Betty Crockers Cookbook by General Mills Inc.

Betty Crockers Cookbook is 50! In celebration, an updated and expanded ninth edition of this American classic reminds us once again of the value of good old-fashioned comfort food. The original Big Red Cookbook was immediately popular with a postwar audience seeking basic cooking advice and simple recipes that took advantage of several then-new convenience products. The ninth edition remains true to its roots, presenting exemplary instruction, savory mainstream dishes (that still make use of convenience foods and the products of parent company General Mills), and, most notably, standout chapters on baking and dessert specialties. New to this edition, which offers nearly 1,000 recipes, are grilling and vegetarian chapters; up-to-date nutrition information; additional color photos; and contemporary formulas for the likes of Brie with Caramelized Onions, Asiago Bread, and Tandoori Chicken with Chutney. Instruction was and is the books strongest suit, and any cook--novice to professional--will benefit from its many how-to features. These include step-by-step directions with photos, tips for kitchen timesaving, and troubleshooting advice. The book also includes several comprehensive glossaries (those on cooking terms and ingredients are particularly good). Standouts among the vast recipe collection, more than 300 of which are designated fast or low fat, include old favorites such as Macaroni and Cheese, Old-Fashioned Baked Beans, and Lemon Chiffon Cake. A few newer ones, such as Sun-Dried Tomato and Olive Bread, also qualify. Published, as ever, in a loose-leaf binder, the book celebrates American culinary know-how, a broad-based tradition of good home cooking, exemplary baking, and the conviction that food and commerce can meld to help people cook easier and eat better. Happy birthday indeed! --Arthur Boehm

My Personal Review:
Time was when the words Betty Crocker actually stood for the best in general-purpose cookbooks, although the recipes, for better or for worse, were always a product of their times. The very first Betty Crocker Picture Cook Book was published in 1950 (still available), revolutionized how
cookbooks were produced, and was an enormous best-seller. The recipes were the result of much thorough testing in the company's kitchens and in homes across America. This was cooking from scratch with very little reliance on convenience foods in its pages. This gradually changed as Betty and her books became more and more of a shill for General Mills products and her name got plastered on one mix after another to the detriment of good cooking.

The 1956 edition was an expanded version of the original 1950 book, with many more recipes and clearer photographic reproduction. It contains the most recipes of the entire series and is, in my opinion, the best cookbook Betty ever made. The next two editions came out in 1961 and 1969 and were both loaded with recipes and wonderful tips/helps, although you could see the beginnings of sacrificing quality for convenience--especially in the 1969 edition, which has some horrendous shortcut recipes that border on parody--but this was still relatively minor in proportion to the majority of the recipes. If you have these books, treasure and keep them; you'll never see their likes again.

The current 10th edition looks good but, like the past several editions, the number of recipes has been drastically reduced. Gone are the many variations, which are especially missed in baked goods. It was wonderful having recipes of many cakes that were sized for two people or small families and having different mixing methods to choose from. Now way too many recipes are of the dump and stir method instead of choosing methods that would insure the best results. Also gone is the very friendly, assuring, conversational voice of yesteryear. Yes, there are recipes covering a wider range of ingredients and styles, but they are mostly stripped-down versions.

It's obvious that the folks at Betty Crocker now seem to think that no one really cooks these days and can't be bothered with proper preparation of dishes, which begs the question of why General Mills even bothers to publish new editions. The Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook is a better bet for those looking for an all-purpose, everyday guide. It has a better layout, the recipes and ingredients are generally of a higher quality, and there are more recipes and variations than Betty Crockers had in some time. Even better, if you care at all about the quality of the food you eat and serve your family, I highly recommend the cookbooks of Cooks Illustrated/Americas Test Kitchen. Their comparable general-purpose cookbook is called The Americas Test Kitchen Family Cookbook. The recipes are tested and reworked--dozens of times, if necessary--to be the best their staff can make them and you get precise directions and brand recommendations to ensure quality results. It's a shame that Betty Crocker has tarnished her reputation for excellent advice and recipes, but there's even better stuff out there now. Go for it!!

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