

PROFILE

Milking It

CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL WANTS TO UPEND AMERICAN HOME COOKING.

BY MARTIN CIZMAR mcizmar@week.com

Christopher Kimball still recalls the first time he had cilantro. It was 1963, and he was on vacation with his family in Mexico.

"I can still to this day remember that bite—it was lamb and cilantro, and it was very pungent and floral and gamey and wild," Kimball says from Denver, where he was touring with the food-themed variety show he brings to Portland this week.

You could trace Kimball's new magazine venture, *Milk Street*, to that day, when a kid from New England encountered an herb that's now available at every grocery store in America. Fifty years later, the former *America's Test Kitchen* founder has pivoted to ingredient-focused cooking that eschews the careful technique and long cook times of traditional American and European recipes.

Milk Street focuses on worldly recipes that are also easy—and if that sounds like a contradiction, that's just because you've marinated too long in a Eurocentric worldview.

"We want the stuff that people cook on Tuesday night, as opposed to the more ornate and exoticized version of ethnic food," Kimball says. "Most people around the world don't think about cooking the way *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* did...Most people don't figure out what they're going to eat at 5 at night."

If you know Kimball's name and bowtie, it's probably because he launched the *America's Test Kitchen* television show in 2001 ("In this day and age it's really had to be a single-platform publisher," he says). The show featured Kimball and other chefs working out kinks in familiar recipes to make "the perfect chocolate chip cookies" and mainstreaming techniques like spatchcocking chicken. Kimball had an acrimonious split with *America's Test Kitchen* in 2015.

In October 2016, Kimball launched *Milk Street* with the premise that if you "start with the right mix of ingredients... the cooking almost takes care of itself."

"When I was in Thailand, it's mostly prep. The cooking isn't really the issue, it's the prep. And they're starting with such bold ingredients that you can't really go wrong because you're starting out with a ton of flavor," he says. "Americans love big flavors and they always have. Look at the fast food people, they figured that out long ago."

The problem with traditional American cooking, in Kimball's view, basically boils down to the fact that it takes too long and uses too much meat. That's something we inherited from the Europeans who settled here.

"Every place in the world came up with a cuisine that made sense for that place. The fact that roasted meat was the centerpiece of the Western European plate is because it was cheap, and you had lot of fuel," he says. "French cooking doesn't really use spices because Europe didn't really have spices—and it's kind of weird if you think about it. I grew up with a cuisine that didn't use spices, and that's why it was all about technique."



RICK VODICKA

Why has this shift taken so long, and why is it changing now?

"Everybody in the last 10 years has a much wider experience with a variety of foods than they did before, and it's greatly accelerated," he says. "When I grew up in the '60s, going to a Mexican restaurant was big deal—there was the band and the Saltillo tiles and the whole thing, it was some exotic experience."

But making food from another culture can, of course, create some tension. Cultural appropriation is now a hot-button issue in the food world, a phenomenon that became clear in Portland when two young American women went on a surfing trip to Mexico and then launched a brunch pop-up called Kooks, where they served breakfast burritos made from flour tortillas they learned to make by observing Mexican women's tortilla-making techniques.

It's a fight Kimball watched closely. Appropriation is, he says, "the third rail of the culinary world right now." While he says that "stealing is stealing," he also says that "you can't copyright a recipe."

"Cooking is a performance art. If you get 12 people together and make the same recipe, every one of them will turn out differently. You can't take a recipe out of a culture successfully," he says. "It's not like it's a piece of music or poem or a book—it's an instruction."

But, Kimball says, it's important to provide context and credit.

"So as long as you give credit where credit is due and you're respectful of that culture and the context, I think it's fine," he says. "Especially if it's a recipe where there are hundreds of variations that already exist."

That puts *Milk Street* in an interesting place—the whole project rejects Western culinary supremacy while delving into the wealth of cuisines from around the world.

"At this point in society we don't have to stick with what made sense 100 years ago. American cooking is still basically Fannie Farmer," he says. "Obviously it has advanced, but it's still the same precepts. People still talk about making stock and sautéing meats and pan sauces. Now that we have the option of using the other ingredients and techniques, we don't have to do that anymore, let's do what makes sense." **WU**

GO: Christopher Kimball's *Milk Street* Live appears at the Aladdin Theater, 3017 SE Milwaukie Ave., 503-234-9694, aladdin-theater.com. 7 pm. \$45-\$95.

McMENAMINS BACK STAGE BAR

LOTUS BAR UNVEILING PARTY
THURSDAY, OCT. 12
6 P.M. 'TIL 8 P.M. • 21 & OVER

The famed 130-year-old cherrywood bar from the iconic Lotus Cardroom has found a new home! Come by to celebrate and toast the giant bar nestled in its new surrounding

Live music with Trashcan Joe
Prohibition-style Craft Cocktail Specials
Passed hors d'oeuvres • Just for fun Passport stamp

BEHIND THE BAGDAD THEATER
3702 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd. • Portland
(503) 236-9234 • mcmenamins.com

The Back Stage Bar is closed for bar installation October 9-11

This Week at Teutonic Wine Co.

WEDNESDAY 10/11
 Visit us at the People's Co-op Farmers Market
 2 to 7 pm (SE 21st & Tibbetts)

FRIDAY 10/13
 PDX Paella 5:30 PM until the food runs out

DAILY WINE TASTINGS AND SPECIALS
 Harvest has begun! Come watch us work while you enjoy a glass of wine and listen to albums on our vintage stereo.

Open Hours
 M - Th. 12 - 9 pm
 Fri & Sat. 12 - 10 pm
 Sun. 1 to 7 pm

TEUTONIC WINE COMPANY
 3303 SE 20TH AVE | PORTLAND, OR 97202
 503.235.5053 | WWW.TEUTONICWINES.COM