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Are Cookbooks Obsolete?

by JULIA MOSKIN • NOV. 8, 2011

The Professional Chef app was released last month by the Culinary Institute of America. [More Photos »](#)

FOR many cooks, the pleasure of Thanksgiving is in the planning. In early November, the recipe folders come out, along with dreams of learning to perfect a lattice pie crust, and the cookbooks covered with splatters and sticky notes that evoke holidays past.

Fast-forward two weeks, to the sweaty hours when the sticky notes have curled up and blown away, the cookbooks are taking up all the counter space, and the illustrations for cooking a turkey in “Joy of Cooking” are revealed to be no more informative than they were in 1951.

If the people developing cooking apps for tablets have their way, that kind of scene will soon be a relic. And so will the whole notion of recipes that exist only as strings of words. Many early cooking apps were unsatisfying: slow, limited, less than intuitive and confined to tiny phone screens. Even avid cooks showed little interest in actually cooking from them.

But with the boom in tablet technology, recipes have begun to travel with their users from home to the office to the market and, most important, into the kitchen. With features like embedded links, built-in timers, infographics and voice prompts, the richness of some new apps — like Baking With Dorie, from the baking expert Dorie Greenspan; Jamie Oliver’s 20-Minute Meals; and Professional Chef, the vast app released last month by the Culinary Institute of America — hint that books as kitchen tools are on the way out.

“I never thought I would say this, but I don’t go anywhere without my iPad,” said Kristin Young, a collector of cookbooks in Santa Barbara, Calif., who said that even her favorite volumes are gathering dust. “If it’s not on my tablet, it’s just not useful anymore.”

The interface of a tablet offers possibilities to the cook that would be impossible with a laptop, let alone a book. Swiping, tapping and zooming through information presented in multimedia is a good match for the experience of cooking, which involves all the senses and the brain, as well. And when those faculties fail, as often happens in high-stress kitchen scenarios like Thanksgiving, apps can come to the rescue with features like technique videos, embedded glossaries and social media links.

Bob Huntley wrestled with the limitations of the written recipe before founding his Houston-based software company called CulinApp. In the 1990s, Mr. Huntley had little time for cooking; he was busy building the network for Doom, the first international online gaming network. But after he sold that business and retired to a ranch outside the small town of Mason, Tex., with his pet longhorns and a T1 data line that Verizon built just for him, he tried teaching himself to cook from cookbooks and online recipes. It didn’t work.

“I struggled with getting the whole recipe downloaded into my head,” he said.

“I would read the whole thing through, but pieces kept falling off — I needed a buffer,” he said, using a term for large caches of downloaded data that make a program run smoothly. “I kept having to go back to the page, and the interface was so difficult to manage.”

Mr. Huntley was becoming restless in retirement around the time Apple’s iPad was coming on the market. Accustomed to inventing alternate realities, he developed ways of presenting recipes on a screen. These strategies can be disorienting at first, but make enormous sense. CulinApp’s first product was Baking With Dorie (\$7.99), the lively app from Ms. Greenspan, which was released this year.

Users can choose from four different ways of seeing each recipe. For novice cooks, a step-by-step view presents each recipe step in full screen, with a video of Ms. Greenspan doing what the text says (creaming butter and sugar together, for example, for her All-in-One Holiday Bundt Cake). Mr. Huntley also developed CulinView, a nonverbal way for a more confident cook to follow a recipe. After ingredients are measured and the oven heated, the rest of the process is shown in a flow chart, illustrated with bright images of mixers, whisks, ovens and ingredients. With arrows and color-coding, it sketches out the process for the more confident cook who already knows how to cream butter and sugar, say, but needs to be reminded what to do with the chopped apple and grated fresh ginger. SpinView puts the whole recipe on one page, with the option of scrolling through the steps. Finally, for the traditionalists, there is the Cookbook view, formatted in the old-fashioned way.

Mr. Huntley is not the only designer thinking about new ways to represent recipes in visual form.

(Page 2 of 2)

“We are completely breaking these texts down to their data-rich components,” said Mark Douglas, a partner in Culinate, a food technology company in Portland, Ore., that produces the app for “How to Cook Everything” by Mark Bittman, the New York Times writer. “Then, we put them back together to make an app that feels the same, but better.”

Last year, Caz Hildebrand, a cookbook designer, and Jacob Kenedy, a chef, published a cookbook that didn’t look anything like a modern example of the genre. Their book, “The Geometry of Pasta,” illustrated entirely in crisp black and white, with all pasta shapes drawn true to size, met Ms. Hildebrand’s goal of designing a visually informative cookbook without any photographs. “People know what a bowl of pasta looks like, or a lump of Parmesan, or they can imagine it,” she said. “I wanted to do something new and enticing.” The recipes she is designing for the book’s app will add motion to the mix, with animated line drawings. Pasta butterflies flutter into boiling water, the word “Parmesan” is itself grated into a bowl, and the word “prosciutto” is sliced into slivers.

Many developers say that recipe animation, either employing stop-frame photography, line drawings or infographics, is the future of digital cooking instruction. Video, on the other hand, while it can be valuable for bringing a personality into the kitchen, has several drawbacks. It is expensive to produce, and eats up precious memory. Because there is so much video in Baking With Dorie, its mere 24 recipes pushed the app to the maximum data size allowed by Apple in the iTunes store. In contrast, the app for “How to Cook Everything,” illustrated only with line drawings, holds 2,000 recipes.

Cookbooks have long offered their own kind of enriched content, in the form of scribbles left in the margins by cooks who found they liked a little extra cinnamon, or a higher oven temperature. As it turns out, there’s an app for that, too.

Since the 1970s, arriving students at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., have been issued essential tools of the profession: chef’s whites, a set of knives and several heavy cookbooks. As of next June, they will also need a tablet loaded with the institution’s new app, The Professional Chef, a complete digital edition of the basic textbook the institute has published since 1962. In addition to reference materials and video, the app brings in networking ability and social media.

Each student user is assigned a virtual notebook, used for jotting notes and questions. (Currently, this function is served by food-stained index cards on which the students rewrite each recipe.) Within the app, class members are linked together through the institute’s wireless network and can read one another’s notebooks — as can their instructor. The goal is for students and faculty members to use the app as a

substantive, interactive, 24/7 teaching tool, said Brad Barnes, the school's head of culinary education.

Nonstudents who buy the app can link to other users, too. (At \$49.99, it is by far the most expensive cooking app in the iTunes store; it has nonetheless stayed in the top 10 in its category since it went on sale last month.)

Nick Ahrens, a fresh-faced recent graduate who helped develop the app, was using it on the school's campus last week to practice vegetable cuts, zooming in to compare his julienne carrots to the ones on the screen. Behind him, a current student, Alexis Lockwood, was feeding a wide ribbon of pasta dough through a roller, adroitly using one hand to hold it and the other to back up the video on her iPad, until the pasta maker's handle fell off.

"There's only so much you can get from process shots," Mr. Ahrens said smoothly, referring to the step-by-step photography that, in a book, provides the most detailed representation possible of a recipe. "You can't hear the onions sizzling in the pan, or how to move your knife through a salmon fillet, or see how to put your pasta machine back together in a book."

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