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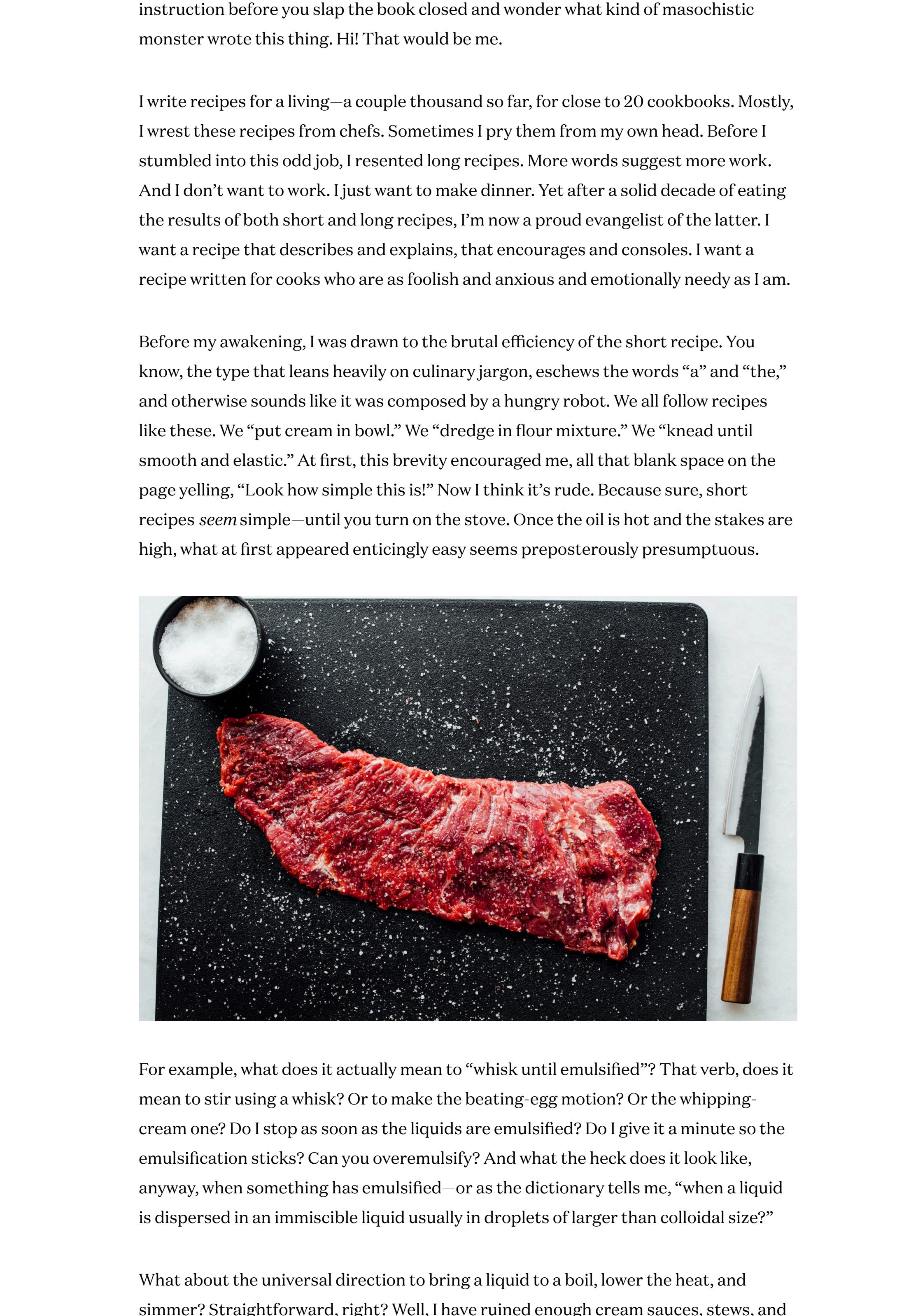
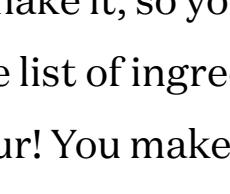
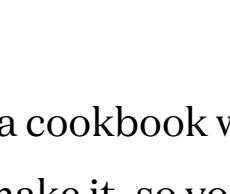
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MARCH 26, 2019

The Case for Very Long Recipes

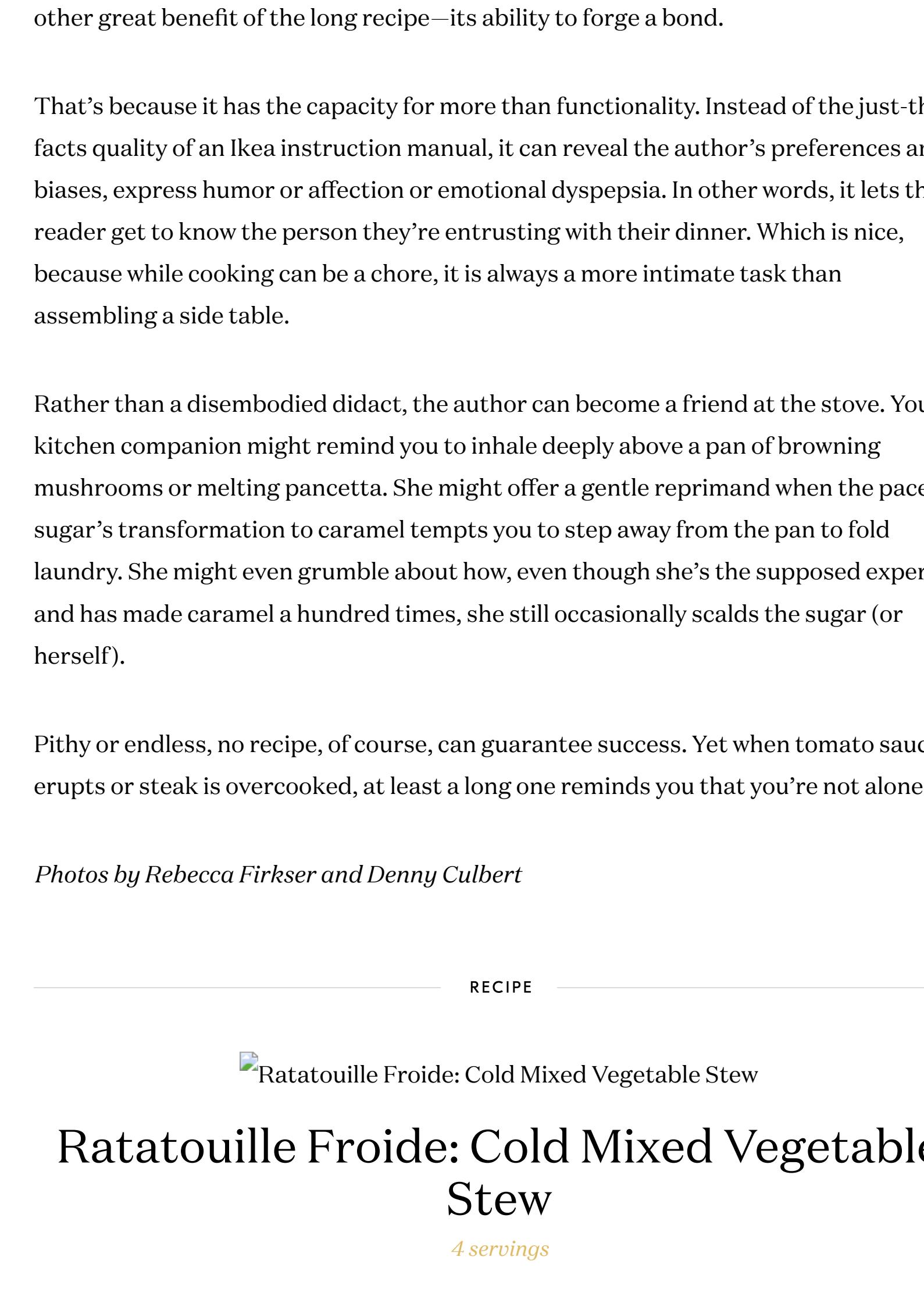
By JJ GOODE

Short recipes *seem* simple—until you turn on the stove.

You're flipping through a cookbook when you alight on a particularly tempting dish. You just *have* to make it, so you glance at the recipe. Suddenly, indigestion sets in. The list of ingredients is interminable; the method stretches to three pages—no, four! You make it through just two dense paragraphs of instruction before you slap the book closed and wonder what kind of masochistic monster wrote this thing. Hi! That would be me.

I write recipes for a living—a couple thousand so far, for close to 20 cookbooks. Mostly, I wrest these recipes from chefs. Sometimes I pry them from my own head. Before I stumbled into this odd job, I resented long recipes. More words suggest more work. And I don't want to work. I just want to make dinner. Yet after a solid decade of eating the results of both short and long recipes, I'm now a proud evangelist of the latter. I want a recipe that describes and explains, that encourages and consoles. I want a recipe written for cooks who are as foolish and anxious and emotionally needy as I am.

Before my awakening, I was drawn to the brutal efficiency of the short recipe. You know, the type that leans heavily on culinary jargon, eschews the words “a” and “the,” and otherwise sounds like it was composed by a hungry robot. We all follow recipes like these. We “put cream in bowl.” We “dredge in flour mixture.” We “knead until smooth and elastic.” At first, this brevity encouraged me, all that blank space on the page yelling, “Look how simple this is!” Now I think it’s rude. Because sure, short recipes *seem* simple—until you turn on the stove. Once the oil is hot and the stakes are high, what at first appeared enticingly easy seems preposterously presumptuous.

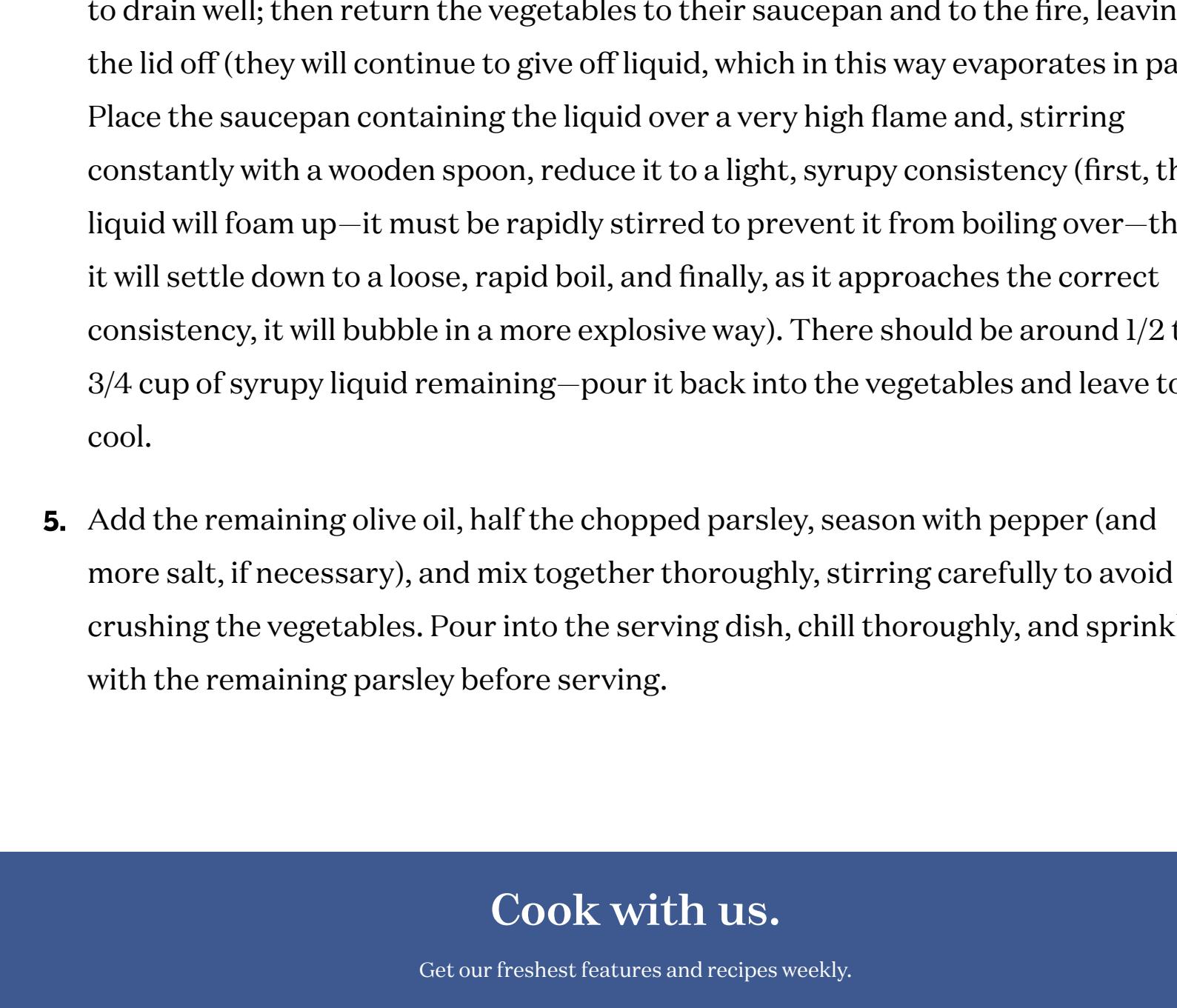
For example, what does it actually mean to “whisk until emulsified”? That verb, does it mean to stir using a whisk? Or to make the beating-egg motion? Or the whipping-cream one? Do I stop as soon as the liquids are emulsified? Do I give it a minute so the emulsification sticks? Can you overemulsify? And what the heck does it look like, anyway, when something has emulsified—or as the dictionary tells me, “when a liquid is dispersed in an immiscible liquid usually in droplets of larger than colloidal size?”

What about the universal direction to bring a liquid to a boil, lower the heat, and simmer? Straightforward, right? Well, I have ruined enough cream sauces, stews, and pots of lentils to know that the concept of a simmer deserves qualification: Is it bare, gentle, moderate, or so vigorous it verges on a boil? After all, the degree of that simmer will determine how fast the solid ingredients in the liquid will cook and whether the liquid will become a rich, tasty sauce—or be reduced to a scorched sludge.

Even an instruction as simple as “sauté until golden” makes me panicky, as I parse the distinction between golden at the edges, fully golden, and golden brown and confront the fact that I’ve never really understood what “sauté” means. In other words, by design, short recipes exclude information, abandoning home cooks to their common sense. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t have much of that.

The good news is that people have already charted this territory. Cookbook writers of yore have identified the factors that give home cooks a reasonable chance of replicating the dish in question. Like waves crashing against rocks, their toil has given shape to recipes. You know the drill. Ingredients are listed, their preparation described: Onions are 1 or 2, large or small, red or yellow, diced or sliced. Processes are stipulated: Heat such-and-such fat in such-and-such pan over such-and-such heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring sometimes, until something happens, about some minutes. Writing a decent recipe just requires filling in the blanks.

But writing a truly useful recipe—one that specifies whenever precision is vital but also encourages flexibility to account for the vicissitudes of cooking—requires room to run. It needs space to tell you, for instance, that an onion shouldn’t be merely “thinly sliced” but that the slices should be half-moons, that the onion should be cut with or against the grain, and whether achieving the requisite thinness requires an estimate or a ruler. It needs space to explain that the ideal pot for your French onion soup is one in which those slices fit in, say, two or so layers, instead of leaving readers to wonder if their “medium pot” is medium enough. It needs space to guide you past pitfalls like premature browning and hold your hand through the elusive determination of whether the onions are sufficiently cooked or whether a few more minutes would level-up the dish. For the inept cook, details like these can prevent everything from second-degree burns to grease fires to, nearly as bad, disappointment.

Converting the artistry and instinct of cooking into efficient exposition—I’m basically a professional philistine, turning every Picasso into a paint-by-number—begins with diligent investigation. So when I begin the task, I channel Robert Mueller. I don’t just want to know whether a chef dices onions, I want to know how he trims the onions, which series of cuts he uses to produce what precise dimensions of onion cubes, where he bought the onion, where he got the money, and whether he has ever had any contact with WikiLeaks. No information seems too obvious to convey to my cohort of cooks. If it were up to me, each one would start from the top: “First, extract yourself from your iOS device, then, using your legs, transport yourself to the stove.”

Fortunately, it isn’t up to me. At least, not entirely. I have editors, who patiently remind me, and chef-collaborators, who indicate with scowls, that a recipe need not solve every challenge a cook might encounter—that the oven he set to 450°F actually runs 50 degrees cooler or that the iPhone-size jalapeño he bought at Publix rings in at approximately four Scoville Units. And anyway, some space must be spared for the other great benefit of the long recipe—it’s ability to forge a bond.

That’s because it has the capacity for more than functionality. Instead of the just-the-facts quality of an Ikea instruction manual, it can reveal the author’s preferences and biases, express humor or affection or emotional dyspepsia. In other words, it lets the reader get to know the person they’re entrusting with their dinner. Which is nice, because while cooking can be a chore, it is always a more intimate task than assembling a side table.

Rather than a disembodied didact, the author can become a friend at the stove. Your kitchen companion might remind you to inhale deeply above a pan of browning mushrooms or melting pancetta. She might offer a gentle reprimand when the pace of sugar’s transformation to caramel tempts to step away from the pan to fold laundry. She might even grumble about how, even though she’s the supposed expert and has made caramel a hundred times, she still occasionally scalds the sugar (or herself).

Pithy or endless, no recipe, of course, can guarantee success. Yet when tomato sauce erupts or steak is overcooked, at least a long one reminds you that you’re not alone.

Photos by Rebecca Firkser and Denny Culbert

RECIPE

Ratatouille Froidé: Cold Mixed Vegetable Stew

4 servings

This recipe comes from *The French Menu Cookbook* by the late, legendary Richard Olney. He wrote cookbooks that exalted simple home cooking, in the same tradition as Elizabeth David, and was a master practitioner of the long recipe. I like so many things about this one—for a dish that, in general, doesn’t really move me.

I like how he puts the prep instructions in the method, where they can be sufficiently detailed, rather than confining them to the ingredient list, where they can’t be. I like how he advises you to start cooking the onions before prepping the other ingredients (though I can’t forgive his omission of the ideal pot size), which is a practical suggestion that few short recipes have the space to provide. And in particular, I like this little master class on how to help normal people succeed at reducing a liquid: “If first, the liquid will foam up—it must be rapidly stirred to prevent it from boiling over—then it will settle down to a loose, rapid boil, and finally, as it approaches the correct consistency, it will bubble in a more explosive way. There should be around 1/2 to 3/4 cup of syrupy liquid remaining....”

Not only can you be sure that these detailed instructions will help you succeed in making the dish if you decide to attempt it, but his obvious care in their construction might even convince even a ratatouille skeptic to get cooking in the first place.

1. Peel the onions and cut each in quarters or eighths, depending on their size. Put them to cook gently in 1/3 cup of the olive oil while preparing the other vegetables. Stir from time to time and do not let them brown.

2. Peel and seed the tomatoes and cut each half into 6 or 8 pieces. Cut the peppers in 2 lengthwise, discard the stems and all the seeds and cut them into pieces 3/4 to 1 inch square; wipe the eggplant and zucchini clean with damp paper towels and cut off the tip ends of both. Cut the eggplant into 3/4-inch cubes without peeling, and cut the zucchini crosswise into 1/2- to 1-inch sections, depending on its thickness. Smash the garlic cloves with the blade of a knife, discard the hulls, and chop the garlic.

3. When the onions are yellowed and soft from cooking, add the peppers, the eggplant pieces, the garlic, salt, and cayenne. Continue to cook gently for 10 minutes or so, stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon, then add the tomatoes, the zucchini (if desired, the zucchini may be added halfway through the cooking process, for it cooks very rapidly, and if delayed it remains firmer), thyme, and the parsley and bay-leaf bouquet. At this point, one may turn up the flame until the boil is reached, easing a wooden spoon to the bottom of the cooking pot and stirring from time to time to prevent sticking. Leave to cook over a tiny flame, at a bare simmer, with the lid ajar, for 2 hours.

4. Place a colander or sieve over another saucepan, pour in the vegetables and allow to drain well; then return the vegetables to their saucepan and to the fire, leaving the lid off (they will continue to give off liquid, which in this way evaporates in part). Place the saucepan containing the liquid over a very high flame and, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, reduce it to a light, syrupy consistency (first, the liquid will foam up—it must be rapidly stirred to prevent it from boiling over—then it will settle down to a loose, rapid boil, and finally, as it approaches the correct consistency, it will bubble in a more explosive way). There should be around 1/2 to 3/4 cup of syrupy liquid remaining—pour it back into the vegetables and leave to cool.

5. Add the remaining olive oil, half the chopped parsley, season with pepper (and more salt, if necessary), and mix together thoroughly, stirring carefully to avoid crushing the vegetables. Pour into the serving dish, chill thoroughly, and sprinkle with the remaining parsley before serving.

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JJ GOODE

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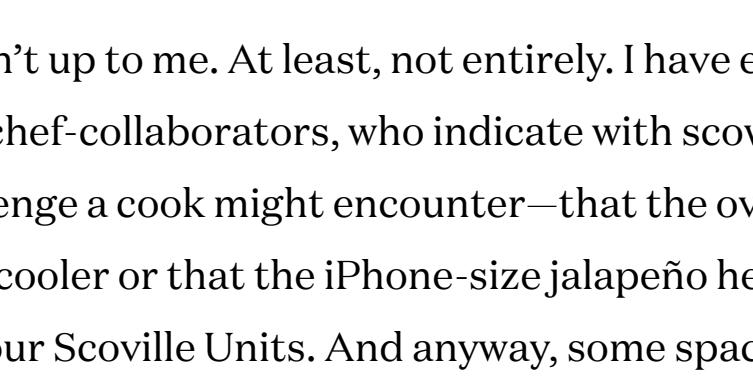


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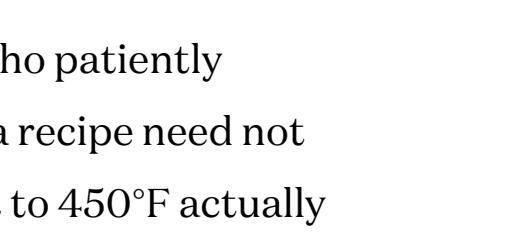


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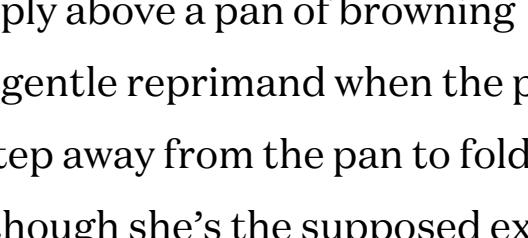
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