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What Einstein Told His Cook: Kitchen Science Explained

WHAT
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TOLD
HIS COOK

ROBERT L. WOLKE



Synopsis

Why is red meat red? How do they decaffeinate coffee? Do you wish you understood the science of food but don't want to plow through dry, technical books? In *What Einstein Told His Cook*, University of Pittsburgh chemistry professor emeritus and award-winning Washington Post food columnist Robert L. Wolke provides reliable and witty explanations for your most burning food questions, while debunking misconceptions and helping you interpret confusing advertising and labeling. A finalist for both the James Beard Foundation and IACP Awards for best food reference, *What Einstein Told His Cook* engages cooks and chemists alike.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 9 hours and 12 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: February 13, 2012

Language: English

ASIN: B0078IWW44

Best Sellers Rank: #24 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Lifestyle & Home >

Cooking #71 in Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking Education & Reference > History

#83 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Technology & Engineering

Customer Reviews

This is a most delightful book, full of kitchen wisdom and chemistry, good and bad puns, and many, many clever witticisms. It is a flat out pleasure to read, but what really makes it such an outstanding piece of work, and a book every kitchen should have, is that it is so full of information, from why and how corn syrup ends up in sodas to why and how to wash your mushrooms--and yes, they are indeed grown in manure, but not to worry, as Wolke explains on pages 286-288 in a little essay entitled, "You Can't Wash Your Car with a Wet Mushroom." (I believe that.) This is the kind of book you'll find yourself reading from cover to cover instead of peeling the potatoes. Speaking of which, Wolke advises that there is a very slight problem with green potatoes, but that reports of their poisonous nature are greatly exaggerated. (See pages 117-120 for the true scoop.) I have just one problem: nowhere does Wolke say how many sesame seeds are in a teaspoon. However, inspired by Wolke's labor-intensive lime squeezing experiment on pages 281-284, I was able to work it out

myself. The answer is 840. I found this by counting the number in a half teaspoon and multiplying by two, genius that I am. (Alas, this was before I realized that I could have counted the number in a quarter teaspoon and multiplied by four.) Which reminds me of the joke about a guy on a train counting cows in a field. When asked how he could do this he explained that he counted their legs and divided by four. Now you may think this was an idle exercise and wonder if I am not slyly making fun of Wolke's book. Au Cointreau! What I learned by counting sesame seeds exemplifies one of the lessons in the book, namely how hard it is to measure anything exactly. On page 294 Wolke asks, "Have you noticed how surface tension makes the liquid bulge up above the rim of the measuring spoon? How accurate can that be?" Well, I have, and I want to tell you getting a straight line of sesame seeds across the top of that measuring spoon was no piece of cake either! There are nine chapters and a really excellent index, suggestions for further reading and a brief glossary. There are some excellent recipes by Wolke's wife, Marlene Parrish. I performed a "thought experiment" on several of them and found that my mouth was watering. One of them, how to make turkey or chicken gravy on page 156 is almost exactly the way I make it. (Smile.) Parrish uses the roasting pan, transferring it to the stove top burners after removing the bird, and then deglazes the pan more or less in the French style. I must note that on the previous page Wolke himself does not recommend this technique finding it "hard to straddle two burners" not to mention "one big cleanup job after dinner." Which makes me wonder who makes the gravy in their household--or, better yet, who does the dishes! The chapters begin with sugar, "Sweet Talk" and end with "Tools and Technology." Wolke gives us a full mouthful on the differences between cane and beet sugar, between brown and white sugar, between cocoa and chocolate, and makes me feel good about not being crazy about white chocolate. He separates the sea salt from the rock salt; he explains what MSG is and where it comes from; how home water filters works; why "the nearer the bone, the sweeter the meat" is actually true, and of course how to open a champagne bottle and clarify butter... Ghee, I'm exhausted! One of my favorite explanations is why beef in the supermarket looks bright pink on the outside and brown on the inside. (See pages 127-128, and, no, they don't spray it with dye, which is what I always thought.) I also liked it when Wolke got down and dirty and tried to fry an egg on the sidewalk, and after some heavy-duty "Techspeak" came to the conclusion that you can't; that frying an egg on the sidewalk is an urban legend. (But try the roof of your Arizona "sun-baked, dark blue, 1994 Ford Taurus" which "measured 178 degrees F, more than hot enough to coagulate both white and yolk.") (p. 193) The icing on the cake for me (if you will) was Wolke's explanation of "Why Crackers Are Holey" beginning on page 307. What his explanation amounts to is a guide on how to make crackers, which is something I've been stumbling around in the kitchen,

trying to do off and on for ages. Two key factors that I was unaware of: One, the oven has to be very, very hot ("saltines are baked at 650 to 700 degrees F."; matzos at "800 to 900 degrees F.") and Two, crackers need holes to let the air out! And now to find an oven that gets that hot...Here are a couple of witticisms: On page 305 Wolke is talking about ovens that use light to cook food, and "the promotional statements...[that sound] like pseudoscientific hype:" They "harness the power of light." They cook "with the speed of light" and "from the inside out." He comments: "Light does indeed travel, appropriately enough, at the speed of light, but it doesn't penetrate most solids very far. Try reading this page through a steak."Or, "The makers of matzos, the unleavened flatbread of the Jewish Passover, seem to have gone hog wild (you should excuse the expression) on perforations. Matzos are much hole-ier than secular crackers." (p. 307)Bottom line: fascinating and fun to read.--Dennis Littrell, author of "Dennis Littrell's Funniest! Most Satirical! and Just Plain Meanest! Reviews"

I might have liked this book better if I read it before I read *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* by Harold McGee. But I read that one first and enjoyed the technical explanations. Some of the same questions are explored in both books, and in McGee's book you will get a detailed explanation suitable for a college student. This book you will get an explanation suitable for about 7th grade. It's more like Mr. Wizard or Bill Nye asked these questions instead of Einstein. If you want easier reading and simple answers, this book is for you. But I felt it was dumbed down compared to McGee's book.

Excellent writing! I used to love the sciences growing up but now I've entered the "real world" complete with a sit-all-day-looking-at-a-computer-screen job. Because of that, I have recently found cooking (something to invigorate my mind and senses in the evening). Wolke's book is the perfect combination of both cooking and science, with just the right amount of humor and sarcasm. I just finished it last night and am already online to buy his other works. Happy reading!

Sorry for the rewrite, but I realized my earlier review really didn't explain just how bad this book is. There are a few bits of useful information sprinkled here and there, mostly in the form of corrected wives-tales. Potatoes won't soak up extra salt in a soup, and adding salt to your pasta water will only raise the boiling point by something like 1/700 of a degree (but you should do it anyway because it tastes better). But to get these few bits of information you'll have to suffer through the wildly insulting tone of the book. Now I realize I should have stopped when he described a molecule

as "one of those eentsy-weentsy things that stuff is made of," but it was early in the book and I thought he was just trying to make the point that anyone can read this book. But no - he really assumes you're an idiot, which seems odd given the subject, or even the title. He continues to talk down to the reader throughout the book. He uses the word "Techspeak" to warn you of anything vaguely scientific. For example, "We all learned that matter comes in three physical forms (Techspeak: states of matter)" or "...liquid water can hold more heat (Techspeak: it has a higher heat capacity)". And instead of bothering to explain things he often just resorts to onomatopoeia. What is energy? It's oomph. The book is in the form of question and answer, and I can't help but think he even rewrote the questions to make them extra dumb. While he apparently does receive questions from the public you can tell they've been reworked because they were clearly all written by the same idiot. The questions all follow the same format ("I heard..." followed by some reasonable question or statement, with a punchline at the end.) In addition to thinking you are stupid, he really thinks he is funny. There's a simple and obvious pun in nearly every section of the book. I found myself thinking "oh no, please don't say..." and then there it was. It seems like entire sections were written just to deliver a pun. There's really very little science in the book, and he shies away from answering anything that would require more than a few paragraphs or too much "Techspeak". One of the most egregious lines in the book, in fact the one that inspired me to rewrite this review was "And what about 'all that yellow-green stuff' inside the crabs? Don't ask. Just eat it." Don't ask? Are you kidding me? No, I'm asking. That's the whole point of this book, or so I thought. As a child if I asked my dad any of these questions and got answers like the ones in this book I would have rejected the answer and demanded a better explanation. But then again my dad would never insult me with the drivel in this book.

Most semi-competent amateur cooks will find this to be an informative and entertaining read. It will likely appeal to fans of Alton Brown's Food TV show "Good Eats". As well as explanations of many foodie things that you will never see explained in run-of-the-mill cookery books, it includes a decent number of fairly straightforward recipes. It is broken into many short sub-chapters, making it easy to read in bursts of 3 or 4 minutes. What it is not, is a comprehensive explanation of all kitchen science. If you are looking for a manual of cookery science and techniques, or a book aimed at budding professional cooks, then look elsewhere.

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