

Weeknight supper recipes are ‘Keepers’

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At first glance, “Keepers,” with its gilded puff-pastry-topped chicken pot pie on the cover, tends to mislead. Is it a pastry book? A baking book? A memoir? Turns out it’s none of the above. It’s a weeknight-dinner cookbook from Caroline Champion and Kathy Brennan, former *Saveur* editors taking a turn as home cooks (Champion now works at *Glamour* and blogs; Brennan freelances). The two have a real gift for knocking out flavorful, family-friendly food quickly, and what these recipes may lack in newness, they make up for in shortcuts, tips, and sheer practicality.

Unlike many cookbooks purporting to offer mastery of the weeknight dinner, “Keepers” focuses on nothing but. There are no desserts or baked goods, no entertaining dishes, just mains and sides. Because of that, and because these recipes are consistently fast (no locating, toasting, and crushing 10 spices together, or instructions to roast and peel a half-dozen peppers before you begin), it may be the best-value weeknight cookbook around.

Some recipes are miraculously streamlined versions of classics. It may seem like a tall order for a weeknight, but that chicken pot pie on the cover? You really can pull it off in under an hour. It’s a matter of using frozen vegetables and commercial puff pastry, and no one has to be any the wiser. Skillet lasagna is one of those “aha!” recipes. As in the case of the pot pie, it turns a 2-hour project into a 45-minute romp. You just need sausage, canned tomatoes, no-boil lasagna, and a skillet. It’s astonishing how little it ultimately seems to matter whether it arrives in a neat stack or not.

Other recipes turn to high-impact ingredients for fast, memorable effects. Although shrimp won’t caramelize in the oven — don’t expect them to — roasting is a fast and reliable technique that keeps them plump and flavorful, ready to be rolled about in a piquant, pickly blend of chipotle, citrus, and vinegar.

A glitch popped up in the recipe for “Jump-in-the-mouth” (a translation from “saltimbocca”) turkey cutlets: “Put the flour on a large plate,” say the authors, but never explain what happens afterward. The flour seemed lonely, so I dusted my prosciutto-wrapped cutlets in it. Presto! A crisp, savory packet of protein came out of the buttery skillet, tantalizingly garnished with lemon butter. The little one hated the sage leaf, but what can you expect?



Caroline Champion (left) and Kathy Brennan were editors at *Saveur* before they collaborated on the “Keepers” cookbook.

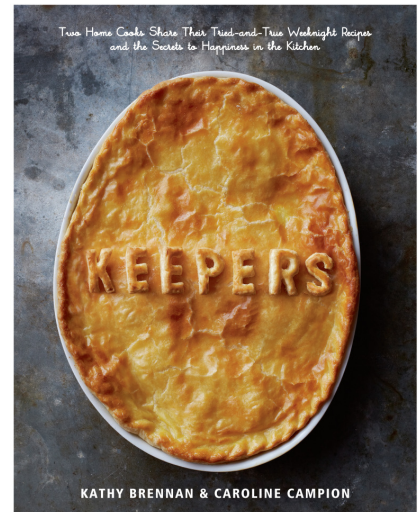
Beef fajitas with charred tomato salsa up the ante for weeknight Mexican. The charred salsa, tweaked to high potency by cilantro, vinegar, honey, and lime, carries the day.

Side dishes offer the same blend of swift and tantalizing. My broccoli was past its prime, but it got a boost from the strong blend of garlic and Parmesan. New potatoes festooned with a fistful of dill and lemon brim with flavor. Green beans get a showering of the world's most flavorful breadcrumbs, mingled with sun-dried tomatoes, anchovy, and Parmesan for a positive storm of umami.

Couscous continues to be the fastest cheat, thrown together with dried cranberries, cashews, and orange for a ridiculously simple side that's very dressy. Slightly more disappointing, in the way whole grains can be, is a dish of farro, its starchy sameness not quite redeemed by a perfectly good mustard-honey dressing, a little fruit, and seeds.

Many pressed-for-time weeknight cooks have pretty much abandoned the paper cookbook. And you could argue that there are more exotic recipes, or faster recipes, or cheaper recipes than the ones you'll find here. But "Keepers" stakes out a solid middle ground where good cooking, high flavor, and convenience meet, and it's admirably consistent.

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KEEPERS: Two Home Cooks Share Their Tried-and-True Weeknight Recipes and the Secrets to Happiness in the Kitchen

Author: Kathy Brennan and Caroline Campion

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