

‘Dinnertime Survival Cookbook’ tackles the weeknight dilemma

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When I reviewed Debra Ponzek’s last book, “The Family Kitchen,” in 2006, I remember thinking that it was better than it needed to be. At the time, the book market for cooking with kids was glutted with cutesy recipes or recipes where the vegetables were disguised as something else. Ponzek’s book, full of real food, was a welcome breath of fresh air.

Now the four-time author, and co-owner of the Connecticut-based gourmet chain Aux Delices, has turned to that much-plowed field, the quick weeknight dinner. Writer and coauthor Mary Goodbody has been part of more than five dozen volumes. As expected, “The Dinnertime Survival Cookbook” is also better than it needs to be (with qualifications).

A spicy cucumber, avocado, and mango soup looks like a bright green smoothie and seems like it ought to be boring after two bites. But it has a surprisingly clear and bracing flavor, lifted by a fistful of cilantro and some mint. Roast salmon is one of those things that’s dead easy and great all by itself, but if you want to gild the lily, Ponzek offers a list of sauces, salsas, chutneys, and more on the facing page.

Sesame orange scallops have the kind of orange-scented soy-based sauce that you love at your local Chinese restaurant. You’ve probably had something like it on General Tso’s chicken a million times. But as hackneyed as it is, it tastes great on a handful of nicely seared scallops. Stir-fried green beans are painted with the same robust flavors as the scallops: soy and ginger, mostly, but with a bit of balsamic to cut it. It’s close to dry-fried green beans and very welcome if you’re in a green-bean rut.

Most of the recipes have a laid-back charm; I had to make some very minor temperature and quantity adjustments to make them work in my kitchen. While gnocchi may not strike you as a speedy weeknight meal, it is if you make the fast ricotta-based kind and don’t bother striating them. Some butter, corn, and peas are enough to make a meal of them. (You need only two ears of corn to get two cups of kernels, though, not 3 or 4). Parmesan- and balsamic-roasted cauliflower is even better than the plain kind, although 25 minutes in the oven has never been enough, in my book. It’s 35 minutes if you want tender curds.

It’s a great idea to marinate flank steak in chipotle, lime, and honey before grilling, but I’m surprised to find the flavors don’t really penetrate even after 8 hours. It’s very similar to a recipe I make all the time; I’ve found that it



Debra Ponzek is co-owner of the gourmet chain Aux Delices.

helps to score the meat and/or puree the marinade so the garlic and chipotle disperse their strong flavors more evenly.

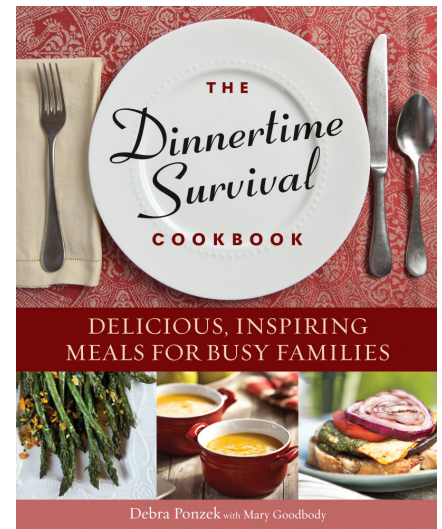
A couple of details seemed fuzzy in a recipe for Asian chicken lettuce wraps: Are we really to saute in sesame oil? Should it be light sesame, then, instead of toasted? Surely the water chestnuts should be sliced or chopped, not added whole? And should the sauce really be thin and runny, thereby flooding the lettuce leaves?

Ponzek takes a simple approach to desserts, and a sticky, molasses-y fresh ginger cake fills the bill without causing a fuss. It's even better if you happen to have some crème fraîche in the fridge. You may find yourself breaking off bits and licking your fingers.

Overall, this is a good, well-organized book, maybe even one of the better ones of its kind. But, as Ponzek freely admits, her approach is more easy than quick. Some shortcuts or do-ahead tips with each recipe would make it better. Or some powerful, quick flavor combinations that are less obvious, or easily procured but little known. Maybe a separate section for recipes that take less than 30 minutes.

But even if the throne of Best Weeknight Cookbook remains unoccupied for now, Ponzek's book is helpful and a good value for the price. And for many busy families, that combination is bound to be a winner.

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