

## Report: April speaker meeting

### The cookbook author's companion: editing food books, with Katie Purvis

by Marie Pietersz

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*Katie Purvis*

*[Photo credit: Marie Pietersz]*

On 22 April, 50 members attended the EdVic speaker meeting to hear Katie Purvis tell them about her 'lucky' foray into cookbook editing and offer some key takeaways for editors who want to break into this specialised field, and some reminders for those editors who have already.

Katie says: 'Editing cookbooks is a complicated business because there are many different types of text to consider — a cookbook typically contains essays, recipes, a variety of end matter and illustrations (not to mention the inevitable problems of your mouth watering and your tummy rumbling).'

Katie spoke about her experience in editing high-end cookbooks, and having worked with Julie Gibbs, Maggie Beer and Stephanie Alexander, doyens in the field of best-selling cookbooks.

She talked about her editing experience in the mid-1990s, the early days of desktops and email, and when the internet as we know it did not exist. 'Editors need to be organised to keep all the balls in the air at the same time. Production schedules and deadlines must be met and should be well documented and, in a manual environment, this was not easy even though I worked with experienced, organised chefs who were the authors, and there might be more than one author involved.'

The first book she worked on was *Maggie's Farm* before she went on to edit Stephanie Alexander's *The Cook's Companion* first edition, originally called *Stephanie's ABC*.

'Even though I had worked on *Stephanie's Seasons* before, I was still pretty inexperienced and there had been months of development editing before it got to me. I recall the towers of A4 paper stacks, spreadsheets of sections A–C, D–F and

so on, each section with its own schedule, several phone calls a day to the author, no internet, several attempts at getting the design right, author testing and retesting every recipe, making every page look good, spelling out abbreviations, cross-referencing, marking the “this goes with that”, indexing, permissions, editors working around my kitchen table and at the typesetters in the country fixing errors at reprints,’ she said.

It was an amazing feat, and well rewarded too, with more than 250,000 copies sold and prizes won. Readers didn’t seem to mind the high RRP for cookbooks containing several hundreds of pages and sometimes no pictures either — the golden days of cookbooks.

‘There are three levels of cookbooks’, she said:

1. cheap and colourful — e.g. supermarket giveaways (great product, all the same)
2. mid-range — usually soft cover, no colour, e.g. *Maggie’s Farm*
3. high-end — beautifully designed and illustrated.

Why do people buy cookbooks when they can have recipes at their fingertips online? Katie answered the inevitable rhetorical question:

‘But they are still selling, even if they are bought as beautiful coffee-table pieces or as wedding gifts, to study, or even actually use.’

She reminded editors that the author’s voice must come through in cookbook editing.

The elements of a typical cookbook that editors should look out for are:

- introductory essay — which sets the voice and tone (even though users may skip reading it)
- chapters — each with its own introduction; may include author’s reminiscences, suppliers, poetry, varieties of ingredients and when they are in season, how to store, tips and tricks
- recipes — with some basic repeats that readers look for, like making stock
- measurements — may be in both imperial and metric, may include conversions and other common forms of measurement
- ingredients — A–Z format, introduction and cross-references
- method
- notes
- variations
- serves
- glossary
- index.

Some editor tips:

- Ensure measurements can be interpreted around the world and are accurate in conversion.

- Language should be understandable even though the internet can be used to learn interpretations and definitions.
- Ingredients may have different names internationally, e.g. eggplant/brinjal, courgette/zucchini.
- Be mindful that authors are chefs, not writers, and might cook by instinct and may not measure ingredients.
- Try to spot any errors in quantities.
- Don't break up words or quantities at the ends of lines.
- Make recipes fit on a page — add or cut text or format to make this happen.
- Food photography — choose food that looks appetising, e.g. risotto may not photograph well.
- Food styling — present plated food with *mise en place* prepping, e.g. flowers, decorations.
- The ingredient list order must match the method order.
- Abbreviations may differ, so check for misrepresentation, e.g. tsp/teaspoon, tbs/teaspoon — Julie Gibbs believes in not using abbreviations for this reason.
- Make a note of amendments, rectify through re-tests and then incorporate in reprints. This could include suppliers and stockists who do not exist anymore.
- Cross-referencing — page numbers must be accurate.
- In each chapter the order of recipes should follow the same pattern, e.g. sauces and condiments, entrees, main course, dessert.
- Make sure the binding of the book is designed so a user can lay the book flat on the bench without having to use a weight.
- Continuation of recipes should ideally be on the facing page, without having to turn the page.
- *The Cook's Companion* design has margins on each side of the page for 'This goes with ...' and mini-recipes.

Stephanie Alexander's *The Cook's Companion* is now referred to by many as the Australian cooking bible. It even has a basics section that includes recipes such as how to make scones and broth, so users have every basic recipe at their fingertips, all in the one place, from the simplest to the exotic.

All her recipes are tested so the final product is what it is supposed to be. There is very little white space — Stephanie fills it up by providing little recipes in the margins. In keeping with its reputation as a bible, the second edition was originally printed with silver-foiled page edges and two marker ribbons. Later editions comprise more than 1100 pages.

Katie's advice to editors looking for work in cookbook editing is that they should try to get some experience, such as by editing a cookbook for a club or school, working on a voluntary basis or doing an internship with self-published authors.

Participants followed up with lots of inquiries and appreciative and positive feedback about the presentation content, which let them inside the door and gave them a quick peek at this specialty editing.

For further specific answers to queries, you can contact Katie, an EdVic member, via [edvic.secretary@iped-editors.org](mailto:edvic.secretary@iped-editors.org).