

= Modern Cookery for Private Families =

Modern Cookery for Private Families is an English cookery book by Eliza Acton (1799 ? 1859) . It was first published by Longmans in 1845 , and was a best @-@ seller , running through 13 editions by 1853 , though its sales were later eclipsed by Mrs Beeton . On the strength of the book , Delia Smith called Acton " the best writer of recipes in the English language " , and in the same vein Elizabeth David called Modern Cookery " the greatest cookery book in our language " .

It was one of the first cookery books to provide lists of ingredients , exact quantities , and cooking times , and to include Eastern recipes for chutneys . Its first edition was the first book to refer to Christmas pudding .

Acton 's recipes and writing style have been admired by cooks including Elizabeth David , Delia Smith and Jane Grigson ; Clarissa Dickson Wright praises her writing but criticises her increasing conformity to Victorian dullness .

= = Book = =

The book was the result of several years of research , prompted by Longman , who had published Acton 's Poems . Many of the recipes came from her friends . Modern Cookery quickly became a bestselling work , appearing in several editions and remaining a standard cookery book throughout the rest of the century . The book was immensely influential , establishing the format for modern cookery book writing , by listing the exact ingredients required for each recipe , the time needed , and potential problems that might arise . This was a major departure from previous cookbooks , which were less precise .

The book was one of the first to list recipes for Eastern " chatneys " , both fresh , like her " Mauritian shrimp chatney " with lemon and oil , and preserved , like her " Bengal chatney " with raisins , crab apples , garlic , and ginger . The first known mention of Christmas pudding , too , is in the first edition of 1845 ; the dish had earlier been known simply as plum pudding . Her recipe for mincemeat (as in mince pies) still contained meat ? she suggests ox tongue or beef sirloin ? which she combined with lemons " boiled quite tender and chopped up entirely with the exception of the pips " .

The book remained in print for over 50 years through most of the Victorian era , but it is Mrs Beeton 's book , first published in 1861 , which is now remembered from that period .

The title varied somewhat over the years ; the 1845 edition 's full title was

Modern Cookery , In All Its Branches : Reduced to a System of Easy Practice , for the Use of Private Families . In a Series of Practical Receipts , Which Have Been Strictly Tested , And are Given with the Most Minute exactness .

By 1860 , the title had become

Modern Cookery , For Private Families , Reduced to a System of Easy Practice , In a Series of Carefully Tested Receipts , In Which the Principles of Baron Liebig and Other Eminent Writers Have Been as Much as Possible Applied and Explained .

= = = Contents = = =

The following list refers to the 1860 edition .

= = = Approach = = =

Acton 's book is divided into chapters with brief , often single word titles such as " Fish " . In a marked departure from eighteenth century English cookery books like Hannah Glasse 's The Art of Cookery , these are written as connected wholes . The chapter on fish begins with an essay on how to choose fish for freshness ; there follows some advice on how to bake fish , and on the kinds of fat best used for frying fish . Suitable pans are illustrated . The recipes follow ; these too are written as stories rather than simply as instructions . Where appropriate , recipes end with a list of ingredients ,

as well as the cooking time , in marked change from eighteenth century practice . Recipes are grouped , in the case of fish by species , and they form a connected story . Acton adds comments where she sees fit , indicating anything from when the food is in season to where a recipe came from , and how much she likes it . For example , she begins her account of the John Dory with a recipe which is more of an introductory essay than a set of instructions , though given the simplicity of the recipe , it says all that a cook would need to know on the matter :

TO BOIL A JOHN DORY .

[In best season from Michaelmas to Christmas , but good all the year]

The John Dory , though of uninviting appearance , is considered by some persons as the most delicious fish that appears at table ; in the general estimation , however , it ranks next to the turbot , but it is far less abundant in our waters , and is not commonly to be procured of sufficient size for a handsome dish , except in some few parts of our coast which are celebrated for it . It may easily be known by its yellow gray colour , its one large dark spot on either side , the long filaments on the back , a general thickness of form , and its very ugly head . It is dressed in the same manner , and served usually with the same sauces as a turbot , but requires less time to boil it . The fins should be cut off before it is cooked .

Acton follows this with an actual recipe , again characteristically simple , and with one of her brief parenthetical asides , at once modestly claiming ownership and praising the dish :

SMALL JOHN DORIES BAKED .

(Author 's Receipt ? good .)

We have found these fish when they were too small to be worth cooking in the usual way , excellent when quite simply baked in the following manner , the flesh being remarkably sweet and tender , much more so than it becomes by frying or broiling . After they have been cleaned , dry them in a cloth , season the insides slightly with fine salt , dredge a little flour on the fish , and stick a few very small bits of butter on them , but only just sufficient to prevent their becoming dry in the oven ; lay them singly on a flat dish , and bake them very gently from fourteen to sixteen minutes . Serve them with the same sauce as baked soles .

When extremely fresh , as it usually is in the markets of the coast , fish thus simply dressed au four is preferable to that more elaborately prepared by adding various condiments to it after it is placed in a deep dish , and covering it with a thick layer of bread crumbs , moistened with clarified butter .

The appearance of the John Dories is improved by taking off the heads , and cutting away not only the fins but the filaments of the back .

= = = Illustrations = = =

The book was from the first edition onwards illustrated with a large number of small woodcuts . Some show cookware , like the pot used to serve Bouillon or the " Mackerel Kettle " , a deep oval saucepan with a lid , used to cook fish ; some illustrate produce as the housekeeper would see it in the market , like the engravings of poultry and fish ? educating the reader in the recognition of gurnard , sea bream , plaice , grey mullet , garfish , and sand @-@ eel ; others show finished dishes , like the Lady 's Tourte or a moulded jelly , " tastefully garnished with preserved , or with fresh fruit . "

= = Reception = =

Delia Smith called Acton " the best writer of recipes in the English language " . Elizabeth David similarly called *Modern Cookery* " the greatest cookery book in our language " . Bee Wilson , writing in *The Telegraph* , agrees that it is " the greatest British cookbook of all time " , adding that Acton deserves to be a household name :

Elizabeth David , asking why " this peerless writer " was eclipsed by " imitators so limited in experience , and in capacity of expression so inferior ? " She answers her own question with the suggestion that Acton , born in 1799 , was " in taste and in spirit , a child of the eighteenth century . " David notes that the year after *Modern Cookery* was first published , Bird 's Custard Powder was

launched : " What we know as modern cookery , and it had little to do with Eliza Acton 's version , was on its way . " And she points out that manuals like Mrs Beeton 's , which in later editions were edited and re-written by other hands , existed to allow cooks to look up recipes , rather than to read cookery books . She concludes that " A book such as Miss Acton 's , written as a coherent whole , is essentially one to be read , as it is written , with intelligence and understanding and application . "

She dispenses her sly wit sparingly , like truffles . ' The Publisher 's Pudding ' , we are told , ' can scarcely be made too rich ' (it is studded with Jordan almonds and muscatel raisins) in contrast to ' The Poor Author 's Pudding ' , a modest bread-and-butter and butter affair .

Bee Wilson argues that the greatness of the book comes from " Acton 's very British sensibility . She calls a spade a spade , noting that some of the coffee served on the newfangled railway lines was a ' commercial disgrace ' . " Wilson adds that Acton has both honesty and reticence : she does not " gush " when she really likes something , " but puts it in brackets , as if holding her emotions in . ' Lemon Dumplings (Light and Good) ' , for example . Or ' Mushrooms Au Beurre (Delicious) ' ... that makes her Eliza Acton (The Best) . "

Elizabeth Ray , editor of *The Best of Eliza Acton* ? a selection of recipes from *Modern Cookery* with an introduction by Elizabeth David , notes that Acton began her writing career with poetry , only to be told by her publishers that a cookery book would be better , and that " an unmistakable literary talent appears even in her receipts , in the style itself , and in the engaging titles she bestows on some of her dishes " , which include " The Elegant Economist 's Pudding " as well as those of publishers and authors .

Clarissa Dickson Wright , in her *A History of English Food* , calls Acton " the best cookery writer of the period " , noting that she paid " considerable attention " to curry in the book . Dickson Wright comments that Acton knew about " her countrymen " 's lack of understanding of curry and " lamented ' the great superiority of the oriental curries over those generally prepared in England ' " . She further notes that Acton suggested practical improvements , such as grating coconut into the gravy , and using tamarind , acid apples and cucumber to simulate the " piquancy you get with bitter gourds , mango , and so on " , which she comments was certainly better than lazily adding lemon juice , but still nothing like " anything prepared by my grandmother 's Indian cook . "

Dickson Wright also comments on the early signs in *Modern Cookery* of what she considers the increasing dullness of Victorian cookery . Although she finds Acton " in most respects an admirable cookery writer " , she observes that between the first and the third editions Acton has gone from using garlic sparingly to avoiding it entirely . She is equally scathing about Acton 's " Burlington Whimsey " which she calls " basically a dish of brawn " ; she argues that the Victorians were too fond of it , and that Acton 's recipe is " the epitome of dull food dressed up to look whimsical . "

Sue Dyson and Roger McShane , reviewing the book on FoodTourist , call it the " very antithesis " of the elaborate haute cuisine of Marie-Antoine Carême , and note that it was one of the first cookery books to provide quantities , timings , and lists of ingredients . They find the recipe for Mulligatawny soup " wonderful " , the oyster sausages " very tasty " , and the " Potato Boulettes " like a French equivalent of gnocchi . But " the section that really caught our interest " was puddings and desserts . They conclude that " this is an inspirational book with an Aladdin 's Cave of recipes and wonderful , timeless writing " and an " absolutely essential part of any serious cookbook collection . "

Kathryn Hughes , writing in *The Guardian* , observes that Acton has been set up as " the saint to Mrs Beeton 's sinner " , " an Austenish heroine : a stylish Regency spinster , a poet rather than a journalist , a committed cookery writer rather than an opportunistic hack . " She notes that Elizabeth David created this image , supported by Jane Grigson , and Delia Smith : " in short , anyone who wants to be in the kitchen cool gang knows that the name to drop is Acton 's . " She agrees that Mrs Beeton " pinched " Acton 's recipes , along with those of other authors , because they were " rather good " . She notes the " elegant tilt of Acton 's writing " and its " sly humour " , as well as the accuracy of the recipes , very unlike eighteenth-century vagueness , and calls Acton " an admirable pioneer " .

Natalie Whittle , writing in the *Financial Times* in 2011 , describes how recipes such as " Water

Souchy " (a clear fish soup) from Modern Cookery and other books of the period are being revived at English restaurants .

Simon Hopkinson , writing in The Independent in 2000 , praises Acton 's Christmas pudding : " It was to the cookery writing of the legendary Eliza Acton where Joyce Molyneux [of the Carved Angel] went to find her perfect pudding recipe . And , as far as I remember , the particular reason why she liked the result of Acton 's recipe above all others was because it had this unusual lightness to it , yet also seemed to offer up the required richness too . "

The Tonbridge Historical Society note that " by 1827 Eliza was living in Tonbridge at No. 1 Bordyke ... Not surprisingly there are many references to Kent and some to Tonbridge in Eliza 's recipes . There is ' Kentish ' sausage meat , suet pudding and cherry jam , ' Tonbridge ' brawn , and ? Bordyke ? Veal cake , preserved ham and bread . "

= = Editions = =

The book appeared in the following editions during the Victorian era .