
Eat Your Books: A delicious database

Denise Sutherland*

Finding that perfect recipe is made easier using Eat Your Books, an online index to your own cookbooks.



Cookbooks really are the flavour of recent years. In a dwindling book market, cookbook sales are booming.¹ From our burgeoning bookshelves, laden with these sumptuous volumes, most of us only ever cook a few recipes from each cookbook, and forget about the thousands of hidden treasures waiting to be found. But there is help at hand – Eat Your Books (EYB) (<http://www.eatyourbooks.com>) is an innovative online index to your own cookbooks.

EYB is an “e-book” way to search all the recipes in your personal “p-book” cookbook collection, quickly and powerfully. The actual recipes are not included, for copyright reasons, nor are page numbers, for edition variation reasons. After searching on EYB, you still need to go to your cookbooks to get the recipe.

EYB was launched in 2009 by sisters Jane Kelly and Fiona Nugent. *Happy Days with the Naked Chef*, by Jamie Oliver, was the first book indexed and by January 2013 EYB was listed as one of the top 50 websites for food and drink by *The Times*. Its popularity continues to grow – they currently have around 50,000 subscribers.

We are a group of enthusiastic cookbook lovers. We wanted to get more from our cookbooks and we figured a lot of other people wanted to as well so we set up Eat Your Books. We are a small, privately owned company, staffed by dedicated people. We love what we do and we work at making every visit our members make to EYB an enjoyable one.²

EYB employs a team of about 20 “pro indexers” from the US, UK, New Zealand, and Australia (including myself) – they enter the details of the recipes from selected cookbooks into the EYB database. So, the task is essentially one of database indexing.

Members are also allowed to enter personal recipes, add recipes from online sources, and to index books in their collection for all members to access. Roughly 20% of the indexed books have been added by members (not the EYB pro indexing team).³ It is truly a Web 2.0 site, as members can generate content for the recipe database, as well as adding notes and reviews to recipes, and interact with each other on the EYB forum.

There are extensive and complex indexing standards to follow, to ensure consistency. Not only do all main ingredients need to be entered, but entries are also made for a host of categories, from ethnicity to recipe type. For example, with soup recipes, they need to be entered as “Soup” under “Recipe Type”, but not with any “Course” (ie not as “Lunch”). Any mention of lemon juice or zest in a recipe is indexed as “lemons”. Rules on how to treat eggs in the ingredients list takes up four

* Denise Sutherland is an author, indexer, editor and graphic designer. She is the author of *Solving Cryptic Crosswords for Dummies*, writes puzzles of all types, and is a pro indexer with Eat Your Books. She is currently the Vice President of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers.

All websites viewed June 2014.

¹ Orr G, “Sweet Taste of Sales Success: Why are Cookbooks Selling Better Than Ever?”, *The Independent* (7 September 2012), <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/features/sweet-taste-of-sales-success-why-are-cookbooks-selling-better-than-ever-8113937.html>.

² Eat Your Books, “Who Are We?”, <http://support.eatyourbooks.com/customer/portal/articles/1034758-who-are-we->.

³ Eat Your Books, “One Million Recipes Indexed on EYB!”, *EYB Blog* (10 January 2014), <http://www.eatyourbooks.com/blog/2014/1/10/one-million-recipes-indexed-on-eyb!>



paragraphs! If an ingredient is mentioned in the title of a recipe (eg “Salt-baked potatoes with guacamole”), it gets listed in the ingredients list, even if it’s usually a store cupboard ingredient that isn’t mentioned (like salt, in this case), and so on.

While it can take some time to get your head around all of the rules, this approach seems to be working.

David Shaw writes:

When I discover sites that claim to be comprehensive, I do my best to find out how they break, looking for the odd case or the search term that blows up the database. I have not been able to do that with EYB, a testament to the thoroughness and precision of their indexing. (They just recently completed the indexing of *Modernist Cuisine*, and I can say without hesitation that the EYB index is easier to use than *MC*’s own index.)⁴

A DELICIOUS DATABASE

EYB has a massive collection of cookbooks in their database – over 134,000 cookbook titles were listed at the time of writing. Of these, 5,030 cookbooks have been indexed into the database (making their recipes searchable). The EYB database also includes ebooks, video books, food magazines, and about 75 food blogs so far. There are over 1.1 million recipes indexed. So, while not every book on your shelf may have been entered into the EYB database, it is a fair bet that a good proportion of them have been indexed (as the most popular books have priority in the indexing work list).

The EYB search engine is well designed and thorough. You can search for any recipe name, ingredient, recipe type, occasion (Christmas, winter, cooking for a crowd etc), course, ethnicity (from Afghan to Zimbabwean), nutrition (vegetarian, low-sugar etc), and in whatever combination you like. It is also possible to exclude things from searches (like “no Brussels sprouts”). Need to find recipes to feed three guests who are respectively vegan, allergic to peanuts, and coeliac? Easy.

You can find “That great lamb curry we made last year”, discover alternatives to plum jam for that glut of plums, find every recipe in your cookbooks that contains chorizo, every Malaysian recipe in your collection, or all the dessert recipes that include fresh mint.

The search engine displays a list of all matching recipes from the books, magazines and blogs in your own collection. They can be displayed in several list options, or in an attractive “Pinterest” style, where photos of recipes are available.

In the search results, a great deal of information is provided for each recipe including which cookbook to find the recipe in, category information, any notes (such as if a recipe requires marinating time), and a full list of main ingredients.

Some things are excluded from these ingredient lists. The quantities of ingredients are not listed. Nor are pantry staples like salt, cornflour and baking soda, or small quantities of things like flour, olive oil, eggs, vinegar, milk and sugar. There are hundreds of equivalent names for ingredients across cultures, so a search on courgette will also bring up zucchini recipes.

The EYB collection includes many Australian titles such as *Maggie’s Harvest* by Maggie Beer, Stephanie Alexander’s *The Cook’s Companion* and SBS’ *Feast* magazine. They list over 440 cookbooks in the *Australian Women’s Weekly* series – though only 69 have been indexed to date. So the number of Australian titles being indexed is increasing steadily, if slowly.

EATING IN THE LIBRARY

EYB offers institutional memberships – most at the moment are private libraries that have a culinary focus, but public libraries would also benefit. These institutional members currently include the culinary art program at Johnson & Wales University (which has over 7,000 cookbooks listed on their EYB Bookshelf), the French Culinary Institute in New York, America’s Test Kitchen (publishers of the *Cook’s Illustrated* and *Cook’s Country* magazines), and the School of Hospitality Management at

⁴ Shaw D, “Eat Your Books”, *Belm Blog* (11 November 2011), <http://blog.belm.com/2011/11/11/eat-your-books>.



Oxford Brookes University in the UK.⁵ Providing access to their cookbook libraries on EYB is a great benefit to the students and staff at these institutions.

Non-members can access the whole online recipes/video recipes database (ie to free content online), and use EYB's powerful search engine. The EYB blog is visible to the public. If a library has a membership, patrons are able to search the content of the library's own collection of cookbooks (when entered into their EYB Bookshelf), and then locate the exact cookbook they'd like to borrow.

A TASTY ONLINE EXPERIENCE

To use EYB, it's a simple matter of signing up at their site. There is a free membership which allows a maximum of five cookbooks, as well as their online and video recipes. To have more than five cookbooks on EYB, and be able to index cookbooks for their system, the options are a monthly (US\$2.50) or annual membership (US\$25).

The EYB website is extensive. It has an excellent blog (generally updated daily), which ranges from cookbook reviews and featured recipes, to posts on new features and expert tips on how to use EYB, and such vexed questions as "when is the best time to add salt to a dish?" There are also regular cookbook giveaways via the blog.

There is an active forum, where members chat about things in general, request that a food blog be indexed, submit comments to the EYB team, discuss cooking tips and tricks, ingredients, recipes, book and magazine recommendations, and so on.

The Library section of the site includes all books, indexed or not, and other recipe resources, included in the whole EYB database. Over 140,000 online recipes are listed (all freely available, with direct links to the recipes included), just for starters!

Members' personal collections are gathered under "My Bookshelf". This section of the site lists:

- Recipes, Books, Magazines, Blogs;
- Bookmarks, Shopping List;
- Import Books, Indexing, Add Personal Recipes.

This is where each member's collection of cookbooks, foodie magazines, and favourite blogs is housed.

The options for "Recipes", "Books", "Magazines" and "Blogs" are format-based ways of displaying the content of your personal cookbook collection.

"Bookmarks" are a way of tagging both books and recipes, to make searches more specific. Books can be tagged by location, those lent to friends, by cuisine, and so on – you type the labels in yourself, so they can be anything. This can be a very useful tool if members wish to add "temporary" cookbooks to their Bookshelf – those borrowed from friends, or from the library. Recipes can similarly be tagged as being part of a dinner party menu, a family favourite, or whatever you can think of.

EYB can generate a "Shopping List", which is designed to print out and have space to add quantities (after looking over the recipe in your cookbook).

"Import Books" is a tool for quickly adding books to a Bookshelf – using ISBN numbers, either entered manually, or via a barcode scanner or app. ISBNs can also be copied over from GoodReads (<https://www.goodreads.com>) or LibraryThing (<https://www.librarything.com>).

The "Indexing" section is where any cookbooks you might be indexing are accessed. "Add Personal Recipe" gives you another way to add your own recipes, like "Nanna Jean's Green Tomato Chutney" or clippings from an old magazine, to the database – these personal recipes only show up in your own Bookshelf.

The EYB "Bookmarklet" allows members to add an online recipe to the EYB database, from any website. Clicking on it, when on a webpage with a recipe, creates a new recipe record in the EYB database, with the URL and recipe name, and photo (if available) are automatically added. You then

⁵ Personal communication with Deborah Sauvé of Eat Your Books (June 2014).



follow standard EYB indexing guidelines to add in the main ingredients, recipe type, and so on. All submissions are reviewed by EYB before going live, to ensure consistency.

Members can either ask to index a book themselves, or “request index” on books in their collection which are not yet indexed. These requests go onto the long list of titles waiting to be indexed – more popular titles, which appear in more members’ Bookshelves, get priority.

EYB doesn’t have an app, instead opting to have well-designed mobile versions of their site. These are well suited to smaller format screens, and have a simpler interface (which doesn’t allow adding cookbooks, for instance). You can still search for recipes and filter results on the mobile interface. This can be very handy when out shopping and stuck for ideas for dinner. If using an iPad or similar tablet, you can choose between the mobile and regular web versions.

The EYB Support section is very thorough, and replete with screen shots and even videos to show you step by step all the ways to use the site (<http://support.eatyourbooks.com>).

EYB’s social media presence can also be found online at: Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/eatyourbooks>; Pinterest: <http://www.pinterest.com/eatyourbooks>; Twitter: @EatYourBooks.

COMPETITION IN THE KITCHEN

There are a couple of other similar sites. The only one I could find which has attempted to do what EYB is doing, is GobbledyBook (<http://gobbledybook.com>).⁶ Their database is much smaller, the site looks much less active than EYB, and it has a very basic design. Several of their pages were down when I checked the site, and it was last updated in 2011.

Cookstr (<http://www.cookstr.com>) has a slight similarity with EYB, and has a modern web interface. It just indexes cookbook recipes which are available online, and it includes whole recipes on the site. Membership is free.

Cooked (<http://cooked.com.au>) is an Australian site run by the publisher Hardie Grant. For a fee (currently A\$4.95 per month or A\$49.95 per year; also a 30-day free trial), members are given full access to the collection of cookbooks they publish (which includes many SBS titles like *The Food of Vietnam* by Luke Nguyen). Recipes are searchable and the database includes the full text and illustrations of each title – the online collection currently has 100 cookbooks.

As a random test, I compared the three sites using the cookbook *Nigella Express*:

- Cooked was by default excluded, as Hardie Grant is not Nigella Lawson’s publisher;
- GobbledyBook did not have this title indexed/listed in their system at all;
- Cookstr lists six recipes from this cookbook, and has the recipes in full on their site;
- EYB has all 192 recipes from the cookbook indexed, with links to 134 of them online – but you need to have a physical copy of the book to find the other 58 recipes.

As a comparison, and perhaps to be a bit fairer, another test was done, at the free-access level (if applicable) of each site. This time a search on the renowned Italian chef and foodie Antonio Carluccio:

- Cooked (Hardie Grant as publisher has local rights) had his four most recent book titles and links to 100 recipes from them (member access only);
- GobbledyBook listed eight (mostly older) titles, but none of them had been indexed;
- Cookstr does not list Antonio Carluccio under “Chefs & Authors”;
- EYB has 42 entries for books from a search for “Carluccio”. This does include a few duplicates for language and edition. A simple recipe search, again for “Carluccio”, yields 1,756 results.

So, as a powerful tool for the amateur (or even professional) foodie to keep e-tabs on their p-recipe book collection, it seems that Eat Your Books is a kitchen accessory that many a cook might give up their (spare?) wooden spoon to have.

⁶ At June 2014, the home page was carrying a “something went wrong” message. Access the site via <http://gobbledybook.com/main/findRecipes>.

