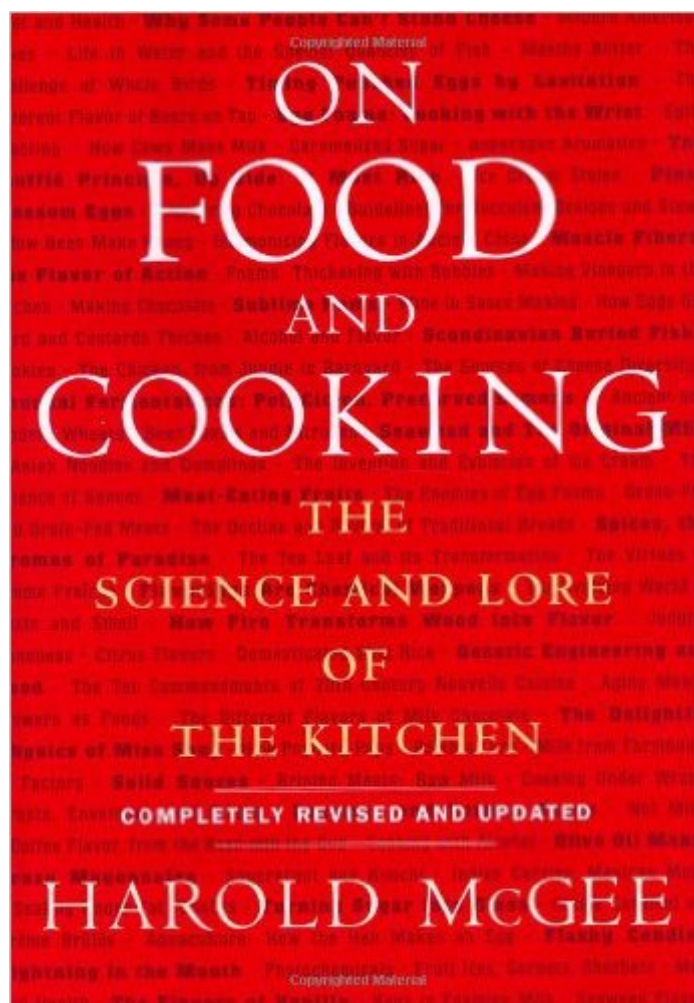


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# On Food And Cooking: The Science And Lore Of The Kitchen



## Synopsis

Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking* is a kitchen classic. Hailed by *Time* magazine as "a minor masterpiece" when it first appeared in 1984, *On Food and Cooking* is the bible to which food lovers and professional chefs worldwide turn for an understanding of where our foods come from, what exactly they're made of, and how cooking transforms them into something new and delicious. Now, for its twentieth anniversary, Harold McGee has prepared a new, fully revised and updated edition of *On Food and Cooking*. He has rewritten the text almost completely, expanded it by two-thirds, and commissioned more than 100 new illustrations. As compulsively readable and engaging as ever, the new *On Food and Cooking* provides countless eye-opening insights into food, its preparation, and its enjoyment. *On Food and Cooking* pioneered the translation of technical food science into cook-friendly kitchen science and helped give birth to the inventive culinary movement known as "molecular gastronomy." Though other books have now been written about kitchen science, *On Food and Cooking* remains unmatched in the accuracy, clarity, and thoroughness of its explanations, and the intriguing way in which it blends science with the historical evolution of foods and cooking techniques. *On Food and Cooking* is an invaluable and monumental compendium of basic information about ingredients, cooking methods, and the pleasures of eating. It will delight and fascinate anyone who has ever cooked, savored, or wondered about food.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This red 'On Food and Cooking, The Science and Lore of the Kitchen' by Harold McGee is a new

edition of what is the most widely quoted culinary work in English. It may be almost as influential on the thinking of culinary professionals as Julia Child's 'Mastering the Art of French Cooking' was on attitudes of American home cooking. The testimonials from the likes of Thomas Keller, Paula Wolfert, Jacques Pepin, and Rose Levy Beranbaum just begins to tell you how important McGee's volume has become. I was immensely pleased to see the exchange of acknowledgments between McGee and Keller to see how much the academic can learn from the professional chef. I can devote my thousand words on how good this book has been to the culinary world, but most of you already know that. What I will do is to list all the reasons one may wish to read this book. First, the book is simply interesting to amateur foodies and culinary professionals. This is the serendipity principle. If you prospect in a rich land, you will invariably find something of value. The 'lore' in the subtitle is not an afterthought. The book includes history, linguistics and cooking practice in addition to simple science. In over 800 pages of densely packed narrative, one will invariably find something of interest, especially since the book covers such a broad range of topics, including: Milk and Dairy Eggs Meat Fish and Shellfish Fruits and Vegetables Seeds, Cereals, and Doughs Sauces Sugars and Chocolate Alcohol (Wine, Beer, and Distilled Spirits) Cooking Methods Cooking Utensil Materials 'The Four Basic Food Molecules' Basic Chemistry This is the perfect book in which to jump around to those subjects that interest you. I just wish the author would have put the last two subjects first so that more readers would stumble across them to gain a better understanding of what appears in the chapters on specific foods. A quick example of how this would help in practical terms is that the characteristics of alcohol, which stand halfway between water and oils explains why vodka is such a great flavor enhancing addition to pasta sauces. Second, professional and amateur bakers should read all of the chapters on grains, doughs, chocolate, alcohol, basic molecules, and the chemistry primer, as this is the one area of culinary practice where knowledge of science can make the biggest difference between good and great results. Both Shirley Corriher and Alton Brown have books which include baking science and Rose Levy Beranbaum's books all cover practical baking science in depth, but McGee puts all of this in a broader context which, to use Alton Brown's great metaphor about science and cooking, gives a roadmap covering a much broader area, to a finer scale of detail. Third, all culinary professionals who have anything whatsoever to do with teaching should read this book from cover to cover, twice. There is absolutely nothing more annoying than having a person in the role of teacher make a patently false statement in their area of expertise. The number of times a Food Network culinary celeb misuses the term 'dissolve' when they really mean 'emulsify' or simply 'mix' would fill volumes. It is still a common mistake to say that searing protein seals in juices. There are many good reasons for searing. Preventing the escape of

liquid is not one of them. Even Brown himself has made some gaffs in print and on 'Good Eats' such as when he described a very corrosive compound as a strong acid rather than a strong base. He confused one end of the pH scale with the other. Fourth, anyone who has ambitions to develop their own recipes should read those chapters which deal with the major foods such as dairy, meats, fish, fruits, and vegetables, with a premium on the material on milk and eggs. Two defining characteristics of science are that it explains things and it predicts things. Most people understand the first but may not appreciate the second. One can predict, for example, that if you use too little fat in a milk or cream based gratin, the dairy will curdle, so, if you are playing around with your favorite mac and cheese recipe, do not be so quick to reach for that skim milk, as you are likely to be very disappointed with the result. Similarly, if you crave some Saturday morning buttermilk biscuits and the nearest carton of buttermilk is a 30 minute drive away, AND, you have no vinegar, AND you have no citrus, there is just a chance that your aging cream of tartar dissolved in milk will save the day, since this is an acidic salt which will stand in for the acidity in the buttermilk. As a former professional chemist, I can assure you that pure inorganic salts like cream of tartar simply do not go bad. I would have loved to hear the exchanges between author McGee and Thomas Keller, as Keller is probably the contemporary epitome of how the culinary professional uses experimental techniques in cooking. The constant tasting which every cook does is nothing more than a practical application of the chemical technique of titration, where materials are combined slowly until the desired result is achieved. What separates good from great cooks is using this technique to test raw materials. This is the truest marriage of science and cooking, following the maxim of Daniel Boulud who stated that to be really great, the journeyman cook must repeat the same procedure thousands of times to the point where the result is utterly reproducible and the cook can detect the desired endpoint easily by eye, nose, and mouth. Sounds like science to me. The author's introduction presents an excellent case for rereading the book in its second edition as he cites the great changes in food culture over the last twenty years. This is also a great case for anyone who is interested in any aspect of food. A very important book indeed.

This is a truly unique and wonderful book. It contains a tremendous amount of information about the food we eat. It shows the structure and composition of animals, plants, eggs, liquids, and seeds, explaining why each one has certain characteristics (for example, it turns out that the smell of fish comes from the decomposition of a chemical in ocean fish cells that maintains the proper pressure balance with salt water). It explains what happens when ingredients are chopped, mixed, heated, cooled, fermented, or otherwise transformed. I discovered the first edition about five years ago, and

it permanently changed how I think about food and how I cook. Since then, I've seen many other chefs mention this book. For example, in Michael Ruhlman's book "The Making of a Chef: Mastering Heat at the Culinary Institute," CIA students often study this (unrequired) book to better understand what they're doing. You should be aware that this book is more an encyclopedia than a recipe book or a collection of essays. If you're looking for a fun discussion of food science, then Alton Brown's "I'm just here for the food" may be a better choice. If you're looking for recipes that are optimized by principles of food science, I'd recommend Shirley O. Corriher's "Cookwise." (Actually, I'd recommend both of those books anyway.) Some readers may find "On Food and Cooking" a little bit too dense and technical to read from cover to cover, but as a reference book, it's unmatched. The second edition is a great improvement over the first, and I'd strongly recommend it not only to new readers but to anyone who read the first edition. (Just the new section on fish makes this book worth purchasing.) This is really a totally new book: it's been completely reorganized, new illustrations have been added, and it's 66% longer than the old version. I'm guessing that the only reason that this book has the same title is for marketing value: the first book was very well known by cooks.

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