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All Consuming

Also by Ruby Tandoh and available from Serpent's Tail:

Eat Up!
Cook As You Are

All Consuming

Why we eat the way we eat now

Ruby Tandoh

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.serpentstail.com

The essay 'Allrecipes' is adapted from an essay previously published in the *New Yorker*.
'Tonic waters' is based on work originally commissioned by Factory International.

Designed and typeset in Berling by CC Book Production

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Our product safety representative in the EU is Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd.,
Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, D02 P593, Ireland.
www.arccompliance.com

ISBN 978 1 80081 0044
eISBN 978 1 78283 9644

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Introduction

Our tastes are social. Even when you first drank milk, there was the milk, yes, but there was also the person behind the milk who will have presumably either made or messed up your relationship with food for the couple of decades after that. We learn to eat from our families and friends, at school and in work. A village develops a particular recipe for an apple pie – one that nobody outside the village likes, but who cares? We want these things not just because of what they are, but who we are.

Tastes spread like this, person to person, like viruses, almost irrespective of the qualities of the food involved. We observe other people in their food lives, often judgementally. Nothing turns me off something quicker than the wrong people liking it, by which I mean people almost identical to me in every respect, in a way that doesn't flatter me. I avoided the viral chopped salad moment of 2024 by the skin of my teeth.

Biology has pre-programmed us to crave some tastes, like sweetness, and be wary of others, like bitterness, but

these are the broadest brushstrokes. They only count for so much. The most important thing that a few million years of evolution has encoded in us is the ability to be omnivores. Bee Wilson wrote about this in her book *First Bite*. We come into this world wanting milk, but everything else we have to make up as we go along. This is where other people come in. This is where stories come in.

A few generations ago, you mostly learned about food from the people close to you. Your access to food was shaped by forces outside your control, like the climate, or trade, or economics, but the choices you made within those parameters – these would have been intimate and social. Conversations, meals together, some person you want to be more like, some person you hate, a myth about this or that, a recipe taught to you, a story about witches. Not always, not for all people, but as a rule: almost everything you knew about food, you probably learned either in the kitchen or at the table.

All this has changed. In the years since the end of the Second World War, the balance of power has moved from countries to corporations. We've seen the rise of restaurant chains, supermarkets, delivery, fast food, ready meals and industrial agriculture. Migrations have reconfigured the culture. Britain has somehow gone from knowing almost nothing about anything, when it comes to non-Western foods, to being a culinary dilettante. We have supermarkets. We have the Magnum ice cream hegemony. More has changed since the end of the war than changed in the few millennia before that.

In his book *In Defence of Food*, Michael Pollan writes about where some of these new food systems go wrong – the

environmentally ruinous stuff, the possible health implications. He explains that for most of human history we didn't have to worry about the moral and nutritional choices that have blown up in the last few years. 'To guide us we had, instead, Culture,' he writes. 'Which, at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother.' But what's this capital-C culture that's untouched by society? You can't separate 'real' appetites from 'fake' appetites manufactured by industry or media or tech. These forces aren't tears in culture – they *are* the culture. And besides, mothers are beholden to them too.

Like it or not, our food culture today is composite and changeable. It is advertising. It is branding, marketing, travel and YouTube. Recipes aren't passed from hand to hand, they come at you from all angles. They're on TV, on the internet, in newspaper supplements, on YouTube and in the comments under Instagram posts. Restaurant trends like smashburgers spread like a rash from New York to London, Lahore and Tokyo, via the infrastructure of the commercial internet. We've gone from learning how to eat from the people around us to learning how to eat from a few billion dissenting voices across the world via the global food machine. This expansive food culture is not, it bears saying, always pure of heart. But it is culture. And, once you start thinking about these forces acting on your seemingly personal tastes and desires, you can begin to look at your own diet with curiosity, rather than judgement. Why do I want what I want? Now, there's a question. And I promise you won't find the answer in your own stomach.

*

This is not the book that I planned to write when I put my mind to it five years ago. Thank god. I thought this would be a definitive guide to why humans want the foods they do. I started at the start, about a few million years ago, when mammals were getting a Swiss army knife set of teeth – incisors, canines, molars – so they could be omnivores. Then I learned about the feasts of Apicius – a Roman epicure who liked flamingo tongues and is a good first-century analogue of unbearable food guys today. In fact, I have just checked and the first chapter I wrote for the first draft of this book started with 3.5-billion-year-old microbial mats. I cannot imagine where I was going with this.

Food culture is always in conversation with the past, but it's also shaped by the economy, tech and changeable social currents of right now. These things move laterally and in feedback loops and pendulum swings and sometimes at cross-purposes. Every time something changes in society, it changes on the plate.

There's a book I found enlightening when I was writing this – *The British at Table, 1940–1980*, by Christopher Driver. Driver writes, from a vantage point in the early eighties, that there were things in food that people even three decades prior could never have forecast: the rise of vegetarianism, the pantheistic diet cults and their demagogues, the invention of cooking as a pastime – not just for real food hounds and hobbyists, but as a kind of factory setting of middle-class urban elites. I've been thinking about the equivalents now, the things that we take for granted in our food culture but that would shock Christopher Driver.

To start with, the anxious energy in our food culture

has been redistributed. People who in the eighties would've spent days making fiddly and disenchanting food for a dinner party now commit themselves to breezy, knowingly effortless cooking, but spend loads of time and even more money getting the very best local, heirloom, organic, artisan, PDO, cold-pressed, small-batch ingredients. There's also the health fads – the change of emphasis from health to the more nebulous politics of wellbeing, or self-optimisation. We've managed to fill the Whole Foods drinks refrigerators with hundreds of flavours of woo, from electrolyte elixirs to tummy tonics and magnesium shakes, each of which speaks to a new neurosis.

And then there's the internet – which has replaced farms or factories or supermarkets as the primary food infrastructure of the modern age. This is where I end up ordering food, and booking tables for restaurants, and being bombarded with recipes I never asked for on my TikTok feed. The internet has had a double effect, completely changing how food systems work, but also changing how food culture is created. Old-money food publications like *Gourmet* have gone, and in their place we have Cookpad and Google reviews, which are just as authoritative as the old guard, albeit with a different flavour. When the last issue of *Gourmet* went out in 2009, the food writer Christopher Kimball wrote an obituary for the magazine. 'Is American magazine publishing on the verge of being devoured by the democratic economics of the Internet?' Kimball asked, but he already knew the answer.

These new ways of learning mean new tastes, sometimes broader tastes, often more predictable ones. Different kinds of media – TV, smartphone, books, apps – don't just give us

blank space for sharing food, they also change the foods we desire and why. The medium is the message. Food blogging gave us hype restaurant queues of an order of magnitude we'd never seen before. Newspaper colour supplements gave foodie esoterica in Britain a mass readership for the very first time. You can blame extremist pizza cheese levels on a combination of how phone screens are oriented, the evolution of phone cameras, and the birth of high-speed mobile data, all of which have created the conditions for the cheese pull shot.

The point is, if you're reading this, you've probably witnessed at least a small part of a forty-year cultural overhaul that has given us Jamie Oliver, Martha Stewart, Wagamama, the idea of hot chefs, Deliveroo, the sriracha revival, animal fries, Magnums, Resy, Noma and Goop. Just in the time it's taken me to write this book, we've gained Topjaw, TikTok recipes and the kombucha revival. I love it. I love humankind's inexhaustible capacity for nonsense. I love seeing these changes come and go, some of them metabolised into new and equally short-lived trends, others totally overhauling how we eat.

It can get to be too much. Try to keep up with the food discourse – and these days who really has a choice? – and you can end up feeling like you're playing cultural Tetris. It's fun until it's not. And somehow, despite all of this – despite the constant, multimedia discourse around food, and despite the fact that it has never been easier to learn about cooking or find information on restaurants or dig around for nutritional guidance online – nobody seems to know what they're doing. If everything is new, all the time, it can be hard to get your bearings. Harvey Levenstein

called it a paradox of plenty – the more we have, the less we seem able to enjoy it, which accounts for diet culture, and the concept of guilty pleasures, and weird culinary nationalism in a time of unparalleled food choice. But you can slow down, and when you do you will see these countless, fractious, prismatic food moments resolve into some kind of shape. This book is partly an attempt to record and decode parts of our food culture at a time of massive structural change – and at a time where, at the snap of a tech mogul's fingers, so much of that culture could suddenly be wiped from the servers. When you work through it like this, you feel overtures emerge, like the way we vacillate between the need for comfort and the desire for change. You start to see the human drives that cause global food system flux. And that's what this book is about.

All Consuming is about food, and the way we talk about food, and the easy, anarchic way that ideas about food are changing right now. It's mainly about modern food culture – the period of whiplash change since the 1940s, during which these systems and cultures have been systemically overhauled. Because I live in Britain, it's mainly about food in the affluent West, but you'll see that modern food culture is most itself when it's online, which means you're never that far from any global food trend.

You'll see a lot of American references here too. There was a point when you could say that French cuisine was the most influential in the world – through colonialism on one hand and the influence of restaurants on the other. Ingredients moved, and people moved, but ideas about food travelled too, and these reproduced French restaurant

culture across much of Europe and America. But for the last seventy-five years, the United States has done more to shape global food culture than any other country, for better and for worse. Again, it's about the ways that food stories spread, and this has only accelerated in the age of the internet. For as long as digital culture skews towards the US, those ideas and tastes naturally filter through to us, too. That said, we're beginning to see a shift, across things like TikTok and bubble tea, towards greater East Asian influence on British food, so you'll find stories about this here too. The point is this: social, economic, cultural, legislative and demographic changes have just as much to teach us, when it comes to learning how to eat, as our own families.

The book starts where most food decisions start – at home, with recipes. The kitchen can feel like a refuge from modern, commercial food culture, but of course this isn't the case. Technology, and marketing, and tremors in online media shape the domestic kitchen just like they shape restaurants.

As befits the era we live in, I spend way more time looking at food content on-screen than I do actually eating or cooking. Right now, a huge number of food stories end up, in fact, being tech stories – from the early crowd-sourced internet, to the rise of social media. I've also tackled the important matter of who, exactly, you should trust when it comes to food, now that with Google reviews and TikTok influencers and blogs and Instagram, criticism is the people's art. Then there are all the places we do our food shopping, and the million nutritionally irrelevant but culturally rich things you find on the shelves. We have more choice in what we buy than ever before – packaging and

ads and high-intensity trend cycles have evolved to guide us. And fast food – the systems that make it possible, and the tight emotional bonds we form with this super-massive industry.

There's a lot going on out there. This book might be adding to the noise, or it might help you make sense of things. In any case, it's not a book of food ethics, or a polemic, or a practical guide. I don't pretend to offer solutions to systemic problems. There are so many others who have done this. All I can claim to have done is sift through a handful of the inventions of the contemporary food age and try to figure out why they happened, along with how they've shaped our tastes – or, why we want what we want. This is a book about mass change in food culture. It's about the stories we tell about food, and the stories that are foisted upon us.

During my research, I've talked to chefs, restaurant critics, restaurateurs, cookbook authors, editors, food scientists, architects of the early internet, recipe developers, students, critics, historians and friends. People are generous. They came through with everything from the origin story of Cornetto to recipes for buckwheat cookies, memories of being in restaurant queues some twenty years ago, stories about their kitchens, and the kind of litigable industry gossip that I'm sadly unable to repeat. But I have also looked around me at the world as I see it, and wondered what it all means. There's no certainty in appetite – it's the world working through us, but it's also fantasy and desire and imagination. 'Speculative worlds that grow up in the crevices between truths,' Hilary Mantel said, about something completely unrelated. But really this is it.

You can't talk about these things without understanding your place in them. And so I'm limited, and enabled, by my own experience. I grew up in a house where we thought about food a lot. There were experiments with a banana and bean sprout salad. We lived in the aftershock of the beige years of vegetarianism. We did this with not much money, but we were lucky – we were never at the point of desperation where curiosity itself is a luxury. Now, I find myself in the unusual position of not just consuming food culture, but also being part of food media. I've written cookbooks, cooked for a living, and worked for newspapers and magazines. I'm part of the food culture macroverse. But I'm also just another person feeling its shockwaves, and the funny thing is that the latter role has been much more useful for the writing of this book. So much of all of the book has come from simply paying curious attention, as an eater, as a consumer, to the things I used to take for granted. Things like ice creams, and vending machine pizza, and a deluge of viral TikTok videos about chocolate-covered strawberries. I'm in this culture, as are you. This book is my attempt to think things through.

Home cooking

Craving content

Or, the unsubtle art of selling a recipe

Whenever I go online, I can count on being confronted with a recipe that I never asked for and which, the moment I see it, I kind of want to eat. Recently it was 'Herby Chicken Caesar Schnitzel', which was accompanied by the kind of video that's carefully calibrated to stoke a craving. Here's the schnitzel being caressed by soft, amber bubbles in the pan. Here's a money shot, when a knife rasps demonstratively over the crust. Here's a green salad being twisted through a slippery dressing. It is slung on top of the schnitzel like a satin quilt on an unmade bed. 'She's crispy, saucy, cheesy and a little bit spicy,' the recipe developer, Jodie Nixon, explains in the voiceover. It was posted by Mob – a hugely successful recipe platform with an ensemble cast of recipe developers, popular on social media and among younger cooks.

Another day, it'll be an unsolicited close-up of a chicken thigh, fresh out the pan, with tortoiseshell caramelised skin. 'They're crunchy, they're juicy,' Jordon Ezra King – the cook – says on the voiceover. 'Gonna do it with herby

rice, and some nice pickle-y fresh crunchy salad.' Again, it was a recipe from Mob. Or how about those few weeks when my For You pages were hacked by an Instagram-famous sausage and gochujang rigatoni? You crumble and fry sausage meat until it's lightly browned, in pieces the size of granola clusters, then add gochujang, cream, shallot, Parmesan, breadcrumbs and a few other things. You can tell it's going to be aggressively pleasing in the same way as a McDonald's double cheeseburger. The recipe developer, Xiengni Zhou, narrates the video. 'It's quick, creamy, and kind of spicy,' she says, and the dish looks so good that you don't even care that you're getting déjà vu. The video has tens of thousands of likes, and it is also, unsurprisingly, from Mob.

Over the last few years, Mob – which was started by Ben Lebus in 2016 – has become one of the most successful cooking sites online. It has released eight cookbooks and counting. As Gen Z's recipe provider of choice, it has 3 million followers on Instagram, 1.4 million on TikTok, and over 100,000 people who pay for their recipes. By the time you read this, it'll probably be more.

Mob is one part of a massive transformation in how we cook. On Instagram, TikTok and even the more sedate platforms like Substack, you'll find searchable, compound-noun recipes like 'sheet-pan miso maple mustard chicken' or adjective-savvy numbers that are 'crispy' or 'chewy' or 'crunchy'. You know these flavours, you can anticipate how this particular assault of umami, salt and sweet will make you feel. They use a weirdly placeless pantry of ingredients, everything from sriracha to miso and cumin. And then there are the visuals – the photos and videos that seem to

have been engineered to bypass rational thinking and go straight to the pleasure centres of the brain.

In the last fifteen years, we've seen entire cooking dynasties built on recipes like this. Recipe developers like Alison Roman – 'Slow-Roasted Oregano Chicken with Buttered Tomatoes' – and Yotam Ottolenghi, who puts his name to 'Five-Spice Butternut Squash in Cheesy Custard'. Even *The New York Times*, which used to have buttoned-up, if technically flawless, recipes for things like chicken chasseur, has shifted towards craveable, suckerpunch recipes. Do you want the 1988 hunter's chicken, with a photo of a French country-kitchen-style table, with crystal wine glasses and produce in the background? Or would you in fact prefer 'Roasted Chicken Thighs with Hot Honey and Lime' – which is illustrated with a close-crop photo of the plump, chiaroscuro-rendered chicken thighs, visibly juicy, with lime wedges wrung out alongside? It's about how you market a recipe.

As things happen, I've just seen a new feature on *The New York Times* site. '44 Creamy, Dreamy White Bean Recipes'. They've got 'Miso Leeks with White Beans', 'Refried White Beans with Chile-Fried Eggs', 'Lemony White Beans with Anchovy and Parmesan', 'Baked Mushrooms and White Beans with Buttery Bread'. I don't know if these are the best recipes in the world, but they are unbelievably popular. Except, maybe these *are* the best recipes. Maybe, in an age where most of us get most of our recipes from the internet, the best ones are precisely the favoured few that actually grab your attention.

Right now there are more recipes available to a person than at any other point in history – a number that's increasing

every minute despite the fact that most of us will cycle through the same couple of dozen recipes for the rest of our lives. To beat the competition, everything has to evolve along increasingly weird vectors to one-up the recipe that came before. And so 'spaghetti and meatballs' eventually turns into 'creamy linguine alla vodka with crispy cheesy meatball bites', plus a soft porn video of balls getting rolled through a slick of buttery sauce. In a world of seemingly infinite choice, the message is no longer just 'this thing is possible', or 'practical', or 'authentic', or even 'delicious'. It has to be – 'This thing will make you see god.'

In 2002, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi along with a few business partners opened a deli in London inspired by the flavours of the eastern Mediterranean. They called it Ottolenghi, and in 2008 this also became the title of their first book. In the book, there was the same style of cooking as in the deli: lively and self-consciously modern, not beholden to tradition – least of all the English tradition of meat and two plain veg. To a certain extent, they drew on their upbringings in Jerusalem (Ottolenghi is Israeli, Tamimi is Palestinian) but they resisted simplistic readings of the kind of food they cooked. 'Food has no boundaries' – this was the party line. And so there were 'Portobello Mushrooms with Pearl Barley and Preserved Lemon'. 'Roast Chicken with Sumac and Za'atar'. 'Cauliflower and Cumin Fritters with Lime Yoghurt'. 'I want drama in the mouth,' as Ottolenghi put it in one interview. And so they concentrated on high-impact recipes where contrast was prioritised – crunchy toppings, hot drizzles, yoghurt dips and kaleidoscopic salads.

These days, this approach is so ubiquitous that you'd think recipes have always worked this way – that you run through permutations and combinations of ingredients, remixing familiar flavours until you settle on something that feels new. It seems obvious to us that a recipe writer is also a recipe developer. It seems obvious that the entire job is coming up with fresh ideas. But this is not how recipes have always worked. Chefs have been coming up with conspicuously inventive new menus forever, and home cooks have always improvised, building new combinations out of the flavours they already know. But when it came to cookbooks, few had ever done this mix-and-match methodology with the singular dedication of the Ottolenghi syndicate.

In lots of cuisines, dishes are stable entities, with a name and a personality and way of being made. Canard à l'orange, moules marinière, crêpes Suzette. In traditional British cooking, we have something similar. If you started calling Cornish pasties 'chuck steak, black pepper and root vegetable turnovers' or, worse still, riffed on them by adding a chermoula dip, you would be laughed out the door. But in the Ottolenghi universe, cooking is modular and iterative. This was the charm of Ottolenghi, in those early days, and the reason those books shaped the outlook of an entire generation of recipe writers: because people were reminded that you could play with food.

Fusion is crucial. Ottolenghi and Tamimi started with a few flavours loosely drawn from the Levant and twisted them with other ingredients. But especially in recent years, the Ottolenghi Test Kitchen – the group of chefs, recipe developers and writers who jointly create the 'Ottolenghi'-headed recipes – have started working with a broader palette.

In the appendix of *Flavour*, Ottolenghi's book co-authored with Ixta Belfrage, there's a list of 'flavour bombs': fenugreek marinade, sweet tamarind dressing, chamoy, hibiscus pickled onion and date barbecue sauce, each picked from its respective cuisine for some singular property of taste. In what the writer Navneet Alang calls 'the age of the global pantry', all base units of food vocabulary are fair game – you can mix miso with British blackcurrants, harissa with lasagne. This is great news for cooks, but even better news for recipe developers, who are finding that the number of possible recipe formulations has exponentially increased. I know this because I, like so many recipe writers, spent much of the late 2010s trying to repurpose Chinese chilli oil, eventually coming up with a recipe for gnocchi with chilli crisp and Parmesan. A year or two later, Mob kitchen put out their own take on this, and I hate to say this, but it was better than mine.

The Ottolenghi machine got its start at a time before Instagram but in the food blogging heyday – when the recipe world online was competitive enough to demand originality, but hadn't yet raged out of control. Today, things are amplified. The most successful recipe developers are testing the limits of the methods Ottolenghi popularised. When I spoke to Ben Lebus – the founder of Mob – he compared the process to making music. There are countless ways of reconfiguring the notes, most of them exciting. This new influx of recipes can be weird and unexpected, with the compositional balance of jazz. And so, if you go to Mob, you'll find 'Honey Harissa Carrots with Whipped Feta', and 'Chipotle Chicken Mac and Cheese'. There's Sophie Wyburd's smart recipe for

'Squash and Chorizo Orzo with Hazelnut Gremolata'. Subscribe to Caroline Chambers' newsletter, 'What to Cook When You Don't Feel Like Cooking', and you'll get recipes like 'Sheet-Pan Miso Maple Mustard Chicken with Sweet Potato and Sprouts'. Right now, it's the most popular food newsletter on Substack.

In an Alison Roman recipe that did well online a few years ago, you fry the ancient triumvirate of onion, garlic and ginger in oil until fragrant. You add turmeric, red pepper flakes and chickpeas. You take your time here: the skins will tan and crisp; some will burst. Take a few of the chickpeas out of the pan, then bruise the others to help thicken the sauce. Roman will tell you to add stock and coconut milk, at which point the broth changes its character, complicating like pastis in water. You season and simmer. Towards the end, you add sliced greens. When it's time to serve, you scatter mint leaves, yoghurt, those crisped chickpeas and red pepper flakes with painterly flair. You might notice that it looks a bit like Trinidadian channa, South Indian coconut curries, or a particular version of chana dal. Officially this is 'Spiced Chickpea Stew with Coconut and Turmeric'. But you probably know it as it's come to be known online, only as 'the stew'.

Mob operates from a spacious office in East London, along the e-culture corridor that runs from Old Street through Shoreditch and up to Dalston. Ben Lebus – a tall, exactingly casual man in his early thirties – showed me around a while back. The office was lively. People were running data on their laptops and replying to comments online. A group was discussing strategy while picking the leftovers

from the morning's recipe tests. Behind a long, glass wall there was a large kitchen with banks of ovens and long, open countertops, with windows looking on to the street below. This is where the team photograph and film whatever they've been working on. Lebus presides over thirty full-time employees, churning out between sixty and a hundred recipes per month. More than a cook, Lebus is a tactician. Increasingly, he's seeing traditional publishers as competitors. 'They are buying recipes and selling them,' he explained. 'And that's what we're doing.'

Lebus started Mob after seeing that his friends at university didn't have the confidence to cook much more than pesto pasta. He worked on recipes that could feed four people for less than £10. He fine-tuned a beetroot risotto, made sesame noodles with sugarsnap peas and hacked homemade fish and chips. He roped in his friends – guys with cameras, guys with a decent suite of Adobe software, guys in bands – to produce the videos. Because it was a brand and not a blog, recipes felt like sneaker drops: teased for a couple of days, then delivered as though this was what you'd been asking for all along. Lebus did market research in the comment section, developing only what he already suspected he could sell. The recipes stacked up, and Lebus got more help. The 'mob' in Mob is the collective of chefs, recipe developers, writers and online-famous cooks – some in-house, some freelance – who create all this content.

What Lebus and countless internet-based recipe developers understand is that a recipe works not just if it works, but if it sells. Here is how things used to work: You bought a one-size-fits-all cookbook. Inside this cookbook, which for some people would be their only cookbook, you'd

have a decent selection of day-to-day recipes. Maybe Freda DeKnight's *The Ebony Cookbook*, or Delia Smith's *Complete Cookery Course*. You could get more or less everything you needed from a book like this – a basic puff pastry explainer, a failsafe recipe for roast turkey, chocolate cake, baked Alaska – everything a pre-digital cook could conceivably need, and a few extras thrown in for luck. But even in the biggest book, and some of them were literally called bibles and encyclopedias, the choice was finite. For the most part you would have to take what you were given. A brownie was a brownie. If it was a mind-blowing brownie . . . well, that's a perk.

As I write this, it strikes me that it sounds like a scare story about communist-era grocery stores, with one kind of chocolate bar and one cereal and one state-brand cola-adjacent pop. But with recipes, limits can be enabling. At home we've got a copy of Giorgio Locatelli's *Made in Italy*. In it, there are maybe three recipes that I make, but when I do make them I go for it. I'm not window-shopping for the best recipe for ragù, I'm not 'seeing a few people right now', or cross-referencing with something I saw some nerd on Reddit say. I'm not having to pick out this ragù from a lineup of tens of thousands of possible ragùs, and so it's free to just be itself. Choosing the recipe is easy, because I already chose the book – and the authority of that book, and the author, are the things that have me hooked.

The power of cookbooks is relational. It's about how the recipes are arranged, which things are included, which things conspicuously aren't, the shape and substance of a foreword and how it relates to the text, who wrote it and who they wrote it for. I have cookbooks that map out an

entire cuisine, and other ones that are more like memoirs, and some that are just compendia of plausibly helpful kitchen trivia, but in any case, they add up to more than the sum of the recipes inside them. But when a recipe breaks free on to the internet, everything changes, and it has to make it on its own. This starts with the visuals.

There have been photo cookbooks for decades, but if you have any cookbooks from any time before the Clinton administration you'll know that the photos haven't always been enticing. You know the deal – a spiced cider baked ham, cooked in the microwave until shrunken and uniformly pink, then retrofitted with orange segments and maraschino cherries like the back of a nuclear armadillo. To make sure that it pops, this comes on a bed of curly parsley. This is in *Microwave Cooking the Amana Way*, by the way, which was published in 1982. Just in case you need to see it yourself.

I have a copy of the *Hamlyn New All Colour Cookbook* from the late eighties. It is, despite every recipe having a photo and this being the entire point of the book, the least appetising cookbook I own. The three-colour layered moulded vegetable terrine, for instance – a dish that is already, definitionally doing too much – has been flanked with watercress leaves. A carving knife has been placed, slightly askew, at the edge of the plate, in much the same way as you might plant a weapon at a crime scene. The photos do a job, which is to show you – with the orthographic clarity of an architectural drawing – what the dish is supposed to look like. But beyond that, nothing. It's illustrative, and that seems to be enough.

Other cookbooks were more practical, and you'd see how to make something like fondant fancies in a step-by-step photo grid. In higher-end publications the photos could be more evocative, maybe a bait-and-switch photo of a Tuscan hillscape next to a recipe for ribollita, or the uptight set pieces of an issue of *Gourmet* magazine. When you look at these photos, you get the feeling that they were trying to make up for being food photos by putting the focus on the garnishes or the appliqué napkins or the tableware or the view – romanticising everything but the cooking itself. There were beautiful photos, like those by Tessa Traeger, where the food becomes a medium almost like paint or clay.

But in the nineties, paving the way for the transition from Paper Recipes to Internet Recipes, food photography changed. Suddenly it *was* about the food. Take the 1993 *Keep It Simple*, by London chef Alastair Little and Richard Whittington. The photos, taken by David Gill, are . . . kind of sexy. The photo for the ratatouille is a close-cropped photo of a split baguette in side profile. The vegetables – slippery and soft – have been piled into the sandwich, and a drop of olive oil spills over the edge. Or Martyn Thompson's food photographs in *The River Cafe Cook Book*, from 1995. I can't tell exactly how the pigeon stuffed with cotechino is supposed to work, but who cares? The focus is tight on the wine-dark skin. The bird has a deep roast gloss.

We have Nigel Slater to thank for some of the horniest food content. *Marie Claire* magazine, for which Slater was hired to write the recipes, published a cookbook in 1992. The food photographs, by Jean-Louis Bloch-Lainé and Kevin Summers, catch the food in moments of déshabillé:

mussels coaxed open, crust of a cheesy gratin broken by a spoon, juices dripping down a figgy pudding. It was, as Slater put it in the introduction, 'the decision to abandon those props, those traditional scene-setters, and the avoidance of styling and tweaking the food to look good for the camera.' It was the same at the *Observer*, where Nigel Slater moved in the early nineties, with Kevin Summers and then Jonathan Lovekin photographing the food. Everything is burst, collapsed, juicy, swollen or sizzling, and indecently close up. This new kind of photo was composed to make the food look not beautiful, as such, but craveable. It's strange now to think that recipes weren't always supposed to be thirst traps. But the most consequential parts of food culture are often the things like this – things that seem so obvious, so unquestionable, that it never occurs to us that they could be done another way.

Photo-centric recipes translated well to the internet. At the beginning, slow bandwidths had photos loading almost pixel by pixel – the world's dreariest striptease. But once things got going, especially moving into the smartphone era towards the end of the noughties, beautiful food found a natural home on blogs and on Flickr and, before long, on Instagram. Then there was video – and phones with enough storage and mobile data to actually deal with them. And it's here, in the intensely visual, photographic world of social media that this new wave of recipe creation took off. It needed people who knew how to work the algorithms to their advantage.

An Instagram feed is totally visual. Recipes come to you without any context or even a title until you tap through to the caption. In this recipe economy, it's harder to appeal to

a person's prefrontal cortex, where the reasoning gets done. You follow a hedonic pathway instead: What immediately registers as delicious? Which arrangement of pixels is craveable? So, on Mob, there are no world-building photos of figs in a hand-thrown bowl next to an £80 candle on a faux French provincial linen tea towel from Toast. Mob style means shooting against stainless steel and in natural light – an approach that makes the colours pop. Scroll down the Mob Instagram grid and you'll see that photos crop close to the bowl. 'I don't like anything extraneous around the dish,' Lebus told me. 'It's just about the food.'

Even the colours are strategised. Take that sausage and gochujang pasta – when I asked Lebus why he thought it did so well, he just said: 'Orange.' As is traditional in the culture of tech start-ups, he's been listening to pop psychology podcasts. 'Orange is the colour that makes people hungry,' he explained. 'It's why the McDonald's logo is yellow and red.' He added that blue doesn't occur naturally in food – even blueberries are a kind of dusky, purple bruise – which is why it's often used in diet company branding. If you scroll through Mob recipes, the palette is mostly the same shades of sunset, yolk, terracotta, mahogany, vermilion and tar that you'd find in a New York-style cheese slice.

The most important part of Mob's visual presence is the videos: it's here that the craving content comes to life, in close-ups of melted cheese and the soft bubble of pasta. You see fat, slick gnocchi jiggling in the pan. You see Parmesan snow. You see things flow and drip. The sound is important too, weighted towards crunches and crackles and the lubricious squelch of a stirred mac and cheese. It's incredibly sensory, sometimes even whole-body satisfying.

In many ways it's like a cross between the glossy food porn of the nineties, and YouTube-era ASMR. Instead of that back-of-the-neck tingling feeling, you just feel your stomach start to groan.

Because Mob grew up on social media, they speak this language fluently, but all this is becoming standard practice. Even legacy publications are moving towards snappier recipes that can hold their own on the grid. Tell me why, when I tapped through to *The New York Times* cooking pages a while ago, the first thing I saw was a close photo of a grilled cheese and cranberry sandwich, double stacked, with a tongue of hot, melted Cheddar oozing out? Even the language is changing shape. Alison Roman's 'Crispy, Salty Latkes'. 'Crispy, sticky, creamy,' former Mob developer and cookbook author Sophie Wyburd told me, explaining the methodologies behind viral recipes. 'People love those words.'

Only half of a recipe is what it makes; the other half is what makes the recipe – the name, the words it uses, if it plays to the senses, a picture, whether it suggests or demands, the length, the deployment or avoidance of words like *sauté*. How you choose these parts depends on what you want the recipe to do and, importantly, who you want to sell it to. Ben Lebus denies that there's any Mob recipe formula, which I guess is probably true in a limited sense, but you only need to look at the Mob website to see that online recipes have their own syntax and that this is changing how we find recipes, how recipes find us, and even what we crave.

When you talk to Lebus, it can be hard to get a sense of

what he likes – which cookbooks he uses, which restaurants have changed his perspective, what food means to him. I got the impression that perhaps he'd spent too long trying to figure out what other people want to see. Over the last year or so, he's been expanding the Mob vision, figuring out ways to optimise what he sees as the 'recipe delivery ecosystem'. 'There are cookbooks. There are very quick social media videos that are often very hard to follow. There are old recipe blogs that are filled with ads and in no way created with the user in mind.' This seems to mean creating a huge, seamless ur-cookbook, one ultra-craveable recipe at a time.

Mob joins an already crowded field. We have recipe blogs, cooking forums, the online outposts of food magazines, YouTube tutorials, TikTok semi-recipes, and the prolific output of places like *The New York Times*, or the *Guardian*, or *Bon Appétit*. Then you've got the Substack-ers, the independent recipe developers, the Instagram queens, and the new-wave brocore set like Bosh or Thug Kitchen. Lots of these recipes were written on the internet, for the internet and, a lot of the time, specifically for social media. Taken together, recipe factories like this contract legions of recipe developers, videographers, editors, photographers, dieticians and cultural advisers, making sure that no matter how many iterations of carbonara there are online, there will always be a new, more clickable one. The paradox is that we've decided that the answer to having too many recipes to choose from is writing more.

On the seventh day, they cooked

Or, how newspaper supplements invented British foodies

I can't remember ever buying a newspaper for the news. As far as I see it, the news sections are fish-and-chip wrapping for the lifestyle supplements inside. Online – where, if I am being honest, I get most of my so-called news – it's the food and lifestyle section that I always navigate to first. Yes, I would like to see a selection of autumn sweaters with statement worm-thick weaves. Now I come to think of it, I'd love to know how to prune the roses I don't have. How do you prepare lips for a matte finish lipstick? What are property prices looking like in Stroud? It makes for a welcome fugue state on a Sunday afternoon. It's also nice to know that, in contrast to the infinite scroll of my Instagram feed, this thing has a beginning and an end.

The best part is the food pages – the photograph-heavy recipes and Christmas pudding round-ups and restaurant reviews that pad out the rear end of the magazine and, sometimes, a supplement of their own. Even when I was a kid I liked these pages. At the time it was Nigel Slater,