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Chef Chakall, the Argentine-born, Portugal-based author and restaurateur, demonstrates recipes from his cookbook at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. Lauren Lancaster / The National

Sweet taste of success

The cookbook industry is proving to be recession-proof as consumers opt to eat at home. Sales of these books have tripled in size over the past 14 years, with celebrity chefs providing that extra zest. **Keach Hagey reports**

On the opening day of last week's Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, the scent of Indian spices wafted through the booths.

The perfume drew such a crowd to the benches in front of Vidhu Mittal's cooking demonstration at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards booth that stragglers were forced to stand. Elsewhere, the winner of this year's Booker Prize was preparing to sign books, but these foodies were not interested: all eyes were on the frying pan.

Thus is the mesmerising power of food television, which has helped the international cookbook industry to triple in size over the past 14 years, according to Edouard Cointreau, the president of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, the sponsor of the booth.

Now, the global recession is helping to accelerate that growth as people increasingly forgo eating out in favour of meals prepared at home.

Cookbooks have been doing better by 10 per cent to 20 per cent, depending on the country, since the economic troubles spread around the globe, Mr Cointreau said. "In France, which is a mature market, one publisher told me cookbook sales were up 25 per cent. It's a surprise. They actually didn't print to sell that much. People didn't expect it because everybody was being very careful."

The boost in cookbook sales is sweetening the global economic downturn for many publishers, who increasingly have come to rely on them to balance their budgets. But for Mr Cointreau, a descendant of the makers of the famous liqueur by that name who boasts a collection of more than 12,000 cookbooks at his ancestral vineyard home in France, it is only speeding up trends he has been tracking for

years. "You have less artistic food and what is called molecular cuisine, scientific cuisine. People are coming back to real food, things from their childhood, things they want to give their children."

His observations have been echoed widely in the food press. According to Epicurious, Conde Nast's food website: "Hallmarks of 2009 will include a return to families cooking together and eating at home more than they have in decades, a premium on high-quality, seasonal ingredients that provide good value, and an emphasis on simple food for the people, by the people."

Baking is back in vogue, with margarine sales growing again after a period of decline, while the UK grocery store chain Waitrose removed its DVD and CD sales to increase shelf space for its pans, knives and baking trays, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, a UK newspaper. UK supermarkets are reporting strong growth in the sales of raw ingredients, according to *The Observer* newspaper, following years of increasing sales of convenience foods.

This budget-inspired return to unprocessed ingredients has joined a longer-running trend over the past few years toward traditional foods made with locally grown produce, Mr Cointreau said.

"Much more than the international foods, people are coming back to the local foods, what they can create with the ingredients they have with the seasons they have at home," he said. "All this is very healthy, both mentally and physically."

In a sign of how mainstream this "locavore" philosophy has become, this week Michelle Obama, the wife of the US president Barack Obama, announced plans to replace a sec-

"When I started at the Frankfurt Book Fair 15 years ago, very few good publishers would take seriously doing a cookbook," Mr Cointreau said. "Now they know they have to do a cookbook because that's how they are going to make money. Cookbooks now support many publishers."

The difference, he said, was television. "There is a natural marriage between television and the

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Edouard Cointreau president of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards

cookbook. It multiplies by 10 or 20 times the sales of a cookbook."

Mr Cointreau now spends about half his time in China, where food television since 2000 has helped fuel annual rises in the number of cookbook titles by an averages of 30 per cent per year, he said. Last year, he reviewed 300 books on China state television. This year, he is planning to review 1,000.

"It's very easy to do," he said. "We have a book and a speaker who reads the book with the public. We turn the pages of the book as he is reading it, and then people buy it. It's very, very important, but it's not complicated. You don't even need the author. You just need the book."

The internet, first eyed with suspicion, has become an important friend of the cookbook as well.

The internet has a multiplying factor on cookbooks, rather than the other way around, which publishers were afraid of three or four years ago," Mr Cointreau said. "If you have a successful blog, you will need a cookbook. I know dozens of cookbooks that come from blogs. People didn't expect this impact of the internet."

Another growing sub-sector of culinary publishing is travel cookbooks. Travellers increasingly want to buy cookbooks as souvenirs, Mr Cointreau said, which has been a boon for the industry.

The merging of the travel and cookbook industries has also been a boon for celebrity chefs including Chakall, the Argentine-born, Portugal-based author and restaurateur who has taken many of his recipes from his travels to more than 90 countries.

"When we travel, what do we do?" he said, speaking at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, where he, too, was scheduled to give a cook-

Despite the economic downturn, his restaurant in Portugal has seen a 300 per cent rise in business in the past year, Chakall said. The secret, he believes, is affordability.

"There are other restaurants with celebrity chefs which are very expensive," he said. "They close. I think they charge too much. They are stealing from people."

But Mr Cointreau thinks the globalisation of food has a larger purpose than just selling more cookbooks.

"Food is a bridge between different people in different parts of the world," he said.

To emphasise food's power to unite, Gourmand gives a special award each year to a cookbook that creates peaceful meetings between groups of people who do not normally get along. One award has gone to a pair of authors, one Greek, one Turkish, who teamed up for a cookbook.

"These are two countries that don't agree on a lot of things, but they agree about food," Mr Cointreau said. "You could say the same thing about Palestinian food and their neighbours. Food is very important to peace. People who sit at the same table have a problem fighting each other later."

He believes the Middle East has great potential to bridge cultures through food, and to participate in the world's booming cookbook industry.

"I think there is a very interesting role for Arab cuisine to be involved in what is happening with this food cookbooks revolution that's going on," Mr Cointreau said. "Among other things, that's because all the food that is now used in the West came from the East."

"For example, it's incredible how much food that French people think is French actually comes