

‘B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook’ offers Southern comfort

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Alexe van Beuren and Dixie Grimes, authors of “The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook.”

Would you open a gourmet grocery in the tiny town of Water Valley (pop. 3,500) in Northern Mississippi with no business experience, and with an infant and toddler in tow? That’s what writer (and onetime farmers’ market manager) Alexe van Beuren did in 2010. A year later, local cook Dixie Grimes joined her, and at The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery the two began feeding Water Valley. The shop calls itself “A small-town grocery with big-city food.”

Four years later, the small storefront, with its old-fashioned signs and eclectic fare, is a thriving hybrid of old and new: \$2 bologna and hoop-cheese sandwiches alongside Vietnamese vinaigrette and artisanal gelato. The “B.T.C.” stands for “Be the Change” — and it’s clear that this grocery is changing paradigms left and right.

Given its hodgepodge roots and eat-local ethos, I thought “The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook” would feel like one of the “new South” books we’ve seen in recent years: all pickled ramps and Korean miso, lady peas and Pappy Van Winkle bourbon and 100 other hard-to-find delicacies.

Not so. The cookbook occupies the other end of the spectrum. Lots of recipes yield comfort foods that wouldn’t be out of place at a community supper. A chicken, asparagus, and mushroom casserole is mild tasting, filling, and easy to throw together, like the rice casseroles served at family get-togethers of decades past. (It doesn’t take 15 minutes to thicken the gravy, by the way, so watch it.) Turkey meat loaf is equally plain, satisfying fare, with enough flavor from Worcestershire and button mushrooms that you’re not wistfully hunting around for some bacon to drape on top. Caraway and dill rescue biscuits from being dull as well as on the tough side (they’re kneaded, so don’t expect feather-light results). And a tomato gravy to go with the biscuits has a little clove and mustard for intrigue, but mostly it just tastes like warm, canned tomatoes.

With a sense of adventure comes greater success: nuts, fruit, prosciutto, and a splash of vinegar enliven a warm (read: wilted) sliced Brussels sprout salad. Cheers went up when I served [a roast pork tenderloin](#) (I substituted boneless loin — have you seen the price of tenderloin lately?); its fruity apricot-cider glaze worth sopping up with forkfuls of pork. And roasted green beans with thick slices of sweet bell pepper and Vidalia onion caramelize after 40 minutes of high heat, and go down easy with a squeeze of lime.

Here and there I found the heavy hand of stereotypical Southern cooking. A gratin of artichoke hearts and English peas calls for two cups of cream, two cups of shredded Parmesan, and breadcrumbs. After 45 minutes I had something golden and edible, but with that much fat, I couldn’t really tell you what vegetable was inside. I loved creamed cabbage mostly because I love bacon and cream, which take equal billing with the cabbage, but then steal the scene as the cabbage shrinks to a soft brown haze.

A scampi-like shrimp bake turns into an actual disaster, thanks to four sticks of butter (yes, an entire pound). I almost made an executive decision to halve the fat, and should have. The shrimp floated and the crumbs drowned in a butter sea. After we’d gingerly picked out the shrimp and tucked into them, there was still a layer of butter a solid half-inch thick in the pan. Nothing was wasted. The chickens loved it the next day.

All in all, I’d hoped for more. Maybe these recipes require Dixie’s magic touch. Yet I still want to travel south and visit the grocery, and I still want to try one of those eccentric sandwiches in person. And I still feel a real affection for the cookbook, even though I probably won’t use it again. I guess that’s the power of a good story.

The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook: Recipes and Stories From a Southern Revival

Author: Alexe van Beuren, with recipes by Dixie Grimes

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- [Recipe for roast pork tenderloin with apricot-apple cider glaze](#)

