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Recipe royalty: The new food celeb is your neighbor

By Robert J. Hughes
The Wall Street Journal/April 01, 2007

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.

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 Miller's Tuscan-Style Ribs With Balsamic Glaze in "Fix It and Enjoy It." And 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.

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."

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.

"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 anyone-can-do-it culture, from "American Idol" to "Dancing With the Stars."

And unlike big-name food writers such as Marcella Hazan and Thomas Keller, who might receive sizable advances, contributors to reader-recipe cookbooks 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.

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," she says. Then she'll send that one back to Gooseberry, too. 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 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 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 e-mail. The two are now pen pals.

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