

Writers with just the right RECIPE

The best cookbooks are the ones that stir your imagination, says Sue Bailey



Asking me to write about cookbooks that stir my foodie soul is a bit like making me choose between my two daughters. How can I judge between the more than 500 volumes wedged into every conceivable space in our cottage and outside study? I can say that the most recent celebrity chef or latest insta-vegan food blogger will not make my shortlist.

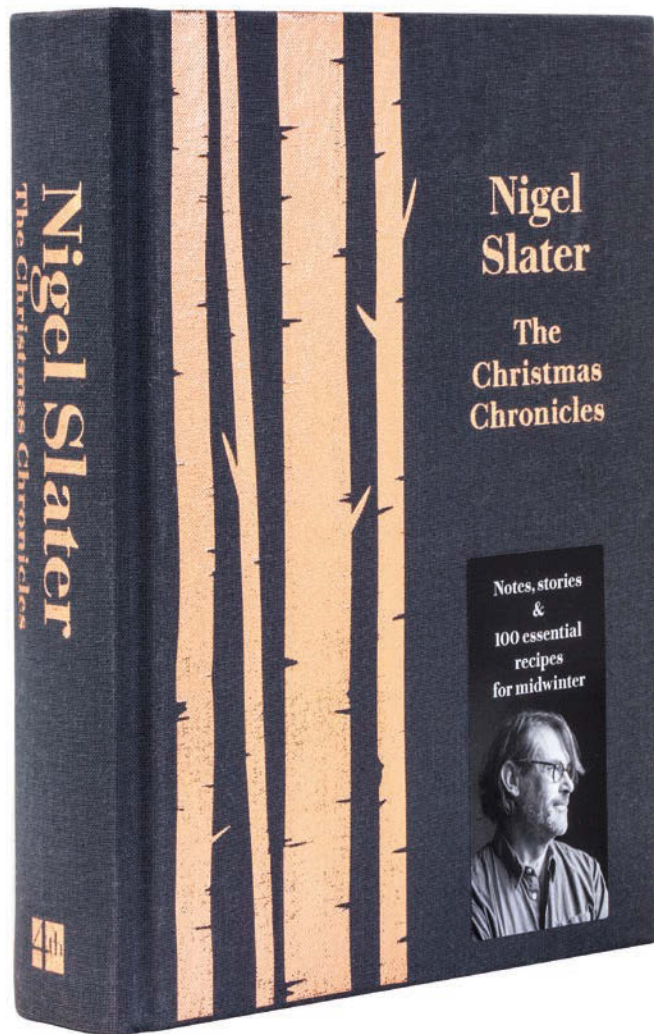
Many recipe books do not inspire or tell a story, so I am strict in my purchases. I define myself as a confident and competent, rather than cautious, cook. I need more than just a recipe that I could otherwise look up on the internet, something that feeds my imagination.

Historically, books that started me on my food journey would be *The Cookery Year* from Readers Digest and *The Times Cookery Book* by Katie Stewart, which belonged to my mother. Although Elizabeth David's early books are classics, I now prefer her book of food articles – *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine* – which is less dated than her recipe books.

I would rather read a book written by a cook rather than a chef, because a cookery writer understands the home kitchen. In addition, authentic food photography can be stunning but I prefer using my imagination, although the odd inspirational illustration does not go amiss.

Nigel Slater is one of my favourite writers because of his use of words. He makes even fashionable-but-often-chewy kale sound interesting in his book *Tender: A Cook and His Vegetable Patch*. His diary-like *Christmas Chronicles* is my favourite. Slater evokes the tang of misty pre-winter mornings mixed with reflections on childhood pleasures. His glimmering word-pictures mixed with comfort recipes is my bedside late autumn reading.

But now, as I walk through the spring leafiness of my garden, I decide that I need sun and inspiration. For this I always turn to Diana Henry's first book, *Crazy Water, Pickled Lemons*, which grabbed me almost 20 years ago. It contains lyrical Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African recipes. She combines intriguing recipes and food culture spiced with personal anecdotes, through which her



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warm personality shines. She is the modern-day version of my mother's favourite, Josceline Dimbleby. I would pair this with a recent find, *The Flavour Thesaurus* by Niki Segnit, who writes about flavour combinations in a wholly new way.

I also like a challenge. I want to try the *Palastin*, a new book about Palestinian food

by Yotam Ottolenghi's work partner Sami Tamimi and Tara Wigley. An old favourite though, is *Moro* by Sam and Sam Parker. I remember the long wooden tables and baba ganoush mezze when we used to eat there when we lived in north London.

For technique, the River Cottage handbook-style texts of the sadly now clean-shaven Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall have always been reliable. I bought his and Fizz Carr's *Family Cookbook* for my younger daughter when she went to university and it is still one of her favourites. I admire his enthusiasm and commitment to seasonal, ethically produced food plus his environmental campaigning.

A recent rediscovery in this current crisis is *Cooking for Chaps*. My personal chap is learning a lot and is surprising me with his creations.

To finish, I must not forget the one-name food-writing stars: Nigella, Jamie, and Delia, who are all excellent on the basics and comfort food. However, I would rather refer to books by Allen or Claudia Roden, plus any books by Elisabeth Luard or Bee Wilson. These give me history, culture, something to make me think and stories to stir my soul – not just ingredients and recipes. ■