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Cookbooks as Edible Adventures

By JULIA MOSKIN

LONG before Internet avatars, home cooks knew the way to self-transformation: cookbooks. Bonding with a new one means assuming a new identity, if only for a week or two.

Those who dream of buying cumin in the souks of Marrakesh (wearing a fetching caftan, of course) can work through Paula Wolfert's tagines and mezzes; fans of Provençal flavors channel Patricia Wells when sautéing her carrots and black olives.

That's why, even in the age of ever-expanding recipe databases, cookbooks are still alluring. In the good ones, voice, images, recipes and food sense knit into edible autobiography.

This fall, readers are getting fewer convoluted recipes that are like postcards from the frontiers of gastronomy (and about as useful in the kitchen). There are more home-cook-friendly recipes, like salt- and sugar-roasted pork belly from a New York chef or prune cake with buttermilk icing from a ranch wife in Oklahoma.

There's attentiveness to American chefs, as if in recognition that homegrown talent is enough to sustain us now. There is also a flood of vegan recipes, slow-cooker books and collections from Martha Stewart, Lidia Bastianich and Rachael Ray. But here are this season's most interesting titles.

First priority for curious cooks: the new English translation of Larousse Gastronomique (Clarkson Potter, $90), the French culinary encyclopedia published in 1938 and most recently updated in 2001. Fortunately, all the traditional and spectacularly impractical recipes — for things like madrilène (jellied tomato soup) or pâté of woodcock — have been preserved for posterity. But the hideous photographs have been replaced with illustrations both attractive and useful: for example, full-color guides to eggplants and artichokes.

Having been edited by a committee of French chefs, anthropologists and historians, the book is predictably biased toward Western Europe. However, living American chefs are included for the first time. Daniel Boulud and Ferran Adrià have made it into the new edition, but so have Charlie Trotter, David Bouley, Alice Waters and Thomas Keller.

The august Larousse committee would be flummoxed by The Pioneer Woman Cooks (Morrow, $27.50) by Ree Drummond, who lives on a cattle ranch in Pawhuska, Okla. She is also a writer, photographer and home-school teacher to her four children. She is also funny, enthusiastic and self-deprecating, making the

book appeal to pavement-pounders and pioneer types alike. A self-described “career gal in black” and a vegetarian, she was between jobs in Los Angeles and Chicago when she met the man who would become her husband during a stopover in her hometown.

Now, she is rooted in a community where meat is eaten at all three meals, pasta is still regarded with suspicion and vegetables other than potatoes are considered entirely optional. Her cooking reflects her attempts to reconcile her two worlds through recipes like steak with whiskey cream sauce, leek and potato pizza and pico de gallo.

The last is a combination of tomatoes, cilantro and onions seasoned with lime juice and chilies that she spends many words and pictures instructing the reader how to get just right.

Vegetarians and gourmands won’t find much to cook here, but as a portrait of a real American family kitchen, it works.

At the other end of the sophistication spectrum, two American chefs who chant the mantra of simplicity have new books out: Marco Canora (Salt to Taste, written with Catherine Young, Rodale, $35) and Karen DeMasco (The Craft of Baking, written with Mindy Fox, Clarkson Potter, $35). Precise, stripped-down food based on seasonal and high-quality ingredients is now aspirational American cooking, the antidote to the heaps of deep-fried, cheese-topped snacks.

It can be depressing to contemplate recipes that rely on ripe quinces or top-quality wild salmon for success, when supermarkets seem to hold ever fewer types of food in ever more shapes of plastic. But these alluring books, which hold out the promise of great food with just a few ingredients, virtually drive you to the farmers’ market.

Both chefs worked at Craft in New York for several years, under the chef Tom Colicchio. Mr. Canora has since focused on his Tuscan heritage at his own restaurant, Hearth, and the recipes in this book are simple and Italianate, like cauliflower roasted with fresh rosemary and fish fillets slowly infused with lemon peel, thyme and olive oil.

Ms. DeMasco, now the pastry chef at Locanda Verde and the baker of truly extraordinary fruit-and-butter cakes, has gone in a more homey American direction, with spins on lemon bars, marshmallows, cobblers and her grandmother’s cashew brittle.

Best in show for coffee table cookbooks is My New Orleans (Andrews McMeel, $45) by John Besh, the chef and owner of six restaurants in the city, and Dorothy Kalins, who provided bright text and photographs of the region, with some photos dating back decades.

The Louisiana-born-and-bred Mr. Besh is well equipped to explain arcane holidays like the feast of St. Joseph, patron saint of carpenters, celebrated by the city’s Sicilian-Americans partly by sprinkling mudrica, a “sawdust” made of bread crumbs, onto bowls of pasta. As a chef, Mr. Besh cannot resist making the sawdust more delicious, with grated cheese, red pepper flakes and pine nuts.

To make sense of the city's culinary influences, the book is organized by ingredients, festivals and traditions of the Cajuns, Creoles, French and Italians and other groups.

Assimilation is also central to How To Roast a Lamb: New Greek Classic Cooking (Little Brown, $35) by Michael Psilakis, written with Brigit Binns and Ellen Shapiro. As the subtitle suggests, this New York chef is perpetually torn between respect for the Old World and ambition in the New, between preserving his mother's family recipes (such as beef stew with leeks and cinnamon) and presenting the Mediterranean fantasias of his sleek Manhattan restaurant, Anthos (such as sea urchin tzatziki).

The book bridges the two, making it the first serious volume on Greek-American cooking. In the best sections, Mr. Psilakis writes in detail about learning from his father how to hunt, garden and fish. (He also writes with evident pain about his father's recent death.)

At the other end of the solemnity scale, readers can spend a few hours with Mitch Omer, whose exuberant profanity in Damn Good Food (written with Ann Bauer, Borealis Books, $27.95) make Anthony Bourdain seem prim. Mr. Omer, now an owner of Hell's Kitchen in Minneapolis, is not a trained chef, but he loves food with a passion. Butter, cheese, bacon, brown sugar and heavy cream work overtime in his restaurant, a popular breakfast destination; it probably helps that the lipsticked waitresses wear sexy pajamas all day and night.

Recipes include an indulgent wild rice porridge (the rice is double-cooked in cream with hazelnuts and dried fruit, then flooded with more cream and maple syrup), bison sausage bread and freshly roasted peanut butter — with butter and brown sugar added.

David Chang, chef at the four (soon to be five) Momofuku restaurants, curses just as much in his new book, but somewhat more creatively. Momofuku: The Cookbook (Clarkson Potter, $40) is creative too, with recipes developing in complexity from the first section (with recipes from Mr. Chang's first restaurant, Noodle Bar) to the last (recipes from Ko, his most ambitious).

From lap dances to bacon tastings, real estate triumphs to nervous breakdowns, Mr. Chang, with assistance from Peter Meehan, who has written for The New York Times, writes about a chef's life in a way that feels completely fresh. The recipes, including those for the ginger-scallion noodles and roasted pork belly served at Noodle Bar, are almost perks; this would be a great read even without them.

Quick: What do olive oil, joy, pizza, pilgrims and totalitarianism have in common? According to Why Italians Love to Talk About Food (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; $35), a serious new work of scholarship just translated from Italian, all are essential components of Italy's food culture. There are no recipes, but its author, Elena Kostioukovitch, has deciphered a large chunk of the culinary code that is second nature to Italians: knowledge about agriculture, festivals and cooking. She spent 20 years doing research while living in Milan, and the result was a best seller in Italy when it was published in 2006.

I Love Macarons (Chronicle Books, $14.95) by Hisako Ogita, a Japanese pastry chef, barely has recipes at all: it comprises about a dozen basic formulas for tinting, flavoring and filling the delicate French

sandwich cookies that rival cupcakes as Trendiest Treat. And yet the colors, graphic design and focused approach — not to mention the low price — make it one of the season's most fetching titles. The French-trained author supplies a sheaf of egg-yolk-heavy recipes at the end of the book, a thoughtful touch to help readers use them up after making all those egg white meringues.

And now, for a dose of clean living. Open to any page of So Easy (John Wiley, $29.95) by Ellie Krieger, a nutritionist who seems to actually love food and care about how it tastes. She does not resort to shortcuts like cooking spray and fat-free salad dressing. Instead, in recipes like endive au gratin and panzanella with chicken sausage, she heaps on fruits and vegetables, adds a measure of meat and fills up on whole grains.

For a more luxurious version of "the good life," pick up The Blackberry Farm Cookbook (Clarkson Potter, $60) by Sam Beall, a lovely collection of pure gastroporn from the inn and farm in eastern Tennessee that has become a destination for food lovers.

It includes biographies of heirloom-corn farmers and ham-curers, images of newborn lambs and Fourth-of-July parties and recipes for baked beans and barbecued veal. Blackberry Farm appears to be the freshly mowed heaven that Southern-food lovers ascend to when they die.

But Simple Fresh Southern (Clarkson Potter, $35), by Matt and Ted Lee, who have written for The New York Times, is a chronicle of what happens when they go to New York instead. Twists on tradition like Easy Shrimp Creole (without a roux, but with smoked paprika and sausage) and the brilliantly greasy Pimento-Cheese Potato Gratin might get them drummed out of Charleston, where they grew up, but they'll be most welcome elsewhere.