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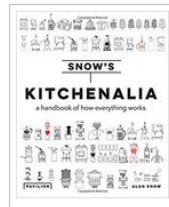
**WHAT**

FEB/MAR 2018

## Practical Magic

A captivating guide to kitchen tools and techniques.

MELANIE REHAK



"If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." So goes the famous William Morris quotation. A great many domestic possessions, of course, are either one or the other. But the world seems short on things that are both. Among my own small trove, I count a wristwatch that belonged to my late father, a silver-dipped porcelain serving bowl I received as a gift, and the original bronze doorknobs in my apartment. We all succumb to the need to purchase many ugly

things we find useful (as the pile of scarred plastic Ikea cutting boards in my kitchen attests), not to mention the helpless desire to own beautiful things we have no reason to buy. It is satisfying, then, to acquire something that fits both bills.

Alan Snow's recent volume, *Kitchenalia: A Handbook of How Everything Works* (Weldon Owen, \$25), is just such a thing. "The purpose of this book is to act as a useful reference guide by giving background information on the kitchen, the tools found there for food preparation, layout, and storage," he writes in his one-paragraph introduction. He's got the practical aspect of his book covered, but he doesn't address its other striking feature: over two thousand utterly charming illustrations, which enliven every page of its four sections—"Tools," "Cooking," "Drinks," and "Kitchens." They depict an array of tools and techniques, including work-top materials (granite, concrete, wood, and quartz, among others); ovens (gas, electric, and convection); boiling pots of spaghetti and numerous other foods; kitchen appliances; and methods for dehydrating fruits and vegetables.

One part of the "Drinks" portion that caught my eye has drawings of every type of coffee-brewing and coffee-grinding contraption imaginable, as well as illustrated guides for using them. The two-page spread detailing the components of every espresso-based drink should be required reading for all baristas. There is also a mini-history of coffee and a brief discussion of the bean's biology and chemistry. It's just enough information to be interesting and, yes, useful, but not so much that it overwhelms a nonexpert. "The coffee bean before it is roasted," Snow notes, "is bitter in taste from the caffeine content. This is produced by the plant to repel insect and animal attack." It's a point he comes back to later, in the section on tea, commenting, "Like coffee, tea contains caffeine as a method of self protection." Is it odd that I felt a flash of self-recognition on reading this?

I don't think so. The other defining aspect of *Kitchenalia* is its clear understanding of, and engagement with, the pleasures of being a human in the world. Snow demonstrates this not by commenting directly on these satisfactions but by conveying the contentment of having the proper tool for the job at hand and knowing how to use it. He writes about process and, in some cases, science, but while the book is in many ways technical, it's also imbued with a sense of how this knowledge improves our lives. His goal isn't to impress or intimidate with discourses on fancy instruments and impossible techniques but simply to inform and entertain. Why else would Snow make his chart of "useful temperatures," including sugar-working temperatures and the smoking points for various kinds of oil, a riotous, rainbow-colored spread? It doesn't have to be gorgeous, but because it is, it delivers both visual delights and practical information. And what other reason is there to include cocktail recipes in which the ingredients are portrayed in the correct ratios with alluring hand-drawn pictograms: inch-high booze bottles, half-inch highball and martini glasses, tiny spoonfuls of sugar, lemons the size of a fingernail. They look like design sketches for the best-stocked dollhouse bar in town.



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DOING  
TONIGHT?



Alan Snow illustration for  
*Kitchenalia*, 2017.

No doubt this is because Snow's official job (one of them, at least—and it tends to come first on the list) is as a children's-book illustrator and author. (One of his books, *Here Be Monsters!*, was made into a hugely successful animated film called *The Boxtrolls* in 2014.) He has a gift for clear description and immensely appealing drawing—two of the most important parts of any good kids' book. Among his other works for children is a whole series on the minutiae of some critical childhood topics: *How Santa Really Works* (not an exposé about Mom and Dad filling the stockings but an inside look at the management systems that help the North Pole workshop do its thing), *How Dinosaurs Really Work!*, *How Dogs Really Work!*, and *How Cats Really Work!* For the same reason I love *Kitchenalia*, I would have loved these books when I was a child. They fall into the genre of volumes that explain how the mysterious adult world operates, which includes classics like David Macaulay's *The Way Things Work* and Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day?*

Part of what makes *Kitchenalia* so pleasing is its understanding that most adults are still trying to figure out how things work, too. Nothing is assumed, and the toaster is given the same detailed treatment as far more esoteric cooking devices like the air fryer and the raclette grill. The toaster's description includes not only notable historical details—who knew that the first electric ones, invented in Scotland in 1893, toasted only one side of the bread at a time, or that the pop-up toaster didn't come along until 1919—but also a nonjudgmental reminder that it is “extremely unwise to use any metal object to retrieve a broken or stuck piece of toast from the machine while it is connected to power.” Likewise, there is a page headed, simply, “Things Not to Do with Microwave Ovens.” (Incidentally, did you know that the first one was five feet eleven inches tall and weighed 750 pounds?)

While *Kitchenalia* is a book for adults, Snow conveys a keen awareness of the mysteries of the kitchen as seen from a child's point of view, which feels like a gentle nudge to let the kids help with dinner, and, in doing so, to usher them into the world they'll someday inherit. For example, he closes “Corers & Peelers” with this: “Rotary peelers are now available very cheaply. These are similar to a device developed in the Victorian period, and there is a certain wondrousness about seeing them work today. Although it is no quicker to use than a knife or speed peeler, children love them.” And, under “Thermometers,” we have the following: “Hand-held laser thermometers are now becoming affordable and can be useful for measuring the heat of sugar solutions, oven temperature, or anything else that doesn't need to be checked internally. They also greatly amuse children.” For the grown-ups, he's not above rekindling the excitement of a little home science experimentation. In the section on wine, after explaining how to use a corkscrew, remove a champagne cork properly, and store wine (turns out that trick of putting a spoon in the neck of a champagne bottle to keep the fizz doesn't actually work! I'd love to know how that legend got started, but Snow doesn't say), he writes, “Wine will taste quite different when oxygenated and this is why some wines are traditionally decanted before drinking.” Fair enough. Then, almost as an afterthought, he adds, “An extreme version of this is to blend the wine in a blender. It is really surprising how different it tastes, and how many eyebrows it raises.” I defy anyone to read that and not consider the intense happiness of raising a multitude of eyebrows at his or her next dinner party as the wine whirls away.

It would be, among other things, a welcome diversion these days, when extreme uncertainty colors just about everything. Many of the systems and institutions we rely on feel shrouded in confusion, if not purposeful obfuscation. *Kitchenalia* can't solve that. But by providing a beautiful, simple, and deeply compelling taxonomy—which starts, as every chef knows it must, with knives—it imposes order on one small part of the world, reconnecting us with comprehensible, mechanical methods of getting things done. In many ways, technology has estranged us from basic human activities—try going somewhere without GPS, or figuring out how to meet a friend for coffee without taking out your phone. It's become difficult to know how things really work (via satellite a lot of the time, even when you're going only a few blocks), so a book that not only asks us to pay attention, but also makes it a pleasure, is more than a set of instructions for outfitting a kitchen and cooking in it. It's a manual for much-needed demystification.

Melanie Rehak is the author of *Eating for Beginners* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

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