

# ‘Friends’ mixes the daunting with the doable

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Cookbook author and London-based food writer Alice Hart is one of those exuberant spirits who seem to entertain effortlessly. I am the opposite. While I hoped that “Friends at My Table,” her fourth foray into print, might smooth my way toward a life of fun-filled food outings, I have to admit I approached it with trepidation.

The book’s presentation is charming at first glance, recipes interspersed with whimsical sidebars and essays — an illustration of apple and squash varieties, a listing of seaside crustaceans, the rules of “beach cricket.” But the photography’s a matte, murky blue, the print is tiny, instructions lengthy. Still, I thought, if the food delivers, no matter.

Recipes seem to alternate between the deeply involved or hard-to-source and the very simple. Not up to a 5-hour porchetta, a firepit venison leg, curing my own pastrami, or building a home smoker, I homed in on easier dishes. A tray of sweet pepper sausage rolls, for example, is rough and rustic finger food whose two main ingredients are store-bought crowd-pleasers: sausage and puff pastry. Basil limeade works miracles with three ingredients, the strong herbal scent transforming a simple thirst quencher into an aromatic garden.

An easy marinade is the secret behind lemon-cardamom chicken thighs, perfectly balanced with a bit of sweet honey to cut the tart citrus. The meat roasts to gilded succulence, and you can picnic on them cold the next day. Toasted Israeli couscous with green leaves is a versatile side, its flavors jolted awake by fistfuls of parsley and mint. You won’t need nearly as much water to cook the couscous as Hart calls for, so proceed with care.

Not every potato salad has much to say for itself, but Hart’s has a biting allure, granted by robust quantities of scallions, mustards, and tarragon. So does a crunchy pickled red onion and cucumber salad. There’s comparatively little cucumber, so save the salad for onion lovers, or those not on first dates.

There’s only one real head-scratcher: an arugula and celery root salad in which the root is supposed to be quartered and then shaved into “long, thin slices.” But fat wedges yield only short, wide curls at best. The lemon dressing is palatable enough; still, after a few bites I am just as happy to say goodbye to celery root until it’s time to mash it



RAHEL WEISS

**“Friends at My Table” is London-based food writer Alice Hart’s fourth book.**

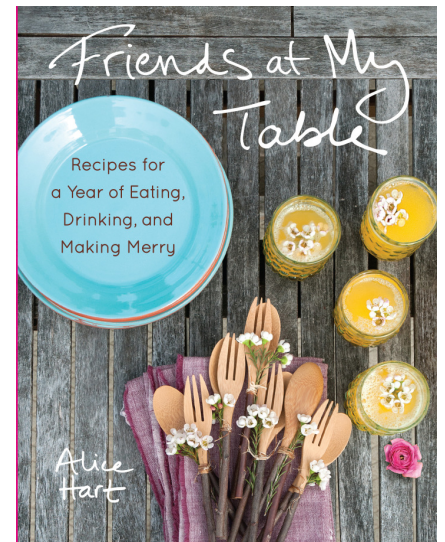
into potatoes.

But desserts, as so often happens, save the day. Fresh blueberries are the crowning grace on simple cream-filled choux buns, scattered with slivered almonds. Four of us demolished 20 in less time than it is taking you to read this review.

Many recipes, while tantalizing to read, veer toward the autumnal: steamy, hot cooking. The book's approach teeters between the lyrical and the technical, and you'll have to hunt a bit to ferret out the more approachable recipes.

You may never get to making the pastrami or your own vodka infusions, or even mastering beach cricket, but as Hart says in one of the most sensible passages in this tempting, uneven book, "The world will still turn."

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**Friends at My Table: Recipes for a Year of Eating, Drinking, and Making Merry**

**Author:** Alice Hart

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