

A Book of Its Time

The Kinfolk Table: Recipes for Small Gatherings

Nathan Williams.

Hardback: Artisan Books, 2013

Review by Rachel M. Stone



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 this description 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 (dare I say, 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-decorated as everything else in the book and described in rapturous tones: one woman’s home is “brimming with art books and vintage furniture”; another’s is “an 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 epinephrine 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.

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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:

- ½ 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 café 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.

Rachel Marie Stone is the author of *Eat With Joy* (IVP, 2013) and of the forthcoming book *The Unexpected Way* (Peace Hill, 2014). She contributes regularly to *Christianity Today’s* her.meneutics blog and her writing has appeared in *The Christian Century*, *The Huffington Post*, *Books & Culture*, and *Prism*, among others. She teaches writing at Zomba Theological College in Malawi, Africa.

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