

‘Midwestern Table’ gets an upgrade

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Amy Thielen, author of “The New Midwestern Table” and new Food Network host of “Heartland Table,” seeks nothing less than to redefine what we think of as Midwestern food. (Disclaimer: Thielen and I were at cooking school together some 15 years ago, though we haven’t seen each other since. Even then, I suspected that my talented, brainy, and enviably energetic classmate was headed for stardom.)

Her path, though unique, is not atypical of the new generation of authors: moving from urban (cooking school, celebrity chef’s kitchens) to rural (in this case, Minnesota, teaching, blogging, becoming a mom) and then into the spotlight one way or another. This book, unlike many launched from similar platforms, has both depth and ambition, and it will court some real wear and tear in your kitchen.

For those who have hours, or even a day to spare, there are a number of slow-cooked mains worth the wait. A chile-glazed grilled chicken, brined for hours in sweetened malt vinegar, has little heat, but a lot of context for molasses and whole spices. A classic beef pot roast, lusciously disintegrating after a long afternoon in the pot, sports an attention-getting dusting of parsley-pistachio salt. You may already know the pleasures of a succulent, slow-cooked (minimum 6 hours) fall-apart piece of pork belly. What you may not know is what a galvanizing effect a maple-balsamic glaze can have on the exterior of that meat. “Serves 6 to 8” turned into barely “Serves 4” for this dish, and one of those four was a 7-year-old girl.

There are faster routes to a satisfying supper, too. Sweet-and-sour potluck meatballs have a strong South Asian flavor profile from cilantro (stems too!) and fish sauce, with the same addictive succulence as a classic gai yang. Wild rice and smoked chicken soup is a straightforward, comforting affair, though I couldn’t help suspecting it would have more texture and complexity if I had used the hand-harvested Minnesota wild rice featured in the accompanying story.

Fancy meatloaf with bacon and mushrooms has an abundance of deal-sweeteners, from umami-boosting shiitakes to chunky, luxe bits of pistachio studded, and then there’s the bacon on top, rubbed with brown sugar. If this meatloaf were sold on the street it would give the drug cartels a run for their money. Finally, a version of the Cornish pasty mixes ground beef and pork with sour cream as a binder, making it juicier and tastier (though no



Amy Thielen, host of “Heartland Table” on the Food Network.

lighter on the stomach) than other versions.

Sides are outstanding, and full of small surprises: Shredded cabbage is gently seethed in milk with rosemary for flavor, and contrasts with toasted walnuts. Save the other half of the cabbage to make crispy cabbage with poppy seeds; yes, it uses 5 tablespoons of butter, but people will scarf the leftovers as if they were french fries.

A Swiss chard side starts conventionally — sauteed greens with a handful of pine nuts — but explodes when mingled with soft cloves of honey-roasted garlic. Raw kale salad gets an unremarkable, serviceable vinaigrette, but is suddenly more interesting with crispy sage leaves, the flavored oil added to marry with toasted walnuts and fresh ricotta. And a grilled mushroom salad takes similar care with its accessory ingredients: almonds toasted in butter, the mushrooms marinated, and then reseasoned after cooking. Pan-roasted cauliflower makes use of sharp sage and sour capers to balance salt pork and butter, though some may still find it overwhelmingly rich.

A short section of traditional baked goods begins with old-fashioned ideas: a “macerated” apple pie has a pale, shattery lard crust (a little hard to work, but dreamy on the tongue), sparkling with sugar. Thielen gives a fairly prosaic German waffles recipe two secret ingredients — extra egg white for loft and texture, and lemon zest to goose the flavor.

There are some blunders: the meatballs call for peanuts in the method, but not the ingredient list. You can't make pasties out of dough rolled $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick (as fat as a finger); $\frac{1}{8}$ inch is probably what was meant. Throughout, it's rarely indicated just how big diced should be, and all my glazes took twice as long to reduce as the recipes suggested.

Yet this book has so much to offer that quibbles tend to fade. There's striking prose and vivid, locavore essays. There are twice as many recipes as you find in the average cookbook, many vibrantly retooled from Midwestern recipes you might have deemed hopelessly passe. And there's that tendency of Thielen's to tweak every recipe until it lights up like a pinball machine.

It's not every dish that can be spiffed up, repointed, and made new again (hello, tuna noodle casserole). But this ardent homage should put to rest some misconceptions and ignite new passion for the heartland's culinary heritage.

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The New Midwestern Table: 200 Heartland Recipes

Author: Amy Thielen

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