

*Suddenly Cooking*

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**Reviewed by Mark Maccallum**

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Imagine you suddenly have to administer first aid to a roadside traffic victim. You're not a doctor. You're not a nurse. And you've never done this before.

You are on bended knees cradling the bloodied head of a stranger, watching his eyes drift between open and closed. You frantically look to your left for help. There's nothing. To your right? Nothing. Only a light breeze across a deserted country road. Moments earlier whilst driving you'd looked down to change a CD. In an instant, a loud thump was followed by a leather-clad body zipping past your side mirror in an upward direction. A motor bike followed likewise. The victim is now your responsibility. Very much your responsibility.

Apart from the ability to turn back time, what do you most desperately want in this world right now? What would give you a chance at redemption, and some faint hope of saving this person's life?

Exactly! An instruction manual.

Fortunately, cooking dinner isn't normally a matter of life or death, unless you take the notion to its extreme - if we don't eat we die. However, if you are one of those people for whom entering the kitchen "feels" like a death sentence, *Suddenly Cooking* by Sophie Ruggles has arrived just in the nick of time. You're saved. And so are your dinner guests.

The title gives the game away: this book is primarily directed towards beginner cooks – such as divorcees, the recently bereaved and young people just starting out. But it will also have immense benefit for long time cooks who've been operating at an uncomplicated level: bachelors like me, cooking quite happily for myself and occasional

guests over 25 years during which time my culinary repertoire reached the dizzy heights of three signature dishes, and the many holes in my knowledge base remained largely unknown – until I read *Suddenly Cooking*.

So what does a new or amateur cook want in a cook book? What makes it a success? Solutions. An easy way to overcome the barriers (fears) which stand between him and satisfying cooking. Typical of the barriers which confront a hesitant cook are: Cook books appear too complicated and mysterious; I don't have all the utensils needed to cook well; Cooking for one person is wasteful; I don't know what ingredients I'll need until the moment of cooking – and then I discover I don't have them; I'll need to buy lots of ingredients which I'll hardly ever use, and they'll go off; Cooking takes too long. And so the list goes on...

*Suddenly Cooking* answers and solves all these fears in a style which is neither condescending nor complicated.

Part of the secret to this book's success is its folksy style. Ruggles allows her laid-back Australian manner of speaking to soften the instructions given on each page. Readers are encouraged by the "no worries" Aussie confidence she has in their ability to succeed – even if there are hiccups along the way. It's only cooking, after all, and it's meant to be fun. Likewise, the line illustrations and hand-written chapter headings promote a sense of: we are serious but we aren't pompous about all this. In the past 20 years Ruggles has worked in a variety of commercial kitchens, run a small catering company and successfully operated her own restaurant, so she knows how to turn out a good meal.

The first 50 pages of this 250 page manual are devoted to getting to know your new environment. We begin with Equipment Essentials where the author introduces newcomers to the basic range of utensils needed in a properly geared-up kitchen. Pencil drawings accompany all the basic items such as pots, pans, a colander, baking tray and vegetable peeler. Okay, nobody needs to be shown what a metal baking tray looks like. But the fact the diagram is included sets the tone for the remainder of the book. If everything you are discovering is above your current level of comprehension, you might think this cooking business is all too hard. Superiority over something gives you comfort. And your comfort is what the author is trying to achieve.

Likewise, the following section, Food Dictionary. Eighteen pages are devoted to various food types, with colour photographs of each and brief explanations of their use. For example, in the three-page meat section we see 25 different types of raw meat. For the rank beginner, seeing a photograph of a leg of lamb or a sausage gives comfort (in the manner described earlier), whereas contrasting a photo of a rump steak with that of a filet mignon steak is demystifying. Perhaps seeing a chunk of minced meat is going a fraction too basic, but try telling minced meat it doesn't deserve its place in the meat section!

The vegetable section covers four pages and gets pretty basic. (Here's what a carrot looks like). But it also includes photos and principal uses of choy sum, Shitake mushroom and French eschallots. Previously, if I'd been sent to the supermarket to buy some French eschallots I wouldn't have known what to look for. The quality of the photographs is just passable, but I thought it fell a fraction short in the Dried Herbs &

Spices section where finer detail was required. Same for the cheese section. But by the end of the chapter we are familiar with the appearance of all the seafood, poultry, fruit, vegetables, rice, pasta, oils, pastes and general pantry items that we're likely to need.

In reviewing this book I read the contents page thoroughly before anything else. So I was surprised to see a chapter up the back titled The Basics in which techniques for cooking vegetables, potato mash, pasta and rice are explained. Everything has to go somewhere and not everything can come at the beginning of a book, but the author might have done well to highlight this very useful section in her introduction. Equally, the section following which explains cooking terminology might have been better placed before the beginner encountered the terminology.

Ultimately, however, the fundamental feature of a cook book is its recipes. All the sizzle in the world won't sell the sausage if the sausage is no good. As such, my taste buds are diligently working their way through the book's 120 recipes (all with colour photographs), and the early reports are good. In the egg section alone I encountered at least one tip in each of the poached, fried, scrambled and boiled egg recipes which rectified long term errors I'd been making. Similarly, I would never have dreamed of attempting Moroccan style baked eggs (actually, I'd never heard of them), but the recipe looked simple enough and the result was a triumph.

The book has changed my approach to some of the simple things. Previously, I could never get my roast potatoes to be crusty on the outside. Now I can. I've changed the way I cook vegetables and I discovered how to improve my mashed potato (by including an egg instead of milk).

The very first words in the Salad Stuff section impressed me. The dressings on offer will keep in the fridge for two weeks: which means I can make a normal sized amount and experiment with it on my next half a dozen different salads. Hence, no wastage. The Carnivore Dinners section offered the predictable range of old favourites, but is presented in a very readable and logical manner. I'm a fan of beef stew but have been too hesitant to make it. However, the beef and red wine stew (page 150) was straight forward in the making and tasted as good as Mum's. Emboldened, I went for broke: chicken and mushrooms in cream sauce. I'd been making a rough version of this for years, but it never seemed to be quite right. It is now.

When I arrived at the Simply Soup section I put up my usual barrier: why make soup when you can simply buy it at the supermarket? But on reading the recipes I realized the only real barrier was my hesitancy - I don't have a blender - and if I were to gear up properly that fear would be instantly removed. The recipes themselves are simple. The Just Desserts section opens with one of my favourites, mixed berry fruit crumble, which I've never made of course. But it looked too easy to ignore, and tasted just like the photograph suggested.

Late in the book I arrived at the best section: Leftover-Makeovers. I don't know if this is an invention of Ruggles or not. And I don't care. It's an absolute God-send for single cooks. It shows how you can transform any excess of the principal part of one recipe into the principal part of another. For example, let's assume you've made the Bolognese sauce (on page 148) and you don't want to eat spaghetti Bolognese for the next five nights in a row. Obviously, you can freeze some for later use. But Leftover-Makeovers

explains how to use the Bolognese sauce as your base for chilli con carne. Likewise, if you've cooked more filling for Shepherd's Pie (page 155) than needed – as I did – turn to page 203 for the stuffed capsicum recipe. No prizes for guessing what you stuff them with! Similarly, an excess of tomato pasta sauce from page 94 becomes the base for a tuna pasta bake on page 204. To me, *Leftover-Makeovers* was a revelation because it doubles and in some cases triples the use of a core ingredient, thus ensuring no wastage of ingredients and an increase in dish variety.

Criticisms? The author stressed – but I don't think she stressed enough – the importance of gearing up. You need the complete set of kitchen tools, otherwise it's a bit like an ordinary bloke trying to change the clutch on his car using only what he has in his home hardware drawer. Also, I felt the reader needed to be more reassured early in the book that although the list of herbs, spices, rice, pasta and general pantry items might seem long, the sum total of their cost is not great and they are used so frequently they'll never reach their use-by date.

The subtitle for this book is “Real food made real easy”. Australians will recognize this vernacular, while newcomers will find that it's simply true. Thoroughly recommended.

**Mark Maccallum** is an Australian freelance journalist and television producer currently living in Barcelona. Although he began his working career as a sports magazine editor and later moved into current affairs radio in Sydney, it has been television news which has dominated Mark's career. He was a television reporter in Australia for many years before moving to London where he spent six years working as a news producer at the BBC. He occasionally makes corporate videos and recently made a documentary about a 4WD adventure to the centre of the Sahara Desert. He has just finished writing his first novel. In his spare time he coaches rugby union in Barcelona to a team of totally mischievous adolescents.