
I

M.F.K. Fisher
1983
with Bald Knife
+ Fork
A Paragon Book
0-399-50397-8

The Anatomy of a Recipe

IT IS MODISH IN THIS DECADE TO REFER TO THE ANATOMY OF A thing or a problem, although Robert Burton really jumped the gun in 1621 with his philosophical exposition of melancholy. Lately there has been published and filmed a successful legal thriller called *The Anatomy of a Murder*, by Robert Traver. In March of 1966 a newsweekly printed an *Anatomy of Inflation*. And so on.

In turn, I plan to discuss the anatomy of a recipe. I could as easily call it a history, a study, an outline, but I like the sound of this.

According to dictionaries, *anatomy* concerns the standard makeup of a thing, or an examination of its parts, or the act of dividing it for observation. I think what I write will qualify in any of these definitions, and certainly it will be done with both passion and precision, for I feel strongly on the subject and consider myself experienced, if not skilled.

The reasons for the gradual changes in a basic recipe such as one for wheat bread, for instance, are inextricably tangled with man's history and assumed progress. A thing like soup, which Jacob sold to Esau for his birthright in the first Biblical reference to the restaurant trade, is too vague to trace unless one settles definitely upon the *kind* of soup, in this case a pottage of lentils, but really the method of making a good lentil soup, even as a loaf of good bread, has changed very little in the several thousand years since it was first mentioned. It is only the way of writing the recipe itself that has evolved, to be trimmed to our changing tempo of reading, preparing, producing.

Perhaps more amusing to contemplate than bread or soup is cheesecake, somewhat less than a staple, more like a treat, a delicacy. In one form or another, but almost always based on sweetened curds, it has been written about and even hymned for centuries. It moved with all the benign as well as corrupt attributes of culture from the East and the Near East into Greece and Rome, and in the almost intolerably lengthy banquet described by Athenaeus in the second century A.D. and called *The Deipnosophists*, many pages are devoted to it, and of course numerous classical references to it by the gabby guests, all of whom could apparently quote every writer of the ancient world, including themselves. One Alexis, for instance, sang from his own *Philiscus*:

Now is the time to clear the table, and
To bring each guest some water for his hands,
And garlands, perfumes, and libations,
Frankincense, and a chafing-dish. Now give
Some sweetmeats, and let all some cheesecake have.

Athenaeus wistfully limited himself to listing only the names of the famous men who had written on the art of making cheesecake, but said that he would communicate to his guests at the banquet his personal appraisal, "not treating you as Socrates was treated in the matter of the cheesecake which was sent to him by Alcibiades; for Xanthippe took it and trampled upon it, upon which Socrates laughed (at his shrewish wife), and said, 'At all events, you will not have any of it yourself.' But I, so fond of

cheesecakes, should have been very sorry to see that divine one so injuriously treated."

He wrote, among many other things, of how bridegrooms were presented with cheesecakes by their brides, in Argos, and how brides themselves, in another district, were given the cakes delicately shaped like breasts, by their maiden attendants. He listed the ingredients of many cakes, but few as concisely as this one from Crete:

Take some nuts and some almonds, and also a poppy. Roast this last with great care, and then take the seed and pound it in a clean mortar; then, adding (some) fruits, beat them up with boiled honey, putting in plenty of pepper, and make the whole into a soft mass (but it will be of a black color because of the poppy); flatten it and make it into a square shape; then, having pounded some white sesame, soften that too with boiled honey, and draw it out into two cakes, placing one beneath and the other above (the poppy mixture) . . . and make it into a neat shape.

Athenaeus added that this was a recipe "of that clever writer on confectionery, Chrysippus"—who, as far as can be judged so long since, forgot to add any cheese at all to his cake. Sopater the farce writer, in his drama entitled *Pylae*, both of them equally unremembered except for loyal Athenaeus the name tosser, wrote:

Who was it who invented the first black cakes
Of the uncounted poppy-seed? who mix'd
The yellow compounds of delicious sweetmeats?

It was Chrysippus, silly Sopater!

There are always a few people who will bother to keep ancient things alive, and through the Dark Ages and even now a curious nose can sniff out recipes which might possibly please Jasper Dillingham, Sr., as well as Sopater. It has been slow going. There was the medieval time-lapse to hinder things, when books went underground with much of the rest of civilized life. With light and the Renaissance, old manuscripts like Apicius' were pulled from the cells and cellars where they had been hidden, and the ancient rules were read out again to the illiterate cooks who must follow them: a little of this, some of that, baked long enough, and

then served forth. It was a priest, or a steward, and gradually, as it proved profitable to marry a wife who could read and write, the lady of the house who directed the kitchen, and obviously it was assumed that the cooks knew basic principles to be followed in preparing any dish, whether baked or boiled.

By about 1650, ladies were keeping receipt books to hand on to their oldest daughters (Americans did this until past the turn of the last century, and I have both my grandmothers', stained, brittle, and shockingly archaic in their vagueness and confusion). Many collections got into print, as people of the new middle class learned to read and to ape the aristocracy. They were called tempting things like *A Closet for Ladies and Gentlemen* (Sir Hugh Plat, London, 1608) and *The Queen's Closet Opened* (London, 1687). Of all the "closets," the one I like best is Sir Kenelm Digby's, "published by his son's consent" in 1669. It has one recipe for Herring Pye, for instance:

Put great store of sliced onions, with Currants and Raisins of the sun both above and under the Herrings, and store of butter, and so bake.

The fact that no crusts are mentioned proves that Sir Kenelm trusted his cook, to whom he read the instructions, to know that anything called a pie, and certainly any pie in *England*, had/had crusts above and below, perforce, of *course*.

The old receipt books, mostly kept by ladies instead of their husbands, are rare and crumbling by now, and very hard to read. One I have liked for a long time was finished in about 1694 by Lady Ann Blencowe, and was kept by her descendants and published in London by Chapman in 1925. It is plain that many of her recipes are much more precise, more detailed, than before. This was of course because her book was meant to be studied and understood by succeeding generations of housekeepers, although Ann Blencowe could not have conceived that her descendants would actually cook in their own kitchens, translating her receipts to cope with electric ranges, presifted flour, and the Servant Problem.

Here is a good "rule" she gave for Brandy Cake (Mrs. Morice's. This is a nostalgic trick of all the old receipt books . . .

my own lists things like Aunt Evvie's Tipsy Parson, Mr. Pike's Indian Relish Not Bad . . .):

Take four pounds of flour well dried & sifted, seven pounds of currants washed & rubbed clean, 6 pounds of butter, two pounds of almonds blanched & beat fine with orange flower water & sack. Then take 4 pounds of eggs, put away half the whites, 3 pounds of good lump sugar pound'd & sifted, mace and nutmegs to your taste, half a pint of Brandy & half a pint of sack & what sweetmeats you like.

How to mixt the cake:—

Work ye Butter to a cream with your hands, then put in your sugar and almonds; mixt these all well together & put in your eggs. Beat them till they look thick and white, then put in your sack & Brandy & shake in your flour by degrees & when your oven is ready, put in your Currants & sweetmeats, just before you put it in your hoop. It will take four hours in a quick oven to bake it.

This recipe is a great improvement over one resembling it which can be found in almost any older book, from Apicius to Digby, but it still has several unfortunate things about it. They would be merely bothersome or tedious to an experienced cook, which I am sure both Lady Ann and her kitchen helpers were, but it is irksome to have to reckon with her lack of time-logic, which is often present even in current procedures. The "flour" is mentioned first in Mrs. Morice's recipe, and yet it is not shaken into the mixture until third from the last addition, just before the currants and the candied fruits. In mixing the cake, the mace and nutmegs which have been prescribed are not mentioned again. Any idiot knows that they could be sifted along with the flour, and that of course they would be grated or powdered . . . but as a spoiled idiot-child of the twentieth century I want to be *told*.

By now it is plain that there are some things I *demand* to be told, in a recipe. Basically they are two: the ingredients and the method. Ann Blencowe has done this better than heretofore at least, but she has not done the essential for me. She has not named the first in the order of their use as well as their correct measurements, and she has not seemed to use them in their natural order in the method for concocting the hoped-for results.

In 1816 an English eccentric if ever there was one (and there were, and fortunately there still are!), named Dr. William Kitchiner, published an extraordinarily amusing and informative book, and an important one in my own search for correction in a recipe's anatomy. It was called *The Cook's Oracle (Apicius Redivivus)*, and it said farewell to "the rule of thumb" in cookery and gave exact measurements for every ingredient of a dish, as well as the order of their use. It is true that they were not listed first, as I prefer them to be, but at least a clear look at the recipe told the cook everything that would be called for, and he or more probably she could trust the good doctor (nonpracticing but always fired with professional curiosity) to recount the method in its correct sequence. Myself, I quibble at doing some of his tricks as they come along: I would like to have more of the additions prepared in advance, rather than let the whole business cool off while I brown one chopped onion in butter to add to a tureen of soup, for instance, and then mix curry powder with flour and three cups of the soup and add it to the same tureen. It is perhaps the fault of the modern tempo? I think the curry broth would profit by standing, for one thing . . . or even simmering a bit. But I bow to Dr. Kitchiner with respect and thanks, and with real regret that I cannot write a book about him and his quirks: the way he would lock his guests either in or out, depending upon their promptness, and the way he. . . . But it is not for now.

Mrs. Isabella Beeton owed a lot to him too, just as we all do to her. Her *Book of Household Management*, which first came out in 1861 and is still in print in a "modernized" version that is not half as much fun, gave recipes adapted to middle-class English households with the minimum staff, a bare one in those days, of about three servants, but with the "lady" running the whole thing, from the bursting nursery high above-stairs to the bustling kitchen-scullery-buttery-pantry far below. Mrs. Beeton not only continued with the weird old doctor's ideas about precise measurements, but she also noted the correct cooking times (given a scullery maid who knew how to stoke the ranges properly), the number of servings (given family and guests who knew what was proper to take upon one's plate), the time needed for preparation (given a stern and experienced cook), and the approximate cost. This last is of course the main reason for preferring an old to a

new edition of the encyclopedic work . . . fascinating financially!

It really took until 1896 for much order to jump the Atlantic into American kitchen records. This was the year Miss Fannie Merritt Farmer published at her own expense *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*. She insisted with clinical sternness that level and standardized measurements be used: eight ounces to a cup, for instance, and five grams or one half tablespoon to a teaspoon, not "some of this" and "a pinch of that." She was the kiss of death, one would assume, to such sloppy recipe writing as kept on being published for brides like my maternal grandmother, whose copy of Marion Harland's best-selling manual, *Common Sense in the Household*, first published in 1871, is inscribed by an older brother: "Improve each shining hour." But even in the Harland *Dinner Year-Book*, brought out less than a decade later in New York and loyally purchased by my beldam in Iowa, there is little sign that Dr. Kitchiner and Mrs. Beeton had ever slaved over their measurements in London. Here is some of a Harland recipe for Chicken Scallop, to be served on the fourth Monday in July with "A Baked Soup, Green Peas, New Potatoes, Lettuce, Huckleberries, Cream, and Cake," a light hot-day snack compared with most of her suggested menus:

Cut cold boiled chicken into pieces. . . . Have ready a cup of yesterday's soup in a saucepan—or some drawn butter—and, when hot, stir in the meat, just boil, and pour upon a beaten egg . . .

Then one put the mixture, "rather highly seasoned," into a bake dish, strewed it with crumbs, put "drops of butter over the surface," and baked it quickly half an hour, covered, before uncovering and browning it. Of course this was a recipe for leftover food, which always depends for its salvation upon the inner and spiritual temperature of the cook, no matter what the weather without. . . .

And about thirty-five years after Miss Farmer had uttered in an authoritative and Bostonian tone the final dicta of *correct* American measurements, and about seventy-one after Mrs. Beeton had murmured them somewhat less scientifically but with

almost equal effect to millions of British housewives, and at least one hundred and fourteen after Dr. Kitchiner had frowned forever upon "the rule of thumb" as applied to civilized dining, well-meaning ladies like my own mother were still copying recipes in much this fashion from their favorite sources:

For a Nut Cake, cream butter and sugar. Beat egg whites and yolks separately. Fold. Add liquids. Sift flour and baking powder together and add gradually. Add nutmeg. Slice nuts, dust them and raisins with flour, and add. Grease loaf pans. Bake . . . etc., etc.

This recipe, once it has been put into some sequence of procedure and given correct quantities, is a good one, but I do not believe that it came, as my mother firmly did, from Mrs. William Vaughn Moody's *Cook-Book*. At least I cannot find it there. Mrs. Moody wrote in a genteel style which I think pleased Mother because its somewhat rambling asides were refreshing in the no-nonsense pattern of American kitchen trusties. It had a little of the nonchalance of a Georgian duchess dictating to her head pastry cook a recipe already too familiar to both of them, but although her listings of needed ingredients tended to be erratic, most of her recipes are worth study and translation.

Fortunately I was a ruthless spotter of anatomical faults by the time Mrs. Moody's book was given to me in about 1944, and I knew a good basic pattern when I saw one. But worse than mayhem would face any inexperienced cook who tried to make a batter containing beaten eggs and liquids and baking powder and then put it aside to slice a large quantity of nuts, dust them and raisins in flour which had not been mentioned in the ingredients and must be sought out, and *then* grease loaf pans . . . and then, as far as can be known, heat the oven and bake, at an unspecified temperature and apparently "till done"!

A recipe is supposed to be a formula, a means prescribed for producing a desired result, whether that be an atomic weapon, a well-trained Pekingese, or an omelet. There can be no frills about it, no ambiguities . . . and above all no "little secrets." A cook who indulges in such covert and destructive vanity as to leave out one ingredient of a recipe which someone has admired and asked

to copy is not honest, and therefore is not a *good cook*. He is betraying his profession and his art. He may well be a thief or a drunkard, or even a fool, away from his kitchens, but he is not a *good cook* if he cheats himself to this puny and sadistic trickery of his admirers, and no deep-fat kettle is too hot to brown him in.

Given such a simple definition of a recipe as the one Webster and I have settled on, and as culinary near-gods like Kitchiner and Beeton and Farmer have set forth, it seems exceeding strange that examples of abuse should continue to come so easily to hand. Even experienced cooks often err, but amateurs are of course the prime criminals. Of these last, I think their slim and beautifully printed volumes which float out of London, through wars and pestilence, are the most quotable. Usually they are on fine paper, with skillful and pleasing woodcuts and a tiny preface by somebody famous. Most of the recipes start out with the comfortably historical "Take": Take a pound of shrimps . . . take some lettuce. . . . The style is always informal: one is discussing, between peers, what was a *succès fou* at last night's little stand-up supper for Imogene (Lady) Craddo, or may be so tonight after Wallie's new opening. A few of the rules give more or less exact ingredients, but in most of them it would be a chancy path indeed from the first "Take" to the table, even for an old tired anatomizer like me. This is mainly because there is no time sequence, no logical progression . . . unless one perhaps had absorbed the right amount of gin-and-lime. For instance, in a dish called *Veal Au Porto* in one such "cabinet," after a vague outline for cooking the dish one is told to "arrange the pieces [of meat] on your dish, let it get cold, and serve with mixed vegetable salad. Pour the sauce over them." Over what? The mixed vegetables? When? After the veal has been served with the salad? How cold? Which? Eh? What say?

Here is another prime example (but almost any page of a fashionable cookery book will yield a juicy harvest of such plums) of this bland ambiguity:

(For *Croûte au Jambon*) Take a few slices of lean cooked ham, cut them into small pieces and warm them in butter. Bind with a stiff and creamy horseradish sauce and serve on hot buttered toast.

Then sprinkle the top with grated cheese which should be browned under the grill.

The time element is almost hysterically askew for anyone mercilessly stone-cold sober. The "croûtes" are served, and *then* sprinkled with grated cheese. But is it really the *cheese* which should be browned under the grill before it is sprinkled upon the canapés of pieces of ham? And if so, how would it then be *sprinkled* upon them, cheese behaving as it does, and they waiting to be sprinkled but apparently already served . . . ?

Such culinary humor, almost always accidental, makes for innocent merriment when read aloud, and most of it has a better spice and ring to it from England than at home. Here, we tend to be less lightsome. There are fewer elegant and giddy little books, partly because American mass publishers are leery of them but mostly because the mainstream of our seemingly endless flood of cookbooks comes from established "culinary authorities," with large research staffs and definite "ideas" in mind. Gastronomical guides in the United States are for the most part written in a flat undistinguished sameness, which can become a dangerous occupational hazard to people who must for professional reasons read them with conscientious attention. They are, in other words, rarely funny, and almost never witty.

Often they are coy or whimsical. More often they are larded with asides on the general worldliness of the compiler's background: Rome, Istanbul for the off-season, a villa on Crete. . . . Most often they depend for their hoped-for appeal upon casual and even intimate folklore: how many oyster crabs Great-Uncle John speared the night he and Diamond Jim competed at a Saratoga dinner table; how Paw used to catch catfish for Maw to serve as *truites au bleu* when she ran the boardinghouse; how Missie Lou-Mary canned her dewberries. . . . Rarely funny, anyway, for a *real* laugh. The formulas for the recipes themselves are often more suited to my demands, of course, thanks to eagle-eyed graduates on the publishing staffs who have been trained to modern patterns, but the usual makeup of "idea" books lacks the extra distinction which can occur inadvertently, as in some of the London books, or discreetly, as in Mrs. Moody's or even such a

standard manual as *The Boston* or Mrs. Rombauer's *Joy of Cooking*.

A good recipe, for modern convenience, should consist of three parts: name, ingredients, method. The first will perforce give some sort of description: for instance, one does not simply say "Cake" or "Bread," but "Golden Sponge Cake," "Greek Honey Bread." The ingredients should be listed in one column or two, rather than in a running sentence, according to the order of their use, and with the exact amount of each ingredient given before its name. The method should in most cases tell the temperature of the oven first, if one is needed, and in a real kitchen guide should indicate in the simplest possible prose what equipment will be used: a saucepan rather than a double boiler, a shallow skillet, a large deep bowl. In the same way, a true manual, written to instruct every kind of reader from a Brownie Scout to a June bride to an experienced but occasionally unsure kitchen mechanic like myself, should indicate in some way the number of portions a recipe will make. In a book like this one in hand, though, I cannot feel it necessary, and certainly it would be guesswork, for if everybody at table is very hungry there should be "enough," and how can that be defined? And even a dolt must know, instinctively, that a six-egg omelet will not feed ten people. . . .

One time, in the "physical receipts" which were an essential part of any household manual in the medieval and Renaissance periods, I found an interesting recipe, or perhaps it could be called a prescription, which I rewrote to use as an example of what I try to prove in this personal anatomy of such a thing:

Name)	To Drive a Woman Crazy
Ingredients)	1 or more nutmegs, ground 1 left shoe, of 1 woman
Method)	Sprinkle small amount of nutmeg on left shoe every night at midnight, until desired results are obtained with woman.

There is an essential question about this arbitrary formularizing. Does a correct recipe also give the results, the desired end of the

procedure? In the case of the woman and the shoe and the nutmeg, perhaps any kind of description is best left unattempted. Some good modern writers, even of the sternly impersonal "standards," occasionally permit themselves a relaxed comment like, "This keeps well and is fine for picnics," or "Our First Lady once ate this and asked for more." In the uninhibited school of modern gastronomic chitchat, mostly from the gentlemen of course, the reminiscences and asides about a dish are bountiful, and often very entertaining, if one has the time.

There is increasing improvement in the style of cookery writing which falls between these two stools of strict manuals and charming kitchen talk. A few good books are being written and even *published* with the respect due any honest work, both of and about an art which may be one of our last firm grasps on reality, that of eating and drinking with intelligence and grace in evil days. The best of these, I think, are by practicing teachers. There is a current vogue for cooking schools, and infallibly the right pupils will seek out the best professors, the dedicated men and women with innate taste, rather than the snobbish showoffs who will give directions for making *crêpes suzettes* in ten minutes which "nobody will know from the real thing." The books by good teachers are scanty, but they are worth waiting for: they will be composed with unfaltering honesty and patience, and the quality of the cook will shine through, exactly as it still does in the textbooks of masters like Alexis Soyer, Escoffier, Mrs. Beeton. . . .

I find all this new cool enthusiasm and detachment very refreshing, and cannot but believe that it is a promise for a much brighter future in what could and should be a part of our literature, which must be written by people who know and respect the language they are using and who have true humility, in their direct approach to something which is essential to life itself, the art of cooking.

Teasers and Titbits

IN PLUTARCH'S *Lives* HE OBSERVED, "IT IS NO GREAT WONDER IF in long process of time, while fortune takes her course hither and thither, numerous coincidences should spontaneously occur." In other words, history repeats itself. Sometimes this can be eerie, in even a tiny way. Occasionally it can be embarrassing, or funny. It can be good, too.

There is an unwritten law, as I assume it to be, that things go in threes, and in one week of my life three coincidences did "spontaneously occur," with such a subtle message that I felt instinctively I would prefer not to heed it. They sound innocent enough.

First, I was reading a collection of short stories written by authors of uneven quality in different decades of the past century, and near the front of the book was the term *félo de se*. It is seldom used in English, but this time it was perfectly in its place, and I enjoyed it, and thought about another one which rhymes with it and is only a little commoner: *auto da fé*. I wondered