

## **Molly O'Neill Interviews Tanya Steel, author of *The Epicurious Cookbook***

Tanya Steel is that rare breed of food-loving editors who came of age in print journalism and moved seamlessly into the online world. Packing a decade's worth of old-media discipline and tradition, she turned Epicurious.com into the premier site for people who cook. Ms. Steel is all of what her name implies. She is also a serious superstar.

Launched by Condé Nast in 1995, Epicurious was initially imagined as a digital repository for *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit*, the company's two food magazines. In 2005, when Steel took the helm, she began commissioning more and more original work, minding dining and cooking trends and serving up feasts of words and recipes for all the demographic groups that comprise a Big Time readership.

Since then, Epicurious has collected almost 200,000 recipes, and every month 9 million unique users log on to answer the question of the day: What the heck am I going to cook for dinner (or for Thanksgiving, or for my shiny new boyfriend, or my in-laws, or the eight people I impulsively invited to dinner on Saturday night)? *The Epicurious Cookbook* is a finely curated volume—250 recipes drawn from the sea of online possibilities—all of which have been test-driven with the savvy and determination generally associated with Detroit's crash-car experts.

Out of my 15,000 cookbooks, it feels like one of the handful that I will actually keep in the kitchen, a book that captures this moment in American appetite. I called Tanya Steel to ask how she did it—and why.

**O'Neill:** First of all, why do we need another cookbook? There are few original recipes and little kitchen wisdom that has yet to be imparted.

**Steel:** Cookbooks reflect the taste of the times. And, there is always a new generation of people falling in love with cooking. Each generation has its own tastes and requires its own tweaks on classic recipes. Each generation has its own *Silver Palate* or *Joy of Cooking*. I strove to make this the twenty-first-century equivalent, reflective of who we are today, and to give enough of a variety, in dishes and flavors, to satisfy someone day in and day out for years to come.

**O'Neill:** How does the size and constant engagement of your audience shape the way you selected recipes for this book?

**Steel:** It keeps us sharpening our understanding of what people really like to cook and eat. So many food sources focus on what chefs cook. We focus on what real people like to actually make. We see that salmon, quinoa, and banana bread are always on our top ten most searched items on Epicurious, so we were sure to include all of those top ten items whenever we could.

**O'Neill:** Crowd-sourcing recipes on the internet is like the age-old notion of exchanging recipes over a backyard fence on steroids. I spent ten years traveling around America collecting recipes from home cooks for *One Big Table* and can't imagine how you parse and evaluate ten times the number I collected and then choose such a sliver of those for *The Epicurious Cookbook*. How do you do it? What exactly is involved in curating the volume of user submissions into coherent recipes with broad appeal?

**Steel:** The book is about two-thirds most loved recipes from *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit*. The other third are exclusively created Epi recipes and user-generated recipes that we tested and retested, as all of the recipes in the editorial part of our database are. We want to make sure it all always works.

We knew we wanted to organize it the way we all cook today—by season and meal. That helped provide a framework from which to begin the selection process. Choosing via highest rated—four forks—as well as very popular seasonal ingredients really helped create the ultimate collection.

**O'Neill:** But I can get all that expertise on Epicurious. I cook from my iPhone all the time. Can you explain to me why I am making room on my kitchen shelf for *The Epicurious Cookbook*? Do you think I have a cookbook disorder? Am I hopelessly retro?

**Steel:** We are all big collectors of cookbooks here at Epi, and showcase cookbooks on the site all the time, because we know people who love food, who love to cook and entertain, who love to eat, want to digest their recipes in all forms. Some love to take a book to bed with them and just pour over the photos and recipe names. Others prefer to cook with a book on the counter. And many of the millions of the Epi community have said they want us to curate the best of the best for them, and that's exactly what we did.

Molly O'Neill is the author of *One Big Table* as well as *New York Cookbook*, *A Well-Seasoned Appetite*, *The Pleasure of Your Company*, and *Mostly True*. A former reporter for the *New York Times* and the food columnist for its Sunday magazine, she hosted the PBS series "Great Food." She has won the Julia Child/IACP Award, three James Beard citations for books, journalism, and television, as well as the foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award. She has twice been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.