Praise for *Cooking to Save Your Life*

'The recipes are charming and irreverent, a collection of tweaked classics and innovative staples, focusing on practical ways to get impressive results, in the midst of the chaos of everyday life … [The] illustrations are deliberately light, playful and accessible.' ***The Hindu***

'Very funny' ***Economic Times***

'Readers will grow hungry – the recipes are excellent … And then there are the serious essays introducing each section that elevate this volume to more than a cookbook.' ***Hindustan Times***

'Irreverent and relatable … indulgent and even decadent recipes that are built simply and cleverly, with conscious choices and without too many ingredients.' **BBC**

'*Cooking to Save Your Life* is not simply a cookbook. Sure, it contains detailed recipes – the standard fare for a cookbook – but Banerjee peppers it with the piquant flavour of his winning secret sauce; breezy lessons in the history of food.' ***Vogue*** **(India)**

'The different sections of the book gleefully traverse through the courses of a meal with an introduction for each that touches on history, social norms, economic considerations and food trends – from the humble origins of soup to the meat-veggie syntax of a meal and the piquant street food lineage of hors d'oeuvres. And in the little note that precedes each recipe, Banerjee brings in humour and wry observations … It is this all-round mix of levity, feasting and a human context that makes the book a great read.' ***Condé Nast Traveller***

'This book feels different, special.' *UpperCrust India*

'The pages contain insightful information for both the novice and experienced cook (I found measures such as size of a golf ball and the phalanges of your fingers convenient) and are peppered with a good dose of thought-provoking nuggets on larger political and social issues pertinent to all of us. I have long been fond of reading cookbooks in addition to cooking from them and the author's language – direct, humorous and at times reprimanding – makes this book a good read. There are suggestions on what to serve your enemy and what to serve dear friends when you have forgotten that they are about to visit you and you have very little time to whip something up to impress them!' **Shvetha Jaishankar, The Wire**

'Beautiful illustrations' *The Telegraph*

'An altogether unusual cookbook, *Cooking to Save Your Life* won't actually save your life – it seems a lot more interested in taste and relish than calorie intake – but it could, sadly, make impossible for its readers the excuse, "I cannot cook to save my life." While Banerjee's prose and recipes are both equally lucid, Olivier's geometric drawings make you hungry without ever being intrusive. There's comfort here, but, also, sustenance.' *Reader's Digest*

COOKING TO SAVE YOUR LIFE

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ABHIJIT BANERJEE

Illustrations by CHEYENNE OLIVIER

juggernaut

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This book grew out of many years of trying to impress our friends with meals that look fancy and taste delicious but come together easily. It is dedicated to all of you, in gratitude for your enduring indulgence and enthusiasm (even when it stretched credibility)

CONTENTS

A FORETASTE

I have been interested in food since I can remember. I would cook an occasional family dinner when I was about fifteen and since then I have cooked many thousands of meals and fed many hundreds of different people. Friends often encouraged me to write down some of my recipes for them, but I only thought of doing this book in 2016, when I was trying to come up with an appropriate Christmas present for my brother-in-law. As I started to think of how to frame the book, I began to notice the extent to which my sensibilities about cooking were connected to my instincts as an economist and a social scientist.

As you probably know, the word economics comes from oikonomía, 'management of a household'. Economists are trained to think about how to make the most of limited resources, and that instinct drives what we do in the household as much as anywhere else. I love thinking about meals, the people I will feed, the stories being told, the shape of bodies around the table, the sound of laughter, the quiet of mindful eating. For me every meal starts with what the cook is trying to achieve: assuage hunger, impress someone, just get through the evening without a disaster. Then there are the people being fed – some of them like food, others just the talk about food. Some want light, others delight in richness. Some may be vegetarian, others unabashedly carnivorous. Then there are the cook's own constraints – there is work to be done, children to be bathed and fed, late hours at work. There are ingredients that were forgotten or seemed too exorbitant,

spices that could not be procured, gadgets that felt like a waste of money. Finally, there is the cook herself – busy, tired, happy, distracted. The meal has to work with all of that, economize on the scarce resources, generate the greatest good for the greatest numbers.

This is why most recipes in the book start with an imagined description of a context where that particular recipe fits well. Many recipes also come with a plan for how to turn them into a meal. Some of those plans are ironic: Andhra-style Ribs with Nepali Alu Achaar and Stir-Fried Green Cabbage, as a comment on the American classic, ribs–potato salad–slaw. Others are political: the wonderful Afghan Kabuli Pullao with the Spinach Pachadi from Kerala, at the very other end of the Indian subcontinent, for the orange, green and white combo that represents the harmonious ideal embodied in the Indian tricolour, alas increasingly forgotten. Yet others serve to maintain peace when different preferences pull in different directions: Thai Pomelo Salad with shrimps cooked separately, for those who eat shrimps and tempeh for the rest, with a chickpea soup rich in saffron to start and some strawberries with black pepper and balsamic vinegar for dessert – a meal with something for the vegans and the rest. I often use these plans to present the meal – the best meals are good stories – though of course there are times when it's better to hold your tongue.

Which brings me to the second sense in which it is a book by a social scientist. I didn't want it to be a book about saving money, because frankly that is not the way I cook. Nor is it about cooking healthy, despite the title (you will see where that comes from). While very little in the book is egregiously unhealthy and a large majority of dishes are entirely vegetarian (and a substantial fraction of those are vegan), when I do write about,

say, meat, flavour and richness get priority over nutritious and filling – I prefer to serve small amounts of the choicest and let my guests fill up with vegetables and grains. But it is very much a book about living and living consciously – making choices, not always sacrificing pleasure for 'higher' goals, but also not losing sight of the many connections between what we eat and making the world more liveable. The tone I have tried to strike aims at lightness, but both food and cooking are so obviously tied to political and social structures that it would be odd to try to avoid them, and I have not: the themes of poverty and inequality, want and need, conservation and climate change, power and gender, self-expression and conformity keep coming back and each chapter has an introduction that tries to make explicit those connections to the recipes I have chosen, without, I hope, becoming too pedantic. In this sense, this book is deeply connected to my work as an economist and as an expositor of economics ideas.

There is a third sense in which this is a book by an economist like me, who worries about the challenge of careful measurement in real-world situations. I give the quantities mostly in cups and grams and spoons like everyone else, but also try to provide an alternative, approximate, measure using things like an iPhone or the phalanges of your fingers. The idea is to prepare for that moment when the cake needs to go in but the measuring spoons have carefully absented themselves.

Finally, the hyperreal aesthetics of most cookbooks bothers the social scientist in me. To me, every recipe is an idea, a starting point. Perhaps best followed relatively literally by the novice chef, but just a source of ideas for everyone else. I therefore prefer the artwork in the book to project a sense that these are concepts, a representation of the core model if you like,

rather than some airbrushed prototype. Cheyenne Olivier's abstract and geometric illustrations that accompany the recipes do exactly that, and they are counterbalanced by her more lively and figurative illustrations of the cook at work in the kitchen, which emphasize the chaotic and embedded nature of cooking – life does not stop for the cook, he/she needs to find an expressive space within it.

I think (and hope) that these pieces fit together nicely, and the result is a cookbook that you will use to both cook and relax with, a book on cooking and eating, *more than just a collection of recipes* ☯

INTRODUCTION

Many people have told me that they *cannot cook to save their lives*. I don't believe them. A lot of them can build a dresser out of an IKEA box – despite the fact that the instructions read like they were written by a wall-eyed robot whose first language was Esperanto, while writing code in C++ or programming a television set to switch between the news and a soccer match. How could it be possible that they are not able to follow a simple set of instructions?

Most culinary disasters, of which there are many, come from either underconfidence or overconfidence, and usually both. What undermines confidence is in part the memory of past disasters, cakes that leaked dough, meat that tasted like old leather, fish that suddenly melted into the stew, combined with the mysterious language that most cookbooks adopt.

My favourite example is from a Bengali cookbook that I owned when I first moved to the United States, which tells you, blandly, to wait till the onions have a nice colour. What is a nice colour, I would wonder, watching the onions go from translucent white to a rich golden, a reddish brown, a darker brown and finally a charred black. When should I have stopped?

But every cookbook writer does that, to a lesser or greater extent: every cookbook is strewn with expressions like 'when the soup thickens

slightly', 'when spices give out a nice aroma', 'when the custard sets' and so on. The bad news is that there is no obvious way to entirely avoid them.

The problem is that there is very little in the world of cooking that is standardized – the heavier the bottom of the pan, the longer it takes for the oil to reach the same temperature, and therefore the lower is the risk that the spices will burn if you leave them in for an entire minute. There are people who are comfortable working with a thermometer in their left hand, but I am not one of them – and in any case, I don't recommend sticking a thermometer in the middle of a beautifully set custard to check the interior temperature.

The best bet, in my opinion, is to use multiple metrics, as people in the consulting business like to say: watch the time, watch the colour (black is almost always bad, unless you started with something black or your goal is something charred, like a pepper or a steak), keep your nose trained (again, burnt things smell burnt, so unless that's your objective...). I will try to offer multiple signposts to guide you through the process, but it's impossible to avoid an occasional judgement call.

In particular there is no shame in starting again – especially if you suspect that something went badly wrong right at the beginning of a new step. The early ingredients are usually a small part of the overall cost of the dish, especially if you count the price of your time and the thought of watching your mother-in-law's face as she munches through the soufflé.

Take comfort in the fact that it's a big part of your learning experience – the next time you will know what cumin seeds look like before they turn black and acrid. And, just to be on the safe side, buy some extra of

everything you will use – other than the expensive and perishable main ingredients like meat, fish or wild mushrooms.

In fact, I often plan entire dinners with some redundancy built into them – that way, if one course is really inedible, I can throw it. Just remember not to throw freshly burnt sauce into the plastic bag in the trash can as I once did – it will burn through the bag and flood your kitchen with the ineffable odour of burnt plastic with cinnamon dressing (or whatever you happen to be cooking).

The most important point, however, unless you are an expert – in which case you probably don't need this book – is to trust the cookbook as far as possible. I know that you did exactly that the last time, while walking into that unforgettable disaster; I agree that the cookbook writer should have warned you that one cup of rice does not take half the time it takes to cook two cups.

But it's still a lot safer to trust the cookbook than your instincts (unless of course you have exceptional gifts or vast experience) because the chemistry of food is complicated; what tastes too salty right now may turn too bland as the dish ripens and the salt gets absorbed, while what tastes flat now may turn too sharp as the salt interacts with the souring agents. And above all, stay away from quick fixes: sweet does not really cut the excess of chilli; yogurt thrown into a boiling sauce will separate into tiny blobs of milk fat, rather than give it that missing creaminess; and acrid, unfortunately, stays acrid.

There is an interesting cycle in the evolution of bad food. It starts with lack of self-belief – should I really trust what I am reading in the cookbook, given that I don't understand some of the words and any of the intentions

behind the words? What does translucent really mean when it comes to onions? Why fry the onions first before adding the chopped tomatoes? Since both will be fried, why not start with them together?

Soon, however, doubt starts to creep in. Why do the onions that I threw in with the tomatoes continue to look kind of chunky instead of turning soft and translucent, as the cookbook writer promised? Maybe I should have waited to add the tomatoes, after all?

Rebellion comes next, aided by a surge of unfounded confidence. What the hell, since in the end we want something saucy flavoured by onions and tomatoes, why not throw the whole misbehaving lot into the blender?

Dismay follows. It's a sauce all right but why does it taste acrid (from the almost raw onion that was never fried but instead stewed briefly in tomato juice before being puréed)? Maybe some sugar will fix it? Brown sugar? Some lemon juice? And so on…

My goal here is to offer you a path away from all that; my ideal would be to anticipate every possible source of confusion and either avoid them or at least address them; I won't entirely succeed, but I have tried hard. Ideally read the book from start to finish because I find it too tedious to repeat the tips, and you might miss something useful if you skip directly to a recipe.

Finally, an important caveat (pre)emptor. Don't buy this book if you really want a cookbook to save your life – it makes no pretence of being about healthy food. The goal here is to make delicious food with ease and confidence, to help liberate your inner gourmet cook from the weight of many cooking projects gone wrong. That often means getting knee-deep

in fat, starch and sugars. Don't worry, you don't have to cook from this book every night – just when you want to make a splash.

I also have an embarrassing admission to make. This book is written the way I cook – expensively. I am fortunate enough not to have to be frugal and I am not. I try to buy very high-quality ingredients (when they are not available, I make something else).

For most of the recipes, the ingredients are all available on websites like Amazon and Big Basket, or on specialty meat and fish online sites. They will also be available in the upmarket food stores in the big cities. A few recipes (such as the ceviche), however, ask for ingredients (sushi-grade fish) you may not find in India. The only reason they are in this book is that they are close to my heart, and I am hoping they will be fun to read, even if not to cook. Or, even better, that you might take this book with you on travels across the world.

I have a food processor, a power blender, a beater, a hand blender, a spice grinder, a pressure cooker, an ice-cream maker and many gadgets that I could not name offhand. And I use them all the time. They save time and make food taste better and I think they are all worth it.

But I also realize that together they cost at least a thousand dollars, which is a lot of money for many people. I have tried to suggest alternatives wherever possible, but sometimes just the effort required in substituting for a good gadget makes the recipe not worth making. *Use your judgement and forgive my indolence* ⊛

Note: All recipes feed 4 unless specified otherwise.

HORS D'OEUVRES

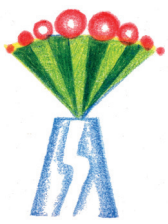
HORS D'OEUVRES

I like my hors d'oeuvres to be exactly that, not the main meal by other means. Piquant or rich, and maybe a little surprising. A wake-up call for the eating mind as much as for the mouth. And less than ten minutes of work.

India is one country where this idea of hors d'oeuvres has never sunk in. The compulsion to be generous as a host is so strong that it is never okay to impose limits on what comes before the meal. It is always one more kind of kebab, or another dainty kachori stuffed with, say, fresh peas and bits of cauliflower, or some phuchhka.

All wonderful, but they keep coming, and I keep eating, distractedly, while trying to focus on the conversation. And then, sometime uncomfortably close to midnight, the host announces dinner. I am already full and half drunk. But the food is delicious, and I keep eating. The night does not pass lightly.

A meal is a story, sometimes a story that has lost its way. But always a story. The hors d'oeuvre is the preface. A good preface tantalizes, sets the tone, provides a slender window into the aspirations of the author. Anything more and it is too much.



A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy is one of the more important writings of Karl Marx, who is one of the most influential economists of all time. But almost no one reads it, because it has a lucidly

written preface that presages almost everything that the book will say. People read the 'Preface' and feel that they are done, which is a pity since the 'Contribution' is probably a better way to get into Marx's views than his famously turgid masterpiece, *Das Kapital*.

A central point in the 'Preface' is that economics rules. What Marx calls the relations of production, which is a fancy way to describe the way production is organized, more or less determines the shape our lives take. Everything else, culture, religion, institutions, is moulded to serve the basic economic relationship. Under capitalism, food is important, because it provides fuel to the workforce, but cooking is a distraction, at least from the point of view of a social scientist, except to the extent it is interesting to understand why the distractions are the way they are.

This spawned a long tradition of studying workers (especially workers in poor countries) as walking, talking machines that turn calories into work and work into commodities that get sold on the market. This focus on being productive means that poor people must always be on the lookout for more calories and better nutrition. The pleasure of eating, to say nothing of cooking, has no place in this description of the lives of the poor.

Fortunately, the poor refused to cooperate. As anybody who has ever spent time with actual poor people knows, eating something special is a source of great excitement for them (as it is for me). Every village, however poor, has its feast days and its special festal foods. Somewhere goats will be slaughtered, somewhere ceremonial coconuts cracked, perhaps fresh dates will be piled on special plates that come out once a year, maybe mothers will pop sweetened balls of rice into the mouths of their children.

And perhaps predictably, the non-poor adapt these celebrations to

their own situations: my family in Kolkata, many, many generations away from farming, still celebrates the winter harvest. Rice, coconuts, date sugar, cane sugar, sweet potatoes, milk, sesame seeds and more, in various combinations, are turned into tables full of different delicious desserts, and those warned off eating too much sugar have to suffer the sight of them.

My selection of hors d'oeuvres is inspired in part by the marketplaces of the developing world where the less affluent will often go for their occasional excitement. Every other stall sells something sharp or sweet or spicy to eat. Dozens of families on their weekly or monthly day out crowd around, eating and laughing, jostling each other.

In Nairobi, it would be mutura, the fiery blood sausage that I (and all other foreigners) are forbidden to even try; in Lima, obviously Ceviche (pages 12–15), in Jakarta maybe Nasi Goreng, in Delhi, Fruit Chaat (page 10), in Kolkata, Street-Snack Potatoes (page 30), in Mumbai, perhaps Masala Peanuts (page 26).

It is probably no accident that these tend not to be especially nutritious. When life is hard enough as it is, these outings and that bite into something nice provide variety and relief and make it easier to go on. Cheap and nutritious is what they eat day in and day out; a little splurge on something else that excites the mouth while being inexpensive and fast is a natural choice.

With the right ingredients, piquant is easy to produce cheaply and quickly. High turnover is what keeps the food affordable—subtle tends to take time, attention or money.[1] For me, piquant works well when the main meal is not eaten right away. The actual lunch or dinner can then start gentle, with soft flavours that build to something dense and complicated.

[1] *There are exceptions of course – a great cheese sandwich takes minutes to make but can be enormously subtle*

If time is short, maybe skip the hors d'ouevres or go for something either fat or umami rich (bluefish pâté, page 24, or marinated cheese, page 16) with a strong salad or a set of spicy vegetable dishes as the first course. *But of course, that partly depends on the story you want to tell – I will tell you mine as we go* ☯