

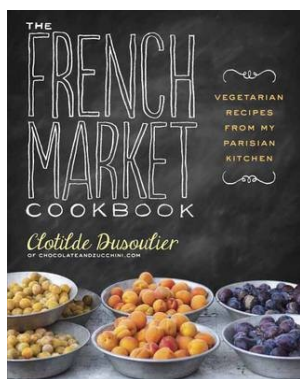
Just how long should a recipe be?

JUNE 25, 2013 BY SUSIE | 3 COMMENTS | LEAVE COMMENT

For some years I've been an advocate of more explicit recipes - you know, recipes that tell you not just time and temperature ("3-5 minutes over a medium flame"), but what to look, listen, smell, and taste for - the telltale blistering of the skin, the moment when the spice releases its aromatic oils, the squeaking sound the dough makes when it's absorbed just enough liquid.

But there are a lot of other factors involved in recipe design and construction. The pressure to condense is pretty clear: designers need to meet a particular page count, marketing and sales wants a nice-looking, uncrowded format, and everybody wants there to be room for a picture. The pressure to expand comes from authors and editorial: an urge to explain and foolproof, to charm in the headnotes and to enlighten in the sidebars.

What are some of the tricks publishers use to save space? Here's a few:



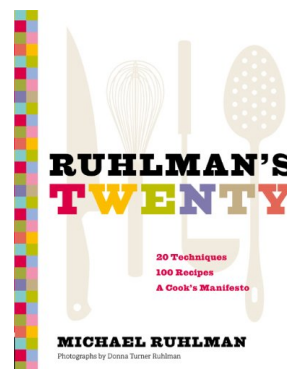
Nested recipes: Open up Clotilde Dusoulier's *The French Market Cookbook* to the recipe for "Strawberry Tartlets with Breton Shortbread Crust" and you'll see 4 ingredients. Easy, right? But 2 of them - "Lemon Pastry Cream" and "Breton Shortbread Tart Dough" are separate recipes you'll need to go elsewhere in the book for. Is it worth it to enjoy the spacious 2-page layout here, with the picture on one side and a brief recipe on the other, but have to hunt through the book to get the other steps? Or would you rather have a less compact but possibly more practical 4-page spread? [To be fair, most of the recipes in this book don't make use of nesting - I just happened to open up to this one.]

Process photos. In some books, like Ruhlman's *Twenty* and *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* (which otherwise have little in common), step-by-step photos strike a compromise, letting each picture shoulder some of the explanatory burden and reducing the word count (though maybe not by as much as 1000 words a picture!)

Narrative format or action format. "Standard format" recipes are the ones we all know: ingredients list, followed by instructions. But narrative format and action format save space by calling out the ingredients *within the text*. (In action format, the ingredients are called out with bullet points after the first part of the sentence, as in "In a large bowl, toss together: ..." In narrative format, the ingredients might be called out in the middle of the sentence - it's just a difference in syntax.) The best-known example is probably *The Joy of Cooking*.

Many of these issues disappear in e-cookbooks and recipe apps, thanks to the magic of hyperlinking. Yet paper still gives you physical benefits in the very physical act of cooking.

Personally, I like best of all a two or three-page recipe with a picture, lots of sensory cues, and maybe an anecdote in the headnote or a sidebar with tips. I don't mind turning the page back and forth to check the ingredients. I get a little impatient with cutesy digressions within the recipe ("I toss the scraps to my adorable poodle, Luzy LeStrade, and he goes *wild* over them!") but I generally like catching glimpses of the author's personality in the language.



Do you prefer your recipes condensed and telegraphic? Or do you like them spelled out? Do you have a subconscious recipe page-limit beyond which you will not go? (I think mine's 4.) Or are you suspicious of short recipes? I'm curious to know whether there's a consensus on what's the ideal length of recipe, or whether it's varies widely and subjectively...

CATEGORY: SHELF LIFE WITH SUSIE

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3 Comments

geoff@kupesoftware.com on June 26, 2013

Love this post. I too have often wondered what other's might think of the written recipe. I know, I love a good picture. That makes or breaks it for me really. How shallow. I think for me 4 pages would be the limit as well, but I'm not sure if everyone might feel that way.

Bec

BethNH on June 26, 2013

I don't really care for long recipes. I prefer the ingredients and recipe to be on the same page as much as possible because I hate flipping back and forth. A two page spread is ideal.

I don't want the directions to be wordy. Simple. Numbered or bulleted with as few words as possible.

TrishaCP on June 27, 2013

I absolutely loathe "nested" recipes- particularly when page numbers aren't cited. (I see a lack of page numbers a lot in older books- I am indexing one right now and it is driving me up the wall!) I can understand why it is done, but as more cookbooks are available as e-books- it is even more unwieldy to go back and forth to see what you need.



Seen anything interesting? Let us know & we'll share it!