Chapter 12

On Kitchens and Cookbooks

By Rory Bester and Karen Dudley

Karen Dudley is a noted South African chef, restauranteur, cookbook author and food entrepreneur. Her restaurant, "The Kitchen", in Woodstock, Cape Town, was patronised by everyone who had ever heard about it, including former US First Lady, Michelle Obama. Dudley's first cookbook, A Week in the Kitchen (2012), *has become a bestseller in the South African market and has been followed by more cookbooks, including* Another Week in the Kitchen (2013), Set a Table (2018) *and* Onwards (2023). *Rory Bester teaches a graduate course called "Kitchen Histories" in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of the Western Cape. The course is an exploration of the kitchen as a complex archive of often competing microhistories, with the cookbook as not only a curation out of this archive, but also as a rendering of multiple kitchens in public. In this conversation Rory Bester and Dudley bring together their interests in kitchens and cookbooks to think about food, memory, identity and roast chicken 101.*

RB: In '*Kitchen Histories*', we try to understand cookbooks in more complex ways. A common reaction to cookbooks is that they're not serious, and looking through a cookbook library is just for "fun". It doesn't contain anything serious, either in terms of reading cookbooks or in terms of making them. Do you think there's a place for nuance and complexity in making and reading cookbooks? And if you do, what is that nuance and complexity for you?

KD: If I see yet another cookbook with a roast chicken recipe I'm going to glaze right over (no pun intended). But, if the roast chicken has something to do with somebody's life story or personal journey, or the recipe has some special little hack or family secret, then I'm interested. We want to hear an expression of an author's story in the roast chicken, rather than getting "Roast Chicken 101". We can get that on YouTube. So, yes, there's definitely a place for nuance and complexity in cookbooks. Food is about so many different layers and textures, and these don't come from simple, neat answers. They come from exploring complexity. They come from digging deep into the nuances that are relatable and that connect us.

RB: Food is all over YouTube, and especially on social media platforms like Instagram. So much so that in the first year of '*Kitchen Histories*', we presented the cookbook projects on Instagram. It has a certain alure—it's instant, it's interactive, it's free, and it can be a powerful form of knowledge activism. These were all things we wanted the cookbooks to be. But somehow it was really difficult to manipulate the Instagram platform enough to make the projects look and feel and read like cookbooks, and ultimately became an exercise in understanding the value of a physical cookbook. At a time when especially social media is so instant and bite-size, how do physical cookbooks remain relevant and compete with our desires for instant gratification?

KD: YouTube and Instagram ... incredibly helpful! Incredibly useful! Because of them, there's really no excuse for people not to learn how to cook something...

RB: ... like roast chicken ...

KD: ... like roast chicken! Or to know something about an ingredient. What an amazing resource! But, having and holding a cookbook in your hands, as opposed to seeing something on screen, is a whole different story. There's a different way that people connect to recipes and have a relationship with the food they make when it comes out of a cookbook that's in your hands. What YouTube does well is stimulate curiosity about food. What good cookbooks do is sustain growth and curiosity about food.

RB: Cookbooks don't only tell stories through words. They do it through a design sensibility, which something like Instagram struggles to replicate, especially in the design and layout of the text that sits below the image. This is something that was awkward in the Instagram cookbooks and frustrated even more so by the mechanism of the "... more" in Instagram posts. Is there a design sensibility that is particular to cookbooks, as opposed to other kinds of books?

KD: A cookbook tells a story, and that story needs a multi-layered design sensibility. Which is what Instagram can only do in the photography. There is a way to make a story flow through design. The paper, the colours, the font, the layout all help the story to unfold and flow. It's critical for cookbook writers and designers to collaborate on bringing a deep consciousness about the unfolding flow of the story in a cookbook.

RB: But, as much as a cookbook needs to flow in this way, it's also not the kind of book that is typically read from cover to cover. It is often flicked through and dipped into when a picture or ingredient catches the reader's eye. And in that moment, in that slice of reading a recipe, it still has to give something that is part of the bigger story of the cookbook. It should read in the moment, but also feel like it is part of something bigger.

KD: This is why a good cookbook is a collaborative project. Oftentimes, cooks aren't designers. So, you bring in partners who can help interpret your story. That's where it becomes a collaborative project. A cookbook needn't be a lonely thing. We need to be open to people who know other kinds of stuff. People who know how to put books together. People who can style and photograph a dish or meal. People who understand what the market needs. Because, ultimately, we want to offer something that's meaningful to the world and enable anyone to take what is on the pages in the cookbook and realise it on their own table.

RB: What are the elements of a good cookbook? Tell me about your understanding of the importance of curiosity, inspiration, friendships and stories ...

KD: The first is curiosity. When you're putting out a cookbook, you have to produce something that's distinctive and unique, but that people can also relate to. In a way, it's like you articulating curiosity for other people. My own curiosity and other people's curiosity is joined by that little bridge of relatability. You've got to be able to reach for it. But you've also got to be able to do it. The second is inspiration. A while ago social media went mad for baked feta. It was a mad internet crushing over feta and tomatoes with a bit of olive oil baked in the oven. People were going crazy and feeling inspired about it. People want to be inspired out of their humdrum, even if the ingredients are already there, and then just employed in a different way. People get really inspired by possibility.

RB: Do people ever send you photographs of the food they've been inspired to make from your cookbooks?

KD: Quite often. It's so lovely, and I love it when people take a recipe and make their own. There's something wonderful about a cookbook becoming part of culture. That's also the contribution of a cookbook when the pickled cauliflower has become part of somebody's weekly ritual or part of a family's story. Some people feel close to me because I've been in their kitchen. I've been on their

dinner table. Their book is a bit messy and dog eared because they keep going back to the eggplant with teriyaki. I love that messiness. I love that the book is falling apart because it means I've made a fast friend ...

RB: Which, going back to the elements of a good cookbook, is important because friendship is the third element ...

KD: Food has the power to seduce and bring comfort. Especially when we are reaching for the people around us. You can look at someone and feel like they need a little sandwich or a boiled egg. In this looking for the person's need, as opposed to just foisting something on them, the love comes in. Sometimes it might be unexpected, like I just want a slice of cucumber. Other times I want more. It's about listening to ourselves and what we need, and then reaching for others in that opportunity. Which leads to the last element of a good cookbook, which is the stories. If you want to know how to make a thing, you can go to YouTube. It's going to give you great technical knowledge. But stories, especially ones that are relatable and carried throughout the cookbook, touch people in deeper ways than just technical knowledge. When I did my first book, I wrote what I thought was a really nice introduction. But when I showed it to a friend, she said I must tell *my* story, the deeper story about how I come to my home and how I came to my food. She wanted me to connect with my food identity, show how I came to express myself through food, show that I'm still learning and bringing my friends along with me.

RB: How would you characterise the evolution of your cookbook journey, from your first book, '*A Week in the Kitchen*', to your current book, '*Onwards*'? How do you understand the journey in terms of an evolution of your practice?

KD: The first cookbook happened so suddenly. A photographer friend and a designer friend said let's do a cookbook. We've got all these things right here in the restaurant. So, every day I made twenty different salads. My chefs put a little bit of salad on a plate. I'd style it, we'd shoot it, and we'd give it to somebody to eat. We literally shot a week in the kitchen. Nobody was doing anything like that. And people related to the book so profoundly that it became a bestseller. I realised I can really make a contribution here, and people were hungry for more. So, pretty quickly we did '*Another Week in the Kitchen*'. And then, '*Set a Table*', which was my third book. At this point I needed people to know that I can do more than make lovely salads and sandwiches, that I can actually cook, that

I'm actually a chef. '*Set a Table'* is a more entertainment focussed cookbook. It's very close to my heart in its beauty and marked a little period of my life where I had a restaurant called '*The Dining Room'*. And then I did '*Onwards'*, which is a story about me and where I am now. Still looking, still learning, still searching, still experimenting. It's been such a wonderful journey, and the books have articulated my growth. And I can build on this for my next cookbook, which I think will be called '*Upwards',* and which will probably involve more of the conversation that I'm now having about food systems, about the work that other people are doing, especially young chefs, and about collaborations and conversations. It's about a new imagination for the way we think about food, and letting go of the old ideas that aren't serving us. I love making cookbooks and have been so lucky to make them.

RB: How much is a cookbook about trust between you and your reader?

KD: People have to trust my creative style. This is not only about liking what I like, but also knowing that what I like is true to who I am. I love walking past a plate at a market, looking at its decorative green fringe, and thinking I see something on you with your little green fringe. I can see a piece of yellowtail with a kimchi dressing drizzled over. I can see you on that green fringed plate. People need to trust that I actually know my stuff, and that it'll work. People are in my world, in my home. They're seeing my children and my sweetheart. They're seeing me make stuff there. There's a trust. It's not some kind of studio. It's real life. And, practically, it means all the recipes have to be tested. They have to work in different baking tins, different ovens. They have to work whether you're in Joburg or Cape Town or Kimberley.

RB: I want to ask you about kitchens, because cookbooks often emerge out of all the kitchens that make up your life. At any given time, you, especially you, are holding multiple kitchens. There's your mother's kitchen, your home kitchen, your two restaurant kitchens, and even the kitchens of the people who make food out of your cookbooks and then send you pictures. These different kitchens have overlaps and similarities, but they also show up differences and contradictions. How do you understand your life's collation of kitchens?

KD: My home kitchen and my restaurant kitchen are both really working kitchens. At home it drives my family bananas. They're always asking why there are so many bottles of sauce everywhere. My children call them squatters. They're just sitting there and not paying any rent. But I need all these

resources around me. My mother's kitchen is here with me, but in memories rather than physical things, in her generosity, her belief in doing things properly and always reaching for something that is properly good and delicious. Like a scone or a muffin. I also have memories of her Hong Kong Chicken. It looked sticky and black and had the flavour of soy sauce. And garlic and ginger and sugar. It was pure *umami*. I've tried to make it, but haven't reached the flavours of her Hong Kong Chicken. It probably came from one of those 1970s cookbooks that fancied itself for making "Oriental" food. Or maybe it was a cutting out of a newspaper. Some auntie introduced Hong Kong chicken and it was novel and interesting and amazing and now I sit with this legacy, with this intrigue. Now I have this problem of trying to make my mother's Hong Kong Chicken.

RB: Does Hong Kong Chicken remind you of anything else?

KD: When I think of Hong Kong chicken, I also think of the red and cream damask curtains in the lounge in my parents' home in Fairways in Cape Town.

RB: The kitchen is full of emotions. The archive that the kitchen holds is full of emotions, and a cookbook must navigate these emotions. Some of these emotions, like sentimentality and nostalgia, are often easily presented in cookbooks, especially when remembering the simplicity and comfort of a childhood kitchen, or in writing an inspirational cookbook about the love and kindness that oozes out of a grandmother's kitchen. Others, like a sense of sadness and loss, are more difficult and not surprisingly less common in cookbooks. Then there are difficult emotions, like betrayal, jealousy, anger and hate, which are common in novels and films about kitchens and food, but are rarely represented in cookbooks and their stories. Have you ever considered any of these more difficult emotions when thinking about your cookbook practice?

KD: It's a very interesting thing to explore, because we can't really understand our progress or our little joys if we don't understand a little bit about pathos. So, I have one story, which is in *'Another Week in the Kitchen'* (2013), it's called Layne's Hummus (Dudley 2013: 163). When I lived in the US, I went out with someone called Layne. He was a lovely man, but we were just never getting it together. He's basically a priest, but was experimenting with a relationship with a woman. In a last-ditch effort to make it work, we went on a road trip from Washington D.C. to Florida in a huge panel van that belonged to an old lady. And he packed hummus. It's a little bit different to a regular hummus. It has cayenne pepper in it. Layne ate like a ramp model, but made amazing hummus.

We arrived in Florida, which was smelling of jasmine blossoms, and it's hot and humid. And we're navigating this relationship that's fraught and difficult. And the hummus is all the sadness of this unfulfilled relationship that's just not happening. So, the hummus is basically the best thing that came out of this failed, sad relationship. It carries some of that kind of sadness of unrequited love. Every time I have the hummus there's a little touch on that sad time, that difficult journey, but in dipping carrots in the dip, it is something that becomes so amazing. So, I have this sad memory, but also one of the best things he gave me.

RB: Holding the emotion isn't only about the stories that are inside a cookbook, but also the stories that are outside a cookbook, right?

KD: Recipes can help us through things. People have written to me and told me how powerful my recipes and stories are. They bought my book, and it helped them through the death of their father, or they just cooked like mad from one of my cookbooks to process an emotion. Some people even keep my cookbooks on their bedside tables. There's something in where people are in their lives, and a connection with food that is healing.

RB: Why do you cook?

KD: I cook because I can't help myself really. Sometimes it's because people need to be fed. Sometimes it's because I want to do something new and be the person to take somebody to that new place. There's a joy in being able to take somebody along with you. I cook because there's great pleasure, and I suppose I'm still always looking for affirmation. I'll make something for my family and go, is that working for you? Do you like that? It's good, hey? Do you think it could be in a new cookbook? What do you think of that? Did you get the little crust on there? Did you see how I cooked it a little bit less, so it's a little bit more tender? Did you taste the curry leaf in that sauce? It's about saying come with me because deliciousness always wins! So, sometimes I have people in my head that I'm cooking with or for, and others that I want to seduce. But, for the most part, I'm cooking to my own desire and looking to making something that's really exceptional and interesting and curious and something that's kind of pushing the boat out a little bit.

RB: You have a mantra when it comes to food—"Adopt, Adapt, Develop". You find something that sounds amazing or you eat something that is equally amazing and you adopt it. Then there's a

process of adaptation and experimentation, substituting one ingredient for another, cutting or shaping something differently in ways that speak to you. And lastly you develop it, trying it again and again until you know you love it, your family loves it and your friends love it. Then you put it out into the world. It's a beautiful account of a creative process that is about curiosity, questions, research and actually making a gustatory argument for something. I'm especially interested in the "Adapt" part of your mantra, which is not only an opportunity to localise something that is from elsewhere, but also tap into the possibilities of future indigenous food systems.

KD: When I started writing cookbooks, pomegranate syrup, which is a classic Mediterranean ingredient, wasn't readily available in South Africa. But *moskonfyt* has the same tart, sweet profile as pomegranate syrup. *Moskonfyt* is not only local, but also peculiar to us here in the Western Cape where grapes are grown for winemaking. And then, if we think about carbon footprints, there is even more impetus to find sustainable local equivalents. If we aren't already making it ourselves, we have to reach out to producers who can make it. Right now, I'm wanting to make lots of taramasalata. To get the salted and cured fish roe that is tarama paste, especially not the dyed one, is very difficult. So, I'm speaking to Greek chefs and asking them if we can't make it using *snoek* (pike) roe. *Snoek* is everywhere in Cape Town fish shops. It's part of the cultural landscape of the city. We smoke the fish, so why can't we smoke the roe and do something that's particularly indigenous to here? Then there's bulgur wheat. Instead of using bulgur wheat, we can use red sorghum. Love red sorghum! It has better flavour, a marvellous texture, and it's indigenous. It just feels right. As a cookbook writer, it's kind of a responsibility to put it out there and to say, look at this good thing, let's use this good thing that's from here. It might taste slightly different, but it belongs here. It's something unique to us.

RB: For the last two years you've judged the '*Eat Out Woolworths Restaurant Awards*'. What's it like for you to eat food prepared by other chefs and more specifically, judge their food?

KD: Because I'm so curious and so hungry for new experiences and new flavours, I'm always curious about what people are making, and how they're expressing themselves. I love when there's a humility in the delivery. I love when there's beautiful technique. Sometimes a thing is so delicious you just want to put your face in it. I get very excited when there's a feeling of generosity—not a generosity of portion, but a generosity of spirit. I recently ate at La Petite Colombe in Franschhoek outside Cape Town. Oh, my hat, it was phenomenal. The chef, Peter Duncan, comes from the small town of Saron, which is just north of Tulbagh in the *Grootwinterhoek* Winderness Area. He made a

linefish “*viskop*” (fish head) chowder that reached back to the way his family made fish head soup when he was a child. Two very beautiful pieces of yellowtail were poached in oil tableside. So, you see it being poached, then it goes off to the kitchen, comes back again in little bowls, along with all the other ingredients for the chowder. There are bits of onion and bits of spice and bits of other interesting things and cream. And the chowder gets poured over this fish. It’s so powerfully the chef’s family’s story. You can see it in all the ingredients coming into play right there on the table. You can see the tenderness of heart, and it was such a beautiful experience.

RB: Grannies are so often the inspiration for food journeys. And recently, grannies have become the focus of many good cookbooks, from ‘*Pasta Grannies: The Secrets of Italy’s Best Home Cooks*’ (Bennison 2019) to ‘*In Bibi’s Kitchen: The Recipes and Stories of Grandmothers from the Eight Countries that Touch the Indian Ocean*’ (2020). Why are grannies so ubiquitous in stories about food?

KD: Because nostalgia is so evocative. And food is so evocative. For people, for memory, and it touches us so deeply. But sometimes nostalgia is a little bit of a lazy thing because what is true for you might not be true for me. If you’re articulating your nostalgia in an interesting way, that can be a good thing. But you have to be careful. Some people’s mothers and grandmothers were just not good at cooking. They were good at other things, like sewing you a whole wardrobe. And for those that do have interesting cooking stories, we need to be able to make new stories out of the memories. We don’t want to get stuck in the past. We want to have something that has meaning in the present.

RB: A last question about what holds all of this together ... how do you understand what you do as a creative practice? We know the creative practices of visual artists, composers and musicians, novelists, and poets, but what about the creative practices that sit around food, around being a chef and cookbook writer?

KD: My creative practice is curiosity. In other words, looking for things. And then, boldness, with a little bit of boldness and bravery and audacity. So, being creative and audacious is my practice. And then my practice is also putting on my apron and getting in there and testing new things that will work in different contexts, that will work for different people. This kind of development is part of my creative practice. But my happiest time is sitting here amongst my books and creating new things and looking for new things and making things beautiful on a plate and making and finding recipes that are going to connect profoundly with people.

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