

Before and Afters: Looking at Usability in Cookbook Indexes

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On 24 January 2026, ISC/SCI's Professional Development series continued with the presentation "Before and Afters: Looking at Usability in Cookbook Indexes." Seasoned indexer Gillian Watts shared practical insights into what makes a cookbook index truly user-friendly. Drawing on her many years of experience, she walked through real examples of ineffective indexes ("befores") and demonstrated how thoughtful revisions ("afters") can dramatically improve usability.

Gillian is a freelance editor and indexer with more than 30 years' experience in the field. She has indexed hundreds of books in a wide variety of disciplines and has been well-known as a cookbook indexer since 2002. As she joked during the session, she was a "born indexer," alphabetizing her spices and creating her own card index to track recipes by ingredient for her Time-Life cookbooks in the 1970s, long before indexing became her profession.

Using her own search for a chocolate chip cookie recipe as a case study, Gillian pointed out gaps in indexes from her own extensive collection of cookbooks. Some indexes list recipes mainly (or only) by title. The user may be left adrift among quirky or unclear titles that make it difficult to know what the recipe contains or even makes, or they may be forced to flip through many pages with repetitive titles (in this case, recipes all starting with "Chocolate"). Gillian found herself wishing for entries that grouped the recipes by specific ingredient type—in a chocolate-focused book, for example, chocolate chips versus cocoa powder—or by dish or baked-good type (for example, cookies, squares, balls, or cakes).

As with all indexes, the focus needs to be on the reader—in this case, the home cook. As Gillian emphasized, a good index should be concise, accurate, and well-organized to help users find what they need without extra effort. People look for different things when browsing the index and the table of contents for a cookbook. In order to help them, indexers need to think about how people actually use cookbooks.

People turn to cookbooks for varied reasons:

- to find something their family will enjoy
- to use up specific ingredients they already have
- to explore a cuisine or culture



Photo provided by Gillian Watts.

- to follow a favourite chef or trend
- to address dietary or health needs
- to learn new techniques or cooking skills

In all these cases, home cooks rely on cookbook indexes to guide them quickly to the right recipe.

Today's home cooks are more familiar with global cuisines, specialty ingredients, and advanced techniques, thanks in part to publishing trends, food media, cooking shows, and online content. And many contemporary cookbooks include more than recipes. Memoirs, travel writing, and cultural context are increasingly common elements. When they are a significant component of the book, they should be indexed as well. Using the author's name as the main entry with suitable subentries can be an access point for this sort of information.

As we all know, no two indexers will create identical indexes. Gillian demonstrated her personal approach,

Before

Beans & Peas, Dressed, 214
beans, butter: Pasilla Pepper & Tomato Roasted Butter Beans, 127
beets, formanova: Pickled Formanova Beets, 37
beets, golden/red
 Beet & Redwing Onion & Larch Tip Relish, 131–132
 Beet Chips, 131
 Beets, 131–133
 Seaweed & Beet Gastrique Glazed Chewy Beets, 132–133
berries *see* allspice berries; juniper berries; raspberries; salmonberries
big leaf maple blossoms
 Big Leaf Maple Blossom Vinegar, 46
 as wildcrafted ingredient, 15
...

blanching, cooking technique, 21
blending, cooking technique, 21
Blustein, Shira, 1–4
...
butter beans: Pasilla Pepper & Tomato Roasted Butter Beans, 127
...
cooking techniques
 blanching, 21
 blending, 21
 deep-frying, 21
 dehydrating, 22
 drying, 22
 fermentation, 22
 and food waste, 20
 pickling, 22
 preserving, 22
 smoking, 22–23

After

beans
 Dressed Beans & Peas, 214
 Pasilla Pepper & Tomato Roasted Butter Beans, 127
beets, 131–33
 Beet & Redwing Onion & Larch Tip Relish, 131–32
 Beet Chips, 131
 Pickled Formanova Beets, 37
 Seaweed & Beet Gastrique Glazed Chewy Beets, 132–33
berries. *See specific types of berries*
big leaf maple blossoms, 15
 Big Leaf Maple Blossom Vinegar, 46
...
blanching, 21
blending, 21
...
cooking techniques, 21–23

A before-and-after cookbook index in action. Excerpt from Shira Blustein and Brian Luptak, Acorn: Vegetables Re-imagined (Appetite, 2021). Slide provided by Gillian Watts.

developed through years of honing techniques, with a focus on conciseness, titles, and accuracy. For the most part, cookbooks are instructional manuals, not narratives. Novice indexers may try to capture every detail, but cookbook indexing is about making judgements that support usability. For example, does the cook really care how many pages a recipe occupies? One test is to write your index and then look for what seems overdone.

Staples

Gillian recommends developing a “staples list” as you start working on a book, to help avoid index bloat. Staples such as salt and vanilla extract are foundational ingredients found in most kitchens, and usually they do not need to be indexed. At the same time, context matters. Garlic is considered a staple for most cookbooks but will be indexed when it is a main ingredient in a recipe, such as a whole roasted garlic bulb. Gillian also noted that she tends to index seasonings with strong or signature flavours, such as cardamom, cilantro, and ginger. People sometimes crave these flavours, and they may provide a clue to the recipe’s origin.

Granularity

Indexers must also make decisions about how granular to get with ingredients. Novice indexers might get too granular; it must be remembered that these are instructional manuals, not narratives. In cookbooks about kimchi or sauerkraut, where almost every recipe includes cabbage,

it makes sense to have separate entries for green, red, and napa cabbage. A chocolate cookbook may have main entries for different forms of chocolate, such as chips, slab, cocoa powder. On the other hand, if you have a general cookbook with several beet recipes, even if the type of beet is identified in the recipe title, you can list them all under a single main entry, “beets.” Once again, context matters.

Titles

Gillian recommends indexing recipe titles, preferably in title case, to allow readers to find them easily as they skim the index. Quirky titles or those with people’s names should be indexed as is, as repeat users often remember those titles (for example, “An Actual Pie Made by You,” from *Clueless in the Kitchen* by Evelyn Raab). But these recipes should also have access points under their relevant ingredients and possibly under type of dish.

Inversions

Gillian now tends not to separately list titles starting with generic terms like Basic or Classic unless they add meaning, or she inverts the entry to place the ingredient at the beginning. A title like “Basic Kale Salad” would be inverted to highlight the ingredient—i.e., “Kale Salad, Basic”—if there weren’t many titles starting with kale. In a kale-heavy book, “Basic Kale Salad” would simply be listed along with other recipes under “kale.”

For titles that begin with a cooking method (for example, “Braised Ham”), she lists the recipe title under the

A SAMPLE STAPLES LIST

- beer (less than 1 cup)
- breadcrumbs
- butter
- carrots (1 cup or 2 carrots)
- celery (1 cup or 2 stalks)
- cheese (less than ¼ cup or garnish)
- eggs (3 or less, unless principal ingredient)
- flour (except gluten-free)
- garlic (less than 1 clove per serving)
- ketchup
- leavening agents
- mayonnaise (unless principal ingredient)
- milk and cream (unless primary component)
- mustard
- oils
- onions (unless principal ingredient)
- peppers, bell (1 cup or 1 pepper)
- potatoes (1 cup or 1 per serving)
- sour cream (unless principal ingredient)
- soy sauce
- spices
- stocks and broths
- sugar
- vinegars
- wine (less than 1 cup)
- yogurt (less than 1 cup)

*A sample staples list from the cookbook indexing presentation.
Slide provided by Gillian Watts.*

ingredient rather than as a main entry. That's because she's learned that users look for ingredients rather than cooking methods. Decisions to invert can be done on a case-by-case basis, so long as they are approached in a consistent manner.

"About" Entries

Gillian uses fewer "about" entries these days, preferring to simply list the locators—unless those pages provide a lot of useful information. In some cases she will include an "about" entry with undifferentiated locators and then include a separate entry with "(as ingredient)" as a gloss.

Cross-References and Double-Posting

Cross-references are essential when related concepts need linking (e.g., cocoa powder and chocolate) or when ingredients have multiple names (e.g., cilantro and coriander leaves). Double-posting can be useful, especially when similar ingredients have only a few entries each; for example, kale and spinach can also be listed under "greens." British, American, and Canadian cookery terms are different. A cookbook published in Britain may use "aubergine" instead of "eggplant" or "courgette" instead of "zucchini," requiring cross-references, double postings, or glosses for North American audiences.

Other Details Worth Indexing

Most recipes have a brief introduction that can often include personal, memoir-type information that's good to index under the author's name if you have room.

Sometimes there's technical information (such as how to brown butter) that cooks might want to consult later.

Instead of listing all the variants for an ingredient entry—such as "cooking"; "storing"; "freezing"—if space is tight, you can include a single subentry like "tips."

For a cookbook on, say, Indian cuisine, that uses both the original and English names for dishes, decide which approach is more respectful. Depending on how much space is available, it may be better to use both the Indian and English recipe names, or even to create two separate indexes.

Publishers

Gillian was asked what it is like to work with cookbook publishers. In her experience, they usually allow a reasonable amount of time for the index. A lot of expertise is put into a cookbook. The publishers employ teams of experts who have kitchens to develop recipes and test them. They use editors and proofreaders to polish the text and improve readability, making sure that measurements are correct

BRITISH VS. NORTH AMERICAN

aluminium	aluminum	cling film	plastic wrap
aubergine	eggplant	cooker	stove or oven
bacon, streaky	bacon (side)	cornflour	cornstarch
base	bottom	cream, double	whipping cream
beetroot	beet(s)	cream, single	table cream
bicarbonate of soda	baking soda	courgette	zucchini
biscuits	cookies	filo	phyllo
broad beans	fava beans	fish slice	metal spatula
butter beans	lima beans	flour, plain	all-purpose flour
bulgar	bulgur	flour, wholemeal	whole wheat flour
candyfloss	cotton candy	kitchen paper	paper towels
caster sugar	fruit (superfine) sugar	liquidiser	blender
chard, green	Swiss chard	lolly	popsicle, ice pop
chicon	Belgian endive	mangetoute	snow peas
chillies	chile peppers	mince	ground meat



*A comparison of British vs. North American food terms.
Slide provided by Gillian Watts.*

and cooking temperatures are consistent. Designers ensure that the presentation is appealing and easy to use, and indexers ensure that the reader has efficient access to recipes that will suit their needs. (As a caveat to home cooks, anyone can post an unproven recipe online, and it may or may not actually work.)

Getting into Cookbook Indexing

Gillian added that, once you get into it, cookbook indexing is relatively easy, because there are no theoretical concepts, philosophical terms, etc. If you are organized, it is even possible to index multiple cookbooks at once. However, she noted, cookbook indexing, while less conceptually complex than some subjects, requires strong judgement and attention to usability.

Her approach has evolved over time. Gillian's indexes now tend to be terser and more focused. Her style has also adapted to suit an increasingly knowledgeable and adventurous audience, one that can reasonably be expected to know about a wide range of ingredients and cooking techniques.

For those interested in indexing cookbooks, Gillian offered some practical advice, including to stay current with food trends through cookbooks and social and other media and to pay attention to emerging niches (e.g., plant-based cooking, fermentation, health-focused diets). She also reiterated the importance of understanding how different audiences cook and search for recipes.

As always, indexers must approach a cookbook index with the user firmly in mind, paying attention to conciseness and accuracy.