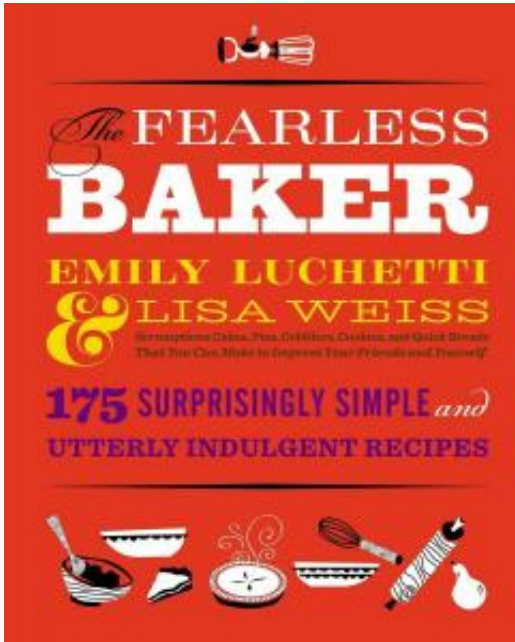


Paving the way for bakers, no elbow grease required



By T. Susan Chang

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I've been a fan of
Emily Luchetti's

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ever since I read her “A Passion for Desserts,” an elegant book that was her first foray independent of Stars, the San Francisco restaurant where she served as head pastry chef. It’s the rare restaurant chef who can speak directly to the home cook or baker in her recipes; and it is clear Luchetti has a gift. She uses everyday equipment, combines accessible ingredients in interesting ways, and her recipes work.

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THE FEARLESS BAKER: 175 Surprisingly Simple and Utterly Indulgent Recipes

By Emily Luchetti and Lisa Weiss

Little, Brown, 288 pp., \$29.99

Now executive pastry chef at Farallon and Waterbar restaurants in San Francisco, Luchetti is back with a new volume. Her ability to relate to the very new baker is on full display. But this book is different. It’s a gateway book for bakers, written with Lisa Weiss, with simple line drawings, basic recipes, and tips in the form of dialogue balloons between Luchetti and “FB” (Fearless Baker, a stand-in for Dear Reader). I’m pretty sure it’s the only baking book I’ve ever read that actually has a chapter called “No Oven Required.”

These are basic recipes - cookies, pies, cakes, bars, and fruit-based “rustic” desserts. Yet, as Luchetti demonstrates again and again, it pays to have an experienced mentor to show you the ropes, even on the basics. Did you know you can core a pear with a melon baller? That it’s better to crack an egg on a flat surface than on the side of a bowl? That you can almost always improvise a double boiler rather than buying one? Maybe you knew the answers are yes, yes, and yes. It’s still nice to hear them confirmed by an expert.

Luchetti is also good at telling you exactly what you need to know in a recipe. Chocolate orange crinkle cookies, for example, should be firm on the edges, and soft in the middle; Luchetti warns that “although they may seem underdone, don’t be tempted to let them bake longer.” The hazelnut gives them texture, and the orange gives them a sprightliness that makes it hard not to wolf them down two at a time.

Lemon blueberry tart is a four-step recipe, if you’ve already baked the tart shell (a pretty easy little task; Luchetti offers a couple of machine methods, and the most tedious part is waiting for the dough to chill). It comes out looking like something you could buy in a pastry shop, only now you don’t have to.

She makes a virtue out of necessity with her odd but charming Key lime pudding cakes. They’re based on a thin batter leavened with egg whites, which separates in the baking. You could think of them as failed souffles, but Luchetti describes them as a hybrid: spongecake on top, custard on the bottom. Either way, their tropical tartness makes refreshing, biting sense.

And then there are recipes that are so simple they scarcely qualify as cooking, yet still pass muster as treats for family and friends. Orange date ricotta tartlets are nothing more than squares of store-bought puff pastry, encasing a rapidly assembled schmear of ricotta, orange rind, and chopped dates. And for a dessert that will take you no more than 5 minutes, you melt chocolate for bittersweet chocolate nut clusters. Once you’ve mixed in puffed cereal, nuts, and fruit, you’re essentially done. Now you have a nubby, chewy, sweet, and crispy pick-me-up to pop in your mouth if (or rather when) that midnight chocolate jones hits.

You won’t find any from-scratch doughs like strudel or puff pastry in this book, and there’s only one recipe that calls for yeast. But sometimes that’s just what you need. It happened to be the hottest week of the entire year when I tested this book. I didn’t even feel like eating, never mind baking. But Luchetti’s accessible approach managed to glide right over my low heat-and-pain threshold, and the baked results persuaded me to eat them just by being so good. It’s a pity Luchetti’s powers of persuasion didn’t extend to putting me back on my treadmill afterward.

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