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COOKBOOK REVIEW

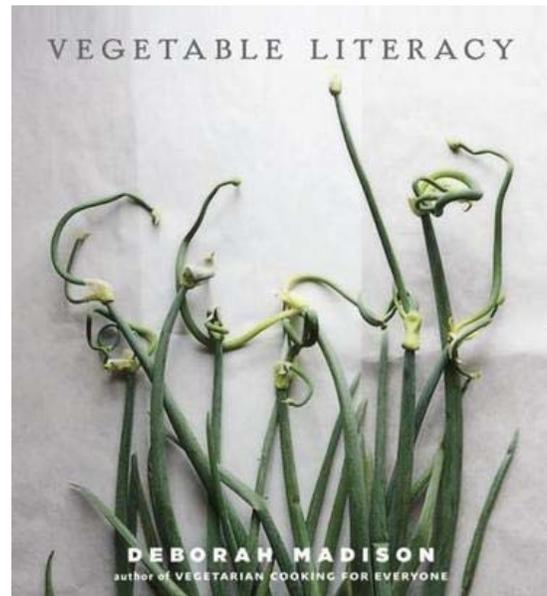
Another volume from the queen of vegetables

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 21, 2013

You may have lost track of Deborah Madison in the 15 years since “Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone” was published, its cover sporting a young Madison with a wooden spoon and a determined expression. Encyclopedic and popular, “Vegetarian Cooking” showed you what you didn’t know how to make, and how to improve what you did.

In the years since, vegetable books have sprung up like clumps of chives in spring, and Madison, who started her cooking career at Chez Panisse and went on to open Greens restaurant in San Francisco, has quietly published smaller, less ambitious books of her own. But “Vegetable Literacy” is a major production. Its signal feature is organization by category — the cabbage family (broccoli, turnips, Brussels sprouts), the nightshade family (eggplants, tomatoes), the cucurbits (zucchini, cucumbers), and so forth. This makes all kinds of sense, because vegetable cousins behave similarly in the kitchen and on the plate.

Vegetable-based or not, a number of the recipes are substantial enough to make a meal. Buckwheat noodles with kale and sesame salad enjoy the bright tang of a straightforward sesame-rice vinegar dressing (though personally, I prefer a little sweetness with that flavor profile). Pale green slivered Brussels sprouts make it pop with contrast, a typical move for the visually inclined Madison. Pasta tossed with cauliflower, saffron, red pepper, and parsley makes a filling meal, though a dryish one, and the al dente steamed cauliflower lacks the caramelized payload you get when it is roasted.



There are 300 recipes in Deborah Madison's latest vegetarian cookbook.

Chard, ricotta, and saffron cakes come out gorgeous, like little pancakes or blini, and they taste like them too. I can never make sense of instructions like “10 to 12 cups trimmed chard leaves” (do you crumple the leaves and squish them into a measure?), but I guessed, and the batter is forgiving. Crispy chickpea triangles are fun to make, a sort of chickpea-flour polenta, which you can cook and cool and slice into shapes perfect for frying. They’re especially good with Madison’s Meyer lemon vinaigrette, whose sweetness only emerges in contrast to the nutty notes of chickpea.

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There’s nothing special about an egg salad with tarragon, parsley, and chives — who hasn’t crushed a few boiled eggs with some herbs? — but still, that’s a wheel that doesn’t suffer from being reinvented.

The most spectacular side I encountered was a celery root and hash brown cake. It’s a major improvement on hash browns, the nutty sweetness of the root plus the nasal zing of celery seed contributing a powerful hit of celery without a single green stalk. One big cake takes 20 minutes to cook slowly, with judicious flipping, in a nonstick pan, and it’s worth every minute.

Sauteed mustard greens are just crunchy enough from peanuts, even if the garlic and soy seasoning is nothing special. I’ve come to love the combination of cabbage family greens with caraway, and Brussels sprouts, boiled and slivered, pick up a pleasing caraway-mustard sauce. I’m sure they would be better still if roasted, but that’s a quibble. Rutabaga batons look like french fries after their stint oven-blasted at high heat, but that’s a cruel tease. Even with smoked paprika, they still taste like rutabaga, and they’re still rather damp inside.

But things look up with the dessert course. A sunny, moist carrot almond cake is good enough for hoarding but too good to last, especially with its accompanying just-right, not-too-sweet ricotta cream.

“Vegetable Literacy” is a physically spectacular book and a passionate one, and it makes a fine gift. It should be noted that Madison’s cultural notes and gardening anecdotes are of the informative rather than the beguiling variety. And though there are a solid 300 recipes, you

Vegetable Literacy

Author: Deborah Madison

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may tire of the flavor spectrum, which circles around a few notes: lemon, sesame-tahini, soy, garlic-herb, cheese-and-cream. Still, it's my belief that a thoughtful vegetable book is always a welcome addition to the world, and "Vegetable Literacy" meets and exceeds that expectation.

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