

CULINARY

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WORDS THAT

SIZZLE

Cookbooks and the stores that sell them break new ground

BY DEE GIBNEY



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The Cookbook Store
850 Yonge Street, Toronto
416-920-2665
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The Good Egg
267 Augusta Avenue, Toronto
416-593-4663
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“We have the top chefs in the world come into our store, but we also get excited about giving someone their very first cookbook.”

The Cookbook Store on the corner of Yonge and Yorkville has sold culinary wisdom for 30 years, with manager Alison Fryer (right, top) and assistant manager Jennifer Grange (right, middle) being there since the start. Even non-cooks appreciate beautiful cookbooks, said Fryer, who sees cookbooks as extensions of conversations about our favourite foods.



COOKBOOKS HAVE GONE RISQUÉ. Take a peek inside *Fifty Shades of Chicken* (a best-selling culinary parody of *Fifty Shades of Grey*) and you'll find chapter headings such as *Mustard Spanked Chicken* and *Learning to Truss You* and others a little too racy to mention. Each recipe is preceded by a sizzling page-long prologue, a witty spoof of the original.

“The cookbook is much better written than the original,” offered Jennifer Grange. Assistant manager of The Cookbook Store for three decades, she was barely visible, seated at the cash register behind the prominently displayed book.

Betty Crocker this is not. Satire aside, the book's recipes are for real. Which is to say that today there is something for everyone, an eclectic array far beyond what Fannie Farmer ever had to offer—although this basic American tome that taught generations to cook is still carried by both The Cookbook Store, a fixture where Yonge Street meets Yorkville, and The Good Egg, Kensington Market's upstart, whimsical, yet cleverly curated ode to all things culinary.

At The Good Egg you'll find rubber chickens strung up against an abstract-design Marimekko curtain. A Buddha butter dish graces the Japanese cooking section. A sausage-link dog leash (one of the jam-packed store's biggest sellers) hangs next to books with titles such as *Real Food for Dogs*.



Whether it's beautifully grained tamarack cutting boards, a \$340 enamelled cast iron Staub pot or a sleek five-dollar vegetable peeler, owner Mika Bareket's gadgets all meet the same criteria: good value for the price, good function and good design. And did we mention novelty? You'll find bacon-flavoured dental floss in a small basket by the cash register.

Unique aesthetics and multiple interests inform many of Bareket's choices: books on art and typography, on music, travel, crafts, comics, gardening, science, politics, fashion, sports and fitness. They all relate to food in one way or another, she said: "Cooking is chemistry. Music and travel enhance our experience of food. We respect the occasion by dressing up when invited to dinner. Geometry and physics determine how to efficiently cut an onion."

If she had to pick a favourite book, it would be award-winning author Nigel Slater's *Appetite*. "It's one of the first cookbooks I ever bought, and it really resonated with me. It felt like a familiar voice, like a friend guiding me. He is our patron saint here in the store. His writing is clear and funny and full of personality. It's like he is in the room with you, holding your hand through the process."

Like The Good Egg, The Cookbook Store covers cuisine from every region on Earth. Both shops also offer a range of classes, from knife skills to cooking with offal. 🍴



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The Good Egg reflects owner Mika Bareket's background in art, sketch comedy and children's books. "I tell kids they're real," Bareket joked about the sausage links on a dog leash. Marimekko-design aprons create a colourful tableau in one corner, and whimsical book titles generate smiles.



What makes a specialty store different from a well-stocked general bookstore is knowledge, said Alison Fryer, who has managed The Cookbook Store since its inception. With a staggering 20,000 titles being launched every year, editing a collection and staying on top of the trends is never a finite task. Old becomes new again for a new generation.

“We have the top chefs in the world come into our store,” said Fryer, “but we also get excited about giving someone their very first cookbook. We like to play detective and match people’s skill sets with the right kind of book. We are not going to give the *Joy of Cooking* to a teenage first-time cook even though it’s a classic. It’s way too text-dense.

“My staff and I have read at least 90 per cent of the books in the store. We listen to customers’ feedback on their experience with a particular book. And we carry long-time classics that go back decades in addition to the contemporary books.”

Bareket has a similar take on the customer relationship: “I like to think of The Good Egg as a hub for conversations about food. Customers are part of the store’s culture. They ask for advice. They exchange tips with each other. They recommend things, so they influence our inventory.

“I think smaller shops like us are more personal, quirkier and therefore more exciting. You never know what you’re going to find. We’re a little more offbeat,” she said, “and our displays are sometimes very tongue in cheek. We like to surprise people and make them smile.”

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“We listen to our customers’ ideas, which lead us into different tangents and trends,” said Mika Bareket, who notes that food culture is strong in Kensington Market where many new grocers have chef backgrounds. Alison Fryer said that cookbooks are passed down through generations, and “there’s no better compliment than a splattered, stuck together, falling apart cookbook.”