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## Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book

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Abstract:

(Food, Cookbooks, Graphic Design, Photography)

"Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book" is a free, online-only cookbook for those who are looking for the motivation to start cooking. This book was created over the span of a year, inspired by my best friend who doesn't know how to cook. I found a gap in the market for cookbooks who talk to you as if they are your peer, not from a culinary school or Food Network perspective. I find recipes and cookbooks written from established chefs to be intimidating and out of reach. All of my recipes have been developed with limited resources in mind and there are no ingredients or tools that are not normally found in a college kitchen on a college budget. "Stupid Good" is a play on the idea that something that tastes and looks so delicious, can really be that easy.

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATER AND DANCE

STUPID GOOD: A SHUT UP AND COOK BOOK

By

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The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Rachel Johnson defended on April 24, 2014.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, who put me on the counter to make chocolate chip cookies at age three.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Food is my whole life. I celebrate food by cooking, sharing it with friends, writing about it and photographing food. As a fine arts major focusing in Graphic Design and Photography, I was able to harness all of this into a singular project: a cookbook. It was my desire to develop recipes, photograph the food, design the pages and then use my experience with marketing and advertising in order to promote the final product. Over the course of a year, this product became “Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book”, followed by more than 200 users on social media and viewed over 700 times on its digital platform website, [issuu.com](http://issuu.com). The title of the book comes from the idea that food could be so good that it just doesn’t make sense. Making meals doesn’t have to be so complicated; it can be enjoyable, easy and take less than an hour; it’s simply ‘Stupid Good’. Extending beyond the initial goal of simply self-publishing a cookbook; it has become a small culture of people understanding the joy and love in making food. The following thesis is an explanation of my process, timeline, results and analysis of my creative project: “Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book”.

My journey started when I discovered the world of food blogging; Moving into my first apartment with a kitchen inspired me to share my journey of cooking for one and how I could help others overcome their kitchen fears. These fears include burning dinner, spending money on a meal that just doesn’t turn out, or even forgetting baking soda in the birthday cupcakes. The first cookbook that truly inspired me to move forward with a blogging venture was ‘In the Small Kitchen: 100 Recipes from Our Year of Cooking in the Real World’ by Cara Eisenpress and Phoebe Lapine<sup>1</sup>. Their approach to organizing

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<sup>1</sup> Eisenpress, Cara, and Phoebe Lapine. In the Small Kitchen: 100 Recipes from Our Year of Cooking in the Real World. New York: William Morrow Cook, 2011. Print.

dinner parties for friends and creating inventive cuisine in such a small space was the first instance in which I realized that making food and cookbooks could be a career. These women in their mid-twenties launched a blog and a book after college, something I now see as a very reasonable reality. I was determined to seek out a similar approach.

My research process could be considered non-traditional; I read numerous food blogs daily, my news source is comprised of restaurant openings and new food trends, and a few times a week, I take the ingredients in my fridge and transform them into dinner, no recipe required. In addition, I interned in New York City at Bon Appetit magazine, an authority in food, and had the chance to experience editorial food publishing firsthand. I put my own spin on food through experimentation and research. Ideas about food are always changing; new chefs are emerging, new pastries demand hour-long lines to obtain, and more people are paying attention to what they are putting into their mouths. Such a sensation requires attention, and it is through all of these experiences that I gathered the summation of my research.

Growing up, I knew the importance of good food; my family remembers vacations from the restaurants we visited, dinner was on the table at 6:00 PM, and we have more than one ice cream maker for marking celebratory occasions. This decision was easy- I am supposed to revolve my life around food. With the assurance that someone else has achieved this idea and the backing of my family to support me, ‘Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book’ became the pinnacle of my college experience. It is through this project that I have become confident in my career goals and can emerge from my college experience with a portfolio that I am extremely proud of.



## Chapter II: Method

In Spring 2013, I launched this process thinking I was going to make three small cookbook-like magazines, emulating the idea of Short Stack Editions<sup>2</sup>, a series of small, hand-bound cookbooks featuring relevant recipe developed surrounding one ingredient. My favorite stack comes from Susan Spungen, a renowned food stylist, who wrote her Short Stack Edition recipes surrounding a strawberry theme. I took inspiration from the idea that these books were so personal, relying on handwritten elements and intimate recipe development that I began to develop a deep respect for the artist and the book itself. I wanted my publication to evoke this same sort of admiration and wanted readers to recognize the personal elements in each page. After budgeting out the preliminary idea, I concluded that material cost would be my largest obstacle and so instead, I focused on creating one larger collection of recipes that kept some of the same personal touches.

It occurred to me that a major resource of my personal blogging and recipe endeavors came from the Internet, so why not turn to the Internet in order to curb my material costs? I could publish the book at no cost to me and the rest of my budget could focus on recipe development and documentation. With the inspiration of Short Stacks, and the motivation of 'In the Small Kitchen', I moved into my final decision: a free eCookbook to be published on Issuu.com including 25 recipes with photographs. I chose to target my book towards a millennial<sup>3</sup> (ages 18-24) group of females with some interest in cooking, but not enough to get a pot of water actually boiling. I conducted a few interviews with close friends, asking them what they would like to see in a cookbook they would potentially use. First and foremost, 'free' was the common thread. If they were to

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2 Spungen, Susan. "Strawberries." Short Stack Editions 3 (2013): n. pag. Web. <<http://shortstackeditions.com/>>.

3 Brandau, M. (2012). Millennials. Nation's Restaurant News, 46(9), 32-n/a. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1197689980?accountid=4840>

buy ingredients and spend valuable time making food, the recipes that they used had to come from a free resource. It needed to be uncomplicated, fast and easy; a typical millennial request. I have followed blogs such as SmittenKitchen.com and BigGirlsSmallKitchen for years; blogs that focused on keeping a recipe simple enough to make in a small kitchen with limited space and limited resources. I studied these recipes and tried to pinpoint the qualifications for what these recipes required to be successful in a small kitchen. I also studied the career Deb Perelman, author of SmittenKitchen.com, who started a free blog in 2009 and has transformed her food writing and recipe development into a New York Times best-seller in 2012 with ‘The Smitten Kitchen Cookbook’. Deb Perelman was one of the first bloggers that with the help of her extensive online audience, emerged into the cookbook scene with such great success<sup>4</sup>. There have been many like her such as the aforementioned Cara Eisenpress and Phoebe Lapine, but none that received such critical acclaim as Deb Perelman’s book received. In a New York Times profile by Leslie Kaufman in 2012, “Mrs. Perelman’s style appears to resonate particularly with young women learning to cook. She is conversational, self-deprecating and often seems to be confessing.” This is the same type of success I wished to have with my cookbook, an audience built upon their relationship with my persona online and that relationship would potentially turn into one read of my cookbook. Establishing trust with your readers is exactly what Deb Perelman sought out to do, and she sold over 75,000 copies of her cookbook. I was very inspired by Perelman’s story and wanted to emulate her idea with my own style of writing and humor and to bring something new to a target demographic that remains relatively untapped.

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, Leslie. "Self-Taught Cook, Best-Selling Cookbook." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Dec. 2012. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/books/a-cooking-blog-yields-a-franchise-and-a-husband.html?pagewanted=2&pagewanted=all>>.

It was with the recipe testing research and the backing of blogger-turned-cookbook-author predecessors that I could go forth by choosing recipes and editing them to become ‘millennial-friendly’. I developed qualifications to determine what recipes would make the book including:

- Recipes must be completed in under an hour and use equipment available in a ‘small kitchen’ (e.g., mixing bowl, sauté pan, medium-sized pot, cheese grater, blender, muffin tin, etc.)
- Recipes must be mindful of ingredients not commonly found in a college kitchen or justify the purchase of a foreign ingredient (e.g., Tahini: Although not a common ingredient in a college student’s pantry, it comes relatively cheap and can be used in hummus, a popular dip/spread)
- The collection of recipes within a section must include at least one vegetarian course and a few meat-inclusive options.
- Pre-packaged or process foods must be kept at a minimum, included only for time and skill level purposes.

With these qualifications, I moved to create themes within the book and organized five sections in which the recipes were to be placed. These sections include:

- Forever Alone Favorites: *Everyday meals for when your mom isn’t around to tell you how special you are.*
- Failure Food: Cheese Edition: *So you got dumped or bombed an interview? Cheese is there to get you through.*
- Dinners That Will Get You Laid: *What to make when you want to impress someone so much, you will be naked by dessert.*
- Drunk Off Dessert: *Sweets so easy, your lady tequila can even help you.*

- Bitchy Bites & Sassy Snacks: *These snacks are made for gossipin', and that's just what they'll [make] you do.*

A bulk of the research came from testing recipes. I had to work within balancing a representation of popular diets such as vegetarianism with more traditional eating lifestyles that might include meat. For example, for the 'Forever Alone Favorites' section, I needed to balance the vegetarian Grilled Cheese recipe, the vegan Tomato Quinoa Soup recipe with Chipotle Chicken Tacos in order to appeal to a wider audience. I personally, am not such a fan of cooking meat at home. It is unappetizing in its raw form and can be difficult to cut if you don't have the proper knife. Though, it was my goal to appeal to as wide of an audience as I could, so I tested a few recipes that involved poultry and red meats. Testing recipes two or three times ensured I wrote down the proper amounts for when they were to be followed by my readers. It was a major responsibility of mine to make sure that those who were spending money on ingredients and time on making the recipe could, in fact, trust me with making a successful recipe. If one recipe had failed as they tried to recreate it, I would lose an audience. I needed to keep this matter of trust intact and testing the recipe three times helped assure me that I was putting out the best recipe I could.

In order to solidify the overall idea of appealing to a millennial target, I needed to create a recurring theme throughout the content of the book. Taking ideas from my own sense of humor and the popularity of self-deprecating comedians such as Louis C.K. and Tina Fey, I wrote introductory text and instructions with a similar tone. I wanted my readers to feel comfortable with the text, as if they were listening to a best friend. The best experiences I've had with teaching people how to cook are with my best friends. I can be casual and callous as I teach them how to make a béchamel; blatant sarcasm and

my facetiousness have proven effective in my experience. My best friend may not know what béchamel is, but she now knows how to make it. I felt as if readers would be more willing to learn from someone with whom they can relate, rather than from an authoritative and intimidating voice of a chef or TV personality.

With these preliminary details set, I was ready to move into the final production of the book. In Fall 2013, I was met with the opportunity to move to New York City for the semester and work with Bon Appetit magazine as an editorial intern. It was an opportunity to research by immersion, throwing myself into a group of people who live, breathe, and talk food. I learned how to elevate traditions of food into exceptional dishes, keep abreast of food news and trends, and more importantly, how to create those trends. I was taught how to effectively target digital media and use strategic tactics in order to engage a social media audience. The main contribution this experience had on my project was the advertising aspect; I created a Facebook fan page (*Figure 1*) and integrated my existing Instagram account in order to promote the book and build anticipation for its release. Writing for Bon Appetit Magazine helped me understand how to format my posts, word my status updates, and tailor content in order to attract more viewers and comments. Currently, 220 users follow the ‘Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book’ page on Facebook and 201 users follow my

personal account on Instagram. I also sought on-campus advertising opportunities with V89 (FSU’s radio station) and FSView (campus newspaper) for advertising purposes. It is my wish to



Figure 1

continue the maintenance of the ‘Stupid Good’ social media outlets, building a personal brand and interactions with fans.

In the final month of advertising and promotion, I held a tasting event on March 24, 2014, giving my peers the chance to sample recipes from the book before it became available to the public. I sold 15 tickets at \$20 each and served five courses including two drink options. The menu was as follows:

- Sun Dried Tomato White Bean Hummus
- Brie & Blackberry Bites
- Spinach and Arugula Salad with Tahini-Lemon Dressing
- Quinoa Cakes with Roasted Brussels Sprouts and Lemon-Garlic Aioli
- Marbled Cheesecake Brownies
- Citrus Stone Fruit Sangria and Minted Gin Lemonade

I catered the entire meal and handled decorations, ticket sales, table and chair rental, and the food preparation. It was my hope to gain awareness for the book launch and create anticipation amongst those invited and those who follow the invitees on social media. All were encouraged to post photos using the hashtag #stupidgoodbook. In a post-event survey, I found that 88% of those who had attended the event were very likely to make the recipes once they had tasted them and 100% were very likely to check out the cookbook when it launched.<sup>5</sup> Tasting attendee, Shawn Cedeno said, “I love the recipes because they utilize interesting and simple food combinations I am willing and more importantly, able, to recreate.”

In Spring 2014, I began the process of gathering the creative materials (photographs and designed pages) for the book. In terms of photography, I chose to keep the style very classic and clean, but playful in terms of allowing some ‘mess’ and reality

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Rachel. Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book Tasting Event Survey. Survey. 25 March 2014

in cooking. For example, with the Strawberry Shortcake Ice Cream Sandwiches, I allowed some crumble of the shortcake to fall on the plate, what would happen when you experience eating the dessert. I chose to photograph on white plates, a very clean and classic photography technique aimed to create focus on the food alone. I left the patterns and colors to the tablecloths and napkins, allowing pops of color that complemented colors and textures in the recipes. In terms of equipment, I used a Nikon D7000 with a 50mm f/1.4 lens and natural lighting techniques. Some Adobe Photoshop was also used in order to touch up the photographs.

The same guidelines I used in my photos translated into my approach to the graphic design of the book. The final product consists of 70-7x8” pages compiled in Adobe InDesign, exported into a PDF file and viewable via Issuu.com software. I wanted to keep it the design concise and clean in order to complement the photography and the simplicity of the recipes. In order to maintain the audience reading the entire book page-by-page, I used a master in Adobe InDesign to keep all of the text fields in the same locations on every page and relied on a consistent grid in order to align objects properly. I imported all of the recipe text and information from Google Drive software and then placed all the photographs. In addition to recipe pages, there are a few topics such as “Grocery Shopping For One” that resemble magazine spreads covering various topics. “The Cheese Plate” spread discusses two versions of cheese plates, varying in price, and includes tips on how to assemble the most party-friendly board. Call outs, not included in the main text, are indicated by circles and include information on serving cheese at room temperature and including utensils to cut cheeses. This tactic was influenced by magazine layouts that include more information in designed ways.

The cover inspiration came from “Melissa’s 50 Best Plants on the Planet” by Cathy Thomas<sup>6</sup>, integrating my circle logo design with square photographs. In addition, the cover design calls to social media trends such as Pinterest and Tastepotting, allowing viewers to see all the information at a glance before they invest time in reading. “Stupid Good” was released to the public on March 31, available at [StupidGoodRachel.com](http://StupidGoodRachel.com). The cover was distributed amongst the social media channels and a list of email users that had signed up to receive notifications earlier in the month. The book was published for free on [Issuu.com](http://Issuu.com), a free publication viewing service.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Cathy. *Melissa's 50 Best Plants on the Planet: The Most Nutrient-dense Fruits and Vegetables, in 150 Delicious Recipes*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 2013. Print.



### Chapter III: Results and Analysis

According to data from Issuu.com, “Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book” was read 273 times, made 485 impressions, and was downloaded 8 times in its first week. To date (April 15, 2014), the book has been read 713 times and has made 1,553 impressions<sup>7</sup> (Figure 3). The term ‘impressions’ refers to the amount of times information for ‘Stupid Good’ was viewed either on a desktop or mobile device in a

social media feed, embedded in a website, or in Issuu.com search results. Statistics for this project helped me understand the importance of capturing an audience through



Figure 3

social media with anticipation, effective keyword use, and outstanding creative work. Also, that it may not matter how many times a link is presented to you, only about half of those impressions make it to actual clicks.

Reflecting upon the amount of content I put out in the first week and to date, it may have been to my advantage to revisit the amount of times I pushed the link, using my personal and page accounts in order to gain more interaction. In order to use the photos to gain more interest, I could have also used the photographs in the book to promote specific recipes within the book more on Instagram: a group of followers that value the quality of

<sup>7</sup> "ISSUU - Digital Publishing Platform for Magazines, Catalogs, and more." ISSUU - Digital Publishing Platform for Magazines, Catalogs, and more. <http://issuu.com/> (accessed April 15, 2014).

photographs more frequently than those on Facebook. There is always room for improvement and due to my interest in continuing to build this brand, I can take these improvements into consideration for future projects.

Reflecting upon my advertising and marketing tactics, I was very pleased with the amount of strategy that went into the pre-publishing stages. Using a local newspaper article, a short video promoted by V89's radio audience, and hosting an event that directly solidified 15 fans of 'Stupid Good' all contributed to an overall success. Personally, I found that the tasting event was the most satisfying in terms of marketing. I was able to speak to those interested in the book firsthand and was able to see the reaction of each dish served. I felt as if the post-event survey provided extremely valuable insight pertaining to its effectiveness and demonstrated a positive reaction amongst attendees. I wish to continue this idea by bringing my recipes to smaller scale dining experiences and testing ideas with peers in order to better understand their views when it comes to food and cooking.

Moving into an analysis of my work compared to similar projects, I can most comfortably relate my project to that of an eCookbook available on MrFood.com. The Mr. Food Test Kitchen is a leader in providing recipes that exemplify 'quick and easy cooking' through their website, cookbooks and syndicated television show. Based in Fort. Lauderdale, FL, Mr. Food Test Kitchen produces over 12 eCookbooks a year, relying on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in order to push their recipe page PDF documents. From my experience working with Mr. Food Test Kitchen, it doesn't seem to be so much about quality as it is about the quantity of eCookbooks and the amount of views. It is my hope that I can eliminate the notions that eCookbooks are simply used to generate more clicks, more interactions. I want to be able to connect with my audience in a personal way,

using the new millennial generation's way of looking at food to my advantage. My eCookbook is different in that I provided in-depth text about my personal experiences, developed it specifically for those enticed by an accessible source, and promoted using a first-person marketing strategy. In very few ways can this be truly compared, as the Mr. Food Test Kitchen is viewed by over a million unique visitors<sup>8</sup> but despite these statistics, it is my goal to pursue this phenomenon of engaging more and more viewers to my publications, fostering a culture of millennials who cook and read cookbooks.

In conclusion, I felt an overwhelming sense of satisfaction after completing this yearlong project. I have a portfolio piece to present as the summation of my college career and I've inspired a few people to cook. The latter of those ideas is the most important to me, and I wish to dedicate my future to turning a few people into a culture of people who love to cook, who love to shut up and cook. I will embark into post-graduate life with the knowledge of how to put together a project, promote it, and evaluate for the next version, a skill valuable to anyone but especially anyone specifically seeking an understanding of creative direction in the publication industry. I will continue to cook, to eat and explore my love of food and it is through "Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book" that I have the confidence to move forward.

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<sup>8</sup> "Mrfood.com UVs for March 2014 | Compete." Mrfood.com UVs for March 2014 | Compete. Compete.com, n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.

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I wake up every morning, and I can't believe I'm in this horrible business, committed to nothing but making these pieces of dreck that go up on a stupid wall. I hate that. That's why I'm trying to make movies into something more than just movies. To me, movies should be VISUAL BOOKS! I'll take your book, and I'll make it cook. I'll make that book cook, baby! I'll take that book to cook and make that book cook! "Shut up!" "What?" "Shut up already!" See that? See how I did that? You probably think she's telling me to shut up to send me on my exodus. Wrong. Here's a lesson: You get a "Shut up!" like that, you better have that contract ready. Because someone's ready to sign. And she signs. She signs that line. And I feel oh so fancy fine! I'm the best! When it's up to you to make food that will last you until the next acceptable meal time, eggs and potatoes are the way to go. Don't be intimidated by the omelette flip- if it breaks, so what! You're only making breakfast for you (and possibly whomever is in your bed right now). Makes: 1 omelette and a generous portion of home fries Cook time: 30 minutes. In a medium skillet over medium heat, toss potatoes in olive oil and seasonings. Let cook, stirring occasionally while assembling your omelette, for 20 minutes. Your potatoes are ready when they are fork-tender and browned on the edges. Melt butter in a saute pan over medium-low heat and cook onions until translucent and soft, about 5 minutes. Add garlic, spinach, salt and pepper- cook until spinach has wilted. Her first cookbook, "Stupid Good: A Shut Up and Cook Book" was published in 2014, encouraging the merits of fresh, vibrant food and cooking for yourself as a twentysomething. Today, Rachel works as a freelance food writer and photographer specializing in online food media and manages her brand, Stupid Good Food. She lives in Austin with her boyfriend, dog, and full pantry. See more articles.