

#73 - The Lazy Genius Buys a Cookbook

Hi, friends! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! You're listening to episode #73 - The Lazy Genius Chooses a Cookbook. Have you walked through a bookstore lately? There are a million cookbooks that are calling your name. Such pretty covers and pictures and promises of easy dinners! And put away my wallet when I enter the cookbook section on Amazon, y'all. It's a problem. I love cookbooks, and you probably do, too. They hold such hope. Maybe this one will have that perfect recipe I've been waiting for. Maybe this one will make my kids eat spinach. Maybe this one will get dinner on the table in fifteen minutes. We hope for a solution, plus you, like me, might actually like reading cookbooks because it's fun. They're so pretty and give such great ideas even if you never make the food! I'm all for having a cookbook collection, but if you're not careful, that collection will become an albatross on your back. You'll be overwhelmed by all the choices in all those cookbooks, not to mention the actual Internet if you decide to head to Google or Pinterest. It's just too much. So in today's episode, we're going to create a strategy for how to choose a cookbook, and the next time you go to Barnes and Noble and walk through those aisles of beautiful hardbacks and their siren songs of deliciousness, you'll be better equipped to make a choice that you'll actually use. In my best infomercial voice I will say that you too can have a collection of cookbooks that do what you want them to do, a collection of cookbooks that you love! All for three easy payments of 29.95 I kid. So let's learn how to choose a cookbook.

First though, can I tell you about a different kind of book that I hope you read? My friend, Shannan Martin, formerly known as Flower Patch Farmgirl, would love the fact that we're talking about cookbooks because she loves to cook and is quite good at it. But she's not just a home cook who likes to make salsa and pie. She's one of the most beautiful writers I've ever encountered with an equally beautiful soul. Shannan is about to release her second book called *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*, and I would love for you to go and preorder yourself a copy. I'll put a link in the show notes to make it easy, but Shannan writes words you didn't know you needed to hear. In *The Ministry of Ordinary Places* - which can we just pause for a second to say how great a title that is? - she encourages you and me to encounter and receive the love in our own homes and neighborhoods and ordinary spots in our everyday lives. I've never met anybody as in love with her neighbors and neighborhood as Shannan, but her enthusiasm doesn't make us feel guilty. It's not even that she's some crazy extroverted person who doesn't feel weird introducing herself to strangers. It's weird for her too, but in this book, she helps us see the beauty in what's right next door or across the street or on the walk to school. This book is destined to change my life like her first one did (that's called *Falling Free* by the way), and if you want to read some of the most beautifully constructed sentences about the most ordinary things you'll ever encounter, please go preorder *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*. And as a preorder bonus - this is fantastic - you get a wall calendar of photos of her neighborhood and her own ordinary places ohmygosh. So again I'll put a link in the show notes, and it is my absolute honor to point you in the direction of this book. I can't wait for you to read it.

Okay, now let's talk cookbooks. The first question to ask yourself when you're picking up a cookbook is what do you want it to do for you? I'll say it again: what do you want your cookbook

to do for you? How is going to serve you? Here are some possible answers. You want doable dinners you'll actually make and your people will actually eat. That's one. Or two, you want a book that's inspirational, that's full of unusual ingredients and combinations. Three, you might want a book that's beautiful to look at with great writing and great stories attached to the recipes. Or four, you might want a book that teaches you. You want to learn how to cook better, how to recognize patterns in flavors and techniques and how to actually become a better cook. And there are many more answers. Here's the problem. A lot of times, we want a cookbook for one purpose but buy for another. For example, you really want a cookbook that's going to give you lots of recipes you like to make and your family will love, recipes that will become what I call your brainless crowdpleasers, meals that you can make without thinking and everyone pretty much loves them. But then you see a beautiful book with a stunning woman on the cover, lots of white light and beautiful food with the title Simply Keto. You think "Man, maybe Keto... maybe we should do Keto. Everybody's doing it, and she seems pretty happy and like her pants aren't too tight. Maybe I should do this." And then you open it and you see stunning photos of stunning food and think "Wow, she makes that bacon avocado omelet look amazing. I mean, I know my kids don't really do eggs, but maybe they'd do this. That's so pretty." You've done that, right? I've done that! I call these idealist cookbooks and have psyched myself into buying more than one. I forget what I'm actually looking for - easy, family-friendly meals for example - and then buy something about power foods or fresh ingredients or a book that's completely salad. I'm the only one in my house who eats a lot of salad, and even then it's not that much. Now, do I want to be the kind of person who eats a lot of salad? Do I want to be the kind of mother who has children who like to eat salad? Maybe yes. Maybe I do. So I buy the seemingly perfect salad cookbook, thinking that it will make me and my family become an idealistic salad-eating family. But it won't. A cookbook is not going to fix anything. I'll say that again: a cookbook is not going to fix anything. Now sure, some are majorly helpful in offering you what you're looking for, but you have to know what you're looking for and be okay leaving behind the ideal.

I don't particularly love the fact that a cookbook that makes the most sense for my family is basically twenty different ways to eat pasta, but it works better than a book of Marcus Samuelson's favorite recipes. If you don't know Marcus Samuelson, he's a professional chef, you might have seen him as a judge on Chopped or Top Chef or any number of food TV shows, but he's a professional. A literal professional who has access to tons of ingredients and experience and knowledge and all the things. Even though the cookbook I currently have sitting on my shelf is titled "Marcus Off Duty - Recipes I Make At Home," that doesn't mean I'm going to make them in my home. And guess what? That book has been on my shelf for over a year, and have I ever made anything from it? No. Do I wish I had? Yes. But those are two different things. We cook everyday. We have to eat multiple times a day. There are definitely occasions to try new things and experiment and push past your usual way of making dinner, but jumping from spaghetti Mondays to charred calamari with tomato, olive, and orzo salad which is one of Marcus' recipes in this book is too big of a jump. I don't cook calamari. No one in my family, including myself, likes olives. And the recipes calls for three kinds of fresh herbs. I'm lucky if I have one. The recipe seems like it wouldn't be that big of a deal and definitely shouldn't be that big of a deal - it's just food, I should be able to make it, right? But no. We have to be honest and not feel bad about it. We all cook different things for different reasons and have different palates to please, but I think we all struggle with idealistic cookbook shopping. So the first step in building a cookbook collection you love is to know what you want a cookbook to do. Idealistic cookbooks just make you feel bad and take up space. It's okay that you don't cook the way other people do. It's okay that your meals are more brown than any other color. Get comfortable there, find new ways of cooking within that space, and maybe - who knows - eventually you

might try a calamari recipe on a Wednesday night, but that's not the goal. The goal is to enjoy making and eating dinner tonight. Not next year, not when your kids are out of the house, not when you have that dinner party you've been talking about throwing for three years but haven't gotten around to yet. If idealistic cookbooks are a problem, so are idealistic dinners. If you sit in the space of dinner future and long for a different way, it'll make you so discontent with where you are now. Don't try and survive regular, daily dinner because it feels hard. Because, yeah, it's hard to make food with tiny hands and tiny questions and tiny blocks of time, but don't make it harder by buying cookbooks that aren't serving you in this time. Don't make it harder by longing for dinners that happen once in a blue moon. Just don't do it. And it's not just about little kids or picky palates. If you live alone or with just one other person, buying cookbooks that are all about feeding big groups and entertaining are definitely fun for those times you have people over, but they're not designed to help you eat dinner tonight. And if you wish that you had kids or had more friends or you feel sad that you're in a new city and haven't met anybody yet, cookbooks about entertaining make that fester. They're idealistic, and you need something to make you excited to cook dinner tonight. So that's really the biggest message. Embrace your current cookbook stage of life, and don't feel embarrassed or frustrated or ashamed that you're not a different kind of cook, whatever that might be. Choose what works now.

Okay, so practically, what kinds of questions can you ask yourself to see if a cookbook is right for your collection? First thing, flip through it quickly. Can you spot five recipes that you could make tonight with at most a quick swing by the store to get a lemon or something random you don't have? Are there five realistic recipes you could make tonight? If the answer is no, put the book back. Put it back! Right now! It's just going to take up space. But maybe you're like "But Kendra it's so pretty and I love pretty cookbooks!" Guess what? Maybe your reason for buying cookbooks is to be inspired by their beauty. Maybe you don't care about recipes. You want to see pretty pictures and you don't feel bad that you don't cook from them much. That's great! That's leaning into your reason for building your cookbook collection. You want a collection of beautiful cookbooks. If you still feel inspired to make dinner and don't resent anyone, including the authors of those beautiful cookbooks, for not setting you up better for dinner success, by all means, buy that book. Be inspired but only if that's your primary reason for building your collection in the first place. Taking that five recipe idea though, do you feel your wheels turning several times as you flip the pages? Are you inspired to use that ingredient or set your table that way or serve your pot roast in a cast iron skillet like that picture says? Can you not stop smiling as you stand in the aisle at Barnes and Noble? If it inspires about five times, buy the book. The cookbook should do its job multiple times as you flip to get a place in your collection. Otherwise, you'll never reach for it.

That's really the process, you guys. Those two steps. Know what you want a cookbook to do in your regular life, and then make sure that cookbook does it a handful of times as you flip the pages. If it doesn't, it's not for you. Find one that is.

Now I want to tell you about a couple of resources you'll find in the show notes. One is from the Lazy Genius Library which is just a fancy name for my blog called How to Know if a Recipe Is Any Good. It's pretty detailed, but I'll give you the highlights here and you can take that knowledge into your cookbook searches. If the recipes don't meet these requirements, they're probably not going to be great recipes. So here's the gist, and you can read more about it through the link in the show notes. A good recipe comes down to three things - flavor, salt, and heat. Flavor is how things taste obviously, and you want ingredients whose flavors go together and complement each other. The next thing is salt. You have to have salt, guys. Salt doesn't

make things taste salty; it makes things taste more like themselves. Salt brings out the true nature of food. So if a recipe is supposed to feed four people and there's no salt mentioned or it says "salt to taste" or offers a pinch of salt, honestly I don't always trust that cookbook writer. It sounds harsh, but it's true. Salt is vital. And the third thing is heat. Heat develops flavor, creates great texture, and if heat is mishandled or not even brought into the equation, the recipe's not going to be great. This is why a lot of slow cooker recipes are fine but not awesome - because they don't utilize heat. There's nothing wrong with low and slow, but without some kind of flavor development because of heat, a recipe could be missing the mark a bit. I give detailed examples of how these three components work together in that post, and I actually find recipes from the Internet and dissect whether they're good or not without actually making them. It's a fun little experiment. So as you develop that skill of just noticing and knowing what to look for in a recipe, you'll have a better idea not only if a cookbook fits your needs but if the recipes in it are going to be good. So check the show notes for that.

Another resource I'll put in the show notes is a post to my favorite cookbooks. There are two lists - one for baking cookbooks because I love to bake so very much, and the other is more dinner recipes and that list will have both cookbooks and favorite websites I go to. So check for both of those in the show notes. And again, I build my cookbook collection differently than you might build yours, so just because I like a book doesn't mean it's right for, so be sure to know what's right for you. That's the Lazy Genius way to buy a cookbook. Know what you need, recognize if you'll actually use it, and then use it. Love using it and love your collection, no matter how small it might be. Small but mighty is way better than shelves of dust collectors. So know what you need, not so much what you want in an ideal world, and then make sure that that cookbook will deliver on your need several times. It's not rocket science, but we don't always do the simple thing. We make things more complicated than they need to be.

Everything you need will be in the show notes which you can access in most podcatcher apps, or you can head to thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/cookbook to get all the links you need. And that's also where you can preorder The Ministry of Ordinary Places.

That's it for today! Thanks for listening, and if you want to share this episode with a friend, that would be amazing, as would a review on Apple Podcasts if you have a minute to do so. Reviews make a huge difference - massive - in people being able to find the show. A recent review that I loved comes from cgwittwer, and the review title says "Not Just for Moms." Here's what she says - it's so nice and so encouraging! "I am not exaggerating when I say this podcast has changed my life. Not only do I look at everyday routines in a completely new light - I love my life in a more genius way with her amazing tips on everything from cooking chicken to gratitude. And by the way, this podcast is not just for moms. I'm a young, single woman who lives in an apartment by myself. Seriously, just give it a listen." Thank you, cgwittwer, and all the other 600-some people who have left reviews. When I'm feeling wonky or wondering if what I'm doing is dumb or helpful, I'll sometimes read your podcast reviews, and they seriously give me a boost when I need it. I say that reviews help people find the show which is true, but it's also just really nice for me selfishly. So thank you. Thank you to every single one of you who's left a review, who might soon leave a review, who has told friends and sisters and neighbors about this show. I'm so incredibly grateful. And now we're all going to be lazy geniuses about buying cookbooks. Changing lives one cookbook at a time, man. I can't wait to hang with you next week in your earbuds, so until then, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! Bye, guys!

