

Perfection, Inc.

Kitchen stickler **Christopher Kimball**, creator of America's Test Kitchen and *Cook's Illustrated*, has built a company that is thriving even as the media industry collapses like an undercooked soufflé. Can he keep it up?

Christopher Kimball, wearing a flannel shirt and precipitously baggy jeans, hunches over a spigot on the side of an enormous wood-burning and stainless-steel piece of equipment called an arch. Boiling maple syrup gushes from the spigot into the metal bucket in Kimball's hands, the sweet steam surrounding his head of thinning brownish hair and dewing the lenses of his rimless glasses. The syrup has been boiling all morning in the arch, starting hours before the cold March sunlight crested the mountains and fell onto the sugar shack at Kimball's 700-acre Two Pigs Farm in southwest Vermont.

Kimball grins slightly as he draws the fourth bucket in a row of perfectly cooked syrup from the arch.

"What's the record, Nate? Four buckets? Five?" asks Kimball.

"Four, I think," says Nate Bachiochi, a boyishly handsome 24-year-old in work boots and a baseball cap who's been sugaring since he was 6. Nate and his dad, Tom, taught Kimball everything the tall flatlander knows about sugaring – including that you typically can get only one, two, or three buckets of properly cooked syrup out of the arch at once.

"Looks like we set a record here," says Kimball, as he hands



Nate bucket number four and begins filling number five. He's smiling slightly, pleased, as if this fine first draw of the day was the result of him doing something absolutely right. This feeling, of getting something absolutely right, is like crack for Kimball.

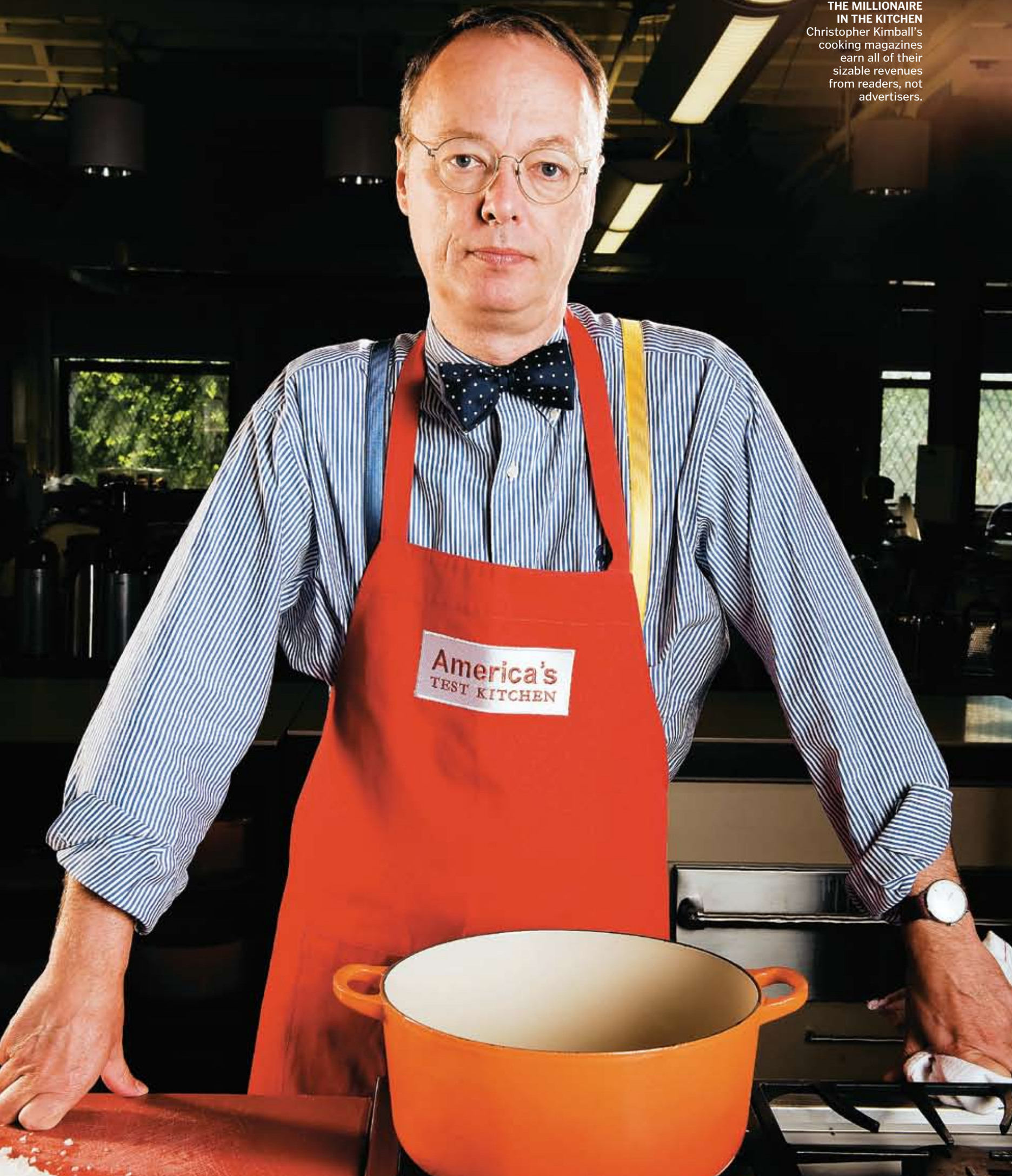
Kimball, who at 58 resembles a cross between a nerdy, slightly mad scientist and an investment banker, has what appears

to be tens of thousands of dollars of sugaring equipment: the arch and filters and bottlers and – for real – a reverse osmosis machine, all imported from a commercial sugaring equipment manufacturer in Canada. The operation is almost gratuitously complex for a guy who just wants to bottle his own syrup. But this isn't just a guy. It's Christopher Kimball, for whom there is no such thing as a hobby. If something can't be done perfectly, preferably using top-of-the-line gadgetry, it's not worth doing. Plus, he's already pre-sold 350 gallons of the amber liquid to the readers of his two cooking magazines, *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country*, and now he has to deliver the goods.

Anyone who has read *Cook's Illustrated*, the wildly successful flagship of Kimball's Brookline Village-based publishing empire – which also includes the *America's Test Kitchen*

BY KRIS FRIESWICK /// PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA BARISONZI

**THE MILLIONAIRE
IN THE KITCHEN**
Christopher Kimball's
cooking magazines
earn all of their
sizable revenues
from readers, not
advertisers.



and *Cook's Country* public television programs, websites for each of his projects, and a cookbook publishing division – knows Two Pigs Farm. Kimball's family, which hailed from Westchester County, the burbs of New York City, built a cabin in a small southwestern Vermont town in 1955, and Kimball started coming up here as a child. The town is a collection of old houses, mobile homes, and farms, all of them nestled into a steep notch between two mountain ridges. Kimball writes about this place frequently in his opening editorials for *Cook's Illustrated*. Those editorials rarely have anything to do with the exhaustively tested recipes that have made his magazines and cookbooks so popular. Instead, his essays, accompanied by a black-and-white illustration of Kimball in bow tie and apron, are about hunting or sugaring in Vermont or his country neighbors, among them hippie artists, crazy (sometimes dangerously so) survivalist hermits living off the grid in Quonset huts, wizened longtime locals, and transplanted New Yorkers who sometimes realize that, in this corner of Vermont, they may have accidentally gotten just a little bit too far away from it all.

If you read between the lines of Kimball's editorials, however, you learn that this Vermont town and its people had more to do with the creation of the *Cook's Illustrated* brand and its offshoots than maybe even Kimball realizes. This is where Kimball learned the importance of paying attention, absorbing as much as you can, then following your gut. And following his gut is what led Kimball to employ a business model that's unusual in his industry, earning all revenue from readers – not advertisers. Today, as the economy and the Internet threaten ad-based media companies, this unconventional approach has kept Kimball's business solidly in the black while those around him struggle to survive.

Magazines and newspapers are facing the worst media economy since Gutenberg's press first stamped words on paper, yet Boston Common Press, a private partnership that owns Kimball's publishing activities, is reportedly very profitable. Because the company is private, Kimball won't disclose his eq-



DELICIOUS The magazines' Brookline kitchen is where Kimball's *America's Test Kitchen* TV show is also taped.

uity stake, revenue, or net income. (His partners include George P. Denny III, a former Bain & Co. partner who runs a private equity firm, and Eliot Wadsworth II, a partner at another private equity firm.) Rough estimates put the gross revenue for print and Web subscriptions alone at more than \$40 million a year. Kimball himself is not shy about admitting that the company is making money hand over fist. He does it by giving his readers exactly what they want and by charging them big for it – for instance, the six-issues-a-year *Cook's Illustrated* is \$35.70 a year on the newsstand, \$24.95 for an annual print subscription, and \$34.95 for an online subscription (\$29.95 if you're a print subscriber, too). He doesn't offer discounts for print subscriptions, and he doesn't have to: Subscriber renewal rates are about 78 percent, according to Jack Bishop, the company's editorial director. Most magazines would kill to have renewal rates near 60 percent; the average across all consumer magazines is between 35 and 40 percent, according to Samir Husni, director of the Magazine Innovation Center at the University of Mississippi. *Cook's Illustrated*, launched in 1993, and the more down-home *Cook's Country*, launched five years ago,

have increased their circulation every year since they began. *Cook's Illustrated* claims just under a million subscribers; only four other cooking magazines in the United States have larger circulations, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation.

But at the heart of it, Kimball makes his money by sticking to two lessons he learned from the old-timers in southwest Vermont. The first: There is a right way and a wrong way to do everything. A right way to take a chain saw to a fallen tree, drive a tractor, milk a cow, chop silage, clean out a pig. It's no surprise that the first kind of cooking Kimball learned as a boy was baking – a culinary discipline that succeeds or fails by degrees and detail – at the elbow of Marie Briggs, a baker in his town. “[Vermonters’] method of teaching,” recalls Kimball, “was they never tell you something explicitly. They always demonstrate.”

The second lesson: Pay attention, or else. “The thing I liked about [Vermont] as a kid was that you were taken very seriously,” Kimball says. “If you don't do a good job, you know. They don't yell at you, they just make you feel like a complete loser. . . . You disappoint them, you know.” Excelling in this milieu is

still the source of enormous pleasure for Kimball, as is clear the day I visit the sugar shack.

This belief that there is a demonstrably right way to do everything, and his quest to learn what it is, fueled Kimball's rise to the top of a multimillion-dollar publishing empire. It has also earned him a reputation as a man who “likes smart people and has no patience for whiners or complainers” (according to Pam Anderson, *USA Weekend's* food columnist and a onetime *Cook's Illustrated* employee), “the worst manager imaginable” (per Mark Bittman, the *New York Times* best-selling cookbook author and another former employee), and “intense and brutally honest” (from Bishop). Kimball has been known to make test-kitchen chefs and writers cry with his scathing criticisms. Kimball himself admits “I'm a terrible manager. I don't do it. That's why I hire the very best people, who don't need to be managed. If I have someone who needs to be managed, I let them go.”

“He doesn't really care about the personal, frankly,” says Bishop, who's known Kimball for about 20

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WRITE RECIPE. TEST. SELL. REPEAT.

Christopher Kimball has figured out that there's a lot of money to be made from promising the perfect recipe for roast chicken and more.



MAGAZINES

Cook's Illustrated debuted in 1993. *Cook's Country* followed in 2004. Their recipes are also repackaged in spinoff magazines.



BOOKS

Titles include *The New Best Recipe*, *The America's Test Kitchen Family Cookbook*, and *America's Best Lost Recipes*.



TELEVISION SHOWS

America's Test Kitchen and *Cook's Country* both air on public television. Viewers can also pay to see ATK shows online.



WEBSITES

Each magazine and television show has its own website. Accessing magazine content requires an online subscription.

years. "He's really more interested in the idea."

Kimball's idea is simple. So simple that he's amazed it's not how every publisher does it. The reason the others don't is because it's crazy expensive. Every recipe that appears in his publications and on his TV shows must represent the single best way to make a dish – and they are forged in the fires of the Mother of All Test Kitchens.

The *Cook's Illustrated* recipes follow the most rigorous journey. First, each recipe idea is pre-surveyed to see if readers are even interested in it. Then, based on research in the company's cookbook library, a test-kitchen cook comes up with several versions of the dish and submits them to a staff taste test. She is then pummeled with questions about why she didn't try this ingredient or that sauteing method or a different type of sugar. She goes back to the kitchen for more experimentation, and more critiques follow. Only when all hands believe the recipe is the best it can be is it sent to a handful of readers, who make it and report whether they'd make it again. If a recipe – even after all that time and testing, and even after more revisions – doesn't score well with the readers, it ends up on the kitchen floor. Surviving recipes are published with the story of their journey in the test kitchen. There's even a science guy on call to conduct more technically challenging experiments and add explanation to the articles so readers can learn why,

"I'd always hated advertising. I thought it was an unholy alliance that made no sense to me between an advertiser and the editorial content."

CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL

He believes only readers should support magazines and websites.

say, on a molecular level, cream of tartar does what it does (and I have no idea what that is, but it is apparently very important).

While arduous, the work seems worth it. The *Cook's Illustrated* recipes are recycled again and again in Kimball's TV shows, cookbooks, and ancillary publications such as *Entertaining*, plainly advertised as "collections of recipes from past issues of *Cook's Illustrated*, not new recipes."

What readers and viewers get are recipes that use ingredients available at any major supermarket in America and that yield consistent, predictable, excellent results. Do Kimball's test cooks create recipes that offer sublime moments of transcendence, an herbal combination or preparation of ingredients so surprising, complex, or unexpected that it elevates a dish to culinary brilliance? Will his magazines introduce you to varieties of cuisines and ingredients that you never imagined in your wildest kitchen fantasies? No and no. But his recipes are nearly bulletproof. And based on his subscription increases – averaging 11 percent annually over the past

eight years for *Cook's Illustrated* and 38 percent annually since launch for *Cook's Country* – this is what his readers want.

The business model is pretty bulletproof, too. While the rest of the publishing world was reeling from an average decline in ad pages of around 28 percent in the first half of 2009 compared with the same period last year, Kimball's company is doing so well that he just completed a renovation on the Brookline test kitchen, and unlike almost every media company in the country, he is hiring.

It seems that Kimball is doing something absolutely right. At least for now.

After attending Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, and Columbia University (where he earned a bachelor's degree in primitive art) and some time spent working with his stepbrother in a publishing company, Kimball went to work for a man named Dan Harding. Harding ran courses in marketing and publishing through his organization, the Center for Direct Marketing,

in Westport, Connecticut. Kimball knew nothing about either topic but credits Harding with teaching him how to break down a problem into its smallest elements to understand and solve it, "sort of like we do here," says Kimball from his offices in Brookline. Today, he's dressed in his publisher uniform – a pressed white shirt, bow tie, and suspenders. Around the office are photos, most taken in Vermont, of his wife of 22 years, Adrienne, and their four children, who range in age from 11 to 21.

Kimball says he started taking cooking classes about the time he met Harding. Predictably, he hated the classes. "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]," says Kimball. "They were just repeating what someone told them. Nobody actually tested anything. Nobody seemed to care about the recipes. It was all very loosey-goosey, and I'm not loosey-goosey when it comes to something like a recipe.

"Why do you add sugar to egg whites while you're beating them?" he asks, getting visibly agitated. "What does cream of tartar do? Why does an acid help denature the proteins in egg whites? What is denaturing?" Frustrated by his stupid, stupid cooking instructors, who were likely just as happy to see Kimball go as he was to leave, he decided that the only way to get the answers about egg whites was to start his own cooking magazine. Fueled

by \$100,000 in angel investments from friends and family, Kimball launched *Cook's Magazine* out of a tiny office in Weston, Connecticut, in 1980. He was 29 years old.

He quickly assembled a team of writers and test cooks that today resembles the American Culinary Hall of Fame. Melanie Barnard was one of his first employees. "He's a perfectionist," says Barnard, a food writer and author of cookbooks such as *Panini* and *Short & Sweet*. "[His wife] Adrienne is a saint, because he's tough. He doesn't see things any other way. It's good for the readers and the people who work for him. You always knew you were doing high-quality work, and you were always proud of what you did." John "Doc" Willoughby, now executive editor of *Gourmet* magazine, joined Kimball's team in the late 1980s. "Working with him was fun most of the time," says Willoughby. "He expects you to stand up for yourself. He criticized your work. You criticized his. It was like working with friends." Culinary greats Mark Bittman and Pam Anderson were also on the *Cook's Magazine* team back in the 1980s, having drifted there because, at the time, it was one of the few places a food writer could find full-time work.

Unlike his current publications, that early magazine took advertising. In 1983, after three "ugly years" of struggling to keep the magazine afloat, says Kimball, he sold a partial interest to *The New Yorker*. That magazine, and the interest in *Cook's*, was acquired by Advance Publications (S.I. Newhouse's publishing conglomerate) in 1985. In 1986, Kimball sensed that Newhouse wasn't all that interested in supporting *Cook's*, and, "to be honest, it wasn't a very pleasant place to be. It was all about selling ad pages," says Kimball. He arranged for Advance's interest to be purchased by Swedish publishing house Bonnier Group. This alliance, says Kimball, changed everything.

"I'd always hated advertising," says Kimball. "I thought it was an unholy alliance that made no sense to me between an advertiser and the editorial content. [Bonnier's] attitude was that people should pay for their magazine content." In Europe, the norm is that magazines are supported by subscribers, not advertisers. One of his Bonnier bosses told him, Kimball recalls, "It's not how



MULTIPLE COURSES
Clockwise from above: Christopher Kimball as a child doing work on his parents' Vermont farm; with Julia Child during her visit to the *America's Test Kitchen* set in 2000; fishing in Vermont; with his wife, Adrienne; and on one of his many prized motorcycles.



many recipes, it's which recipes.' That was exactly the whole basis for my entire company right now."

In 1989, nine years after he launched *Cook's Magazine*, Kimball sold his interest in it to Bonnier and went on to other publishing ventures, which included a men's magazine, the embarrassingly named *Smart for Men*, that died before the first issue ever came out. He was offered part-interest in the Brookline Village-based *East West Journal* in exchange for taking on the job of publisher and turning the alternative medicine magazine around – or not. He redesigned it and renamed it *Natural Health*, and circulation climbed. In 1998, the partnership that now included Kimball sold *Natural Health* for a figure that he says was "far north" of a rumored \$15 million. Meanwhile, Bonnier sold *Cook's* back to Advance, which killed the magazine and rolled its subscriber base into *Gourmet*. Someone failed,

however, to renew the trademark protection on the name "Cook's," a fact Kimball discovered a few years later during a trademark search. He sent the trademark office \$175 and bought back the name, which he promptly slapped on his new creation – a subscriber-supported, advertising-free, mostly black-and-white cooking magazine that featured scrupulously tested recipes, scientific explanations for probing questions about egg whites and so forth, and very little else. He then proceeded to get the old *Cook's* band back together for the launch of *Cook's Illustrated* in 1993.

"Chris called me," says *Gourmet's* Willoughby. "He also called Jack, Pam, and Mark. We all called each other and said, 'This has to be the stupidest idea he ever came up with.' But it was a job, and as long as he paid me, I was in." Bittman says he wasn't too sure about the idea when he first heard it, but realizes now that it was "a complete stroke of genius."

The magazine's popularity

soared, and 15 years later, the formula has remained essentially unchanged. This surprises no one more than the people who helped launch it. What amazes them most is that readers still want it. There are only so many perfect ways to make a roast chicken, right? How long can a magazine remain a must-read when the subscribers essentially dictate the content – and when those subscribers, year after year, ask for stories about the same types of foods? For instance, the July/August issue features stuffed flank steak, French fries, chopped salads, buttermilk pancakes, and grill-smoked pork chops. Some variations of these ideas have appeared repeatedly throughout the years.

"Chris has a great hatred of pretension," says Willoughby. "He wants to do something that is straightforward, down to earth, and that's what he's doing, and he's going to stick to it. He used to say to us, 'We get bored because we do this eight hours a day. But the readers

“I would have thought that [Cook’s Illustrated getting stale] would have happened a long time ago. There’s only so many recipes that are part of the traditional American culinary vocabulary.”

JOHN “DOC” WILLOUGHBY

former Kimball employee, now Gourmet magazine executive editor

see this magazine once every two months. They’re not bored. We’ll stick with it until the readers get bored.’ And they’re not bored.” But, Willoughby adds, he’s surprised the magazine hasn’t gotten stale. “I would have thought that would have happened a long time ago. There’s only so many recipes that are part of the traditional American culinary vocabulary.”

The continued popularity may be because *Cook’s Illustrated* and *Cook’s Country*, despite their high renewal rate, do have a new set of readers that cycle in over time, then cycle away again once they’ve learned what they need to know from Kimball’s no-nonsense instruction. “It’s not a magazine for people who want to be creative,” says Willoughby.

It’s also no longer a magazine for Anderson, the best-selling author of *The Perfect Recipe* and *Cooksmart: Perfect Recipes for Every Day*. Despite her cookbooks’ titles, she says, “There are only so many foods I care about perfecting in that way. I feel like I’ve gathered as much information as I care to know using that approach.

“Food became a bigger story for me than just finding the perfect way to make something. But I cut my teeth on that style and am forever changed by approaching recipes in that way,” says Anderson.

Even Bittman, author of *How to Cook Everything*, *Mark Bittman’s Kitchen Express*, and others, says he loved working with Kimball, but left *Cook’s Illustrated* because he disagreed with Kimball’s “one perfect way” approach. Still, he adds, “there isn’t a magazine on the market that doesn’t repeat itself constantly. There’s things I agree with and there’s things I don’t. Whatever he’s doing, it works. When it starts to fail, it’s time to ask the questions.”

In fact, the rate of new subscriber growth for both magazines has

slowed – for example, to just 1.5 percent from 2007 to 2008 for *Cook’s Illustrated*, down from 4.5 percent the year before, and nearly 20 percent the year before that. Kimball says the majority of the growth of both magazines in the past year has been in Web subscriptions, not print. Nonetheless, the company continues to throw off enough cash that Kimball’s been growing it, and he’s been growing his real estate portfolio in and around southwest Vermont; there he has at least five houses, one of which is used for taping the *Cook’s Country* television show. Kimball is set to build another barn at Two Pigs Farm, where he already has a rambling farmhouse, a main barn, the sugar shack, a henhouse, a sty for his spring shipment of piglets, a barn for his half-dozen horses, a sauna house next to a man-made pond, a vegetable and herb garden, and beehives (which were totaled this spring by a hungry bear). There are also the two side-by-side, five-story brownstones in which his family lives in Boston’s South End.

Listening to his readers, and giving them what they want, is responsible for all that Kimball has. But there is one place in the magazine, and only one, where Kimball has decided to ignore his readers’ wishes: his editorials about Vermont. They don’t tend to test well. Only about 35 percent of readers surveyed like them. The rest, Kimball admits, are indifferent or hate them. But Kimball has absolutely no intention of moving on to a new topic.

“It’s my magazine, and I’ll do what I want.” Which, of course, is only true to the extent that it is also what his readers want. He can be excused, though, for reserving that little slice of copy for himself and for the bimonthly homage to the place that is as much a part of Kimball as his bow tie and suspenders. ■

KIMBALL’S TOP 5 KITCHEN TIPS

The Cook’s Illustrated founder and editor offers these kitchen dos, in his own words:

EMBRACE SALT

Most home cooks are afraid of salt; most chefs love it, and for good reason. Salt makes everything taste better, even chocolate desserts. So don’t reduce the salt in recipes, and taste-test as much as possible to get the salt level right. For heartier dishes or even something as simple as an omelet or frittata, a sprinkling of coarse sea salt just before serving is a pretty good idea, too.



GO HOT

What do you see in a restaurant kitchen? Flames and smoke. The staff gets pans hot, really hot, since they know that heat produces flavor. To properly preheat a skillet, for example, add a bit of oil when cold and heat until it just starts to smoke. Then it’s ready for sauteing.



BE SHARP

I suspect almost every home cook in America is using a dull knife. Sharpening steels don’t sharpen; they just tune up knives that are already reasonably sharp. Dull knives have edges that have turned over and need to be reground. Only the Chef’sChoice M130 Professional Sharpening Station (about \$160) does a top-notch job. The AccuSharp Knife and Tool Sharpener (about \$10) works in a pinch.

PREP FIRST

Never start cooking before you have read the recipe and prepped all the ingredients, placing them in small bowls, combining those that go together in the recipe. I place this *mise en place* onto a plastic tray with a copy of the recipe.

(We do the same in the test kitchen.) Everything is measured, thought out, and ready to go. Cooking is the easy part.



IGNORE COOKING TIMES

They are utterly worthless. Your oven and mine might be off 100 degrees from one another. Your skillet might be lousy at retaining heat, whereas mine holds it nicely. When using the oven, check halfway through the published cooking time and constantly thereafter. On the stove top, use your eyes, nose, and fingers to check food, not your timer.