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Writing the Recipe

By Pamela White

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Writing the Recipe
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It sounds simple. Sell your family recipes for money. Gather up your community's traditional dishes and submit them to magazines. List meals you make for guests and slap together a cookbook. Right?

Wrong.

Writing down recipes is an art, and one that keeps reinventing itself.

I have a wonderful cookbook – "The Home Queen Cookbook" – that is packed with recipes submitted by the wives of governor's, senator's, famous businessmen, and other notables. This book was published in the late 1800's, after Fannie Merritt Farmer's Boston Cooking School cookbook was published, but those fine home queens' submissions are less than standard in their presentation.

Writing the Recipe

Sponge Cake – "Ten eggs, weight of 8 in sugar and four in flour, flavor with lemon, add a pinch of salt." That is the entire recipe and while seasoned cooks might be able to understand what is meant, and professional chefs sympathetic to the simple notes made for memory's sake, new cooks would be stumped by this listing of ingredients.

Write simply, but not as simply as the Home Queens did. Remember that omissions or mistakes are disastrous to the cook using your recipe, and will also hurt your reputation

with editors. Think about how you felt the first time a "friend" shared a fantastic recipe with you but left out one or two of the ingredients so your version would never be as good as hers or his. If you've never been the victim of a recipe-otomy then your friends are true. If you have, you have my sympathy.

We all have our own way of creating dishes - after family traditions, borrowing from this cooking show or that classic cookbook. Sometimes dishes are created out of necessity - quickie dinners, no-time-to-shop meals that use up stuff you have on hand, or ways to use up garden surplus. Personally, I dream of cakes and pastries, cassoulets and frittatas. My original recipes come from those late night, subconscious feasts.

We scribble notes on napkins, in journals or keep them inside our head.

It's time to get organized. Dedicate an entire notebook to recipe development, or buy a recipe box and fill it with note cards on which you've written your recipes and notes about your results (including comments from your resident taste-testers.) You're going to need these notes and recipes on hand when you find a new market to submit to.

Writing the Recipe

Standardize – When writing a recipe, list the ingredients in the order they appear in the preparation. Write out measurements to avoid any confusing abbreviations. When writing for the internet or non-American publications consider using both metric and non-metric measurements, or providing a conversion rate. If you don't, it means an extra step for your reader to look on a conversion chart, or even flat cakes or rock hard muffins.

Most recipes list the ingredients in one of two ways. If you are using herbs, onions, or eggs, for example, you might list "one-quarter cup basil, washed and chopped," "one Vidalia onion, sliced and sauteed," or "four eggs, beaten." Alternatively, you could list the ingredients and discuss the preparation in the

how-to part of the recipe, i.e., one-quarter cup basil, one Vidalia onion, four eggs. When using frozen or canned food, list the size of the can or package.

Tools Needed – Unless you are writing recipes for an article or a cookbook on slow cookery, or stoneware pans, then you'll want to list special tools, pans, or appliances that will be needed to prepare each recipe. If the recipe is for a chocolate, chocolate chip quick bread, one way to write this part of the recipe is "lightly butter a 9" by 3 " loaf pan or muffin tins if you are making muffins."

Cooking Method – Do you preheat the oven, start the grill, season the pizza stone? Not everyone reads through a recipe before embarking on the culinary adventure of making the dish. Give your readers a head start – tell them up front what pans they need and what they need to do to them before they are ready to pour the batter, or grill the steaks.

The Process – My favorite cookbooks are the ones that tell a story, either as an

introduction to the recipe, or during the paragraphs explaining the steps. You can number the steps, or write it as an explanation. In your pizza recipe, include the history of pizza, your history with pizza, how to make thin, crisp crusts or simple ways to make cheese-stuffed crust if you want something new to feed your teens. You can weave your tidbits into the recipe – one cookbook on breads gave a recipe for making French baguettes with hard crusts. The key was to spray the bread with water during the baking. The author shared that she had, unintentionally, spritzed water on the oven's light bulb causing the hot bulb to shatter all over the baking bread.

So how does the cook know when it's finished? Don't just give the time parameters. Cake recipes talk about the toothpick test. Flans, I learned, are done when they are in the firm yet wobbly stage. When making candy, be kind to cooks without candy thermometers and define

what the hardball and softball stages look like when staring into the pot at a spoon covered in goo.

Extra Information – List substitutions. If your recipe for sorrel soup can be made with spinach as a substitute, share that. Tell about garnishes. Will your whipped cream and orange mousse look stunning with a mint leaf or thin chocolate medallion perched on top? Serving suggestions are another way to give your readers more than they expect. My chile relleno casserole benefits from cool side dishes like a spinach salad or the mildness of homemade flour tortillas. Nutritional information is always a bonus, and sometimes a requirement. Don't forget information on how to store it, or if it tastes better the second day.

Ready to submit? First, walk through the

recipe as you've written in. Did you list two tablespoons butter but forget to tell your readers to melt it? Did you have baking soda on the list of ingredients but you never use it? Regroup, revamp, rewrite until it's perfect.

Copyright Stuff – Did you know that the ingredients of a dish cannot be copyrighted but the preparation can? You can take a traditional recipe, chicken Cordon Bleu – and use the exact ingredients found in countless other cookbooks, but write your preparation in your own words (or even with a new approach.) I met a food writer once who said that her recipes were taken from popular cookbooks - she just changed three ingredients, adding parsley, using white pepper instead of black, and reducing the amount of salt by half. Ta da – she felt she had an original recipe to sell. Not cool. (Did I just say that?) If you are so in love with one of Maida Heatter's lemon cakes that you added something special to it for your own signature touch, give credit to her for originating the cake. If you want to publish someone else's recipe on a website or in a magazine, newsletter or book, write to the publisher, addressing it to the

permissions department, and state where, why and how you would like to use it. Permission may be given with a fee attached or for free.

Don't steal recipes. Do acknowledge your influences, read cookbooks published throughout the last two hundred years, and recognize that today's cookbook and magazine buyers may enjoy reading more than cooking. Write to that market, and you'll enjoy success.

Pamela White has written an e-book on becoming a food writer, teaches food writing classes and publishes an online newsletter on food writing. Information on all three is at <http://www.food-writing.com>

My Mother's Recipe Box

By Rachel Paxton

Remember the days when cookbooks weren't so readily available, and you or your mother relied on only one or two different cookbooks for cooking all of your family's meals? I still have my mother's old cookbooks, as well as my grandmother's. Each one is worn from age and use—if you flip through the tattered pages it is obvious which recipes were turned to time and time again. These cookbooks will always number among my most precious treasures.

When our mothers wanted to try new recipes, they most likely didn't run out and buy new cookbooks. They often didn't have the extra money to spend, and often there weren't very many to choose from. So where did they get new recipes? From each other.

When I was a child I remember my mother exchanging recipe cards with friends and relatives and bringing them home and filing them away in her recipe box. I always loved going through her recipes (although she often got mad at me for getting them all out of order!)

All the years while I was learning how to cook I went through her recipe box time and time again, pulling out my favorite recipes and preparing them again and again.

Seeing who the recipes were from made them all the more special. I also love looking back at all the recipe cards I prepared myself while I was in 4-H and spent much of my time learning how to cook. I still prepare many of the recipes I used back then. To this day, all I have to do is open my recipe card box, and I am instantly transported back in time.

My mother hasn't exchanged recipe cards with anyone in more than 20 years. I have very few of my own (although I hope to inherit hers someday!) But even to this day there is no better place to find favorite family recipes than in my mother's recipe box.

Twenty years from now, I look forward to going through my recipe box with my own daughter, telling her stories about where all of my different recipes came from.

Rachel Paxton is a freelance writer and mom who publishes the Creative Homemaking Recipe of the Week Club, a weekly newsletter that contains quick, easy dinner ideas and money-saving household hints. To subscribe send a blank e-mail message to

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