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Cooking Light: The Beginning—and End—of a Beloved Food Magazine

A talented Birmingham-based team launched this groundbreaking publication

By Rachel West

When *Cooking Light* launched in 1987, it was revolutionary: It brought healthy cooking into home kitchens at a time when the concept wasn't at all mainstream.

From the first issue of *Cooking Light* in April 1987 to the last in December 2018, a talented team of food editors, registered dietitians, and test kitchen professionals spent more than three decades helping readers navigate and implement the ever-evolving science of nutrition and health.

Their goal was always to help home cooks make a meal that they felt good about serving their families and also—and this is monumentally important—tasted good.

Cooking Light helped make healthy cooking mainstream—a new topic when the inaugural issue (bottom row, center) hit newsstands in 1987.



The Column

Cooking Light actually began at the desk of Jean Liles, the food editor at *Southern Living*, who was a devout reader of and responder to letters from readers.

“Through the letters and recipes she received, Liles recognized that there was a desire for lower-calorie, lower-fat, lower-sodium recipes among readers,” said Susan McIntosh, a registered dietitian and former *Southern Living* food editor.

In 1981, Liles, knowing what readers were looking for, proposed a column in the foods section on lighter foods to *Southern Living* editor Gary McCalla.

McIntosh, who was working as a registered dietitian at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), serendipitously met with Liles to express her interest in working at the magazine.

“I told her I thought it would be great if they would have a column on healthier, more nutritious recipes,” she said.

McIntosh’s timing couldn’t have been better. She interviewed and was hired as the inaugural editor of the *Southern Living* Cooking Light column.

John Logue, then editor-in-chief of Oxmoor House, the book publishing division of Southern Progress Corporation, was in the meeting when Liles suggested the column. He thought the idea for lower-calorie recipes might also be a good topic for a cookbook. It was Ann Harvey, the manager of editorial projects at Oxmoor House, who proposed the name *Cooking Light*.

The *Cooking Light* column first appeared in the January 1982 issue of *Southern Living* and ran in each monthly issue for many years.

This column was followed quickly by the first *Cooking Light* cookbook published in 1983 by Oxmoor House.

Both the cookbook and the magazine column garnered a big response from readers, which led to talk of a magazine, McIntosh said. To test the waters, a special edition newsstand issue of a magazine titled *Cooking Light* was published in 1986.

Don Logan, then president and CEO of Southern Progress Corporation, quickly recognized the full potential of the *Cooking Light* brand, said Kathy Eakin, an Oxmoor House manager and senior foods editor at the time.

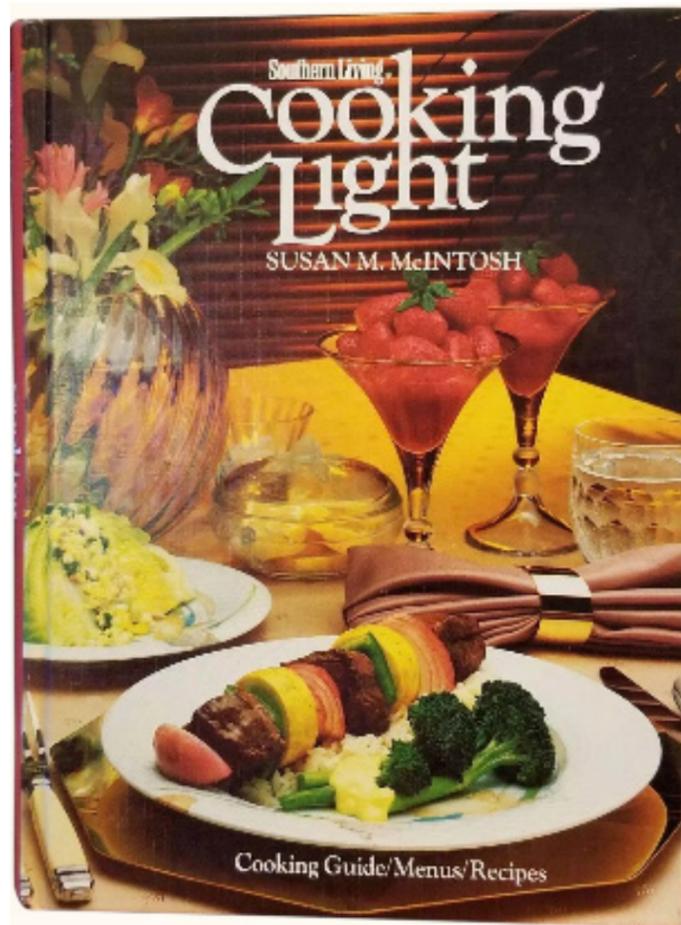
Martha Johnston, former vice president of business development and food marketing at *Southern*

Living, said the fact that the *Cooking Light* column in *Southern Living* was doing so well bolstered Logan’s confidence in the concept. “The column had become very popular. *Southern Living* readers were so interested because it was a ‘new’ topic,” she said.

Also, Oxmoor House was creating a second cookbook entitled *Cooking Light 1986*. This cookbook concept was based on the very successful *Southern Living Annual Recipes* series but contained healthy recipes and a summary of the latest scientific research on health, nutrition, and exercise.

The *Cooking Light*-focused special edition also performed well in the mail and at newsstand, which, Eakin said, “gave Don the confidence to say, ‘We’re going to launch a magazine.’”

Cooking Light existed in various iterations—a monthly column in Southern Living magazine, a special edition, and cookbooks—before becoming a magazine.



The Launch

Once the decision was made to move ahead, the launch of *Cooking Light* was quick—a frighteningly short six months. Normally it takes at least 18 months to launch a magazine from concept to the first printed issue.

“I will never forget that day that Don Logan called us in,” Johnston said. “Don announced that in addition to our regular jobs, we had new ones, and he wanted a magazine in six months.”

“It was a daunting task,” Eakin said.

“Don was very clear. He wanted a magazine that would represent a positive way of life, helping readers achieve a healthier lifestyle through nutrition, delicious food, and regular exercise,” Eakin said. *Cooking Light* was destined to be much more than a “diet” magazine.

While a number of people were involved at the start, the primary editorial launch team included Eakin, who was eventually tapped to become *Cooking Light*’s inaugural editor; Johnston; and Liles. This three-person team developed the magazine’s editorial outline.

The tagline was “The magazine of food and fitness.” It was divided up as 25 to 30 percent health, nutrition, and fitness information in the front of the magazine while the remaining 70 to 75 percent was devoted to recipes and food. A health advisory

committee was created to review the content to establish the credibility of the magazine, Eakin said. Initially this committee was comprised of faculty from UAB but was later expanded to include health professionals from across the country.

“It was sometimes stressful because *Southern Living* was still the matriarch of the company,” Eakin said. “While the standards that had been established with *Southern Living* food provided the basic guidelines for recipes, these guidelines often didn’t apply to healthy cooking. We had to have the courage to break free and go our own way.”

One deviation from the company norm was *Cooking Light* using freelance recipe developers. *Southern Living* used reader recipes and staff-developed recipes exclusively.

One reason the launch team opted to use freelancers at *Cooking Light* was because the magazine would have national—not just regional—reach, said Johnston. “We felt it was important to get freelancers from across the country,” she said. “There were very few people who knew how to do tasty, healthy, light recipes. It just wasn’t something that regular recipe developers were doing at the time.”

The use of freelance recipe developers proved to be a boon for the Birmingham food scene. “Our recipe developers were in New York

City or the Midwest—that’s where the primary recipe developers for food magazines were located,” Eakin said. “They started using ingredients that we’d never heard of, and we questioned if our readers could even locate the ingredients in their grocery stores. Once we started asking for these ingredients to test recipes, specialty markets as well as large supermarkets and the smaller grocery stores started providing them.”

The Challenges

The team struggled in the early days to get recipes through the test kitchen because they either wouldn’t pass the taste testing or they wouldn’t meet the nutritional standards, Johnston said.

The guidelines for calories, fat, sodium, protein, and serving size were based off what the team at Oxmoor House had used to create the *Cooking Light* cookbooks. Meeting them was an ongoing issue, Eakin said.

Mary Creel, a registered dietitian who was working as a senior home economist at Pillsbury, was the first editorial hire from outside the company. She started in October 1986.

“I remember desserts had to be under 200 calories per serving,” Creel said, and every other food category had strict limits, too. “But back in those days, there were no other resources for consumers wanting healthy,

“While the standards that had been established with Southern Living food provided the basic guidelines for [Cooking Light] recipes, these guidelines often didn’t apply to healthy cooking. We had to have the courage to break free and go our own way.”

—Kathy Eakin, inaugural editor of *Cooking Light*

low-fat, low-calorie recipes. There weren't bloggers, there weren't magazines, and cookbook authors weren't really there yet."

The *Cooking Light* team helped define and create what healthy cooking meant, incorporating the latest in nutrition science using the ingredients that readers could find. "If you couldn't find it in Opp, Alabama, you couldn't use it," Creel said.

Through it all, flavor and an adequate portion size were paramount.

"One thing we didn't want people to say was, 'For a light recipe, it's great,'" Johnston added. "The push was on to make sure the light recipes were good on their own and judged on their own. You didn't expect them to have the same kinds of flavor [as traditional recipes] with three pounds of butter and three pounds of sugar. You wanted it to have its own flavor."

Mangoes, couscous, and most of the whole grains that are now widely available were foreign territory then, Creel said. Quinoa and tahini may be common now, but those ingredients weren't familiar to most Americans at the time, and they certainly weren't available at every grocery store.

But that unfamiliarity didn't stop the editorial staff. The first issue called for kale, mussels, and saffron and had stories about whole grains, Indian cuisine, and seasoning with fresh herbs. What seems common now was uncharted territory then.

They developed new cooking techniques to lighten recipes, things like draining yogurt to get a thicker product (like widely available Greek yogurt now); figured out how little fat could be used to cook meats while still producing flavor; and introduced new flavor profiles.

"When it came to portion control, we didn't take a traditional cheese-

"One thing we didn't want people to say was, 'For a light recipe, it's great.' The push was on to make sure the light recipes were good on their own."

—Martha Johnston, member of the *Cooking Light* editorial launch team

cake and make it serve 20 with a small portion," Eakin said. "We were very conscious of not manipulating the portion size. We were constantly challenging that so that you had a decent-sized serving."

The exactness of portion size was a departure, too. Where a traditional recipe might say it serves 4 to 6, a set number of servings was crucial for healthy recipes in order to produce accurate nutrition analysis, Eakin said. The *Cooking Light* column in *Southern Living* focused on serving size and low calories; *Cooking Light* magazine included a complete nutrition analysis with each recipe.

The recipes also had to be magazine-friendly. "We would get the recipes to pass with good flavor and an adequate serving size, and then we had to see if we had something to photograph," Eakin said. "Some recipes tasted good but weren't photo-worthy." Getting the out-of-season ingredients to test the recipes, and then to do photography was challenging thanks to the magazine's hyper-condensed six-month development schedule.

In addition to the recipes, the magazine reported the latest in nutrition research without jumping on every trendy bandwagon that came along. "So much of it up front was about educating readers," Johnston said. "*Cooking Light* was educational but not preachy."

"We worked hard to make sure the health, fitness, food, and nutritional information was useful and accessible," Eakin said. It took about six months to start getting letters from readers once the magazine published its first issue. The common questions were usually about ingredients—what it was and where to find it were the overriding questions.

One of the biggest challenges for the team was getting advertisers to understand healthy cooking. "There had never been sales executives who had the focus of promoting a healthy lifestyle," Eakin said.

"I found it took the sales team and the advertisers a while to understand and embrace the *Cooking Light* concept," Johnston said. "At that time few people knew what to expect of lighter recipes."

Johnston, who was running the *Southern Living* Cooking School and doing food marketing and business development, was out selling the concept of *Cooking Light* early on in addition to selling the cooking school. "It was a challenge to explain," Johnston said. "It was just starting to be the thing to talk about. A number of companies got it, but it took some explaining for others."

Over the next five years, the *Cooking Light* staff met its challenges. Readers began to depend on the magazine as their

go-to source for delicious, healthy recipes and credible health and exercise information. By 1992 the magazine became profitable based on a strong newsstand and subscriber base and, importantly, advertiser support—a major achievement in the magazine business.

The Evolution

Ann Taylor Pittman, the magazine's executive editor when it closed, was with the publication for almost 20 years, starting as an editorial assistant and working her way up the ranks. She witnessed first-hand the evolution of the magazine and its readers.

"People became much more sophisticated in their food knowledge and much more willing to try new things," Pittman said. *Cooking Light* was pushing the boundaries back then—incorporating more whole grains and using less meat, for example—but everyone wasn't on board at the time.

"It wasn't mainstream," she said. "We had to toe the line, include substitutions for more esoteric, at the time, ingredients. Even phyllo dough was kind of esoteric. Feta cheese was out there, which is so crazy."

In 1988, when U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop said 30% of calories or less should come from fat, *Cooking Light* made sure every recipe in the magazine met that revised guideline. But it was challenging. "Trying to make a vinaigrette for a salad was ridiculous," Pittman said.

"Because there weren't any modified products out there, we used diet margarine and cooking spray a lot," said Creel, who worked at the magazine for 27 years. "I don't think we ever used

avocados because the fat was too high. When manufacturers came out with low-fat cream cheese, we were thrilled."

But, as nutrition science evolved, so too did the magazine, even when readers were reluctant. Pittman said the magazine did away with the 30% calories from fat rule around 2008. That change underscored how science had shifted: The focus was no longer on just fat, but the type of fat—unsaturated fats were favored over saturated.

A fair number of readers were fat-averse and hesitant to embrace the loosened guidelines and incorporation of healthy fats.

"We paved the way for them. We were their source for healthy eating information. And a lot of them were not ready," she said. "Even still, for *CookingLight.com* or Instagram, people say, 'Is this really healthy? There's so much fat.'"

Over the years, one thing that *Cooking Light* always did was maintain balance—moderation and variety are the keys to healthy eating. That common sense approach still stands, Pittman said. Use the real whole ingredient and just use it wisely where it counts the most, and use it in moderation.

"Toward the end there we were trying not to use reduced-fat cheese and trying to use the whole-milk version of the ingredient because there's more satisfaction there," she said.

"Along the way we also had this explosion of interest in farmers' markets and farm to table, so vegetables became really sexy," Pittman said. "Mainstream America was on board with vegetables—the color, the beauty, seeking out different varieties, heirloom varieties. That was definitely our sweet spot."

Pittman said they heard from readers and people in the nutrition community about how they loved what *Cooking Light* was producing. They appreciated that it opened peoples' eyes to how inclusive healthy eating can be by leading them toward fresh ingredients and whole foods. The message: Healthy food is really just good food. It's not a punishment or a compromise.

"I feel like our readers were very vocal," Pittman said. "We heard from them especially when they were unhappy, and some when they were happy. They cared. They were invested. It was their magazine that they loved. They wanted it to suit their needs and live up to the standards they expected."

The End

In late 2017, Meredith Corporation announced it was acquiring Time Inc., the parent company of *Cooking Light*—the companies officially combined operations on February 1, 2018. In rejiggering its portfolio of publications to align with its strategic business plan, Meredith announced on September 12, 2018, that *Cooking Light* and *Eating Well* were purportedly merging.

Despite a strong and devout subscriber base of 1.6 to 1.7 million and 6 million total readers, a readership that was more than double that of *Eating Well*, Meredith felt *Cooking Light's* name to be a liability in a modern era where the idea of "light" is outdated. This redirection meant the Birmingham-based *Cooking Light* team was let go. The Vermont-based *Eating Well* team now produces the content for the new, enhanced 10-issues-per-year *Eating Well* that launched with the January/February 2019 issue.

Cooking Light the brand does live on in limited form in a handful of special editions published throughout the year as well as CookingLight.com, which continues to produce new content and recipes. But the editorial team who produced the magazine is no longer involved in a full-time capacity.

The Legacy

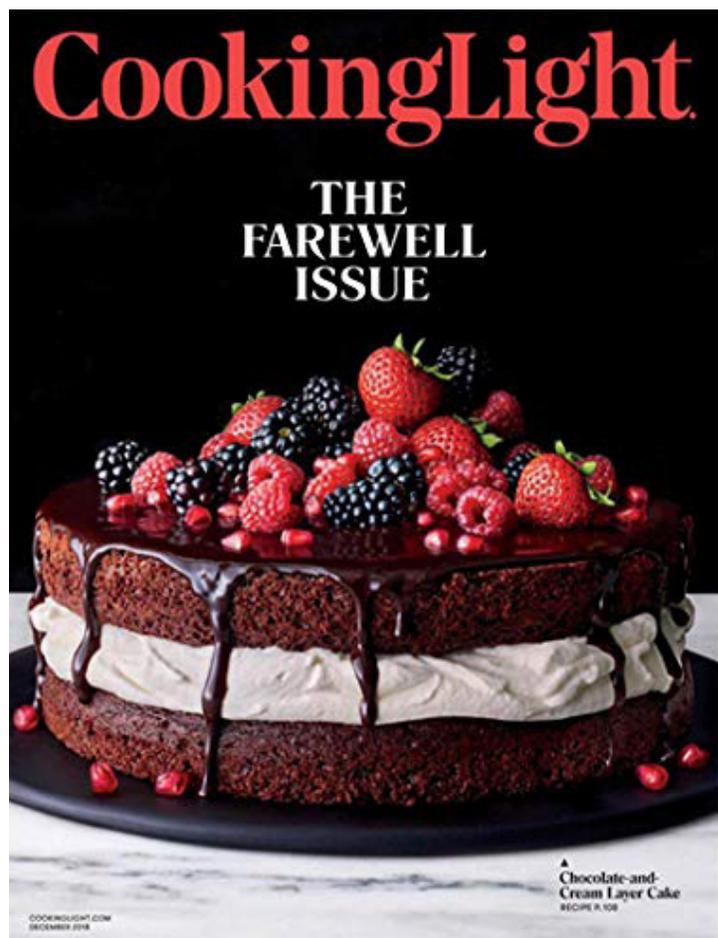
The magazine's legacy and impact on Birmingham has been immeasurable. In addition to encouraging local grocery stores to stock new ingredients, the publication had a wider impact, bringing a wealth of fresh creative talent to the city.

"The real legacy starts with people; it starts with the audience," said Hunter Lewis, the magazine's fifth and final editor and current editor of *Food & Wine*. "I hope that the legacy month in and month out, and daily on the website, served them with what they needed. That the print product surprised and delighted and gave them more ideas than they can imagine of what they would cook each night."

Lewis also said that the magazine's staff—the editors, test kitchen staff, photographers, and stylists—and the creative energy they brought to the city over the magazine's 31-year history is one of its lasting legacies.

"It's fascinating. A brand that was born out of *Southern Living* helped Birmingham spin a new kind of creative community," Lewis said, as in the businesses that *Cooking Light* alumni have opened, including Mike Wilson of Saw's BBQ that now has multiple locations and Tiffany Vickers Davis and Mary Drennen of Nourish Foods Co., a company with national reach.

Cooking Light ended its memorable 30-plus-year run with the December 2018 issue. The brand lives on in limited form in special interest publications and on CookingLight.com.



"We were all very grateful to create a wonderful magazine here in Birmingham at a time when Birmingham itself is on the rise," Lewis said.

"I think food is 100% the thing that this city needs to continue to grow, to make it stronger and more economically viable, bring more tourism," he added. "Food is really a foundation for the future growth of Birmingham, and some of that foundation was built here on Lakeshore."

Pittman said her hope is that *Cooking Light* helped busy readers all over the country not only get a healthy meal on the table for their families, but also made them more confident to try new things, to experiment even when things fail, and to not accept less than what's really good for them on their plate.

"Cooking a healthy meal for the ones you love is an act of love. It's one I try to do every day," Pittman said. "It's why it was so important to me and everyone there to try to solve dinner for people who are busy. We really believed—and I still believe—that we helped people."

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