



Life-Changing Cookbooks: *How to Cook Everything*

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In December of 1998, I was six months out of college, had my first real job, and was living in my own apartment for the first time. After several months of take-out, frozen pizza, and meals composed entirely of snacks, my credits cards and my body were worse for wear and I decided it was time to change. *How to Cook Everything*, by Mark Bittman, had just come out and was getting lots of attention. I'd walk by it every time I was in a bookstore, taken in by its cheerful yellow cover and the emphatic italicized *Everything*: How To Cook *Everything*, it said, followed by "Simple Recipes for Great Food". This might be it, I thought. This might be the book that will transform me into the adult I want to be. Someone who goes into the kitchen with ease and purpose and turns out good food that is fit for presentation and consumption by other people.

I had just had dinner at a friend's house, where she served a giant, messy, delicious tofu and sweet potato curry over rice. I sat in the kitchen with her while she cooked, which she did entirely casually, carrying on a conversation, chopping up vegetables, and listening to music. When I asked her for a recipe at the end of the night, she said she didn't have one; she just made it up as she went along. I had watched her tasting here, adding more salt or spice there, turning the heat down when she mysteriously decided that was necessary—I wanted to do that, too. *How To Cook Everything* seemed full of promise, like a book of spells I would read and use to create something new. I asked for and received it for Christmas. I was on my way.

The first time I had attempted to make dinner for a group of people, it had been an unmitigated disaster. I was 17 years old, left home alone for a long summer weekend for the first time, and desperate to impress my best friend and two guys we'd been hanging out with over the past month. Another 17-year-old might have used her parents' absence and an empty house as an excuse to throw a wild, teen movie style kegger with motorcycles driving through the living room window and down the rec room stairs and metal bands staging an epic Battle of the Bands on the front lawn, and the thought did cross my mind, but I wanted to do something sophisticated. Mature. *Adult*. I wanted to host a dinner party. Until that fateful evening, I had never done much cooking for other people beyond the occasional spaghetti from a jar over pasta. I decided to be daring and serve my friends spicy shrimp and tomatoes over polenta, which I had had at another friend's house several months before. I didn't have a recipe for this dish, but I figured it couldn't be too difficult. I drove to the grocery store and bought a ring of frozen cooked shrimp, which cost a full day of my salary as a day camp counselor, a can of crushed tomatoes (despite the fact that there were delicious tomatoes growing behind my house in my mother's garden), and a box of instant polenta. I drove home, unloaded my groceries (*my* groceries!), took a deep breath, and got to work. I served the meal at a candlelit table with cloth napkins, bursting with pride, feeling as if I was taking part in some sort of ritual or ceremony, that the act of serving a meal to a group of friends would transform me in some definite, subtle yet palpable way.

As soon as I took the first bite, I wanted to yank the tablecloth off the table and take every plate with it. The shrimp was rubbery, the tomatoes were mealy, the polenta was crunchy, and worst of all, none of this mattered because I had doused everything in way too much cayenne pepper, rendering everything inedible. Thankfully, I was spared sitting through the horror of my guests politely choking down their portions; there was no politeness to be had as everyone spit out their first mouthfuls, jumped up from the table, and insisted we just go to McDonald's like they'd wanted to do in the first place. Cooking's not for me, I decided, scraping the expensive failure into the trashcan, blowing out the candles, and hoping my best friend would spot me some Happy Meal money.

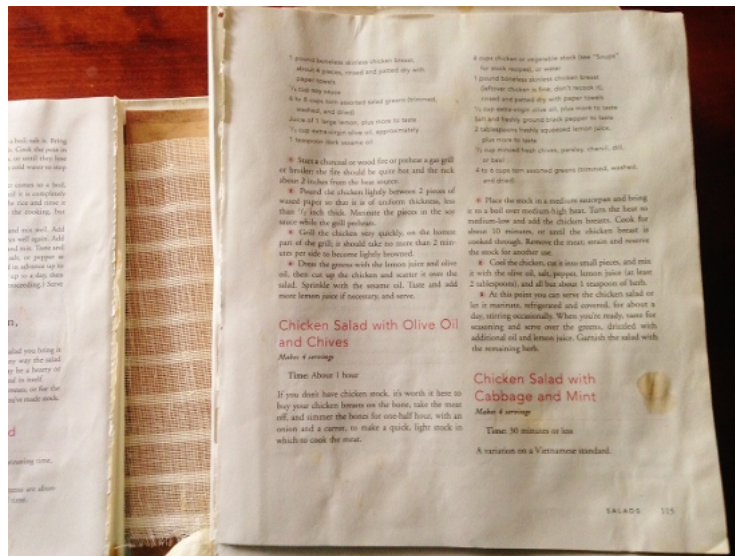
Cooking well seemed to me to be an inherent gift that some people were just born with. In June of 1998, I was about to graduate from college. I went to a friend's apartment for a celebratory dinner. She served a roast chicken with garlic, mashed potatoes, and grilled asparagus. It was as if she had invited a few people over and casually unfurled a pair of wings she'd been hiding under her clothes. How did she do this? I tasted grilled asparagus for the first time during this meal—how did she know to grill instead of steam? Where did one go to learn these secrets? This woman and I had gone through four years of school together; now we were almost done and she was able to cook and serve an entire well-balanced, attractive, delicious meal for a group of friends. I was still pouring jarred spaghetti sauce over usually overcooked pasta on a good day. I felt immature, stunted, and lacking. It seemed to me that the ultimate sign of being a grown, capable adult was not only being able to feed oneself, but to be able to feed a group of people. The idea of having to prepare an entire meal for anyone other than me filled me with panic and dread. The fact that I had several job interviews lined up, that I had plans to leave the small town I was from and move to Boston as soon as possible, which I did just a few months later, suddenly meant very little to me. Cooking seemed so basic but so necessary and so impossible. Six months later, *How To Cook Everything* offered hope. *Everything. Simple. Great Food.* Tell me your secrets, Mark Bittman!



I still have and use my original copy. The binding is broken and many of the pages are sticky and stained. One of the more disgusting pages is the one with the recipe for Weekday Morning Scrambled Eggs. As a new city resident, I was still charmed and impressed by going to brunch, which I often did twice per weekend, and thus a good portion of the aforementioned credit card debt was due to overpriced egg dishes. I figured I could make my own eggs at home, but quickly realized despite being served scrambled eggs at least weekly throughout the first ten years of my life, I had no idea how to make them myself. Weekend after weekend I opened *How To Cook Everything* to page 735 and once again attempted to cook Weekday Morning Scrambled Eggs. It was always the weekend when I tried to do this, but the Best Scrambled Eggs on the next page required 40 minutes of time, cream, and tarragon—I felt entirely overwhelmed and outclassed just reading the recipe.

Weekday Morning Scrambled Eggs turned out to be plenty challenging; rather than simply following the recipe exactly as it was written, I attempted to use my friend's curry-making method. I played music and danced around the kitchen, throwing in whatever spices caught my fancy. I didn't read closely, and kept my burner turned up high, slinging the eggs in and wondering why they turned brown as soon as I started to stir them. I was inspired by one variation, Scrambled Eggs with Onion, and added the haphazardly chopped onions *after* adding the eggs, shocked to the core when the result was overcooked, discolored eggs with nearly raw onions and way too much paprika. I thought having a cookbook was enough, and I thought real cooks cooked by instinct, and now that I had a cookbook and was making an effort, I was instantly a real cook. I didn't realize that cooking is a skill that takes care and practice. I didn't realize you have to follow the recipes and pay attention to directions like "turn the burner to medium-low" and "cook until the onion is translucent. but not brown, about five minutes. Add the eggs."

It's been 17 years since my college friend blew my mind with her roasted chicken meal, and to this day, I have not dared to roast my own chicken. Unlike much of the rest of the book, the Poultry section is pristine. I have read the the "Basics of Roast Chicken" section many, many times. It starts out: "The 'secret' of roast chicken is simple: Start with a good bird, time the cooking properly, and serve it promptly." Why is *secret* in quotation marks, Mark Bittman? What makes a bird a good bird? Timing cooking properly continues to seem like some sort of sorcery, even though I do now take the time to read basic directions and cooking times. How can I ever be sure that I'll be able to serve a roast chicken promptly, knowing how hard it is to time side dishes to be done at the same time as the main dish? Can I call myself a functional adult if I serve a possibly mediocre, probably improperly timed roast chicken to a group of friends and then offer them an overdressed salad and maybe some hastily mashed potatoes half an hour later? To avoid addressing these anxiety-inducing questions, I quickly turn the pages away from the Basics of Roast Chicken, explicit chicken-trussing diagram be damned. Maybe, just maybe, by the time 2018 rolls around, I'll celebrate 20 years with *How To Cook Everything* and attempt to truss a good, well-timed, prompt chicken of my very own.



The chicken dish I *do* go back to again and again, as evidenced by the broken binding and stained, wrinkled pages, is Chicken Salad with Olive Oil and Chives. This recipe calls for poaching chicken breasts in stock, letting it cool, cutting it into small pieces, and mixing it with olive oil, salt, pepper, lemon juice, and chives. This is the kind of cooking I am actually capable of doing after sixteen and a half years, more or less, but I still re-read the poaching directions before I make it—boil stock over medium-high heat; turn the heat to medium-low; add the chicken breasts; cook for about ten minutes. This recipe is improved by non-cooking techniques like using the best olive oil I can afford, which is not particularly expensive olive oil, so it's forgiving, too. It also calls for my favorite ingredient, fresh herbs, which I grow on my porch or windowsill—including tarragon! I figure growing edible plants gives me at least ten grown person points, so I worry about my cooking-related grown person points a little less. Believe it or not, poaching chicken is rare enough that people are impressed by the chicken's juiciness and texture—I realized this chicken salad was a hit after I served it to my tofu-curry, no recipes required friend and she asked me “HOW did you make this chicken?! It's so tender!”

Just last night, my boyfriend and I served dinner to five other people. We made a recipe we've perfected together over the last several years—black bean tacos. There is no recipe for black bean tacos—we sauté onions and garlic, add black beans, add salt, pepper, and whatever spices are around and sound good (last night it was cumin and chili powder), add whatever other vegetables are around and sound good (last night it was red peppers and potatoes) and serve with tortillas and top with whatever's around that sounds good (last night it was my mother's fresh tomatoes, avocado, cheese, and salsa.) It uses one pot and is hearty and varied enough that there's no need for the wizardry of side dishes. My onion-chopping technique came from *How To Cook Everything*—I actually *don't* need to check the illustration anymore, after years of doing so. I've practiced enough that chopping onions is now a skill that I can use while preparing something with care and, within reason, by instinct, without a recipe.

Karen Corday lives, writes, reads, eats, drinks, naps, and occasionally cooks in Western Massachusetts (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190721074526/https://www.pastemagazine.com/tag/Massachusetts>). Follow her on Twitter: [@k_files](https://twitter.com/k_files) (https://web.archive.org/web/20190721074526/https://twitter.com/k_files).

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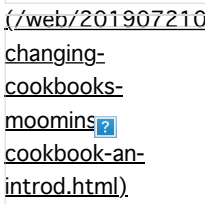
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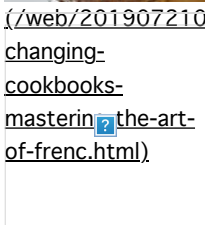
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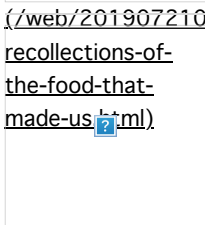
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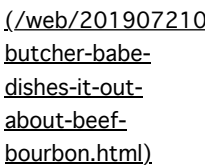
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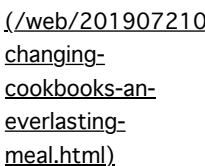
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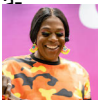
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