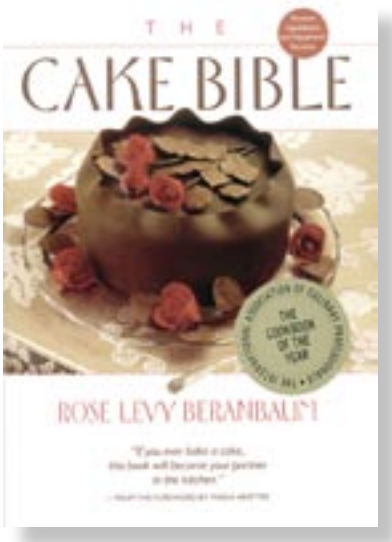
She Wrote the Bible

BY MARGUERITE THOMAS



Rose Levy Beranbaum has written numerous books, including *The Cake Bible* (William Morrow, 1988), a culinary best seller currently in its 34th printing. Other award-winning books include *Rose's Christmas Cookies* (Morrow, 1990) and *The Pie and Pastry Bible* (Scribner, 1998). Her newest and most all-inclusive publication is *The Bread Bible* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003). She is currently working on a comprehensive book on cakes for John Wiley & Sons. Beranbaum is a contributing editor to *Food Arts Magazine*, and her work has appeared in numerous publications including *The Washington Post, Fine Cooking, Bride's, Reader's Digest,* and *Hemispheres.* She has been a guest on a number of television shows, and now appears in her own PBS show called *Baking Magic*. She also writes a blog called "Real Baking with Rose," sponsored by Gold Medal Flour. She recently launched a new product line, roselevybakeware, and is spokesperson for Lékué, a silicone bakeware manufacturer based in Spain. Beranbaum lives with her husband of 30 years, Elliott Beranbaum, in New York City.

MARGUERITE THOMAS is travel editor for *The Wine News* and she writes "The Intrepid Gastronome", a monthly column for the *Los Angeles Times International Syndication*. She is the author of *The Elegant Peasant*, Light and Simple Variations on Traditional Country Fare (Jeremy P. Tarcher)

Let's start with the beginning, *The Cake Bible*, the book that made your name when it came out in 1988. *The Pastry Bible* and *The Bread Bible* followed. Did you first come up with the concept of a book, or a series, and the "Bible" title, or did you write the first book and then you and your editors worked out that brilliant title?

I had it in back of my mind to do a "bible" sort of definitive book, and though the word "bible" did occur to me, I would never have had the temerity to call it that if, not for [the late food writer] Bert Greene, who was my best friend. He came up with the title entirely on his own. He insisted that I call it a bible because, he said, I was his muse and he knew that's what the book would be because of my approach to baking. I resisted at first, but when everyone at the publishing company starting calling it by this name—and giving it more respect—I started to reconsider.

It's hard to imagine not liking that title.

I asked the bicoastal restaurant consultant Clark Wolf, whose opinion I greatly valued, what he thought of it, and he said it would be like sticking my chin out and saying, "Here! Punch me!" This clever assessment helped me to realize that I believed 100 percent in what I was doing and that I was willing and ready to take it on the chin!

Was The Cake Bible your first book?

My first book was *Romantic and Classic Cakes* (Irena Chalmers Great American Cooking Schools Series, 1981). It was written on an IBM Selectric typewriter, and it was a great dress rehearsal for a larger book. I could never have written *The Cake Bible*, with all its depth and continuity, without a computer.

Did you set out on a straight path directly into the world of food?

No, in 1967 I was actually a student at FIT [New York's Fashion Institute of Technology]. I had a job as a medical secretary at the time, and the doctor I worked for persuaded me that I was too thin-skinned to survive in the tough garment worker environment. I realized he was right, so I transferred all my credits to New York University to major in food.

Who were the people who most influenced you when you were growing up?

My mother was a pioneer of sorts, being the only woman in the entire dental school where she was a student. Because she worked full-time, I was raised by my grandmother, who had

been a sample maker in the garment industry. She taught me magical things, such as how to make a piercing whistle from a single blade of grass, how to draw nectar from a honeysuckle blossom, how to cross-stitch, and how to tell a story (she regaled me with tales from czarist Russia, which she called the Old Country.) My father was a skilled cabinet-maker and still marches to his own drummer. But it was my great-uncle Nat, who was the designer of the Movado Museum watch, who taught me how to think beyond the obvious.

You have written cookbooks and articles about food not related to baking (*Rose's Celebrations,* in 1992, and *Rose's Melting Pot,* in 1994, both published by William Morrow), but many of us have always felt that baking and cooking require very different mindsets—a left brain-right brain kind of thing maybe. As someone who has been successful in both, give us your take on this truism.
Julia Child advised me that it is very hard to get out of the baking pigeonhole, but that it could be done. Baking requires precision. With cooking, one can be more free-spirited. It took me years to feel free to cook by heart without measuring or being locked into a recipe, including my own! (I once found myself saying "it says"—and then realized the "it" was I.) I find that most bakers can cook well, but the reverse is not necessarily the case.

Book editor Maria Guarneschelli has said that the best food book authors she's worked with have all been uniquely focused on their careers. You, of course, are among the ones she mentioned. Is this particular kind of focus something you've developed, or is it an inherent part of your personality?
Maria and I always worked well together because we agreed on so many basic principles, including this one. I have long considered my ability to focus my greatest asset. I'm not sure if it is genetic or if I learned by example, because both my parents embodied this quality.

What aspect of your personal road to success are you most proud of?
My greatest joy, and what I consider my greatest achievement, is having touched other people's lives in a positive way. For example, people who have never baked before have started successful businesses using my recipes.

You are a prodigious writer of books and articles, and you also have successfully marketed many products. Tell us about your most recent venture.
I am the spokesperson for Lékué of Spain. I also have my own line of ceramic bakeware with them called roselevybakeware. It includes Rose's Perfect Pie Plate and a Sweetheart Crème Brûlée set. (Both Lékué and my line are distributed by Harold Imports).

Along with books, articles, product lines, and the rest, you put together and obtained all the underwriting for a 13-episode baking show on PBS. Do you have an agent who helps you market all these unusually successful concepts?
I have two business managers who handle everything including my book contracts. One is also the business manager for the Rolling Stones, the other is working on the upcoming Canadian Olympics [in Vancouver, in 2010], so their vision goes beyond my food world.

Do you have any tips for others about how to keep one's name out there once a book, television show, or a magazine series has come out?
I was greatly influenced in this by my friend and colleague Shirley Corriher. In the early days of IACP she advised me to travel and teach in order to get my name out there. She said that at most schools the owners also make sure to get their guest-teachers publicity via local radio, TV, and print. Since we share a great love of food science, the food profession, and people in general, Shirley and I made a point of attending every food symposium we could, including the chefs groups, which at that time were entirely separate from IACP. I also wrote as much as possible for the food magazines. I think this helped establish my credibility with the press so that when my first big book came out they were already acquainted with my work, and they did wonders to publicize it.

Did you like the process of creating and appearing on your own TV show? Do you feel that you can reach people in a different way through television rather than print?
"Show and Tell" was always my favorite subject at school, and TV is the "show" to the "tell" of my books. I find the process of cookbook writing more gratifying than the process of television production because during most of the former I have total control and can be obsessive about detail. TV is a huge challenge. It forces you to think in an entirely different way, and to give up control. For a good performance one must trust the producer. But TV also provides a huge opportunity to reach many more people and to demonstrate visually techniques that are difficult to grasp, even with the most carefully chosen words.

Have you had ideas that were held close to your heart but that you have not been able to bring to fruition?
I've always longed to do a four-color cake book. Having studied fashion design, I have a strong feeling for the visual art of design. And I think people want and need to see what a cake looks like. I've been exceptionally fortunate in being able to realize most of my goals and visions, and now that I have just signed a contract with Pam Chirls at Wiley for a comprehensive four-color cake book, I will realize this dream too.

When you were growing up in New York City, was good baking, or simply good food, a part of your home environment?
Neither! My mother was a dentist, so sweets were not big in our household. But her mother, who lived with us, used to have a candy store, and she would make rock candy, crystallized on dental floss. I only remember my grandmother baking once in all those years. It was an apple pie, and it was wonderful. Her comment when I praised it was that it wasn't worth the trouble. Grandma wasn't a very good cook either, so my interest in food was avoidance more than enthusiasm. But when I discovered how wonderful food could be when prepared well, I was completely seduced by the possibilities. I wanted to spend all my time cooking and baking. Surprisingly, my mother turned out to be an excellent cook after her retirement. Actually, perhaps it wasn't so surprising. I remember her saying when I was growing up that she loved to eat. Of course at the time I thought she was crazy!

You have attended all but three IACP conferences, most recently the regional conference in Sweden. You've also traveled twice to Australia to be a presenter at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. Any other major, or upcoming, trips?
I have been a presenter at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, and I traveled to Japan to research sugar for an article for *Food Arts.* Earlier this year I was in Ireland, and I have upcoming trips planned to France and Spain.

In addition to networking at conferences (and aside from the basic hedonistic pleasure that many of us get from travel), in what way do these experiences influence your work?
My baking and cooking have both been influenced profoundly by my extensive travels around the world—by my exposure to different ingredients and how they are used in cooking and baking. In recent years, the Internet has also provided an amazingly effective vehicle for connecting to people. Recently a woman living in Samoa reported her pleasure in being able to make a multigrain bread from my newest book for her husband, who longed for the bread of his childhood in Germany.

I love that you've included the Internet as another means of world travel—because, of course, you're right to underscore the point that the connection to other people is one of the most compelling reasons for visiting a foreign culture. And in its own way, the Internet enables us to do some of that.
I'm really excited about the possibilities of my new baking blog, sponsored by Gold Medal Flour. It will provide a platform for sharing ideas. The world has never seemed so wonderfully and easily accessible.

I envision you typically starting each day with a wonderful breakfast of homemade chocolate croissants, or muffins and scones just out of the oven. Of course if this vision of your early morning routine is anything close to accurate, you must have the metabolism of a hummingbird to maintain your trim shape.
My routine actually begins with a one-mile swim at a nearby pool. Then coffee, and around 11:30 a small lunch, often something

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The Culinary Trust

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special projects at the French Culinary Institute in New York and he spends six weeks a year there giving demonstrations, lecturing, and interacting with the students. He has also been an adjunct professor at Boston University for more than 20 years. He appears annually at the Aspen Food and Wine Festival and does charitable culinary events throughout the country. About one-third of his time is given to charitable organizations, from the Culinary Trust to PBS to local farm groups in his home state of Connecticut. When I asked him why he gives so much of his time to charitable work, particularly The Culinary Trust, he said, "Because I believe so strongly in education, and the Trust promotes that through scholarship and the preservation of cookbooks."

What does this Renaissance man do in his spare time? He loves to travel with his wife of 38 years, Gloria, and they are building a second home in Mexico, where they hope to spend two months or more a year. Pépin, of course, designed the house, painted the tile, did some of the woodworking, and so on. He also enjoys gardening, mushrooming, skiing, and painting. His beautiful drawings grace the pages of his cookbooks, his watercolors are often backdrops for his menus, and he has generously painted original works of art to raise money for The Culinary Trust. For the Annual Conference in Phoenix, Ariz., U.S., in 1999, he painted the cover for the Culinary Concert Program and also participated in a fund-raising dinner and painting contest at the home of the late, legendary Indian artist, Fritz Scholder. A year later, he did the same in Providence with another well-known artist and friend, Ed Giobbi.

It's not surprising that he's received awards too numerous to mention, probably the most notable being the French Legion of Honor. Pépin says his true treasures, though, are his family, especially now that he is a grandfather, and the knowledge that he has taught so much to so many. As culinary professionals, members of IACP, and beneficiaries of the Culinary Trust, we honor, thank, and salute you, dear Jacques, on your 70th *anniversaire*.

Road to Success

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I've baked. If I'm wandering around New York during the day, my lunch is usually a banana from a stand. I usually walk wherever I'm going, as I spend so much time at the computer. I try to get exercise whenever I can since I don't consider baking much exercise! Come to think of it, my greatest achievement is not getting fatter than I am given the temptation of wonderful food and desserts I am always surround by.

Who—in the entire world--would you most like to have dinner with some day?

I love this question. "Some day" implies someone with whom I've not yet dined, but if it could be a repeat dinner it would unquestionably be Michael Batterberry, the visionary publisher of *Food Arts* magazine. He is wondrously erudite and endlessly fascinating, funny, warm, and entertaining. And his knowledge of food and wine are legendary. But if I had to choose a fantasy—a never-before-experienced dining partner—I can narrow it down to three. Lionel Poilâne, if only he were still alive. (He was arguably the world's most well-known bread baker, who started a movement towards a return to artisinal bread that spread from Paris around the world). I met Poilâne once at the Chocolate Show in Paris and was utterly taken by his charm, his passion for life, and his métier.

And I'd want to dine with Pat Conroy, my favorite novelist, and a brilliant raconteur who also adores food and wine. Also, Martha Stewart, who constantly inspires me with her genius for innovation, self-creation, and a towering creative talent in so many of the arts, including business. I could learn so much from even one dinner with any of these delightful people.

As with any author of cookbooks, you surely have more food than you and your husband and friends can possibly consume. Even with plenty of freezer space, have you come up with any creative way to dispose of baked trial runs (short of the garbage disposal)?

The garbage disposal starves in my house. A neighbor once told me, as I was headed to the incinerator room, that my failures are her life's delights! Whatever we can't consume I give to the people who work in our building. I've known most of them for over 30 years now and they have become like family. In fact, several of the handymen have very discerning palates and are great "tasters." Alec, from Croatia, is an excellent cook, and Willy, the doorman, used to be a baker. Kenny and Eddy are teaching me Spanish—just in time for my trip to Spain! It's great to get feedback so close to home.

Speaking of feedback, do you have other tasters whose opinion you rely on?

My husband Elliott has a fantastic palate, and thankfully is completely honest. I value his discernment and input. But having said that, ultimately I go mainly with my own taste. As Elliott once advised me in his direct but loving way: they're paying for your taste buds, not mine!