effort into building a reputation for sound, accurate, reliable, workable recipes. One mistake can destroy reader confidence, wiping out years of hard work.

Consistency is a close second to accuracy in importance for the recipe writer. Once you decide how to specify an ingredient or spell a cooking term, be consistent. If you specify green onions in one recipe, don't call for scallions in the next. Style decisions such as these can vary from project to project, depending on the audience and the employer, but be sure that your nomenclature and style are consistent throughout the recipes in a particular project, be it a brochure, an article, or a book.

Clarity and conciseness go hand in hand with accuracy and consis-

T I P S F R O M T H E E X P E R T S

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A good recipe:

- Includes title and descriptor that inspire and whet the appetite but never overstate;
- Is written with clarity and accuracy but never with verbosity;
- Presents the ingredients and method sequentially, never randomly;
- Brings success to the new cooks as well as the veterans; and
- Works the first as well as the umpteenth time you make it.

tency. Make each recipe as clear and easy to follow as possible. Don't get bogged down in elaborate explanations. If you're mired in a hopelessly complicated sentence, break it into several short sentences. The passage will be easier to read, understand, and follow. Although you want your recipes to be concise, you also need them to be complete. Don't sacrifice completeness for conciseness.

In some cases, style matters will be dictated by recipe-writing guidelines developed by a publisher or food company. By all means, follow your employer's preferred style. Always ask for a style sheet before beginning any major project—this will prevent your having to rewrite or adjust your recipes later.

If you have serious reservations about certain style decisions, discuss them prior to beginning the project. If you explain your reasons for handling matters of style in a particular way, the company might well accept your suggestions. In researching this book, we learned that many major publications don't even have written style guidelines. Such companies might welcome your input.

Culinary Illiteracy

Several recent studies by national food companies have shown that an overwhelming number of today's recipe users are cooking illiterates—that is, they haven't learned to cook alongside their mothers or grandmothers, and they lack knowledge of what many food professionals consider basic food terminology and skills. These young adults, aged 25 to 30 years, are often called the "lost generation" in the kitchen.

A national food literacy survey, conducted in late 1990 by National Family Opinion Research, Inc., on behalf of the National Pork Producers Council, revealed some startling results. Although 90 percent of the 735 adults (aged 25 to 54) surveyed considered themselves good to excellent cooks, almost three-fourths of them flunked a basic 20-point cooking quiz. Only one person out of the 735 people surveyed received a perfect score on the multiple-choice, true-false test, which included such questions as:



- How many ounces are in one measuring cup?
- One stick of margarine or butter is equal to (a) 1 cup, (b) $\frac{1}{2}$ cup, (c) $\frac{1}{3}$ cup, (d) $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, (e) don't know.

A staggering 45 percent of respondents didn't know how many teaspoons are in one tablespoon. Most of the respondents expressed a desire to cook, but they cited lack of time and lack of basic cooking knowledge as the main reasons they didn't. However, 51 percent said they try a new recipe at least once a month, and 30 percent said they try a new recipe at least two to three times a month. When looking for recipes and cooking information, one-third of the respondents reach for a cookbook; one-third reach for the telephone to call a friend or family member; and about one-fifth take cooking classes.

Keep in mind that many people just like those responding to this survey are in your audience.

Put It in Plain English

Among the many frequently misunderstood cooking terms are *fold*, *sauté*, *braise*, *cream*, *dice*, *roast*, *deglaze*, *cube*, *blend*, and *pan-broil*. Instead of using these terms, describe the technique in simple words that are readily understandable to both novice and experienced cooks. For example, instead of saying "braise," say "simmer, covered." Many cooks frequently braise meat—they just do not use this term.

In Chapter Five, "Cooking Terminology," and Chapter Three, "The Style Sheet," we suggest terms to avoid and offer substitute wording. Like many of the guidelines in this book, these are not hard-and-fast rules. Often, there is no one right way. For example, although *ketchup* is the preferred spelling, if you want to spell it *catsup*, that's fine—just be consistent.

Personalized Style Sheet

You might find it useful to create a style sheet for each project or a personal style sheet of problem words. A style sheet can be as sim-



ple as scribbled notes on a sheet of notebook paper or as well organized as a photocopied form with spaces labeled alphabetically.

For example, if working on an assortment of beverage recipes, you might jot down can and bottle sizes of frequently used ingredients. For a collection of grilling recipes, make notes on food safety, marinades, and grilling times.

Decide on your preferred wordings or terminology for common procedures and list these phrases and terms. Note your decisions on spelling, capitalization, and hyphenation, and refer frequently to these notes to maintain consistency. During work in progress, a quick glance at the style sheet can clarify a fuzzy editorial memory. Another advantage is that should you need to turn a project over to another person, the style sheet will ensure that the project continues smoothly.

If you save these various style sheets in a folder, you will soon have the makings of a style manual, customized for the type of projects you frequently do.

Recipe Format Study

Although some recipe-writing rules are considered universal, such as listing the ingredients in the order in which they are used, even such basics are open to discussion.

A qualitative research study on recipe format, conducted in November/December 1992 for the Test Kitchens of the National Live Stock and Meat Board (now called the National Cattlemen's Beef Association) by Gatten & Company, produced results that challenge conventional wisdom. Although we do not endorse all of the results in our writing guidelines, they do provide interesting food for thought.

Eight focus groups in four cities across the country produced several general findings, including the observation that consumers lack confidence in their ability to cook. This lack of confidence limits their ability to make decisions regarding alternatives and substitutions, so all or most of the decision making should be taken out of recipe preparation. For example, if a recipe calls for a medium onion, consumers want to know that a medium onion is about 3 inches in diameter.



The study showed the following consumer preferences.

Format/Recipe Style

- **Straightforward recipe name.** Consumers prefer names that clearly describe the finished dish rather than names that are fun and creative.
- **Ingredient breakout style.** The ingredient list is grouped according to recipe parts, such as filling, topping, sauce. The recipe is easier to read, is perceived as shorter and simpler, and shows the dish as a whole.
- **Numbered or bulleted preparation steps.** The recipe is easier to follow and appears simpler.
- **Easy-to-read large print with adequate spacing.** When a recipe is easy to read, it appears simpler and easier to prepare.
- **Photograph of finished dish.** Consumers have difficulty visualizing a recipe, so a photograph helps.

Ingredient Listing

- **Meat listed as first ingredient.** Because meat (or fish, seafood, or poultry) is usually the main component and most expensive ingredient, it is an important factor in meal planning and grocery shopping.
- **All ingredients listed before the method.** The ingredient list provides consumers with a quick, easy-to-read pantry checklist and/or shopping list.
- **Readily available ingredients and/or ingredient substitutions.** The use of available ingredients encourages consumers to try a recipe. Substitution information decreases confusion and guesswork, thus ensuring consumer confidence in cooking and offering an opportunity to adapt the recipe to personal tastes.
- **Multiple measures for ingredients.** Giving more than one way to measure an ingredient (such as 1 small apple, about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped) decreases guesswork, thus ensuring confidence. It also provides clarification.



- **Avoidance of abbreviated measurements.** Spelling out units of measurement prevents confusion, improves readability, and encourages accuracy in measuring.
- **Elimination of "divided" for multiple-use ingredients and "each" for repeat measurements of different ingredients.** This decreases confusion, encourages accuracy, and helps prevent errors. The preferred form is to list each ingredient measurement separately.

Preparation Directions

- **Concise, but sufficiently detailed directions.** A recipe should appear simple and easy to prepare. It should not confuse the reader, require guesswork, or offer inadequate guidance. Consumers want to be told what *not* to do, as well as what to do.
- **Equipment specification.** Specifying the exact equipment decreases the need for guesswork and helps to ensure consumer confidence.
- **Preheating directions.** Giving directions provides clarification and helps to prevent consumer frustration.

Recipe Features

- **Preparation time, cooking time, and/or marinating time specified at top of recipe.** This information helps consumers decide whether to make the recipe and permits better planning of meal preparation.
- **Nutrition information (particularly calories, cholesterol, fat, and sodium).** There is an increased interest in this type of information among consumers.
- **Number of servings per recipe and size of each serving.** This information permits better meal planning.



T I P S F R O M T H E E X P E R T S

Greg Patent, USA

Author of *New Cooking from the Old West* and other books

The [recipe] headnote is like a beautifully wrapped gift—attractive and enticing, creating a sense of anticipation. A headnote can evoke a mood, a scene, a taste, or even a smell. It doesn't have to be long-winded, but it ought to stimulate the imagination and the taste buds. A headnote should have the power to transform. Armchair cooks know the effects of well-written headnotes. They transport the reader to places all over the world.

Personal Style

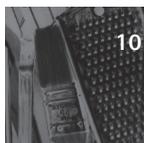
Although we can provide some do's and don'ts for writing recipes, what we can't do is provide a universal formula that works in every case for every recipe. Nor would we want to. The charm of cookbooks and other recipe collections is the unique voice that comes through in each.

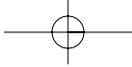
As Judith Jones, one of the country's most respected cookbook editors, told us when we prepared the first edition of this book, "I hope you're going to say to write recipes with some real feeling, not with a formula. There should be real writing—the readers should know there's a person there. You should observe what you're doing [as you prepare the dish], then let the readers know you've cooked it and you've been there. Tell them how the food is supposed to look and what is going to happen."

Harvey Steiman, cookbook author, radio show host, and magazine editor, agrees. "One of my pet peeves is recipes that lapse into instruction-ese," he says. "Except for model airplane builders, who enjoys following tedious instructions?"

The convoluted sentence structure and lack of articles that constitute what is often referred to as "recipe shorthand" put a barrier between the writer and the cook, he argues. Such stilted language, Steiman says, "implies that recipes are just a set of instructions instead of a creative process."

Recipes are indeed a creative process, for both the writer and the





user. Many people read recipes and cookbooks for enjoyment, so writing style is almost as important as cooking reliability. Although certain basic information should be included in every recipe, the way you word this information can reflect your personal style and entice the reader. The headnotes on recipes provide an especially good place for the author's voice to shine through.

