



Brette Sember is a Clarence author, attorney and author of 40 books, including cookbooks. "Food runs deep in my family," she said. "My mom is an excellent cook. It's always been a huge part of my life."
Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News

Cookbook author offers recipe for success

By **Andrew Z. Galarneau**

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After a satisfying meal, well-meaning guests have been known to tell the proud home chef, "You should write a cookbook!"

Not Brette Sember. The Clarence lawyer and author has written about 40 books, including two cookbooks released this year. After having "The Parchment Paper Cookbook" and "The Muffin Tin Cookbook" published by Adams Media, Sember has a message for would-be authors: Loving food and loving writing are important, but the most important ingredient is months of hard work.

"It's going to the grocery store almost every day. It's spending all day in the kitchen, making everything over and over again to make sure the recipes are right," Sember said. "It's grueling, sweaty, hard work."

With the popularity of Food Network shows, a growing interest in food-related careers and the emergence of cooking as a hobby, publishing a cookbook has become almost as enthralling as writing the Great American Novel was to an earlier generation.

But today's cookbook author has to make his or her way in a world where everyone with a yen to share recipes is giving them away on the Internet -- for free. To get paid for them takes much more than a love for cooking, Sember said.

You need a detailed book proposal with a razor-sharp focus, professional discipline to get it done on deadline and the skills to lead the book's marketing through social media, such as Facebook and cooking blogs.

"In a way you do this because you love food, and by the end of the process you're like, "Oh, my God, I don't want to cook another thing for months," she said. "So in a way it really impacts your personal life. If cooking is a passion, is a hobby, something you love to do, once you turn it into work, it changes. It gets a lot harder."

Starting early

Sember has been writing and cooking most of her life. While in Clarence High School, she started writing for the high school newspaper and literary magazine.

Her parents were both teachers, and her mother wrote college textbooks -- and she helped. "From the time I was in high school I worked for her, as an assistant," said Sember. "Writing exercises, writing instructor's manuals, finding passages. It's always been what I've done --and I still do. I co-author her textbooks with her."

And she grew up in her grandmothers' kitchens, she said. "Food runs deep in my family," she said. "My mom is an excellent cook. It's always been a huge part of my life."

Sember got her English degree at the University at Buffalo and headed to UB Law School. She married her husband, Terrence, and had her first child, daughter Quinne, before getting her law degree in 1994. She spent four or five years as a solo practitioner, primarily in family law, with matters such as divorce and guardianships.

She was taking time off to have her second child, son Zayne, when she was contacted by a publisher. Years before, when she was looking for all sorts of work related to her legal career, she had replied to an advertisement in a law publication looking for authors.

Now the company wanted to know if she was interested in writing her own manuscript. "I got a phone call from an editor asking me if I wanted to write a book on how to file your own divorce in New York," Sember said. "I said, 'Sure.' It kind of took off from there, and I never went back."

Armed with her organizational, research and legal skills, Sember ended up writing a succession of books over the last decade. They are mostly how-to titles -- "The Essential Supervisor's Handbook," "How to Parent With Your Ex," "The No-Fight Divorce Book."

Her biggest seller to date is probably "The Complete Credit Repair Kit," which has sold more than 50,000 copies in numerous editions, Spanish translations and e-book editions.

Channeling Martha

As she approached 40, Sember launched MarthaAndMe.net, a blog aimed at sharing Sember's year-long mission to adopt, as much as possible, Martha Stewart's prescribed approach to domestic life. Sember said it was one way of facing a midlife crisis.

"How can I make my life better? Who has perfected living and doing food well? Martha," Sember said. "I'll live like Martha for a year and see if it makes my life better."

She didn't achieve domestic nirvana, but she did attract an audience of readers and media exposure, appearing as a guest on Martha Stewart Radio about 10 times. (She has never met Martha Stewart, though.)

The experience emboldened Sember to try food writing.

She had enjoyed a Bon Appetit recipe, sole with crabmeat en papillote, cooked in wax or parchment paper. Sember liked that the paper, in addition to creating the environment for steaming the fish, made cleanup a snap.

"I realize, this is really versatile. I could do a lot with this," she said. "So I started playing around with it. I realize, I could cook almost anything in parchment. Then I realize, there is no book out there about this."

That meant Sember had an opening. "You really need a hook -- something that makes it unique and different," she said. "Just a collection of recipes has no selling point."

Sember, well-versed in publishing industry requirements, knew the next step was writing a book proposal, laying out what would make her cookbook unique. It emphasized the convenience angle -- "You have no dishes to clean up, which is a big selling point for a lot of people," Sember said.

The proposal led to a contract, which specified how many recipes the book would have, sections that would be covered and other details. Then Sember set to the familiar task of writing. But there was one thing she hadn't counted on: The publisher wanted the manuscript in six weeks, to get the book on the market before anyone did something similar.

Of the 180 recipes, she had already done 30 or 40, though Sember had to recook them all to test them. She worked 12-hour days, seven days a week. "I started the day at Wegmans and came home and cooked like a maniac till 6 or 7," she said.

"I would never do it again," Sember said. "It was every moment of those six weeks. It almost killed me."

Her second book, on using muffin tins for portion-controlled and kid-friendly food, took a relatively leisurely three months.

"My family members were very tolerant of me," she said, "eating out of parchment paper for months, then eating food that was round for months."

Her husband did the dishes and fed Sember's experiments to his officemates.

"He's the best ever," she said. "He feels like that's his contribution to the insanity that was happening in the kitchen."

For the family

"There are so many people who say 'I want to write a cookbook,'" Sember said. "Having your favorite recipes that you know by heart might make them feel like your recipes, but they're not. You didn't create those recipes, and you can't write a cookbook with them, because you don't own them."

What a lot of people really want, and can have a good time putting together, is a family cookbook.

"You can collect the family favorites, the ones Grandma always made that you love, that your mom cooked, that your aunt made," she said. Upload the recipe text and photographs on a home computer, and web services will send you handsome volumes for less than \$20. "You give it to people marrying into the family, you give it to the girls when they come of age, but

that is not a commercial cookbook. That's a family cookbook -- two totally different things."

For those determined to get into the cookbook business, Sember said, you might think about starting with a cooking blog. They're free to start, have only deadlines you impose on yourself and let fledgling food writers start small, sharing their culinary adventures while they build an audience.

The audience will be important if you end up pitching publishers, who prefer proposals that come with a crowd already primed to buy the paper-and-ink version, Sember said.

"You almost can't sell a cookbook without a blog, unless you're a four-star chef. That's the way it is now," Sember said. "You have to create some sort of platform, or you're not going anywhere."

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