

Vegan 'Bible' presents a multitude of options



Pat Crocker aims for a comprehensive approach.

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One of the things I love about

cookbooks is that they let you try on being someone else - a Basque fisherman, say, or a cattle rancher. Or, in the case of our family recently, a vegan. The same household that bravely tasted recipes from the liberally larded "Fat" book a few short months ago, gave up meat and dairy for five long, virtuous days.

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THE VEGAN COOK'S BIBLE

By Pat Crocker

Robert Rose, 400 pp., \$24.95

"The Vegan Cook's Bible" is the work of Pat Crocker, a home economist and natural-foods specialist. With lots of information on the digestive, endocrine, immune, and other internal systems, and more on produce, grains, and pantry items, the book aspires to be comprehensive. I was struck by how many approaches to veganism are here. Recipes borrow from meat-free dishes in the Mediterranean, Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

In each recipe, Crocker relies on a few critical ingredients to deliver flavor. In sweet potato curried cauliflower soup, it's dates and candied ginger. Their sweetness, combined with the sweet potato, nearly overpowers the curry and soy elements meant to balance them.

A salad of citrus wheat berries and greens handles sweetness with more subtlety: chewy, nutty wheat berries have the springy heft of protein, lightened and brightened with citrus dressing. Chopped dried cherries and pine nuts offer a sly contrast that keeps the berries from surrendering to their righteous but dull character.

Crocker's a fearless cook who is not afraid to use a complete arsenal of techniques to generate drama on the plate. In baked cranberry tofu, she uses a tart lime and soy marinade to bake the white squares (though, typical for tofu, there is somehow not nearly enough seasoning). She serves the squares with a creamed asparagus-leek garnish and rice noodles. Thirty minutes of sweating, sauteing, and simmering later, you have a substantial tofu dish whose rich coconut milk almost feels like dairy.

Vietnamese spring rolls with peanut sauce and umeboshi sauce are lovely to look at, but fiendishly labor-intensive. The umeboshi alone takes two hours (I scorch a pot in the process). Shallow-frying tofu for the rolls is no more fun than frying usually is. Working with paper-thin, sticky rice paper isn't so bad with a little practice. I find the dish a lot of work for a merely OK dinner.

Crocker tries to fool the senses with roast zucchini stuffed with almonds, cumin, and whole-grain bread cubes, served with red pepper sauce (a must here). A little voice inside me is asking, timidly, "Wouldn't this be so much better with pork? Or as a Parmesan gratin?" Afterward my 2 1/2-year-old demands a sandwich with "butter and jam and ham."

Oatmeal-coconut cookies are best right out of the oven, with a light, warm, tender crumb of sober spelt and sweet coconut. Cold, they're all right, but their true identity becomes clear: health cookie. More successful are chewy black blondies, made with vegan margarine and chocolate, flaxseed, and pecans.

As a reluctant and temporary vegan, I have to admit it isn't as much of an ordeal as expected - and I feel healthier, too. Still, after working so hard and soiling so many pots, I want to be a little delighted. The book won't convert you, but if you're already vegan, there's plenty here you'll like. ■