

DELICIOUS DIVERSITY:

A Review Essay

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IT IS THIRTY YEARS since Canada became the first country to endorse a Multiculturalism Policy, a policy that has since become entrenched not only in legislation, but in the lifestyles of Canadians. Not least of the impacts of a diverse society has been on our eating habits. BC boasts some of the finest restaurants in the world, and the variety and quality of food products available is unparalleled. Cooks (and cookbook authors) have taken utmost advantage of this bounty and devised recipes that adapt, blend, and recreate foods from around the world. This current selection of cookbooks covers the wide spectrum of food trends in British Columbia, reflecting the diverse flavours, styles and attitudes that utilize indigenous and imported foods.

I still have my mother's copy of the *Five Roses Cook Book*, c. 1952. It long ago lost its cover, most of its index, and the table of contents. I leaf through the whole book looking for a favourite recipe, but that is not a bad thing – remarks scribbled in the margins and indistinguishable smears indicate favourite recipes and recall family celebrations.

The replica edition of the 1915 *Five Roses Cook Book* from Whitecap is much different from mine; it is a fascinating glimpse into the settlers' homemaking of a century ago. There is one "formula" to preserve eggs for

the winter (140), a couple more for "home-made baking powder" (139), and a set of explicit instructions for baking bread in an oven set over gas rings (11). The kinds of yeast used then seem very mysterious to those of us who purchase "instant" yeast in the supermarket: Royal Yeast, potato yeast (which takes 18 hours to make), and hop yeast. For those interested in back-to-basics baking, this book will be a wonderful adventure. Most of the recipes have few ingredients and require little in the way of equipment. This is not a book, however, for the novice cook. While most recipes use recognizable measures (although "drachm" isn't in my dictionary), most of them lack directions beyond "mix in the usual way" and do not provide such usual modern instructions as size of pan, oven temperature or cooking time. But the basic good quality of these recipes provides a wonderful starting point for those who like to experiment and, especially, for those who feel constrained by exact measurements.

The landmark West Vancouver restaurant celebrates First Nations traditions by using a fifty-foot alder-fired grill to cook its fresh local seafood, but chef Dan Atkinson's *Salmon House on the Hill Cook Book* offers advice on how to replicate the experience at home. Alongside regional specialities such as Plank-Baked Salmon, his recipes frequently blend

BC products with flavours from around the world: Grilled Chili-Crusted Salmon with Tomato Balsamic Salsa and Tortilla Chips; Grilled Beef Tenderloin with Greek Olive Tapenade; and Cajun Fried Green Tomatoes. Atkinson is a relaxed chef, encouraging readers to use his recipes as a starting point for their own experimentation; his pleasure in cooking is evident in such recipes as Sockeye Salmon Corn Dogs and Cinnamon Rolls with Kahlua Icing. Bonus: tips on buying and preparing local seafood are scattered throughout the book.

According to Nathan Hyam, who is, in his own words, the unlikely New York-born “Thai guy” (1), the cuisine of Thailand led the way in fusion cooking, blending ingredients and techniques from China, India, Portugal, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. Thai cuisine is an art form rather than a rigid set of rules; a wide variety of flavours and textures in any dinner is the one constant; Hyam suggests a half-dozen menus as a starting point. *New Thai Cuisine* opens with a splendid assortment of the pastes, sauces and broths inherent to the cuisine. There is an even-handed assortment of courses: appetizers; soups and salads; fish and seafood; poultry; vegetables; and desserts. Colour photos show different modes of presentation. There are interesting commentaries with each recipe: part cooking tips, part travelogue and part memoir.

If the scent of Thai food is indelibly memorable, the aroma of curry must surely be one of the most enticing. Sami Lalji, founder of one of Vancouver’s top restaurants, Star Anise, recently went to India looking for inspiration from traditional cuisine: “With all due respect to chicken soup, curry is the soul-food in our IndoCanadian household. Curry stimulates the endorphins

and charges the nerves” (9). Each recipe in the slim volume, *Go Ahead Make My Curry!*, is accompanied by a colour photo (a boon to cooks unfamiliar with the presentations of these dishes) and also by beverage suggestions, many of them from local wineries and breweries. Lalji takes old favourites and gives them a new twist, coming up with Mugalie Fried Chicken Steak, Kashmiri Beef Bourguignon and Oyster Stew in a Red and Green Curry Broth. Desserts are direct from the subcontinent: Maharaja’s Khir Pudding and Banana Curry Flambé. He also gives directions for making your own curry powder and garam masala, an indispensable and pungent spice mixture.

Susan Mendelson’s catering company, The Lazy Gourmet, is an award-winning Vancouver institution. Her new book, named for her company, rewards faithful customers with some of their favourite recipes: The Famous Lazy Gourmet Cheesecake, Lemon Citron Tarte, Veggie Burgers, and Carmelized Onions (a frequently used ingredient). The book was written with Executive Chef Joey Cruz, who lived in Manila and Singapore; the recipes have a global flavour, incorporating cuisines from east and west. Containing only a few ingredients, but lots of flavour, these recipes could come to be new versions of comfort food.

Lynn Mendelson (Susan’s sister) has a catering company in Toronto. *Chicken! Chicken! Chicken! and More Chicken!* is an updated revision of a book she published fifteen years ago. Mendelson clearly holds that chicken soup is for the soul and gives several variations, from the traditional Mama Rozzie’s with Matzo Balls to Hot and Sour Chicken Soup with Lemon Grass. There are also many versions of that

perennial finger-licking favourite, chicken wings. While the book isn't primarily concerned with low-fat cooking, there are many recipes for that diet staple, the boneless, skinless chicken breast. While containing old favourites, it also inspired by global cuisine. You will find chicken from Senegal, Ethiopia, Spain, Morocco, China and India. The Russian speciality, Chicken Kiev, has five differently flavoured butters. What I liked best about this book was that many of the recipes have savoury accompaniments; sauces, dressings and stuffings elevate the humble chicken to taste sensation.

Many people barbecue year-round, even in the coldest areas of the province. Part of what attracts them to this style of cooking is the challenge of ever-new, ever-tastier sauces and spices. David Veljacic offers, *In a Flash*, many variations of these. Marinades, rubs, and basting sauces add flavour to the cooking process, while salsas add spice to the plate. There are basic cooking instructions for steaks and hamburgers, but also some interesting treatments for fish and seafood. A nice variety of salads suits the laid-back cooking style.

Probably the most interesting life-style cookbook I've seen is David Hoar and Noreen Rudd's *Cooks Afloat!* Along with the recipes is a mini-field guide (with great pictures) to berries, ocean plants, and seafood that can be found along the West Coast. A checklist for boat living is handy, as are the many tips, such as those for cooking on a diesel stove and managing food and water supplies. How to sprout your own seeds and make yoghurt are two helpful sections for those not within easy reach of a supermarket. There is even a section on extracting otoliths (the balance organs of fish) and making jewellery from them. This

complement of recipes is exactly what you would want if you could take only one cookbook with you on a boat – all the basics are here: sauces, breads, quick breads, soups, desserts, etc., but there are also enough variations on each type of "catch" to give interesting choices for meals and to provide references for building new dishes. The recipes are health-conscious and varied in execution.

Good management and sustainability of the ocean are of crucial importance to the province, not just to the commercial fishing industry and sportfishers, but to the overall health of provincial waterways. The Living Oceans Society is a non-profit organization "committed to the preservation of marine biological diversity and the creation of sustainable fisheries through the establishment of marine protected areas and ecosystem management of our oceans" (149). *Fish for Thought: An Eco-Cookbook* was produced as a fundraiser for the society and offers short articles on the global fishing industry, including the authors' areas of concern, such as fish farming, over-fishing and illegal fishing. Recipes are provided by celebrities, chefs, and local fishers, each accompanied by a profile of the contributor. As might be expected, the recipes are a grab bag of the simple to the sophisticated, but there are only two or three per type of seafood. If you are so inclined, buy this book as a gesture of support for Living Oceans Society and try the recipes at your leisure. One note: the articles would have benefited from some solid editing.

Many people are moving toward vegetarianism, even if for just one or two days a week. Some may be interested in becoming vegans (neither using nor consuming animal products, including dairy), but concerns about getting the proper nutrition (or

memories of the daunting books on food combining) may deter them. *How it all Vegan* is breezily written and unconventional. The book begins with a helpful section on alternatives and substitutions and ends with an appendix that lists the myriad products containing animal products. In between are some inspired recipes, influenced by Japanese and Jewish cuisines. Some recipes are substitutes for traditional fare: cream cheese, mayonnaise, even chopped liver and gravy. Others are original vegan recipes: Sweet Potato and Apple Kugel, Potato “Cheese” Perogies, and Ginger Peanut Soup. I especially liked the breakfast section. There is a section just of kids’ food and fun things to do in the kitchen, such as making play dough or an edible necklace. “Vegan House and Home” gives such tips as “45 Things to do with Vinegar” and how to make your own cleaners, beauty products and pet treats.

Lois Hole, in her introduction to *Rhubarb: More Than Just Pies*, tells of a high-protocol incident when she was chancellor of the University of Alberta and baked a rhubarb pie for Prince Takamodo of Japan, who had acquired a taste for the tart treat when he was a student in Canada. I had always assumed that rhubarb was indigenous to our country, because it grew like a weed everywhere I lived. According to the history of the plant in this volume, rhubarb’s original home was China, where it was treasured for certain pharmaceutical properties; in the late eighteenth century there was fierce competition between the Russian State Monopoly and the British East India Company for the rhubarb trade. Despite the title, there are pies here, of course, of many types and combinations. There are also puddings and sauces; soups and beverages (it makes

a delicious and beautifully coloured wine); cakes, breads, squares, chutneys and jams. You can bake, stew, scallop, whip, and freeze it. And you could make a Rhubarb Fool.

Bon appétit!

BOOKS REVIEWED

- Atkinson, Dan. *Salmon House on the Hill Cookbook*. Vancouver: Whitecap, 2001. 192 pp. Illus. \$19.95 paper.
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- Living Oceans Society. *Fish for Thought: An Eco-Cookbook*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000. 148 pp. Illus. \$21.95 paper.
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- Veljacic, David. *In a Flash*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001. 159 pp. Illus. \$22.95 paper.
- Vitt, Sandi and Michael Hickman. *Rhubarb: More Than Just Pies*. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2000. 144 pp. \$14.95 paper.