



RECIPE REVOLUTION

THE HOST OF THE AFROS + KNIVES PODCAST TALKS TO
A FOOD PRODIGY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF COOKBOOKS

by Tiffani Rozier
portrait by Nico Oved

At 17, Rahanna Bisseret Martinez is already almost a culinary veteran. At 13, she was a contestant on the first season of *Top Chef Junior*, a spinoff of Bravo's marquee show. Since then, she has interned at a remarkable list of notable restaurants: Chez Patisse in Berkeley, Mister Jiu's in San Francisco, Gwen in L.A., Compère Lapin in New Orleans, Ikoyi in London, and others.

Today, Rahanna is writing her first cookbook, set to be published by 4 Color Books, the new imprint from award-winning chef and author Bryant Terry that is part of Ten Speed Press. As this young chef looks to the future, I am curious what she will be taking with her from cookbooks and culinary artists of the past.

When Julia Child published her groundbreaking *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in 1961, she was a pioneer. It took years for other chefs to catch up to her techniques and recipes. Now, 60 years after Julia's breakthrough, we live in a world where anyone can publish their recipes on a blog or social media feed. In the digital revolution, is there a place for print? I chatted with Rahanna about cookbooks, the act of writing her own book, and some food hacks I will never understand.

What is your favorite cookbook?

I've been reading *Everyone's Table* by Gregory Gourdet and JJ Goode, and *Mister Jiu's in Chinatown* by Brandon Jew and Tienlou Ho. Oh, and *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue* by Adrian Miller. I've been reading through them all—super interesting.

Oh, cool. Do you have a method for choosing a cookbook, or do you do what I do in a bookstore: skim the shelves and pull things that seem interesting?

I love going to the library. I'll read what I pull off of a shelf, but I'm also the person who has cookbooks on preorder.

I love the library! When you're getting into a cookbook, what's your process?

I like to read the intro first, then I'll skim through the go-to pages and look for something exciting to focus on. I'll use a bunch of bookmarks, make a couple of recipes, and try to read through all the recipes and headnotes.

Are there elements in the cookbook that make you think: Why are we still doing this? What are your critiques of traditional cookbooks that you would like to explore creative solutions for?

What I'm trying to do with my cookbook is shift how we translate recipe names. I want to give the traditional recipe name in its original language and then offer a translation. No one asks for translations for macarons or carbonara. It's important to normalize words that aren't really that difficult to say. I think it's essential to have the original language and original spelling first. Then you can explain in the headnote that the word you used actually means "spinach" or something.

I find cooking hacks so interesting. I don't think you need to really use an iron to make a grilled cheese—unless you are in a very desperate situation. Still, social media has become a great way to distill cooking techniques and share recipes that otherwise seem intimidating. How can food technologies, apps, and social media platforms better support pros like yourself with making food, food culture, and cooking easier to understand?

Things like one-pan and quick dishes—those are a front door to more possibilities. It's important to understand that we're in 2021, and these are the food trends. Still, maybe there could be a spin on these trends that is more traditional or exciting and that highlights the techniques shown. I think that's one way that social media can engage cookbook readers and attract new ones.

There's a trending topic among people who follow and read food blogs. The chief complaint is that people don't want to read the narrative portion before getting to the recipe. Why do you believe this is happening? Is the writing just not compelling?

I think it's important to remember that when you're writing a cookbook or a blog, you are sitting in front of a screen. But when readers go online and search for that favorite pancake recipe, or whatever it is, they typically use a small mobile device, which means a lot of scrolling. I think it's important to know how website design works. Other platforms and delivery systems have to be considered.

Do you believe that as we innovate, people are going to feel lost and overwhelmed? What could the pushback be, and who do you think would embrace opportunities to deliver cookbooks in a new way?

I think the delivery of cookbooks could innovate in many ways, on the page and off the page. I really like the idea of a more accessible cookbook with different sensory cues. Maybe someone is very driven by touch, and they need a cue that reads, "This dough needs to feel like a dried-out Play-Doh" or a visual cue like, "You should see tiny bubbles around it." We can describe the sound of something popping in a pan or how a mixture should sound splashing around in the blender. I think different sensory cues can take recipes off a page and pull them into reality.

As you write your first cookbook, is there anything you are exploring about food that you haven't before? Have there been any surprises about the process that are informing future projects?

Yeah. I think one of the surprising things about writing my cookbook so far is discovering that it's harder to say more with fewer words. Also, just being able to know when to reel it back. I put all this information down and then I have to understand, okay, in the future, I might be able to write another cookbook, and this information could go into that one instead. I think it's important to be able to edit yourself and pull back when you need to.

Also, growing up, I was introduced to a lot of different foods. My grandma and my mom are super social people, so if they go somewhere and eat something they love, they're going to ask for the recipe. I was very privileged to have access to other cuisines. Not in the "I'm going to go across the country to learn about this new thing" type of way, but in a home kitchen, everyday cooking type of way. That's what I've been exploring.