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Eating your way around the country, around the world

By Anne-Marie Seltzer

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Arlington, Mass. -

Arlington has a world of dining options within its borders. Depending on your mood, you can enjoy cuisine from South America, Europe, Asia, and seasonal American fare, of course, without leaving town.

I selected some of these cookbooks because they refer to restaurants in town. I hope they give you an appreciation of the food of other cultures as well as a respect for the effort required to bring authentic dishes to your table.

“1001 Foods to Die For”(Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2008; \$39.95) takes your taste buds around the world, while giving you a global education at the same time. While this book brings together food and beverage from China to South Africa, it isn’t an ordinary publication. There are interesting histories, regional perspectives, fun facts, and contributions and recipes from prominent food writers. (Mark Bittman, Ina Garten, Jamie Oliver, and Madhur Jaffrey are on the list.) Dishes include French Apricot Tart, Maryland Crab Soup, and Mille-Feuille.

The versatile nature of stir-frying makes it a popular and convenient cooking method for the experienced chef and the home cook. “The Complete Book of Asian Stir-Fries”(Periplus Editions, 2007; \$29.95) is an authentic guide to traditional and contemporary stir-fry recipes. This speedy cooking process seals in the flavors and nutrients of the ingredients and enables cooks to use fresh, seasonal ingredients or leftovers in the fridge to create delicious meals for the whole family. Plan a dinner of shrimp and coconut fritters, stir-fried beef with eggs, and ginger and nutmeg sweet potato pudding soon.

“The Complete Book of Hot & Spicy Asian Cooking”(Periplus Editions, 2007; \$29.95) is a useful guide to the incredible variety of chili peppers and Asian herbs and spices used to create the flavors of Eastern cuisine. Attractively illustrated, this book also includes instructions for storing spices and guidelines for making curry pastas, salsas and relishes. Recipe seasonings can be adjusted or substituted according to tastes. You’ll discover how easy it is to prepare combination soup, poached chicken in green coconut sauce, and spicy tomato rice.

In the 16th century, Portuguese navigators circled the globe, conquering new lands to build one of history’s largest empires. “Cuisines of Portuguese Encounters” (Hippocrene Books, 2008; \$29.95) is the first cookbook to encompass the entire Portuguese-speaking world and explain how Portugal and its former colonies influenced each other’s cooking traditions. Arranged geographically, this book contains 279 recipes. You’ll find menus for religious holidays and festive occasions, a glossary of terms, mail-order resources and a bilingual index. A must for culinary historians!

The Syrian-Jewish culinary tradition is largely unknown to most Americans. In “A Fistful of Lentils: Syrian-Jewish Recipes from Grandma Fritzie’s Kitchen”(Harvard Common Press, 2008; \$16.95), Jennifer Abadi preserves and shares her family’s culinary history. Working alongside her grandmother, she learned family recipes that hadn’t been written down. She also includes family anecdotes, religious and historical lore, and original artwork. Her dishes include meat pastries, cheese dumplings with egg noodles and rolled date cookies.

“Bobby Flay’s Mesa Grill Cookbook: Explosive Flavors from the Southwestern Kitchen”(Clarkson Potter, 2007; \$35) is the first and only compilation of signature cuisine recipes from this popular New York restaurant. Mesa Grill has inspired Flay throughout his career and this cookbook has everything the at-home cook needs to indulge. You’ll find 150 recipes, including offerings from the brunch menu, a Tequila guide, cocktail recipes, and necessities for stocking a bold pantry. Bring regional cuisine to your table with Mussels in Red Chile Pesto Broth, Southwestern Fries, and Caramel Apple Shortcakes.

“Mod-Mex: Cooking Vibrant Fiesta Flavors at Home” (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2007; \$24.95) was written by Scott Linquist and Joanna Pruess. If you love flavorful, authentic Mexican cuisine, you should add this book to your library. Filled with 125 fresh and easy-to-prepare recipes, Mod-Mex highlights regions from Baja and the Yucatan to Oaxaca. You’ll also find tips on day-before preparation, recipe variations, cultural insights, and cooking techniques. Fill your kitchen with the flavors of Mexico with Baja-style Mahi-Mahi tacos, Quinoa-watermelon salad, and chocolate layer cake with morita chile mousse.

“Simply Delicioso: A Collection of Everyday Recipes with a Latin Twist”(Clarkson Potter, 2008; \$32.50) is the first cookbook by Food Network host and culinary expert Ingrid Hoffmann. Born in Colombia, she now resides in Miami, Fla. The book reflects her experiences with both cultures, resulting in 125 lively recipes with surprising Latin accents. She includes recipes for appetizers through desserts, plus clever entertaining and timesaving shortcuts (“chica”). Give your taste buds a treat with Hoffmann’s chorizo empanadas, tamarind-glazed baby back ribs, and chipotle tamale pie.

It’s little wonder that Southerners are proud of their baking history. “Southern Cakes” (Chronicle Books, 2007; \$19.95) is filled with the kinds of recipes that make you want to take time to relax and enjoy something delectable. Never baked a cake before? No worries. Baking 101 covers all the basics, including buying the right equipment, mixing the perfect batter, frosting the cake, and storing your masterpiece properly. Nancie McDermott captures Southern sweetness with brown sugar pound cake, Mississippi mud cake, and orange slice cake.

“Tangy Tart Hot & Sweet: A World of Recipes for Every Day” (Weinstein Books, 2007; \$34.95) is a culinary and personal scrapbook of Padma Lakshmi’s life. An award-winning cookbook author, actress, and model, she offers sophisticated international cuisine inspired by her travels, yet simple to prepare. Lakshmi makes it easy to impress guests with elegant, savory, and sweet dishes such as Keralan Crab Cakes, Mexican Macaroni and Cheese, and Chocolate Amaretto Ice Cream. Says the author, “Cook with your heart, because cooking is celebration and food is love.”

The award-winning “Taste of Nepal” (Hippocrene Books, 2007; \$27.50) is one of the few Nepali cookbooks on the market. Nepal is a landlocked nation tucked into the Himalayan Mountains between India and China (Tibet). Its cuisine is surprisingly diverse for such a tiny country; Chinese and Indian culinary methods and tastes have influenced its dishes. But not every traveler gets to experience the secrets of the Nepali home — one must be invited. Jyoti Pathak helps readers discover those secrets through dishes such as rice with daal (lentils) and vegetables, sun-dried fish with tomato chutney, and fresh corn pudding.

Think Tuscany and blue skies, sunflower fields and delicious aromas immediately come to mind. Fragrant olive oil, fresh herbs, fresh fish and vegetables, and warm creamy cheese abound. “Tastes from a Tuscan Kitchen” (Hippocrene Books, 2007; \$24.95) offers home cooks 150 recipes, ranging from pasta and lentils and fish soup to Tuscan meatballs and veal scallops with lemon sauce. Of course, there are desserts — chocolate profiteroles and sweet crepes. The Tuscan cuisine is filled with nature’s treasures. You can’t go wrong with any recipe from this book.

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