

THE HOME FRONT

Velveeta Fudge Meets Its Public

Glossy New Cookbooks Celebrate Amateur Chefs' Creations; One Recipe, 3 Cans of Soup

BY ROBERT J. HUGHES

MARINA CASTLE-HENRY is an airport-baggage screener in Burbank, Calif., JB Miller works for a church-financing company in Indianapolis, and Wendy Paffenroth is an educator in Pine Island, N.Y. They're also home cooks whose recipes have appeared in some of the biggest-selling cookbooks in the country.

Ms. Castle-Henry's Veggie Turkey Pizza is in "The Taste of Home Annual Cookbook," published by the magazine of the same name. Readers of the "Fix It and Forget It" series, published by Good Books, can find Mr. Miller's Tuscan-Style Ribs with Balsamic Glaze in "Fix It and Enjoy It." And Ms. Paffenroth's "Rise and Shine Quiche" is featured in "Fall Family and Friends," one of the Gooseberry Patch books.

Until recently, works by professional food writers and celebrity chefs ruled the cookbook aisles of mass-market retailers like Barnes & Noble and Borders. Recipes by home cooks, meanwhile, were relegated to the sort of spiral-bound editions put out by church groups and hospital guilds. But now, amateurs are muscling in on the pros in a growing category of cookbooks that pairs homey reader-supplied recipes like Potluck Wiener Bake and Cheery Cherry Cheese Balls with glossy covers, four-color photography and major-league press runs.

A collection from the ladies of the Red Hat Society, the national organization that celebrates women over 50, has sold 106,000 copies since it was released in October, according to its publisher, Rutledge Hill Press. (The average cookbook is considered successful if it sells 50,000 copies, industry experts say.) Gooseberry Patch, an online-catalog company in Delaware, Ohio, that sells country-style housewares, has put out more than 50 collections of recipes contributed by its customers and sold more than seven million copies. Last fall, it introduced three new titles, each with printings of about 100,000 copies. Next month, Chronicle Books is releasing a selection of winning recipes from amateur-baking competitions around the country. And William Morrow is



Clockwise from top left: JB Miller, a 'Fix-It and Forget It' contributor, prepares chili; Kathy Grashoff, with an apple crumble for Gooseberry Patch; 'Taste of Home' regular Inge Schemerhorn makes goat cheese and onion quesadillas.

Kitchen Pro-Am (clockwise, above left): JB Miller, a "Fix-It and Forget It" contributor, prepares chili; Kathy Grashoff, with an apple crumble for Gooseberry Patch; "Taste of Home" regular Inge Schemerhorn makes goat cheese and onion quesadillas.

Pellman Good. "These are great cooks we've come to know through the years and have cultivated," she says.

Home-grown recipe collections go back to the 19th century. During the Civil War, women raised money for bandages and other medical supplies by selling homemade books of recipes, says Jan Longone, a curator of American culinary history at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. By the 1890s, she says, "every state in the union had charity cookbooks." About the same time, newspapers and magazines started to ask readers to contribute recipes, which were published in the periodicals and then collected into books, a practice continued to this day.

Gourmet magazine editor-in-chief Ruth Reichl believes the current popularity of reader recipes reflects a desire for community. "There's a huge segment of the population that takes great comfort from cooking and knowing that a recipe

"We live in the great golden age of the amateur," says Christopher Kimball, founder and editor of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* magazines. Recipe sharing, he says, is part of our one-can-do-it culture, from "American Idol" to "Dancing With the Stars." Mr. Kimball's company plans to publish a cookbook of "lost recipes," made up of entrees sent in by readers.

planning to publish two books of recipes sent in by readers to American Profile, a newspaper supplement that reaches 7.5 million readers.

Folksy, but Fattening

The cuisine tends to be more home-style than haute—cakes and casseroles are mainstays—and many recipe titles have an old-fashioned feel, such as Martha's Cabbage Stew from the "American Profile Hometown Cookbook." Some recipes are inventive. The recipe for Zucchini-Wrapped Scallops in "Taste of Home Cookbook" includes a marinade of Caribbean jerk seasoning and scallops wrapped in thin strips of raw zucchini so they stay moist while being grilled. But other creations aren't likely to appear at sophisticated dinner parties—Velveeta Fudge, for example, from the "Red Hat Society Cookbook." Primary ingredients: ½ lb. of the processed cheese, ½ lb. butter, 1½ lbs. confectioner's sugar and ½ cup of cocoa. ("Definitely fun to make," reads the accompanying note. "Let your chapter judge whether it's fun to eat.")

Critics complain that much of this folksy fare is just plain bad—and bad for you, high in sodium and overly reliant on processed foods. But others say it is a welcome break from the hard-to-find ingredients and esoteric techniques that have been dominating much of the culinary scene, and applaud the challenge to the snobby food hierarchy.

Americans have a big appetite for cookbooks: They bought 15 million in 2006, up more than 7% from the year before, according to Nielsen BookScan. Recipes by home cooks represent a low-cost way for publishers to tap into the popularity of reader-driven content that has become a fixture of recipe Web sites and blogs and made Taste of Home magazine, with about 3.6 million subscribers, the most popular cooking magazine in the country. (Released last fall, "The Taste of Home Cookbook" has more than one million copies in print.)

And unlike big-name food writers like Marcella Hazan or Thomas Keller, who might receive sizable advances, contributors to reader-recipe cook-

books get a byline or a short bio and a copy of the cookbook. "A lot of people just want the recognition," says Vickie Hutchins, a co-founder with Jo Ann Martin of Gooseberry Patch. Some repeat customers "vie to be in every book," she says. Ms. Paffenroth is a serial submitter; her recipes are in about 30 Gooseberry Patch books. "Sometimes, five years later, I'll make the same recipe and tweak it," Ms. Paffenroth says. Then she'll send that one back to Gooseberry, too.

In fact, not all reader-recipe publishing is such a casual, over-the-transom affair; some publishers use the same "semipro" again and again. The list of contributors to the "Fix It and Forget" series is "by invitation," says its founder, Phyllis

is not from a professional cook, but from someone just like them," she says.

Taking a page from online recipe sites and blogs, publishers of reader-recipe books often print snippets of stories that writers send in with their recipes, and encourage connections among contributors and readers. That's how Ms. Paffenroth met fellow Gooseberry serial contributor Kathy Grashoff, of Fort Wayne, Ind. Both mentioned having sons in the military in notes with their recipe submissions, and the Gooseberry owners introduced them via email. The two are now pen pals.

Perfection Not Guaranteed

While cooking magazines generally have their own test kitchens—the recipes in *Gourmet*, for example, are tested repeatedly before they appear in the magazine—many cookbooks aren't so thoroughly vetted. Often it's up to the writer or editor to make sure that the recipes "work." The Gooseberry Patch recipes are tested on an ad hoc basis at company potlucks; that seems to work well enough, Ms. Hutchins says. But only about 10% to 15% of the dishes in the "Red Hat Society" cookbook were tested, according to editor Geoffrey Stone. He says the book's recipe editor was experienced enough to be able to eyeball the recipes and tell whether they would work or not but adds, "We can't guarantee that all the recipes are perfect."

Nor are they all recommended for the diet-conscious. "These recipes are not based on good cooking or good cookbook writing," says Nach Waxman, owner of Kitchen Arts & Letters, a Manhattan bookstore. "You can destroy your health just by reading them."

In general, says nutritionist Suki Hertz, who examined several of the cookbooks for *Weekend Journal*, there's bound to be too much sodium when recipes use processed foods, not to mention a few other things one should eat in moderation. A recipe for beef stroganoff from the "American Profile Hometown Cookbook" includes a can each of French onion soup, condensed cream of mushroom soup and condensed golden mushroom soup, in addition to butter and sour cream. One serving has 1.3 times the recommended daily sodium intake, Ms. Hertz says, 70% of the total fat and 90% of the saturated fat.

Such criticisms don't put off the genre's fans. "I like simple food, but good food," says Inge Schermerhorn, the wife of a retired physician in Concord, N.H., who has a collection of more than 2,000 cookbooks. Her recipe for lime cheesecake with coconut macadamia-nut crust won a blue ribbon at the Rockingham County Cooking Contest several years ago and was also featured in "Taste of Home."

"You have to know what you're doing," Mrs. Schermerhorn says. She is currently working on her next submission: chicken liver pâté in aspic.

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Robert J. Hughes tries his hand at Spaghetti Pie and several other home-spun recipes and tells the tale at WSJ.com/link/homefront

Homey on the Range

Here are some new cookbooks that tap into Americans' hunger for simple, homestyle cooking.

COOKBOOK / AUTHOR / PUBLISHER	COMMENT
Everyday Food: Great Food Fast Martha Stewart Living / Potter	From the three-year-old magazine. Most dishes take less than 30 minutes to make and use easy-to-find ingredients. Sample recipe: Strawberry Shortcake.
From Warehouse to Your House Sally Sampson / Simon & Schuster	Dishes to make with food bought in bulk at giant warehouse stores, such as Oatmeal Lace Cookies. (Yield: 12 dozen.) Ms. Sampson's other books include "The \$50 Dinner Party."
Not Your Mother's Slow Cooker Recipes for Two Beth Hensperger / Harvard Common Press	Taking a cue from the popular "Fix-it and Forget-it" slow-cooker series, this book by a James Beard Award-winner focuses on make-ahead cooking for two, such as Turkey Chili with Baby White Beans.
Robin Miller: Quick Fix Meals Robin Miller / The Taunton Press	From the host of the popular eponymous Food Network show. Ms. Miller is not a trained chef but has a master's degree in nutrition. "Chef recipes are too complicated," she says.
Sara Foster's Casual Cooking Sara Foster, Carolyn Carreño / Potter	The third cookbook by the owner of a take-out business in North Carolina focuses on homey fare such as Grilled Bacon, Egg and Cheddar Cheese Breakfast Sandwiches.