

Journalist First, Foodie Second,

And she's brought the numbers

Maile Carpenter '95 is the reason you want to lick that photograph of chocolate cake on the cover of *Food Network Magazine*. She's the reason the 100-plus recipes in each issue won't leave you feeling like a Pinterest fail. Instead they're deliberately feasible for a normal cook in the middle of a busy week, with ingredients you can find at your local market.

As founding executive editor, Carpenter has made the anti-stuffy, low-maintenance, fun food magazine the best-selling in the country, surpassing *Bon Appetit*, *Food & Wine*, *Rachael Ray Every Day* and *Cooking Light* — combined — in newsstand sales, according to the Alliance for Audited Media.

A lot went into that cover shot. First, the cooks in the Food Network test kitchen had to create the recipe — more than two-thirds are developed in-house — then various staffers (sometimes including Carpenter) endured the arduous task of taste testing and commenting and sending the recipe back to be tweaked, sometimes three or four times.

Then Carpenter and her team chose which mix of recipes to include, keeping in mind that the issue wouldn't be published until next season, meaning they're working with pumpkin pies in June and Christmas cookies in September. The perfected recipes then were re-created in duplicate and triplicate and more, and pulled out just as the food stylists were ready with their spatulas and brushes and final touches before the photographer began clicking, flashes strobing, the food slumping and melting and a fresher version swapped in, until together they'd created that delicious image.

Then Carpenter has to choose. Lead with a cake this month or enchiladas? White background or blue?

All of this attention to detail has

rocketed *Food Network Magazine* to a monthly readership of 13.9 million people, and the secret ingredient may be that Carpenter is one of them. She and most of the rest of the staff fall into the sweet spot of the magazine's demographics. They're busy. They have small children. They're working parents. Both parents work. They don't have time to run around gathering 14 ingredients for a single recipe for a weeknight dinner, but they still want to put something impressive on the family table.

"I cook a big family meal out of our magazine at least every Saturday night, and then when I can during the week," Carpenter said. "The recipes are perfect for us, and it's a good way to get in there and read."

At the time of the magazine's launch in 2008, the Hearst Corp. didn't have an entree in the fast-growing foodie market. They partnered with Scripps, where Ellen Levine, then the Hearst editorial director and now a consultant on a swath of Hearst products, hired Carpenter, who grew it into the second-largest magazine in the country in terms of newsstand sales and in the top 10 percent in readership overall.

"She just got it," Levine said. "If you don't go out and talk to America, you may end up focusing on a group of people who are in one stage of life or in one state. The most talented editors are the ones who want to please their audience, and in this case the audience is huge."

Carpenter began mimeographing her own newspaper in second grade. She got her first cooking job at 15, braving splattering oil as a fry cook at McDonald's. She still has a scar on her arm to prove it.

By high school she was hanging out at the public library, poring over cooking magazines. Her dad was in the military and the family moved often, exposing Carpenter to a wide palate of foods. She came to Carolina purely for its journalism school (although she's also a big fan of the barbecue).



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Maile Carpenter '95, founding executive editor of Food Network Magazine



TIMOTHY HIATT/GETTY IMAGES

With her husband, Wylie Dufresne — the James Beard Best NYC Chef in 2013 — two children and most of her staff, Carpenter falls into the category of people too busy to over-fuss dinner. The magazine's recipes aim to impress without overdoing.

After college she covered the TV and film industry at the *Wilmington Morning Star* (now the *Star-News*) and later for *The News & Observer*. The school had taught her to be a fanatic about grammar, punctuation and accuracy, which she now drills into her own staff, who check and double-check each recipe.

She eventually found a food-writing job at *Time Out New York*, and at night she earned a degree at the French Culinary Institute, wanting to understand the industry from inside and out.

"It took me about two seconds to realize I didn't want to cook for a living. It's too intense and the hours are crazy," said Carpenter, who is married to chef Wylie Dufresne — the James Beard Best NYC Chef in 2013 — with whom she has two children. "I knew since day one that I've been a journalist first and a food person second. I didn't really think the culinary school would change that, but at the very worst I'd spend a fortune and end up with chops in the kitchen."

She uses that knowledge to divvy recipes into categories — quick and easy for weeknights and more elaborate for the weekend

— but always with accessible ingredients. The kitchen staff takes field trips to Walmart and Target to check what's on the shelf.

They figure out ways to cut corners without wrecking the dish, like by buying precooked pouches of rice and farrow and quinoa — grains that would never have appeared when the magazine was newly launched — so meals can be thrown together after work. They watch the spice section, too, and if they can't find an ingredient, the recipe gets tossed.

With all of this exposure to delicious food, though, Carpenter's own favorite is McDonald's french fries.

"I should not admit how often we stop for them on the highway," she says. "They're

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Maile Carpenter '95
founding executive editor
Food Network Magazine

delicious!"

Her sole food aversion is mint, which is so off-putting that she had to recuse herself when the crew was photographing mint chocolate chip ice cream.

"Everyone is well-aware of the mint thing," says creative director Deirdre Koribanick, who stands far away when she's chewing gum. "But it's so pleasant to work here. *Food Network Magazine* wouldn't be what it is

without her. She's very particular and super smart, and the content reflects that."

As Levine says, "There's a three-letter word at the magazine, and that's f-u-n, which is something we believe in at the magazine."

— Janine Latus