

My Grandmother's Recipe Book

Format: Common App Personal Essay | Level: College Application | ~600 words

My grandmother keeps her recipe book in a three-ring binder with handwritten tabs and no index. For twenty years she has known exactly where everything is by feel alone, the way experienced programmers navigate a large codebase without a map. When she asked me to digitize the recipes, I realized I was not just transcribing text. I was designing an information architecture for someone who had already built a perfectly functional one.

The binder is organized by occasion, not by ingredient or cooking method. Recipes for holidays are grouped together regardless of whether they are savory or sweet. Recipes she makes for my grandfather are flagged with a small red sticker, not labeled, just marked. There is a section at the back that she calls odds and ends, which contains recipes that do not belong anywhere else and which she describes as things I might try someday. When I asked her why a pasta dish was filed under desserts, she said it reminded her of a dinner we had in Italy when I was seven, and that was where she would look for it.

I spent a week trying to design a database schema that could represent this. The obvious approach, categories, subcategories, tags, failed immediately because the categories were personal rather than culinary. A recipe filed under my grandfather does not mean it is his favorite; it means it belongs to a set of associations that only my grandmother holds. Any schema I built would impose a logic that was not hers, and the moment I imposed that logic, the information would become harder for her to find, not easier.

I ended up building something closer to a search engine than a recipe book: a full-text database with freeform tagging, where my grandmother could add any word she associated with a recipe and retrieve it later by any of those words. It is worse than her binder in some ways. She cannot flip to the Italy section, because there is no Italy section; she has to search for it. But it is more robust to the one failure mode her binder has, the day when she cannot remember which occasion a recipe belongs to and has to search by feel.

What I learned from that project is that information architecture is always a model of someone's mind, and the question of whose mind it models determines who can use it. The binder worked because it was my grandmother's model, built over twenty years by the person who would search it. The database works less well for her and better for everyone else, which is a tradeoff I made without fully understanding it at the time. Systems design, I have come to think, is always a set of choices about whose intuitions to optimize for. The hardest part is knowing whose intuitions you are leaving

out.

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