

## **Review / Books: A Feast of Books for Foodies**

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I'm a tough nut to crack when it comes to cookbooks. I cook every day and, as the mother of two small children, I expect a cookbook to give me a serious run for my money. Fancy photographs and elaborate recipes using luxurious ingredients don't necessarily light my fire.

What sends me to the stove and rummaging through the cupboards are carefully written and researched cookbooks that expand my culinary knowledge (both historical and technical), act as springboards for experimentation and simply renew my enthusiasm for pulling off flavorful meals. Of this season's new cookbooks, the following titles inspired me to go to the market with children, menus and grocery lists in hand.

"The French Laundry Cookbook" by Thomas Keller with Susie Heller and Michael Ruhlman (Artisan, 320 pages, \$50) prompted me to slow down and cook more mindfully and analytically in my chaotic home kitchen. Mr. Keller is the American-born chef and owner of the French Laundry, an intimate restaurant located in rural Yountville, Calif. Hailed as one of the best chefs in the country, Mr. Keller is a tenacious perfectionist who relies on top-notch ingredients and always tends to the technical details.

For the most part, the dishes in this book are time-consuming and impractical for today's harried home cooks. Many dishes are composed of multiple recipes and require professional equipment such as a tamis (a flat, drum-shaped sieve), a chinois, or a small blowtorch. The book, however, is still a treasure trove. Outstanding photographs by Deborah Jones and numerous essays written by Mr. Keller, Michael Ruhlman and Susie Heller immediately lured me in.

Rather than try one of Mr. Keller's involved dishes, I opted for a more moderate approach. I got the idea from Susie Heller, the book's recipe tester and writer. In her short essay titled "When in Doubt, Strain: Notes on How to Use This Book," she encourages readers to be flexible and think of ways to use Mr. Keller's recipes and techniques in different ways.

As I had just purchased 100 pounds of locally grown organic Yukon Gold potatoes for the winter, I was intrigued by Mr. Keller's potato puree recipe, "Tasting of Potatoes With Black Truffles." It seemed to be a good opportunity to review the basics of making superb mashed potatoes. Following Mr. Keller's instructions, I soon felt as if I was in a very informative, hands-on professional cooking class. As directed, I gently boiled my spuds in their jackets until they "offered no resistance when poked." I then drained them and put them back in the pan, heating them gently to remove excess moisture. Next I passed them through my tamis (purchased for \$22 at my local kitchenware store) and, over a carefully monitored heat, beat in a cup of heavy cream and 10 tablespoons of butter.

Although my right arm got a serious workout during the beating process, I was rewarded with smooth and rich mashed potatoes. As I tucked into the luxurious puree, I sighed and knew exactly how I wanted to use the remaining 99 pounds of Yukon Golds sitting in my garage.

"Chez Panisse Cafe Cookbook" (HarperCollins, 267 pages, \$34) is Alice Waters's seventh book and, I think, her best yet. The founder and owner of Berkeley's acclaimed Chez Panisse restaurant, Ms. Waters has always used the highest quality local ingredients in her kitchen. By the year 2000, she plans to use only certified organic products, and that personal mission permeates every page of this book. Ms. Waters writes with such intense respect for food and passion for her purveyors that the reader can't but follow her lead.

These recipes are gleaned from her casual restaurant, Chez Panisse Cafe, which is located upstairs from its more formal namesake. Although some recipes, such as duck confit with baked figs, are rather complex, many are remarkably straightforward and accessible. Obviously sensitive to the quandaries of home cooks, Ms. Waters gives good descriptions about how a food should respond

when being cooked and what it should look like when it is done. She also offers lots of advice about what to do when an ingredient is not available.

I tried the baked goat cheese with garden lettuces and the slow-baked king salmon with sauce gribiche. The salad is one of the cafe's most popular dishes and calls for marinating disks of goat cheese in herbs and oil before dredging them in bread crumbs and baking them in the oven. The results were sublime, and the salad lends itself to endless seasonal variations.

The dish that hooked me for good, however, was the slow-cooked king salmon. The unusual recipe calls for baking a three-pound fillet in a 200-degree oven with a pan of simmering water for about one hour. I substituted a troll-caught fillet of coho for the king, and, guided by Ms. Waters's descriptive text, I judged that the salmon was done when it was barely firm to the touch and juices were collecting on the surface. Served with a room-temperature caper and herb sauce (sauce gribiche), the salmon was extraordinarily moist and buttery. It was so good, in fact, that I made it again shortly thereafter. "Chez Panisse Cafe Cookbook" has since found a permanent spot on my cookbook shelf.

I was immediately curious about Lynne Rossetto Kasper's new book, "The Italian Country Table: Home Cooking from Italy's Farmhouse Kitchens" (Simon & Schuster, 416 pages, \$35). In 1992, Ms. Kasper's "The Splendid Table" won the Cookbook of the Year award from both the Julia Child/International Association of Culinary Professionals and the James Beard Foundation. Judging from her latest work, which explores the culinary traditions of Italy's rural regions, Ms. Kasper has not been resting on her laurels. The granddaughter of an Italian sharecropper, Ms. Kasper spent 20 years searching through the Italian countryside, hunting down farmers, country museum curators and opinionated rural cooks. She gracefully weaves the fruits of her labors into this delightful book.

Because most of the information was gleaned from thrifty farmhouse cooks, I immediately related to the practical and flexible recipes at hand. Ms. Kasper frequently documents the differences of opinion between cooks and gets a charge out of exploring the endless options and creativity in cooking. For example, in her 40-page chapter titled "Pasta Meets the Tomato," she presents four basic techniques for making tomato sauce. Each uses the same ingredients, but different cooking methods yield vastly different results. I tested and was pleased with Tomato Sauce IV. It's a simple concoction made by cooking garlic, basil and onion in extra virgin olive oil for one minute. Then unseeded tomatoes are added and the lot is simmered for 30 minutes. While at a market in Umbria, Ms. Kasper had been told by a farm woman to simmer the aromatics in the oil for one minute and only one minute. Ms. Kasper liked the light, fresh-tasting sauce so much that she hasn't changed it since.

For those readers who yearn to experience farmhouse life in Italy, Ms. Kasper included a final chapter titled "When in Italy." After a discussion on the country's agritourism movement, she gives detailed lists of various farms and country homes that welcome overnight visitors.

To coincide with her book, Ms. Kasper also has an audiocassette, "Stories From the Italian Country Table" (Simon & Schuster Audio, two cassettes, \$13). These 32 often hilarious narratives are based on Ms. Kasper's rural adventures and discoveries -- from the history of polenta to Italian Tupperware parties. This is the first audiobook to complement a cookbook and, in the hands of an accomplished storyteller like Ms. Kasper, it's a welcome innovation.