A Cornucopia of Midwestern Cookbooks

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Midwestern cuisine may not have the mystique or allure of some of the more cosmopolitan regions of the country, and much like the so-called "flyover" states from which it comes, is too often overlooked. In reality, Midwestern foodways are as diverse as the people who call this region home, simultaneously drawing from generations of farm table traditions and rich immigrant experiences and influences.

The following are just a brief selection of the cookbooks that celebrate the culinary traditions of the Midwestern region, from the kitchen table to the supper club and beyond.

Regional Identity

Several cookbook authors have compiled collections of recipes that embrace and epitomize the identity of the Midwest, including Maren Ellingboe King's *Fresh Midwest: Modern Recipes from the Heartland* (2022), Shauna Sever's *Midwest Made: Big, Bold Baking from the Heartland* (2019), Amy Thielen's *The New Midwestern Table: 200 Heartland Recipes* (2013), and Kaleb Wyse's *There's Always Room at the Table: Farmhouse Recipes from My Family to Yours* (2025). As these cookbooks' titles indicate, the Heartland is a central defining feature of these recipes, not just geographically but in terms of an emotional sense of place: the "heart" of the Heartland.

In addition to celebrating great food, the cookbook authors also privilege the importance of who those meals are shared with and the time spent around the table with loved ones. Wyse opens his cookbook with collages of family photos and brief biographical sketches of those who have come before and whose love and traditions influence his own cooking, while Sever reflects on how her collection of recipes is something she is proud to pass down to her children. The foundation of Ellingboe King's cookbook are archives of her ancestors' recipes, as she draws inspiration from her grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

A common thread that unites these cookbooks is that in each case, their authors are Midwesterners by birth who set out in adulthood to other parts of the country on new personal and professional adventures, from New York to California, but found themselves drawn once more to their home states and in some cases, the same communities where they grew up. As these cookbook authors discovered, nothing feeds the soul—and the stomach—quite like home.

While these four cookbooks follow many of the genre's standard conventions, there are also elements that feel uniquely Midwestern, pieces that ground the reader and home chef within the unique sense of place and community around which the cookbooks are built. Ellingboe King's *Fresh Midwest* has an entire section dedicated to "Gatherings," which celebrates both the fresh ingredients of individual seasons and the importance of coming together around a shared table. Thielen's *The New Midwestern Table* includes chapters for lake fish and what she calls "Projects," which feature recipes for pickles, syrups, and preserved vegetables, ways of saving the bounty of late summer and early fall for the cold days to come. Sever's *Midwest Made* is grounded in what she refers to as her "Five Baking Tenants of the Great Midwest": bakes should be big, easy to make, purposefully built around the baking context and available ingredients, and be simultaneously invested in both the present moment and the rich traditions of the past (3-4). Wyse opens *There's Always Room at the Table* with a similar set of three rules, prioritizing family traditions, easy availability of ingredients, and dishes that are low in fuss and high in flavor (xxiv).

In each of these cases, the cookbook authors celebrate and elevate what makes Midwestern food unique, from field-fresh sweet corn to Danish Kringle and German Lebkuchen, Kolacky and rugelach. There is a central identity to Midwestern food, which is hearty, filling, and freely shared. But every Midwestern chef and baker brings themselves into the kitchen and into the food they create, in ways that reflect their history, their family, their traditions, and their love.

History

In addition to the personal and family histories celebrated by Ellingboe King, Sever, Thielen, and Wyse, some Midwestern cookbooks highlight the broader history of the region and the land itself, including Heid E. Erdrichs' *Original Local: Indigenous Foods, Stories, and Recipes from the Upper Midwest* (2013) and Paul Fehribach's *Midwestern Food: A Chef's Guide to the Surprising History of a Great American Cuisine, with More Than 100 Tasty Recipes* (2023).

Erdrich's *Original Local* begins with a chapter on "Foods of the Earth," which reflects upon and celebrates plants that are indigenous to the region, foregrounding the connection between the earth, the natural world, and Midwestern food traditions. Erdrich grounds her work within larger conversations about the indigenous food movement and Native American communities, and in the opening pages of the cookbook, she frames recipes as a powerful means of both tradition and storytelling. *Original Local* features chapters on "Manoomin" (wild rice) and "Mandaamin" (corn) that highlight the significance and meaning of these plants and food sources within different Native American traditions, while the recipes share space in the cookbook with historical context, community stories, and photographs.

Fehribach's *Midwestern Food* includes chapters on pickling and preserves, burgers, barbeque, and pizza, as well as the memorably named chapter "Of State Fairs, Tailgates, and Main Street Cafes: Sandwiches and Handheld Food." While many of the other cookbooks addressed here consist primarily of recipes, Fehribach's *Midwestern Food* is pretty evenly balanced between history, a critical analysis of regional foodways, and recipes that epitomize the communities and traditions he explores.

Gathering

Shared food and gathering around the table are at the heart of these Midwestern cookbooks, but a few cookbooks expand this theme of the shared experience to a larger scale, celebrating the ways in which towns, communities, and even states come together around food. Cookbooks that celebrate this large-scale sense of gathering include Mary Bergin's *Wisconsin Supper Club Cookbook: Iconic Fare and Nostalgia from Landmark Eateries* (2015), Bryn Mooth's *Findlay Market Cookbook: Recipes and Stories from Cincinnati's Public Market* (2014), and *The Iowa State Fair Cookbook* series.

Gathering together looks a bit different in each of these instances: the Wisconsin supper club celebrates coming together for a leisurely meal with family and friends, embracing an almost bygone sense of dining out as an immersive experience and special occasion. *The Findlay Market Cookbook* highlights the small businesses and partners who contribute to the identity and commerce of the market. Finally, the *Iowa State Fair Cookbook* series features award-winning recipes in a variety of competition categories, with its bi-annual publication commemorating the best of the best that the state's home cooks have to offer.

Community Cookbooks

No consideration of Midwestern cookbooks would be complete without the time-honored tradition of the community cookbook. For churches, schools, and other organizations, these cookbooks often serve the combined purpose of a local fundraiser and an expression of community pride.

One of the hallmarks of these community cookbooks are the variations contributors provide on the same recipe, like chocolate chip cookies with slightly different ingredients, measurements, or baking instructions, which highlight the recipe's customization and malleability, along with the unique nature of each individual's or family's tradition. As these variations show, Midwestern cooking is constantly evolving and under active negotiation, morphing to meet shifting needs and tastes, while remaining grounded in celebrated traditions.

And much like the previous cookbook authors' celebration of their family stories, traditions, and recipes that have been passed down from one generation to the next, every community cookbook features recipes submitted in memory of a loved one who has passed on, a commemoration of their family member's love and legacy, immortalized through food.

Do you have a recipe of your own to share? The Midwest Literary Project is compiling our own community cookbook and would love to hear from you! Email aburger@culver.edu with your recipes or questions.

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