

Christopher Kimball

Date of birth: June 5, 1951

Occupation: Chef

For more than two decades, avid home cooks recognized Christopher Kimball from his many culinary media efforts, which included the popular magazines *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* as well as the public-television shows *America's Test Kitchen* and *Cook's Country*. Although he left those enterprises in late 2015, he is still a force to be reckoned with in the culinary world, with a new magazine, *Milk Street*; a kitchen and cooking school located on Milk Street in downtown Boston, Massachusetts; and new radio and television shows.

Regardless what media outlet he employs, Kimball is a steady and reliable presence, widely lauded for his extensive recipe testing and belief that anyone can become a competent cook, given the right instruction. Discussing *Cook's Illustrated*, the magazine with which Kimball remains most closely associated in the public mind, Alex Halberstadt wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* (11 Oct. 2012), "In simplest terms, *Cook's Illustrated* focuses on preparing middlebrow American dishes at home with supermarket ingredients and omits everything glossy cooking magazines have come to be known for. If you are interested in recreating a Tuscan-style Passover feast or wonder what David Chang, the Momofuku Ko chef, thinks about contemporary art, *Cook's Illustrated* may not be for you." Kimball, known for his rural pragmatism and sartorial stodginess (he favors button-down shirts worn with bow ties), told Halberstadt, "I hate the idea that cooking should be a celebration or a party. Cooking is about putting food on the table night after night, and there isn't anything glamorous about it."

EARLY YEARS

Christopher Kimball was born on June 5, 1951, in a wealthy area of Westchester County, north of New York City. His father, Edward Norris Kimball, was a successful business consultant, and his mother, Mary Alice White, was a professor of psychology at Columbia University.



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The Kimballs owned a farm in southwest Vermont, where they spent summers and weekends. Kimball's mother raised Angus cattle and Yorkshire pigs, paying a local man to butcher them when the time came and selling the meat to area restaurants. She loved to hunt and fish and gave Kimball a rifle of his own before he entered his teens. He became so steeped in Vermont culture, greatly admiring residents' simple family cooking, that many fans assume he was born and raised there. "At the heart of it, Kimball makes his money by sticking to two lessons he learned from the old-timers in southwest Vermont," Kris Frieswick wrote for the *Boston Globe Magazine* (2 Aug. 2009). "The first: There is a right way and a wrong way to do everything. . . . The second lesson: Pay attention, or else." Kimball explained to Frieswick, "[Vermonters'] method of teaching was they never tell you something explicitly. They always demonstrate."

Although meals at home in New York were prepared by the family's cook, he got his first experience in the kitchen when he learned to bake from a local woman in Vermont named Marie Briggs. Reminiscing about this inspirational time in an interview with Claire Lui for the Columbia University alumni magazine *Columbia College Today* (July/Aug. 2010), he explained, "Food was the center of that community and she was the center of that community because she was the cook. The food was simple, but it was really good. I really liked that, and that's how I got started."

EDUCATION AND FIRST FORAYS INTO PUBLISHING

Kimball attended Phillips Exeter Academy, a preparatory school in Exeter, New Hampshire, before entering Columbia University in 1969. Despite later adopting a staid appearance, he was an active participant in the campus's counterculture. Columbia was then a hotbed of antiwar activities and protest marches, and he has recalled missing many tests because of frequent student strikes. He earned pocket money by driving a cab on the weekends and spent much of it going to Grateful Dead concerts, which often ended in the early hours of the morning.

Kimball graduated in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in primitive art and was accepted into a graduate art-history program at Cornell University. Unsure of the career path he wanted to follow, he declined admission, later taking a job at the Center for Direct Marketing in Connecticut. He moved to the suburbs, cut off his 1970s-era long hair, and married for the first time.

While living in Connecticut, Kimball began taking cooking courses but found himself frustrated by the imprecision of the instruction. "I used to get really irritated, because I would ask all these questions and be incredibly annoying in these classes, but nobody knew [the answers]," he recalled to Frieswick. "They were just repeating what someone told them. Nobody actually tested anything."

Kimball got the idea of launching a cooking magazine for those like him who would appreciate rigorous recipe testing and the absence of glitz. "The other food magazines weren't really about food," he told Lui. In 1980, with approximately \$100,000 raised from family and friends, he began publishing *Cook's Magazine*. Some of his early staff, including Mark Bittman and Melanie Barnard, went on

to some success in the culinary world. He soon discovered that keeping a new niche publication afloat, combined with his inexperience, was a difficult proposition, however, and after just three years, he sold partial ownership to the *New Yorker*. That company, in turn, sold their interest to S. I. Newhouse's publishing conglomerate in 1985. Ultimately, in 1989, he sold off *Cook's Magazine* in its entirety to Bonnier, a Swedish publishing house; shortly afterward, the publication was shut down.

Kimball spent the next few years bouncing around the publishing world, working on a men's magazine that was defunct even before the first issue came out and turning around a troubled special-interest publication on alternative health. By 1993, however, he was more than ready to try his hand at another culinary venture.

AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

That year, Kimball rehired many of the employees who had worked on *Cook's Magazine* and launched the similarly named *Cook's Illustrated*. Totally free of advertising and supported solely by subscribers, the largely black-and-white magazine had what many critics have characterized as a Victorian feel, filled with scrupulously tested recipes (with scientific explanations where needed), meticulous line drawings, and a chatty letter from Kimball himself in the front of every issue. Kimball, dividing his time between a farmhouse in Vermont and a townhouse in Boston, typically wrote about southwest Vermont, and the letters often unsentimentally detailed the joys and tribulations of living in the area among eccentric locals, survivalists, aging hippies, and newly arrived New Yorkers seeking more peaceful environs.

For each cover Kimball chose a Flemish-style still-life oil painting of food, believing that it gave the publication a timeless look. It was the recipes themselves, however, that won the magazine legions of avid readers. Each recipe was assigned to a test-kitchen cook who prepared several versions, attempting to isolate which factors contributed to or detracted from success. Only after as many as one hundred variations were created and judged was it decided which version of the recipe, if any, warranted inclusion in a bimonthly issue. "I am not against people playing around with recipes, but they should get to the point where they really understand the recipe first," Kimball told Jessica Gross in an interview for the blog *Longreads* (June 2015). Expounding his decisions regarding the layout of the publication, he said, "Black and white tells you right at the beginning this is a serious magazine about cooking, not a lifestyle magazine. We're not trying to sell you on something; we are there to explain something."

"What readers and viewers get are recipes that use ingredients available at any major supermarket in America and that yield consistent, predictable, excellent results."

After also publishing the well-received cookbooks *The Cook's Bible: The Best of American Home Cooking* (1996), *The Yellow Farmhouse Cookbook* (1998), and *The Dessert Bible* (2000), a second magazine, *Cook's Country*, was launched in 2004, featuring rustic comfort food and dishes from various parts of the nation. Each magazine spawned a television show: Kimball hosted *America's Test Kitchen* (also the name of his umbrella media company), the instructional cooking program with the highest number of viewers on public television, from 2001 to 2016 and *Cook's Country* from 2008 to 2016 on PBS. While the former is filmed at a kitchen in Massachusetts, the latter is filmed at a farmhouse in Rupert, Vermont, purchased specifically to highlight the approachable, rural focus of the show's companion magazine. Kimball became well known for his steady presence in the test kitchen, asking questions and prompting his cooks to explain their process and ingredients. A team of *America's Test Kitchen's* editors eventually put together *The America's Test Kitchen Cooking School Cookbook* (2013), which includes favorite recipes from *America's Test Kitchen* as well as summaries of cooking basics.

Discussing Kimball's overall ethos, Frieswick wrote, "What readers and viewers get are recipes that use ingredients available at any major supermarket in America and that yield consistent, predictable, excellent results. . . . His recipes are nearly bulletproof."

MILK STREET KITCHEN

In late 2015, shortly after parent company Boston Common Press had installed someone in the newly created position of chief executive officer, it was announced that Kimball was severing his connection to *America's Test Kitchen*. The following year marked the launch of his new venture: a magazine, cookbook, television, radio, and cooking-school empire named after the Boston street where it is headquartered.

Milk Street Kitchen focuses on techniques and recipes from around the world, rather than the comfortingly traditional fare that had long been Kimball's trademark. "Instead of using Eurocentric techniques that rely on concentrating flavors through long applications of heat, Mr. Kimball is exploring ways to build dishes that rely on texture, spice and freshness," Kim Severson wrote for the *New York Times* (31 May 2016). Kimball defended his decision to Alexandra Hall for *Boston* magazine (Dec. 2016), saying, "I finally realized that the world offers almost infinite possibilities in how to think about food and how to prepare it. I still think apple pie is one of the greatest culinary ideas of all time, but I want to introduce home cooks to all the other options."

Details soon emerged that made plain the acrimonious nature of his split with *America's Test Kitchen*, which filed a major lawsuit against him in the fall of 2016. Among the allegations was that he had built what is now a direct competitor while still on *America's Test Kitchen's* payroll, essentially stealing company resources.

Despite being painted as something of a villain in the press, Kimball maintains that he is uniquely suited to his new mission. “We’re not translating the ethnic soul of a community,” he told Severson. “We’re just saying this is a good idea. You need someone who knows a fair amount about cooking to do this, who has the thoughtfulness and testing to translate Thai cooking to our kitchens.”

PERSONAL LIFE

Kimball has been married three times. He has a son and three daughters with his second wife, Adrienne, whom he divorced in 2012. The following year he married Melissa Lee Baldino, whom he met when she interviewed for a job as his assistant at *America’s Test Kitchen*; they continued to work together as Baldino went on to become an executive producer of the company’s radio and television shows. In addition to cooking, he enjoys playing guitar, and he continues to live in both Massachusetts and Vermont.

SUGGESTED READING

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—Mari Rich