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## TABLE TALK

# The Practical Magic of Cooking With QR Codes

Much of what happens in the kitchen is easier to demonstrate than to explain, which is why the best short cooking videos can be revelatory

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ILLUSTRATION: VIDHYA NAGARAJAN

Does anyone actually learn to cook from TikTok? Maybe I am just too old for it, but the “food hacks” that go viral on the video app seem designed more to make you gasp than to cook better. Snickles! (A dill pickle with a candy bar inside). Twisted bacon! (Just like regular bacon but twirled up like a ribbon). Pancake cereal! (A multitude of tiny pancakes put in a bowl for no apparent reason).

TikTok food videos can seem pointless at best (Oreo sushi, anyone?) and actively misleading at worst. Around 50 million people have watched a video of a woman (Lulaboo Jenkins) boiling her wooden spoons to clean out the “grossness.” She reacts with horror when she sees how dirty the water is after the spoons have been boiled. But boiling wooden spoons is a terrible idea because wood can split and bleach at such high temperatures. To keep wooden spoons hygienic, you just need to give them a gentle wash in soapy water.

## **The secret of cooking is often in your hands, but how can you trust your hands to do the right thing when it is your first time?**

Then again, if short videos can be the craziest way to learn about cooking, they can also be surprisingly helpful. Ever more cookbooks and cooking magazines now come with a series of QR codes linking to short videos demonstrating tips and techniques. These short videos are a very different beast from the aspirational TV cooking shows that have been in our lives for decades. The old joke about TV cooking shows was that people watched them while eating takeout. These new QR-coded cooking videos feel different: shorter and more practical, with fewer aspirational shots of rolling Tuscan hills. At their best, these videos make you feel you are in a friend’s kitchen, sharing cooking tips.

Using QR codes for cooking isn’t exactly a new technology. More than 10 years ago, in 2011, a tech website called [thenextweb.com](http://thenextweb.com) was celebrating the high-tech potential of a new cookbook “peppered with QR-coded videos” called “Bite Me Too.” The videos featured the authors—two sisters—cooking in their own kitchens and demonstrating dishes such as soufflé and poached eggs. The sisters have since migrated to YouTube as [@BiteMeMoreSisters](https://www.youtube.com/@BiteMeMoreSisters), where their videos include french toast flavored with marshmallow fluff made in a panini press.

Much of what happens in the kitchen is easier to demonstrate than to explain. No matter how good a recipe may be, only your senses will tell you for sure when each stage of a dish is right. For this reason, I love the short QR-coded videos on techniques in Molly Baz's hugely successful recent cookbook "Cook This Book," which demonstrate things as basic as how to separate an egg into whites and yolks and how to chop an onion.

## **Long before printed recipes, the main way anyone learned to cook was by repeatedly watching someone else do it.**

In one of her videos, Ms. Baz roll cuts a cucumber. Roll cutting is a nifty way to cut vegetables into pleasingly angled pieces. The downside is that it can take a thousand words to explain roll cutting properly, and you still might not understand it because it involves a series of "oblique cuts" and "quarter turns" that are confusing to visualize. But all becomes clear in about 30 seconds in Ms. Baz's video, as she demonstrates exactly what shape the cucumber pieces are meant to be and how easy it is to achieve. Show, don't tell.

The secret of cooking is often in your hands, but how can you trust your hands to do the right thing when it is your first time? My 14-year-old son and I recently tried a recipe for Sardinian ravioli stuffed with spinach and saffron served with a tomato and basil sauce from "Home Food: Recipes to Comfort and Connect" by Ukrainian chef Olia Hercules. The hand-rolled pasta dough consists of nothing but pasta flour and warm water. Never having been to Sardinia, we were grateful to click on a QR-coded video of Ms. Hercules showing in a calm, capable way how to judge with your fingers when the pasta dough is smooth enough.

Previously, when making ravioli recipes from cookbooks, I have often erred on the side of stuffing the dough so generously that the parcels exploded as they cooked. With the video to copy, we were able to judge the right amount of filling. I can't pretend our ravioli were as elegantly shaped as the ones in the book, but the miracle was that they worked the first time. "These are edible!" my son exclaimed with satisfaction as we sat down to eat.

This new wave of cooking videos might seem high-tech, but in a way they are a resurrection of a much older approach to cooking. Long before printed recipes, the main way anyone learned to cook was by repeatedly watching someone else do it. There were so few cookbooks in Italy until the 20th century partly because most people continued to learn at their mother's side.

It is no accident that many of the most popular cooking videos on YouTube feature grandmothers, from the wildly successful “Pasta Grannies” series to “Mastanamma,” a 106-year-old great-grandmother whose videos show her in a remote Indian village cooking dishes such as vegetable pickles or an egg dosa (a thin rice pancake topped with eggs and chili) vast enough to serve all of her grandchildren. Mastanamma hardly speaks on film, but every one of her gestures is eloquent, honed over decades.

I returned to TikTok, wondering if I had judged it too hastily. If you steer clear of the three-ingredient miracles and the weird items involving blue food coloring, there are some gems here. My current favorite is the “America’s Test Kitchen” feed, which has an emphasis on science. From one of their videos, I learned that the hottest part in a chili isn’t, in fact, the seeds but the pith. Who knew? From another, I realized that I have been whipping cream wrong all these years and that the cream thickens faster if you move the balloon whisk from side to side instead of round and round. I will always prefer recipes on a page rather than a screen, but I have to admit that no cookbook ever taught me that.