



Think Like a Chef

Tom Colicchio

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With Think Like a Chef, Tom Colicchio has created a new kind of cookbook. Rather than list a series of restaurant recipes, he uses simple steps to deconstruct a chef's creative process, making it easily available to any home cook.

He starts with techniques: What's roasting, for example, and how do you do it in the oven or on top of the stove? He also gets you comfortable with braising, saute ing, and making stocks and sauces. Next he introduces simple " ingredients" -- roasted tomatoes, say, or braised artichokes -- and tells you how to use them in a variety of ways. So those easy roasted tomatoes may be turned into anything from a vinaigrette to a caramelized tomato tart, with many delicious options in between.

In a section called Trilogies, Tom takes three ingredients and puts them together to make one dish that's quick and other dishes that are increasingly more involved. As Tom says, " Juxtaposed in interesting ways, these ingredients prove that the whole can be greater than the sum of their parts, " and you'll agree once you've tasted the Ragout of Asparagus, Morels, and Ramps or the Baked Free-Form " Ravioli" -- both dishes made with the same trilogy of ingredients.

The final section of the books offers simple recipes for components -- from zucchini with lemon thyme to roasted endive with whole spices to boulangerie potatoes -- that can be used in endless combinations.

Written in Tom's warm and friendly voice and illustrated with glorious photographs of finished dishes, Think Like a Chef will bring out the master chef in all of us.

Think Like a Chef Details

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From Reader Review Think Like a Chef for online ebook

Andrea James says

I bought this book because it was recommend in a number of articles and blogs that I'd read. I am very interested in other chefs sharing their perspectives on what it means to "think like a chef". I'd never seen Top Chef and I knew very little about Tom Colicchio so I've experienced this book as someone who had not previously heard any of his thoughts.

The author comes across as an affable guy who loves food and his stories of childhood and restaurant experiences were pleasant to read.

Early in the preface of the book, the author says:

"I would struggle to grasp what a recipe was telling me, then put it away and start. Understanding the whole felt more important than carefully following each step."

This statement got me excited because I thought that it's likely that he would therefore break down each of his recipes in the book and allow how the reader (without struggle) to understand the recipe sufficiently to (at least eventually) put it away and cook independently of it.

"Cooking is a craft that begins with technique. Learning these techniques is a bit like learning a new language. If you've ever learned a foreign language, you know there's a point when you stop translating each word in your head, and can understand - first phrases, then sentences, and finally, the entire gist of thing. Part of the process is understanding the shorthand that is common to speakers of the same language and practically meaningless to everyone else."

I agree with the first sentence and with the general comparison to language learning. My mistake was thinking that that this book might give the average home cook some insights into how a chef thinks. The author's examples of learning terms "beurre fondue" and ingredients like morels and ramps as part of that language learning reinforces that this book is more suitable if you are looking to move into professional cooking or if you plan to cook more often from fancy restaurant cookbooks.

Learning the author's perspective of this particular level of cooking was actually less interesting to me right now but maybe I can glean some insights nevertheless.

"Roasting, simply put, is cooking with dry heat, traditionally over or in front of an open flame. Most often, the word "roast" implies oven cooking, but I use the word as shorthand for both oven roasting and pan roasting. They are both the exact same technique, but oven roasting, as the name implies, involves transferring the pan to a hot oven to complete the process. Pan roasting finishes the food in the same pan on top of the stove.

As a rule, I prefer pan roasting. It allows me to effect a transformation on something almost immediately. Roasting in an oven cheats me of the audible, visual, and tactile cues that are such a gratifying step of the cooking process."

(The author then goes on describing these sensory experiences).

I find it hard to believe that I'm the only person wondering, "What's the difference between pan roasting and pan frying?" Why/when would you put something in an oven - if pan roasting is so superior, why make the compromise?

The reader would struggle to think like a chef if he/she didn't know how to make those judgement calls.

To me that judgement call is what enables someone to increase their level of competence. How do I know when something is cooked sufficiently? How do I determine if what I have at hand is a reasonable substitute for a missing ingredient? What is the margin of error for a particular measurement - e.g. adding an extra carrot to a stew for 6 people is not going to vastly change the end result but adding an extra 1/2 teaspoon of salt could render a dish unpalatable.

It didn't feel to me that these insights were clearly explained.

And I am wary of people saying "always" and "never". For instance "you should always heat the pan to a medium heat before adding the food". Actually if you're looking to render the fat from skin-on chicken thighs, starting in a cold pan is slightly preferable and saves you the bother of waiting for the pan to heat. Given this book isn't for newbies, these nuances and exceptions are good to know.

In case this review is starting to feel like I hated the book, I didn't. I was disappointed that it didn't live up to its title for me. As a book of restaurant-type recipes, it was alright. If you have the budget for lobster stock (mmmm...delicious! Something I miss from my restaurant days - I've never made it at home), all the better for you.

The section on trilogies was probably the most interesting as the author illustrated different dishes can be produced using the same key ingredients.

All in all, I really wish Tom Colicchio had shared more of his thinking as he seems like he knows a lot about cooking (maybe that's too much to give for a \$25 book).

Justin says

To my friends and schoolmates who wonder how i know what i know about cooking:

this book came to me as a present from my brother-in-law, who, when we are not arguing over baseball and politics, fight over how to properly braise a roast. i'll only concede defeat in the latter.

Colicchio runs the gamut on basic techniques to roast, braise, and blanch foods, as well as utilizing in-season vegetables and unlikely cuts of meat. he elucidates on some great base-recipes for vingarettes, fondues, and soup stocks, and further brings reason to how salt, herbs --and proper heat-- can draw out the best flavour from a dish.

This dude writes like he presents himself on TV, a guy who loves to cook as much as he loves beer and motorcycles, but somehow finds himself surrounded by gay men --which he takes in stride, and as a compliment.

i use this book all the time, and the meals i've prepared have always been crowd pleasers. it's a great place to

start for any curious delicatessen-in-the-making.

Never eat alone, and experiment only on those you love.

JDC

Rahul Rao says

This is NOT a cookbook (yes, it has recipes in it . . . but that's not the point). For those of you who can follow recipes well, but need help taking your cooking to the next level -- where you can start creating meals 1) based on what you have available or what looks fresh, and 2) without a set recipe -- this is a good starting point. Cooking should be more organic and less chemistry, and this books helps you "think" in a more freestyle/improv way. Of course the only way to really learn improv is to do it, do it, do it.

Kurt says

This is less a cookbook, more a series of introductory lectures on how to cook. Colicchio is a thoughtful and compassionate educator, concerned for the reader to really understand why he does what he does, and there is a warm intimacy to the book that makes it a pleasure to read from cover to cover. Colicchio is adamant about explaining a variety of basic techniques before offering recipes to readers, and it really inspires confidence that anyone who dedicates a little time and effort can create flavorful hearty dishes. I'm not completely familiar with French cuisine, but most of the techniques and dishes in this book seem consistent with the classical French cooking that I've seen on Top Chef - Colicchio uses a lot of seasonal local vegetables and buttery sauces with French names, and the food all looks delicious.

A reader in need of a wow factor for a dinner party will not likely find a lot of satisfaction here, since the focus is on simple foods done to perfection, not so much exotic ingredients or flashy presentations, and many of the recipes will need to be adapted for readers who don't like artichokes or mushrooms (I include myself), but I highly recommend this book for any home cook who wants to elevate his or her level of professionalism when it comes to preparing delicious meals for long evenings with friends and family. I look forward to many evenings with a few friends and the lessons from this book.

Judy says

This book walks you through the processes a chef goes through. It begins with basic techniques - braising, blanching, etc., then goes on to "Studies," in which Colicchio starts with a basic process/ingredient, like roasted tomatoes, and then builds from there, using increasingly complex recipes. The next section is "Trilogies," which uses trios of ingredients (e.g., asparagus, ramps, and morels) in different ways. ("Colicchio's motto: "If it grows together, it goes together" - so if you use ingredients that are seasonal, they will complement each other.) The book ends with a section of seasonal recipes, or "Components," and a few of his favorite recipes.

I had mixed feelings about this book. Colicchio's voice is engaging, especially when he talks about his

childhood in a produce selling/fishing family in New Jersey, and his explanations are clear and, at times, inspiring. However, most of the recipes require many steps, which puts me off immediately. (For example, you need to make brown chicken stock as just one ingredient in a number of his recipes.) He uses duck, truffles, foie gras, lobster (which he suggest taking apart *while they're still ALIVE*) before you boil them. There were very few recipes that I would choose to make. Still, interesting book - I'm glad I read it, but I don't think I will be referring to it often.

Kelly says

I really enjoy reading about chefs and "how" they do what they do, not just their recipes. So, I was hopeful for this book. I did like it, but it was too simplified. Tom highlighted a few of his favorite flavor combinations and then focused on how he uses those in "expanded" ways, but, overall, I don't think he taught me how to think like a chef.

Enjoyable read, but I didn't learn that much and the recipes are not ones that I want to run out and make, and there are not that many in the book (but it's not intended to be a "cookbook"). Some good chef basics worth learning about, though, like beurre fondue.

Avery says

Even though Tom can be a one trick pony (by cooking everything with thyme and butter) this guy can cook.

This is a MUST have book for any serious home cook. It taught me how to compose dishes and the basics of restaurant technique.

Renee says

This book has a lot of good cooking lessons and tips. I take issue, however, with cookbooks that feature ingredients that I am unable to get in Wisconsin. The recipes for salsify, ramps, and duck ham all look very tasty, but I'd have a very hard time obtaining those ingredients.

I did make one recipe from this book-- the "diced potato-leek soup", and it did not turn out well. It was due to my not cooking the bacon correctly. I ended up having to throw the whole pot of soup away and heating up a frozen pizza. Don't let that discourage you, however. I always have bad luck with recipes containing leeks!

Justin says

While it does have techniques there aren't that many and most of them are things like braising that covered in many other cookbooks and not revelatory tips.

Emily says

Tom, You can cook for me anytime. Crush.

Dan Moore says

This book was a quick read for me. I made it through, with kids around, in a few hours. Based on previous reviews I thought it was more of a book, with some cookbook type recipes thrown in. Now that I've been through it, it's a cookbook, organized to teach a lesson, but still a cookbook. Lot's of mouth watering pictures, plenty of recipes, and very short stories on how and why you are doing what you are doing. Each "lesson" is a quick read. The recipes look great, and help you to hone your skills and learn the craft.

I think the author did a good job in bringing his technique to the masses, and I better understand now the magic that happens in a chef's brain that allows him/her to see a few ingredients and picture a complete meal. I also respect and agree with the premise of starting with the basics, braising, blanching, etc. As with most complex endeavors, a firm background in the basics makes all the difference.

There is one complaint that I have with this book, and perhaps it will go away if I can COOK my way through the book rather than read my way through (the recipes are there for practice, not just to eat). Although I see how the professional chef combines ingredients and techniques and the end result just happens, and I understand that what is fresh at the market tells you what to make, when I get to the fresh market, I'm still overwhelmed with what to pick and what to do. Mustard greens, fresh tomatoes, turnips, carrots, lettuce, etc, etc. What goes better with pork? Can I put corn and turkey together? Apples and chicken? It's like I need a color matching wheel to match foods together and I didn't get that out of this book. I still cannot see the end of the road, the final product, and always end up with too many shelled peas and having to run back for mushrooms, which I didn't even think about. I know others who put together meals easily on the fly, so it may be some mental block in my head but I still find myself backing my way into a recipe by picking one main ingredient, then looking for something that includes it, then hunting all over for all the other ingredients.

I did build a meal on the fly one time, as the author does and professes, and it was pure nirvana. The family loved it; the ingredients were all fresh from the garden and simply prepared, and spiced up with simple additions. But don't read this book thinking it'll have "the secret." Putting these combinations together requires knowledge and experience, neither of which is fully available from a book.

Shannon Winward says

Tom Colicchio from before Top Chef. I appreciate a book about cooking that isn't just a recipe book - this is more of a collection of ideas, starting with some basic cooking terms and techniques and moving on to examples for working with/thinking about ingredients. How to "think like a chef". I like the groupings of recipes, such as half a dozen different ways to prepare roasted tomatoes - it's a good way to open up a cook's creativity... thinking about meals as building blocks of what's available, what is inspirational, rather than top-

down, scripted concepts from a page. That said, I felt that the groupings of ingredients weren't necessarily accessible to the home cook: lobster, for example, is something I might cook once a year, if that. Duck, less than that. And I happen to not be fond of mushrooms - so there are three whole chapters I couldn't get much use of. Overall, I found the book to be geared a little too much to the gourmand to fully reach me - I even had to pull out other books or google terms that Tom glossed over in his explanations. But I did learn some things, and I enjoyed being able to read the book from cover to cover, which isn't something you can do with a straight-up cook book. Plus, pictures of Tom Colicchio with a full head of hair. What's not to like?

Matt says

I would say, that other than "Cooking By Hand" by Bertolli, this book has influenced my cooking style more than any other book I've ever read. The reason for this is simple . . . it teaches you to do exactly what the title says.

The entire book is technique driven, not recipe driven. This isn't really a book you can pick up and look up say, "lobster" and just jump in and make the recipe. You need to read the entire first part of the book on cooking techniques so that when Tom tells you to "pan roast" the lobster, you know EXACTLY what he's talking about.

You'll get walked through each technique, step-by-step and he even troubleshoots a little for you, warning you of potential common pitfalls when doing said operation.

I really can't recommend this highly enough if you're looking to improve your home (or professional) cooking technique and really move your game ahead.

Mauri says

Awesome book -- I got it from the library, and had ordered my own copy before I finished the introduction. I'm an experienced home cook and baker, and I already have a firm grasp of many of the basic techniques, but I also know there's always something to learn that can improve your cooking.

I don't usually work without a recipe of some sort (even if I stray from them) and I don't often wander out of my familiar ingredients, but I have wanted to increase my intuitiveness and creativity in the kitchen, and this book has already had that impact. On my first visit to the store today, with dinner in mind tonight, I have come up with a combinations of vegetables to go with fish that I never would have thought of before, and trying new things, like Hen of the Woods mushrooms.

At one point (now that I have finished the book) Tom says something like one idea leads to dozens, and that's true... just thinking about the mushrooms I started coming up with more ideas for them (I'm sure those ideas aren't new, just new to me... which is what matters).

Highly recommend.

Erlinda says

I first learned about chef Tom Colicchio from the TV show "Top Chef." I liked his pragmatic appraisal of the cooks' creations, his knowledge, and his constructive criticism. So I thought I'd check out this book.

I really like this book. It teaches you basic techniques like roasting, braising, blanching, stock-making, and sauce-making in easy-to-read and understand instructions, including pitfalls to avoid. A number of “studies” or recipes are included using the techniques, many focusing on a particular ingredient like mushrooms or spring vegetables. Though some use upscale ingredients that I would probably never use like lobster, there are others like pan-roasted asparagus and roasted sea scallops with mushrooms that I definitely would try.

The book is lavishly illustrated and well-laid out with Colicchio’s wise advise and tips scattered throughout.
