

COOKBOOK REVIEW

Kitchen novices will find ‘Keys to the Kitchen’ easy to tackle

By T. Susan Chang | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 19, 2013

Aida Mollenkamp, formerly of the Food Network, the Cooking Channel, and CHOW magazine, describes herself as a “culinary curator.” I’m not entirely sure what that means. But if her thoughtful new primer, “Keys to the Kitchen,” is any indication, it involves hunting down exciting flavor combinations from far and wide and sharing them in recipes even the uninitiated can easily tackle.

Mollenkamp’s rendition of Indian “butter chicken” is little lighter and faster than the traditional version, which has a long yogurt marinade, high-heat roasting, and a stew step. Despite relying more on tomato and less on butter, it retains most of the original’s flavor. An oven-fried chicken makes use of a similar yogurt marinade, this time tuned to lemon and rosemary. The marinade keeps the chicken moist inside and out — enough so that you really don’t need the beaten egg layer she suggests in order to make the crumb crust adhere.

I nearly sabotaged a braised pork shoulder even before starting it, when I attempted to defrost the meat in the microwave and half-cooked it instead. “Pork is forgiving,” I thought to myself, and so, it turns out, is this recipe, which yields a sweet, faintly boozy fork-tender result, reminiscent of Filipino adobo or Chinese red-cooked pork.



ALEX FARNUM

“Culinary curator” Aida Mollenkamp shares recipes even the uninitiated can easily tackle.

Stir-fried mustard greens and lemongrass beef succeeds partly because Mollenkamp takes the precaution of frying the beef in two batches so it won't steam, and a sweet marinade tames the mustard greens. My only complaint is that it's too good to serve just four. Shrimp simmered in garlicky beer sauce is an instant weeknight winner, thick, aromatic, and satisfying, the flavors falling somewhere between barbecue and carbonnade, the Flemish beef stew.

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Roasted squash pasta with sage brown butter, while simple, shows good technique, building flavor by infusing the sage and garlic in butter, using liberal Parmesan and the pasta water to adjust the texture of the sauce. And a caramelized fennel tarte Tatin is a riff on the classic apple treat. It works fine, although it feels too sweet and one-dimensional to serve as dinner.

It's good to see a robust vegetable section in a teaching cookbook, and Mollenkamp's recipes here are particularly good. Although roasting is the most popular way to serve Brussels sprouts these days, Mollenkamp achieves good results by blanching and pan-braising them with a sharp, lemony horseradish sauce. In a world filled with boring green bean recipes, her saute comes as a welcome surprise: Blanched beans get tossed with caramelized shallots, vinegar, mustard, and soy, a little sweet, a little tart, and not at all monotonous.

Carrot and currant cabbage slaw looks bright and vibrant, lightened by a handful of clover sprouts. The yogurt dressing isn't terribly assertive, and if I make it again I may double the seasonings. (And I think it would be better to discard the thick ribs of the exterior cabbage leaves, which make even the finest crosswise julienne feel bulky.) But it goes with just about anything.

KEYS TO THE KITCHEN

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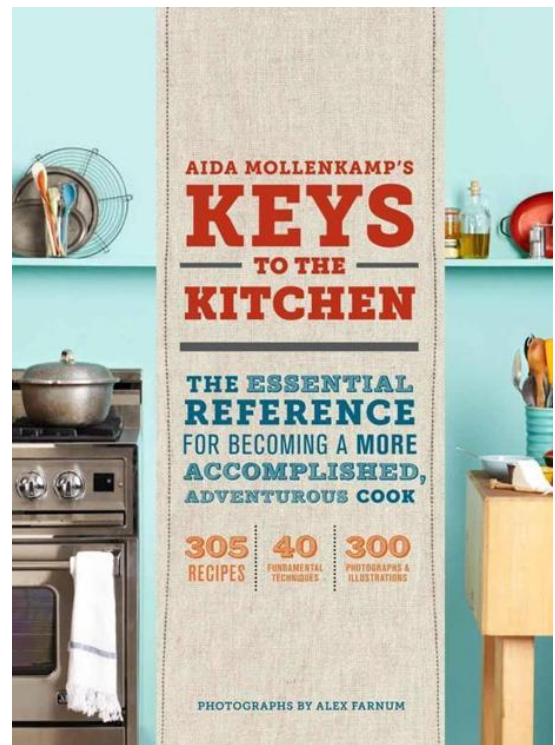
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Best of all are parsnips with toasted almonds, roasted with a maple glaze, buttered and gingered and strewn with nuts. They're the kind of side dish that ends up stealing the supper table show.

The only real clunker turns out to be a roasted carrot soup. The thick puree drones on and on like a sermon as you eat it, despite being showered with good ideas like lime juice, ginger, and toasted coconut. And though I didn't care for it, there are those who might.

“Keys to the Kitchen” is meant as a starter cookbook, so there are long sections on equipment, knife skills, and mise en place. More experienced cooks are likely to skip right over them. But the recipes are presented with clarity and thoughtfulness, and the broad palette of ingredients makes them interesting for anyone. In the end, “Keys to the Kitchen” may not be an essential addition to shelves already overstocked with cookbooks. But it's a very good place to start.



“Keys to the Kitchen.”

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