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Cooks and **books** for your shopping list

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Settling on the perfect Christmas gift is seldom easy " unless you're buying for a cook. Then, shopping is as simple as heading to the nearest bookstore. Some years there's one over–the–top, gotta–have–it cookbook. Though there's no single standout this year, the current crop of cookbooks offers something to please every cook on your list, be they beginner or accomplished, baker or savory–maker. Here are 10 to consider for the foodie on your list.

"Robin Takes Five "

By Robin Miller(**Andrews McMeel Publishing**, \$29.99, 401 pages)

The **book**:It's 5 p.m.: Do you know what you're fixing for dinner tonight? With Robin Miller's help, you can figure it out with the flip of a few pages. This isn't the flashiest **book** on the shelf, but if you're a busy parent, it will likely be the one you use the most. Miller, a best–selling **author**, host of Food Network's "Quick Fix Meals " and mother of two sons, knows what it's like to have to get a healthful, quick meal on the table in a matter of minutes and can help you accomplish the same.

The recipes:With a maximum of five ingredients (not counting oil, salt and pepper), these recipes couldn't be easier, yet the 380 entrA(c)e recipes (out of 500 total) are sophisticated enough to appeal to parents who want more than chicken nuggets and pizza. Cashew–Crusted Chicken with Roasted Jalapeno Chutney, Gruyere–Wrapped Steaks with Port Wine Glaze, Crunchy Asian Slaw with Fried Noodles and Bittersweet Fudge with Dried Cherries are typical recipes.

The gravy:Icons set off recipes that are perfect for entertaining or have low sodium. All recipes, including desserts, contain fewer than 500 calories, and many contain less than 500 milligrams of sodium.

"Molto Batali: Simple Family Meals From My Home to Yours "

By Mario Batali(Ecco, \$29.99, 322 pages)

The **book**:When he began his career, Mario Batali appeared to take his marching orders from the culinary division of Starship Command: he was boldly going where no chefs had gone before. After all the flash and fame that spawned cooking shows, cookbooks and cookware, the Batali brand seems to be operating comfortably on cruise control. And that's a good thing: "Molto Batali " is a straightforward cookbook that acknowledges family meals and the spirit of community at the dinner table. **The cookbook** is organized by month; each chapter contains a variety of pair–worthy apps, starters and sweets that allow cooks to organize a festive dinner.

The recipes: The recipes are simple enough for the home cook to accomplish and diverting enough to entice the fussy foodie. They include robust pastas, hearty roasted meats and vegetables, delectable side dishes, soulful stews and crunchy salads and filling casseroles and gratins. Batali's signature flourishes of fresh herbs, sharp cheeses, zippy vinegars, peppery greens, fat-bolstered charcuterie and slicks of olive oil abound.

The gravy: A helpful glossary of the Italian larder at the end of the **book** underscores the culinary gospel Batali has been preaching since day one.

"The Food of Morocco "

By Paula Wolfert (Ecco, \$45, 518 pages)

The **book**: Reigning queen of Mediterranean cuisine Paula Wolfert has produced the definitive **book** on Moroccan cuisine some 50 years after first visiting the country. The James Beard Award-winning **author** painstakingly researched the country's foodways, describing the essential flavors of the cuisine and producing doable recipes that give home cooks the unique tastes of the region without having to leave their homes. The **book's** jacket describes it best: "A labor of love four decades in the making. "

The recipes: Creamy Fava Bean Soup, Fish Tagine with Creamy Onion Charmoula, Chicken Smothered With Olives, Berber Skillet Bread and Sweet Bastila are typical of the intriguing diversity of this **book's** recipes. Most use basic ingredients and simple preparations but result in complex flavors.

The gravy: The **book's** exquisite photography illustrates the countryside and its people as much as its cuisine, making this a perfect **book** for the armchair reader as well.

"The Good Housekeeping Test Kitchen Cookbook: Essential Recipes for Every Home Cook "

(Hearst **Books**, \$29.95, 690 pages)

The **book**: Every cook needs one basic recipe **book** that's his or her go-to. When the recipes in the **book** have been triple-tested in the Good Housekeeping Test Kitchen to make sure they work with any kind of oven, type of cookware and brand of ingredient, you can rest assured they'll work in your kitchen, too. Not for the gourmet on your list, this is a **book** for cooks with beginner or moderate skills who want to move a bit from their comfort zone.

The recipes: Basics such as chicken soup, pie crust, waffles and potato salad intersperse with such eye-openers as India Cauliflower Curry Stew, Pad Thai, Falafel Cones and Soba Noodles with Shrimp and Snow Peas. Colorful icons indicate low-calorie, heart-healthy, 30-minute meals, make-ahead or slow-cooker options.

The gravy: Smartphone tags throughout the **book** link to 35 how-to videos on everything from cooking pasta to perfection to preparing make-ahead gravy.

"Cooking My Way Back Home "

By Mitchell Rosenthal (Ten Speed Press, \$35, 272 pages)

The **book**: Having grown up in the restaurant business since he was 15, Mitchell Rosenthal spent his life thinking like a restaurant chef, not like an everyday home chef. This charming cookbook is his attempt to establish the roots that plant the everyday home cook to the everyday kitchen. Is cooking for a few familiar faces much different from cooking for a new audience of restaurant customers each night? You bet. In writing the **book**, Rosenthal makes those emotional connections that bind families together through communal dining. Yes, you can go home again.

The recipes: The owner of three restaurants in San Francisco and one in Portland, Ore., Rosenthal has a strong sense of what attracts diners. *The cookbook*'s recipes are drawn from his restaurants as well as his own passions, which include New Orleans–style Southern and Jewish–style delicatessen fare. That means dishes ranging from jambalaya, Tabasco–spiked fried chicken and tasso–crusted pork chops make nice with chopped chicken liver and cured salmon with potato latkes.

The gravy: The *book*'s final chapter on basics offers keeper recipes for chicken stock, mayonnaise, barbecue sauce, country biscuits and cooking techniques.

"The Food52 Cookbook: 140 Winning Recipes From Exceptional Home Cooks "

By Amanda Hesser and Merrill Stubbs (William Morrow, \$35, 440 pages)

The *book*: Ask most cooks where they got a favorite recipe, and it's more likely they got it from a friend who's a talented home cook than from a *book* or magazine. Best–selling *author* Amanda Hesser and food *writer* Merrill Stubbs have taken that idea a bold step forward. Their *book* is filled with recipes gathered on their Food52.com website, where home cooks competed in recipe contests for 52 weeks. After recipes were tested, readers picked the winners. All the winning recipes are in the *book* along with other reader favorites.

The recipes: The recipes combine gourmet and practical elements, making them accessible but intriguing. Think Blackberry Caipirinha, Creamy Sausage Stuffed Mushrooms, Turkey Pho, Double Chocolate Espresso Cookies and Rhubarb Curd Shortcake, all arranged seasonally; multiple photos illustrate each recipe.

The gravy: The *authors* offer comments on each recipe in the *book*; briefs on the contributing cooks are posted with their recipes.

"Girl in the Kitchen: How a Top Chef Cooks, Thinks, Shops, Eats and Drinks "

By Stephanie Izard with Heather Shouse (Chronicle *Books*, \$29.95, 255 pages)

The *book*: Stephanie Izard has made a big name for herself since winning Bravo's "Top Chef " in 2008. Her fame and enthusiasm led to the opening of her Chicago restaurant The Girl & the Goat and the designation of one of Food & Wine magazine's Best New Chefs of 2011. Her cookbook furthers the culinary gospel of creating food that reaches for all the taste buds: sweet, savory, salty, spicy. While her restaurant food is multilayered, her cookbook recipes are aimed at the home chef using ingredients that can be found at the supermarket.

The recipes: Big, robust and often aggressive flavors fill this *book*. Izard's larder is global and her inventive dishes aim high: Clams with corn, bacon and fingerlings; grilled lamb–stuffed calamari; olive oil–poached shrimp with soba noodles; seared arctic char with lamb–cherry hash; crispy chicken thighs with black bean tapenade.

The gravy: Peppered throughout the text are "Ingredient Spotlights, " which define specific foodstuffs and tell how and why they work within recipes; cooking tips and techniques also are scattered throughout the *book*.

"*Sugar, Sugar* "

By Kimberly Reiner and Jenna Sanz–Agero (*Andrews McMeel Publishing*, \$29.99, 293 pages)

The *book*: Knowing that some of the best moments in life are the sweetest, Sugar Mommas Kimberly Reiner and Jenna Sanz–Agero set out to preserve some of America's best old–fashioned dessert recipes. Though most aren't original " does anyone really know the true origins of Devil's Food Cake? " each tells the origins of the particular version in the *book*. There's no doubt Reiner knows her sweets: Her Momma Reiner's Fudge made

the famed O List as one of Oprah's Favorite Things.

The recipes:Part retro, part contemporary and charmingly whimsical cookies, pies and bars share space with candies, cakes and more in such favorites as Gran's Tea Cakes, Cracked Sugar Cookies, Kentucky Derby Bars, Chocolate Hydrogen Bombs and Lucinda Bells \$100 Pecan Pie.

The gravy:The Sugar Mommas dish out helpful hints throughout the **book**. Did you know that a 9-by-13-inch pan holds 15 cups, a 9-by-2-inch round cake pan 8 cups?

"The Splendid Table's How to Eat Weekends "

By Lynne Rossetto Kasper and Sally Swift (Clarkson Potter, \$35, 337 pages)

The **book**:Fans of "The Splendid Table " public radio program expect a level of intelligence, sophistication and passion from Rossetto Kasper and her co-creator and avid foodie Sally Swift. There's no shortage of that and thoughtful contemplation in this cookbook that focuses on the rituals and pleasures of cooking on weekends when the most precious ingredient of all " time " can be lavished. It's a great concept that yields a wonderful collection of recipes.

The recipes:Such a wealth of flavors: Mexican, Vietnamese, Indian, Chinese, Italian. The **authors** show us how to cook everything from Scandinavian broth with scallops and Moroccan lentil soup to Yucatan pork and Indian lamb biryani. Create your own melting pot.

The gravy:Scattered throughout the **book** are culinary "asides " that clearly ring with the knowing voices of the **authors**. Sometimes slightly admonishing, often encouraging, always informative, these ideas offer home cooks something to chew on.

"Poulet: More Than 50 Remarkable Meals That Exalt the Honest Chicken "

By Cree LeFavour(Chronicle **Books**, \$27.50, 240 pages)

The **book**:There are chefs who cluck disdainfully at the thought of cooking with chicken. Too boring, too bland, too predictable. Don't tell that to Cree LeFavour, whose **book** cheerfully chirps the glories of chicken and lays out the proof: 50 recipes that show just how delicious and versatile chicken can be. Home cooks will fall in love all over again with simple roasted chicken and fried chicken, and they'll surely be compelled to dive into the Asian recipes that offer flavors from China, Japan, Thailand, Korea and India.

The recipes:The **book** is organized by flavor profiles: American, European bistro, Latin, East and South Asian, and Middle Eastern and African. Paired with vegetables, salads, potatoes, rice and couscous, LeFavour's recipes show how easy it is to make chicken the well-deserved star of the dinner table.

The gravy:The **book** opens with invaluable information on chicken labeling, chicken types, steps on how to **cut** a whole chicken and cooking methods. LeFavour also champions the most flavorful **cut** of the bird: the thigh.

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