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# The Kinfolk Table



## Synopsis

Kinfolk magazine "launched to great acclaim and instant buzz in 2011" is a quarterly journal about understated, unfussy entertaining. The journal has captured the imagination of readers nationwide, with content and an aesthetic that reflect a desire to go back to simpler times; to take a break from our busy lives; to build a community around a shared sensibility; and to foster the endless and energizing magic that results from sharing a meal with good friends. Now there's *The Kinfolk Table*, a cookbook from the creators of the magazine, with profiles of 45 tastemakers who are cooking and entertaining in a way that is beautiful, uncomplicated, and inexpensive. Each of these home cooks "artisans, bloggers, chefs, writers, bakers, crafters" has provided one to three of the recipes they most love to share with others, whether they be simple breakfasts for two, one-pot dinners for six, or a perfectly composed sandwich for a solo picnic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It's rare that a cookbook would evoke such vitriol, but after I received *The Kinfolk Table: Recipes for Small Gatherings*, I was livid. I realized that this wasn't a celebration of food and gathering and the magic those two ignite, this was the sound of one hand clapping, a coffee-table book devoted to the very "cool" artists and Web celebrities from across the country. The narrative principally centers on the people, not the food, which would be fine if that were the intention. Without a clear narrative and culinary journey, we're left to merely weave in and out of kitchens like a spool of thread, but we're not invited to linger. Rarely do we see the fruits of the contributors' labor and the gatherings they so fastidiously rhapsodize. The Kinfolkers drive miles for mussels and set a formidable table in their

outdoor barns. Theirs is a life of a cultivated beauty that serves up the illusion of simplicity. In reality, the Tao of Kinfolk is nothing more than understated affluence and luxury. Theirs are gatherings where meals are photographed with a thousand-dollar camera; where everyone has clean skin, shiny hair, and ebullient optimism; where kids play around the paddock. Theirs is a world that exists for few. There is no real visceral connection between image and type. Rather, the cookbook tells us the story of people who project the lives you wish you could live, and the recipes are merely an antecedent to that lovely fiction. More troubling was the editorial decision to segment the book by "place." The Kinfolk Brooklyn is whitewashed and moneyed, devoid of flavor, color, or texture. Where is the Russian food? Where is the Caribbean food? Dominican, Italian, Polish, etc.? Having grown up in a borough so rich in gastronomic culture, I remember those diverse meals when you talk to me about Brooklyn food. I don't recall precious dishes made by transplants to the better known and more affluent areas of the borough (Park Slope, Williamsburg, Cobble Hill, and so on), who have a noticeably homogenous look and culinary point of view. So much for the Kinfolk founder's claim that his cookbook will "peel off the fluff and commercial layers that complicate entertaining," and if that passion can't be seen in the pages' austere white dining rooms, it certainly won't be found in the book's recipes. The cooking instructions are as carelessly delivered as those anesthetized settings are carefully crafted. Because, like those spaces, the composition of the recipes is cold, formulaic, sometimes off; it hardly connects the meal to the person to the story to the gathering that celebrates it all. What is it, then, that we're celebrating? A life lived in organic sepia? A life lived through the lens of those who photograph it? While you could argue that, perhaps, I'm not part of Kinfolk's target audience, I'm indeed part of the audience for homemade food that has the ability to connect loved ones. Yet, as executing a handful of dishes proves, the book has some demonstrable flaws where procedure and chemistry are concerned. Many recipes miss key steps in their methods, or offer ingredients that yield imbalanced flavors and textures. If I'm not a trained baker or a chemist and can recognize the flaws simply by reading the recipes, what of the reader who wants only to fix a good meal? I made Sam and Ashley Owens's Apple Crisp twice following the recipe to the letter, and both times the crisp failed. Know that I've been making pies, crisps, and crumbles for the better part of a decade, and the recipe is flawed from top to bottom--the technique, texture, and flavors are off. The juice of two lemons, tart apples, and a quarter cup of sugar yielded a pronounced citrus note that overpowered the apples and cinnamon. The topping was entirely too sweet, sickeningly so, relative to the amount of flour in the recipe, so, on the third go, I was forced to make significant alterations. Additionally, covering the crisp with parchment and wax, as instructed, only added to the cooking time and didn't do anything in terms of the final product. I could have

easily done without it and enjoyed a simple crisp. However, since Sam and Ashley's crisp was tented, I had to increase the cooking time to achieve a brown crust, which inevitably yielded a center with the consistency of applesauce. Although the two can carry a tune and drape a dress--he's a musician; she, a designer--I strongly question their culinary prowess. You can't know how close I came to hurling this book out the window. I'd spent a pile of money on butter, flour, apples and sugar only to witness a recipe fail. It should be noted that Doug and Paige Bischoff's Rosemary and Roasted Garlic Bread was a triumph. Roasting the garlic for an hour resulted in a sweeter, less pungent flavor that married perfectly with the fresh rosemary. While bread making isn't entirely difficult, it's time-consuming, and one has to be vigilant in upholding the integrity of the method: kneading and allowing the dough to rest and rise. A few critical steps were missing from this recipe, namely, the timing of kneading by hand versus by mixer. At the onset, we're given two sets of instructions for the initial, critical kneading--one for a machine application and the other for a by-hand approach. However, the subsequent instructions for the next two dough kneadings were vague. In theory, the directions that follow are supposed to be synched to the stand-mixer timing; in practice, that wasn't the case--a small point, certainly, but one that can adversely affect the end product, rendering a tough, dense loaf. Luckily, I've screwed up so many bread loaves in the past five years that I've become hyperaware of the sensitivity in making bread. I first encountered blogger and event planner Lillie Auld's Almond Jam Tart in Kinfolk's autumn issue, and I was perplexed by the erroneous cup-to-grams conversion for white flour--both the overestimated amount of flour called for (in order to make this recipe sing, I eliminated a half of a cup in the final version), and the mysterious elimination of the step in the recipe in which one would incorporate the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients. Are we left to fend for ourselves and assume the obvious? And obvious to whom? (Only to those who frequently bake, OBVIOUSLY.) Or was the recipe developer asleep at the proverbial switch? My modified end result was a simple, buttery tart with a perfect crumb texture. Sara and Hugh Forte's (of Sprouted Kitchen fame) Chocolate Chip Banana Pancakes were a standout, impeccable in terms of the juxtaposition of flavor and spice (can we talk about flax meal, vanilla, banana, and chocolate for a second? Or maybe an HOUR?), and simple in execution. I made these semi-virtuous hotcakes this morning and they were wonderfully fragrant and a true delight. Admittedly, I felt confident in Sara's work, as I'm a longtime reader of her lovely blog and have made many recipes from her cookbook. All of this raises a question: Were the recipes in this cookbook tested in a real kitchen so we, as consumers, may be certain the chemistry is on point? Was the cookbook proofed by professionals (of the editorial and culinary varieties)? After thumbing through three-hundred-plus pages, it occurs to me that the Kinfolk cookbook is a variation on a

single theme: the creation of a life lived in an Anthropologie catalog. It's the reason why we get lost in blogs and the lives of strangers. We want to be happy, always. We want a life free of storms and sorrow. We want our linens, and bowls, and kitchens with reclaimed wood -- and in this way, Kinfolk succeeds, for its America is rarefied and specific, rife with denizens who are preened to dishabile perfection and apply pretty filters to their photos. I recall a similar charade: GOOP. While escapism looks lovely on paper, in practice it's difficult and expensive. You don't need a book to tell you how to gather, you don't need a formula to cultivate simplicity. Find the people you love, a space to lay down plates, and a meal that binds the two.

When I buy a cookbook, I expect it to be about food, contain dependable recipes and perhaps some interesting stories. This unfortunately does not meet my criteria. Basically a picture book of hipster fluff, I was disappointed in the lack of quality writing and felt the errors and omissions in several of the recipes very amateurish. And let me be clear: I'm an early 30's, small business owner with an english degree from Reed College of all places. I spent half my life in Portland, Oregon and my tolerance for twee is high. But this is some silly, half-cooked hipster nonsense to be sure.

The book and the magazines are beautifully photographed. The writing in both is weak, and the concept in general is way too self-congratulatory. "Look how cool we are!" There is a recipe for coffee, and another for cut melon, it is fairly ridiculous.

[First appeared in The Englewood Review of Books, Advent 2013 issue]The cover copy on The Kinfolk Table describes the new cookbook as "the right book at the right time--a cookbook full of fresh ideas that captures a cultural moment and defines it for a quickly expanding audience. One aspect of that is undeniably accurate--The Kinfolk Table does perfectly capture a certain cultural moment. Whether it is full of fresh ideas, however, is entirely debatable: it bursts not so much with freshness as with signifiers of hipster coolness: it is all about reclaiming all things vintage, heritage, rustic and simple, and its design (iconography?) is similarly devoted to the articles of hipster faith: rough-hewn tables covered with mismatched antique tableware and linen napkins; ultra-spare photographs of desserts in individual ramekins sprinkled with (what else?) coarse sea salt; slender, girlish women in retro dresses and hairdos (aprons optional but highly recommended) holding pies or cut-glass jars of homemade jam. It's a visual treat if you enjoy the nostalgic aesthetic that's so hip right now. Recipe contributors (based mainly in

Brooklyn, Portland, Copenhagen, and the English countryside) are a mostly young-ish, mostly beautiful collection of creative types: printmakers and photographers and designers of one sort or another; chefs and artisanal makers of cheese, ice cream, and syrups. Their homes and gardens are as relentlessly art-directed as everything else in the book and described in rapturous tones: one woman's home is brimming with art books and vintage furniture; another is an ocean oasis of greenery, vintage glassware, and beloved old kitchen items from her family. The aesthetic is strongly value-laden; in one mini-essay, someone's grandmother's vintage cast-iron saucepot is said to be an apt parallel for the whole family's way of life. (Thank heavens it wasn't a vintage chamberpot.) This and other phrases push the bounds of credulity: one home is described as a place where a casual evening dinner with friends extends into another day of sipping wine with neighbors on the back porch. Sounds cozy and fun, but only if you don't think too hard about it. Do those friends ever leave after dinner is over? Do the hosts go to bed between dinner and the wine sipping the next day? Are they in fact doing that back porch wine sipping in the morning? Elsewhere, the descriptions go well beyond twee: we are told that we might explore one woman's garden and make friends with her bees. Hold onto your epi-pen and your insulin pump, folks. In some respects, I embrace and admire the idea governing the cookbook and the Kinfolk quarterly journal that's been in print since 2011: to peel off the fluff and commercial layers that complicate entertaining [ ] to put the social reasons for inviting friends into our homes--the relationships, traditions, community, and conversation--into the foreground and let the superficial details like fancy recipes and table decorations recede into the background. Take note, gentle readers: The Kinfolk Table is about human connection rather than aesthetic display! The images and texts already described, to say nothing of the recipes, protest this claim strongly. Earnestly does the book insist that its recipes are utterly unfussy, meanwhile, one recipe's ingredient list includes: 1 cup go-chu-jang (red pepper paste) 10 fresh perilla leaves 1 cup mixed microgreens 12 ounces sushi-grade raw hamachi In what universe can such a recipe--which also calls for the often hard-to-find short grain brown rice--be reasonably regarded as utterly unfussy? The case for simplicity really breaks down, though, when you get to the recipe for coffee, which requires not only coffee and water but also: an Aeropress (retails at \$29.99) Aeropress filters A coffee grinder (use only burr grinders) An instant-read thermometer A kitchen scale Can we agree that it is a radical redefinition of terms to describe a recipe for coffee that requires (conservatively) \$75-\$100

of kitchen equipment as "simple"? There are other lapses into the absurd--in one section, Williams describes a pair of chefs who happen to be brothers: one is chatty and engaging, the other more reserved and intensely focused on his actions. Both effortlessly engage in conversation with the friends around them while cooking. Remarkable that one can be reserved, intensely focused, and effortlessly chatty all at once! I think I will have that cake and eat it too, and now you know how it is that The Kinfolk Table manages to champion indulgent gourmandism as selfless. Never mind those commercial layers of fluff those other folks are trying to sell you; Kinfolk is here to sell you "casual ginger syrup" packaged in nostalgic apothecary-style jars dressed with a carefully crafted, embossed label. (\$14 for 8 ounces) Pay no attention to that consumerism behind the vintage cafe curtain; this is all about simplicity, community, and the really important things in life! As the late, inimitable David Rakoff put it, "creature comfort is not some bourgeois capitalist construct, but framing it as a moral virtue sure is." Yes and amen. Aside from a few interesting recipes (citrus lentil salad stands out as one of the truly simple recipes in the book) and the catalog-ready, eye-candy photography, there's almost nothing here that can't be found in the authentically unfussy Mennonite "World Community Cookbooks" or The Moosewood Cookbook. These books grasped the significance of place, and of community, and of food without the foreboding sense that if the cheese isn't artisanal or the tableware not heirloom or if you use (gasp) a non-burr grinder, all bets are off. The Kinfolk Table is indeed a book of its time. Maybe that's the problem.

This book was a disappointment. A great concept but the recipes just don't deliver. I'm not sure some of the recipes were even tested. Hipster fluff at its finest. I would be bored out of my organic gourd in my hand knit sweater if I ever shared a table with a majority of the people featured in this jcrew inspired cookbook.

Like the magazine, this is lacking content...and for a cookbook that would be recipes. Maybe it is attempting to evoke a sense of community and family but for someone purchasing a cookbook, that already exists. I found no inspiration, just mediocrity.

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